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THE  
 FUNKAWALA  
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"THIS IS THE SINGLIT WORK I'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR."  
 -SUFFIAN HAKIM

WESLEY  
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“This is the SingLit work I’ve been looking for. Aroozoo has written a thrilling tale of mystery and danger set in the late nineteenth century. I love the gorgeous imagery, the sociocultural authenticity, and prose that evokes unease and wonder in equal measure. The hunt for Rimau Satan hits home in a more contemporarily satisfying manner than the hunt for Moby Dick, and tugs fervently and menacingly at fear triggers I never knew I had. Count me among Aroozoo’s fans, a group that will surely grow with this fine new novel.”

– **SUFFIAN HAKIM**, bestselling author of *The Keepers of Stories*  
and *Harris bin Potter and the Stoned Philosopher*

“Combining memory, myth and a dash of magic, Wesley Leon Aroozoo’s first novel is not only a tale of two survivors in a brutal, nineteenth-century Singapore, but also a harrowing glimpse into the heart of human darkness.”

– **DARYL QILIN YAM**, author of *Lovelier, Lonelier*

“A beautiful novel that vividly captures the lush wildness of 1860s Singapore. The characters of Oseki and Gobind are sensitively drawn and make you want to keep turning the pages to understand their journeys, the circumstances that each has left behind, and the painful and unimagined lives they find themselves leading in a foreign country.”

– **PALLAVI GOPINATH ANEY**, author of *Kopi, Puffs & Dreams*



THE  
PUNKHAWALA  
AND THE  
PROSTITUTE



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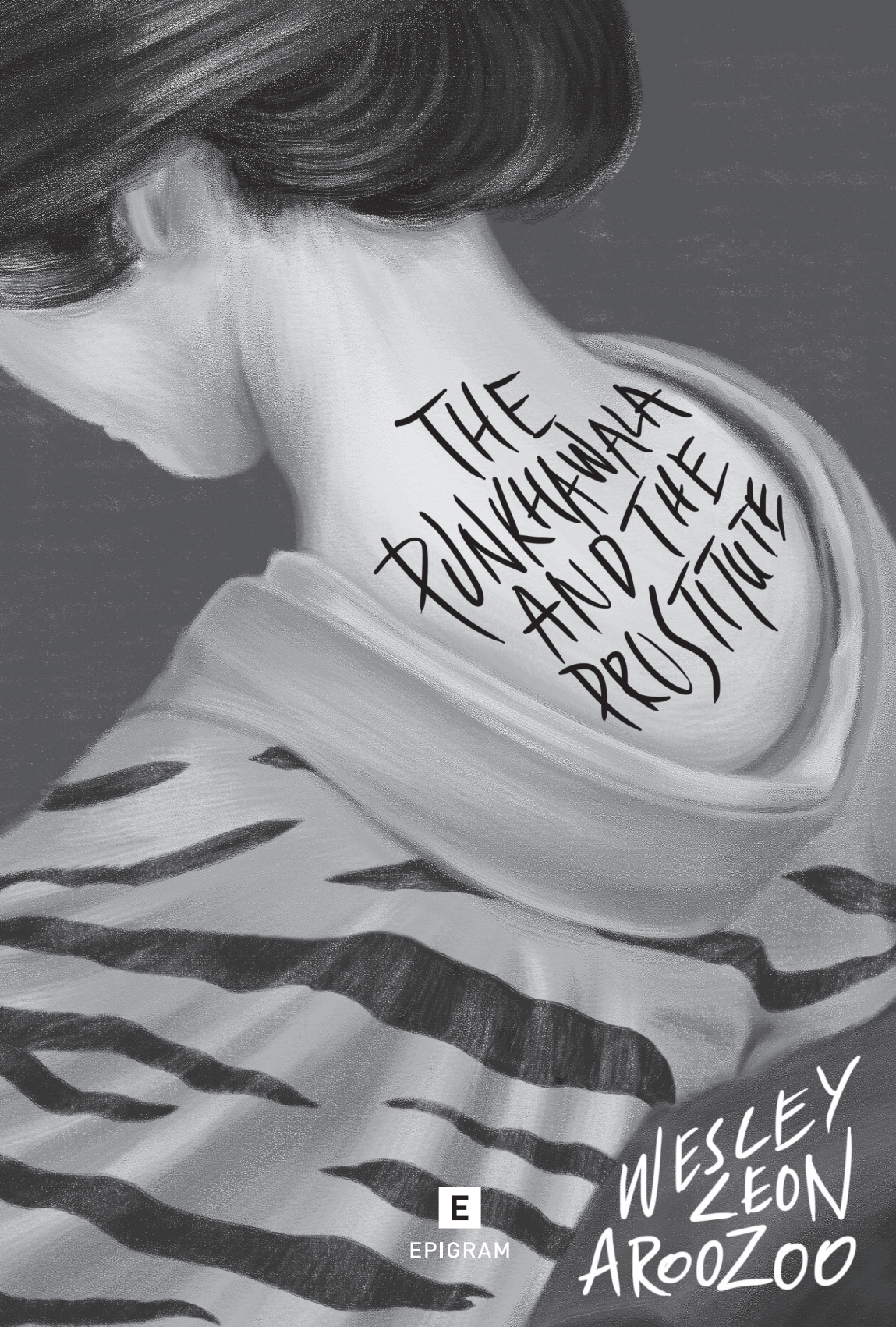
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THE  
FUNKAWALA  
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PROSTITUTE

