

## BLACK RICE BY K. M. Kaung

Review by Rosalind Lacy MacLennan

K. M. Kaung's beautifully crafted, fascinating *BLACK RICE*, told in 42 pages, is a must-read to fully understand modern Myanmar. Fractionalized political groups, that emerged after independence in 1948 from the British Empire, strive for domination. This well-constructed narrative builds to an ultimate high point, a twist of luck, at the end that left me gasping.

As for structure, the black rice metaphor works well throughout the telling of the civil war with the Karens. We follow the first person account from Black Rice, who escapes his alcoholic, violent stepfather, only to fight in an army, struggling to hold together a split nation, crumbling apart in internecine warfare. It's a jungle where no one can be trusted, far from the romantic jingoism of a Rudyard Kipling adventure tale.

What Kaung succeeds in showing us is the ugly and false belief that light skin is superior to dark, the divided loyalties between self-preservation and any form of idealism. References to historical characters like Thakin Aung San, the politically savvy general and activist, who liberated Burma from Britain, and who was the father of Nobel Prize Peace Laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi, anchor us along the way. Good show!

FIRST DRAFT: The deep-seeded prejudice against dark-skinned peoples, held by many Asians, is often unvoiced. But one senses early on in *Black Rice*, that author K.M. Kaung has a deeper intent. She's blasting away more than false beliefs and superstitions: such as all that's needed to raise a healthy offspring is healthy blood and environment .

Kaung's beautifully crafted, fascinating story, told in 42 pages, is a must-read to fully understand modern Myanmar. Fractionalized political groups that emerged after independence in 1948 from the British Empire have been striving for domination. This well-constructed narrative builds to an ultimate high point twist of luck at the end that leaves the reader breathless.

This is an urgently told survival, jungle story, told to the author at age seven, by her deceased cousin "of the very pale skin," about an illegitimate, black, slant-eyed, Chinese child, adopted by upper class Burmese parents, whose life is not guaranteed by learning to speak English, backed by an education in Rangoon.

The reality of human biology is brutal, just like the history of Myanmar. After losing ten fetuses, Pretty Lady gives up trying to have babies of her own. Only then can she accept and adopt a child with a jet black skin. Her blood was Rh negative and her husband's was positive. So the fetuses with the father's blood were rejected by her body with spontaneous miscarriages. When her tenth baby dies soon after a live birth, Pretty Lady relieves the pain of her engorged breasts by nursing an abandoned baby with black skin, whom she names Black Rice, for good luck. The analogy of the name is not lost. Black rice is so glutinous, it is used in cement that has held temples together for centuries.

As for structure, the black rice metaphor works well throughout the telling of civil war with the Karens. We follow the first person narrative of Black Rice who escapes his violent, alcoholic stepfather, only to fight in an army struggling to hold together a divided nation, crumbling apart in internecine warfare. It's a place where no one can be trusted, far from the romantic jingoism of a Rudyard Kipling adventure tale. Yet Kaung keeps you gasping up to the last moment.

What Kuong succeeds in showing us is the ugly and false belief that light skin is superior to dark, the divided loyalties between self-preservation and search for identity , and disillusion with any form of idealism. References to historical characters like Thakin Aung San, who was the politically savvy general and activist who liberated Burma from Britain, and who was the father of Nobel Prize Peace Laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi, help anchor us along the way.