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EPIGRAM

WESLEY  
LEON  
AROOZOO







*To the forgotten ones who shaped Singapore's early history*







DO NOT WORRY, I am not asleep. My eyes may be shut, but I am far from rest. I close my eyes to be near you. When I focus hard enough, I can imagine your fingers gently gliding across my shoulders. Feeling you lean into me, I take a deep breath and your fragrance sinks deep into my lungs. Champaca, jasmine, camellia. Deeper your scent falls and I see you, beautiful as the day when I had to leave you behind. My lungs hurt as I hold on to that last moment. My breath escapes, out of my control, and I am empty once more.

Renuka, I never told you this, but there were countless nights when you would assume I was fast asleep. I made you believe that with my heavy breathing. But I was always wide awake thinking of you as I lay next to you. Our hearts may be moving further apart as the days go by, but with each throb, I know I am a beat closer to returning to you. Once my punishment is over and done with, I promise to never let you go again. They can send me as far as this ship can sail; I do not care about the heartless black seas or my afterlife rotting away. All I care about is what I can do with the life I have now, and not the ones that I may never have. The others on board, they care too much about their varna. They are afraid of not being able to reincarnate for crossing the



forbidden seas away from India.

You should see, Renuka. They cleanse themselves every day at dawn, noon and dusk with water from the Ganges that has been stored on-board in a large wooden barrel that reaches up to my waist. They use a single old cloth and take turns soaking, squeezing, then rubbing it against their skin. I would occasionally hear them utter “kala pani” with anger and frustration as they queue to clean themselves with the stored sacred water, as though it could wash them back to India.

Do you remember the time you caught me watching you clean yourself? Do you remember, Renuka? You were so silly, you didn’t talk to me for days. I was your overcaring fool.



It would be foolish to wonder if his tattered singlet could cover his paunch. The moonlight seeping through the porthole on the cramped lower deck of the *Lady Ebsworthy* illuminates Jaffa, a burly man whose life of excessive drinking remains visible despite days deprived of adequate sustenance. He bends over the wooden barrel, his belly spilling over the rim and covering a third of it.

“How can this be? It’s empty!” he exclaims as he lowers the washcloth into the barrel. The sudden shock sends softness to his knees and the bewildered Jaffa can barely keep his balance as the ship dips into another swell. The other convicts quickly wobble over, surrounding the barrel to see for themselves, waiting for the moonlight to attest and confirm the truth.

“What happened to our water? Yesterday, there was at least a quarter left,” one convict says. He seems a breath away from sinking into delirium.

“How are we going to cleanse ourselves until we reach land?” another chimes in, his eyes wide in disbelief.



“The white men tricked us, our brothers,” Jaffa declares. “They knew it would never be enough for this long journey across the kala pani.”

“If you didn’t use so much water to cleanse your fat body, we would still have enough left,” another convict says as he rubs and scrapes his palms on the insides of the barrel, every drop worth a splinter.

Jaffa, almost at a loss for words but determined to always have the last say, cries, “I used the same amount as all of you! You saw me! You all saw me!”

The convicts start to jeer at him. Jaffa instinctively pulls his tattered singlet down over his stomach as he searches their eyes for affirmation.

“Do not panic, my brothers. You will be fine.”

An earnest voice at the back of the deck has the huddle of heads turning in unison like flowers shifting to face the sun. There is the imposing sound of chains dragging on the floor as Gobind approaches them with bloodshot eyes and hands clasped together in prayer as the ship’s rocking calms. Even though he is the only one amongst them in heavy, rusted iron cuffs on his wrist and ankles, Gobind does not look like a convict at all. He is different from the others and it is hard to put a finger on it. Maybe it is the air of peacefulness he bears. Perhaps it is his dark, neat and tiny curls, the kind usually found on the crown of a little boy lovingly groomed by his mother with her own saliva.

“You do not have to be afraid,” he repeats.

Or could it be his tender and assuring tone that falls gently on one’s ears, leaving all silent? They have never heard him speak a word before.

“I promise you, my brothers,” Gobind continues. “Help each other and we can get through this.”

Jaffa spits on the ground. The worn wooden planks beneath his bare, bloated feet groan with each step he takes towards Gobind. As brave as he looks, Jaffa only dares take a few steps and keeps a good distance away from Gobind.



“We are not your brothers, you monstrous swine. We have sinned but you’re not like us.” He stomps his foot with authority.

Gobind looks around and sees all the convicts staring back at him with judgement in their eyes. He instinctively replies, “You can ask my wife. She will vouch for me. It was a mistake.”

“Look, even if you threw yourself into the sea, the kala pani would spit you out!” Jaffa scoffs. He feels bolder with the support of the other convicts, who break out in laughter. There is power in numbers.

“Spit you out a thousand times over, back to India!” Jaffa sneers, his spit flying as the convicts roar louder with laughter at Gobind, who looks puzzled by the onslaught of such unfair accusations. Keeping his emotions at bay, Gobind grips the iron chains in his hands tightly and retreats into the shadows, but the moonlight seeps in and stays, dispersing the darkness and not letting him hide. He clenches the chains tighter, his yellowed and grimy nails grinding into the rust of the iron. Any harder and the chains would dig into his skin.

“Quiet down there! What’s this...bloody...rocket!”

A European officer has staggered down to the lower decks without anyone noticing. His top is unbuttoned, crumpled; his eyes glazed, probably from drinking too much during the dull days out at sea. His moustache could use some grooming as well.

“Any more...chatter...I will...”

The officer needs time to think. The convicts stand quietly at attention, waiting, at the mercy of the effects of alcohol on the brain.

“I will...”

It finally comes to him.

“Throw...all you...savages...into the...sea.”

He punctuates his threat by slamming his baton against the bulkhead. The meaning is clear even if none of the convicts understands his language. Proud of his bravado, the officer turns and stumbles back through the wooden hatch above, slamming it shut after him.



Even Jaffa the loudmouth has been silenced. Now, nobody dares to ask about the mysterious disappearance of the stored water from the Ganges.



Renuka, do you remember that day at the Ganges? I squeezed through the crowd just to find you. The sun had set and swarms of people of all ages had gathered along the river to be part of Aarti.

“Renuka,” I called out.

My voice drowned in the continuous ringing of bells and the hypnotic chanting of thousands of worshippers. They raised their hands up to the heavens before lowering them together in ritual. I caught a glimpse of you in the crowd limping away and tried my best to keep up before I lost you in the sea of people again.

“Renuka!” I called out louder this time.

A plump lady blocking my way cupped her palms over the flame of a priest’s lantern before sweeping her hands over her head. I dodged her devotion and saw you in the distance, standing in the crowd. I hastened my steps and soon, I was within arm’s reach of you.

“Renuka.” I reached out and held your hand. You turned around and were unusually silent. What’s wrong? You looked at me void of expression but you were still the most beautiful, with the brightest and kindest eyes anyone has ever seen. When you look at me, I can hear myself breathing, I can feel my heart pumping and I can never take my eyes off you. I noticed you fiddling with your turmeric-coloured sari. You never fiddled unless something was not right. I know you.

“Renuka, what is wrong?”

With a smile, you shook your head, assuring me that nothing was amiss. I took your soft hands and led you gently down the steps to the silt-laden waters of the Ganges, mindful of your limp.



“Slowly,” I cautioned you. You must remember this moment clearly, or maybe even better than I do. There, it was only me and you as we shut out the thousands of voices around us.

I presented to you a floral diya. Though it looked just like any other leaf boat made from folded banana leaves with an oil lamp sitting in the middle, ours was special. Ours had petals of pink camellia, white jasmine and marigold champaca. It was more beautiful than anyone else’s. You looked at it with no interest, then at me with no expression, before returning your gaze to the holy waters. It couldn’t be the flowers. Something else must have been wrong.

“Are you okay?” I asked, but you did not answer. Perhaps you would be happy once I lit the oil lamp. I bent down and placed our diya into the Ganges, dabbling the water to gently propel it forwards. Even as it floated away from us to join the hundreds of other diyas on the river, we kept sight of ours as if it were the only one that mattered.

“I forgive you, but don’t do it again,” you suddenly said. What did you mean?

“Just promise me you won’t do it again. Don’t suddenly walk away,” you pleaded as you grabbed my hand as you have done a thousand times before. You bit your lips, just as Mama would on the rare occasions when she was displeased with me.

“You always remind me so much of Mama,” I replied. From your expression, it was not the right thing to say. I turned my head away and racked my brain to figure out what I should promise to never do again when, from the edge of my vision, I noticed something.

“Our diya!” I shouted as it caught fire. It crumpled swiftly, the fire engulfing it before thousands of voices chanting in the Ganges became louder than before, thundering us back to reality. The noise was a roar of commotion, coming from above the deck.

I open my eyes in a jolt and see no other convict in the lower deck with me. This can’t be. I hobble, still in chains, to the porthole and



see fire out at sea. Above me, I hear terrified screams and scattered, panicked footsteps. How long have I been asleep?

Dragging my chains, I clamber up the rickety ladder leading to the deck. I manage to slide the hatch open and pop my head out. Flames swarm the mast, climbing high into the empty night sky above me. In the alarming glow of the blaze, I spot the European officers trying to stop hordes of men armed with wooden spears from coming on-board. I do not know the intruders, who are bare-chested and tanned with long, unkempt hair.

Jaffa and the other convicts are fighting alongside the white men. Jaffa knows how to use his weight to his advantage. He pushes through the mob, snatches a spear and impales a foe right in the gut. He pulls the spear out. Blood all over. Then, he pierces his enemy again. And again. You should never see such brutality, Renuka. With blood splattered on his face from his kill, Jaffa turns and looks at me like a savage.

“Get out here and help, you fool!” he screams in desperation. I turn to my left and see the drunk officer who reprimanded us earlier leaping overboard to escape. I look back at Jaffa and the others. More invaders are starting to swarm the ship, more are coming on board. We are clearly outnumbered. I am about to close the hatch before I remember what you had asked of me. Not to walk away.

You would have been proud of me, Renuka. I did not think twice. With my hands tied I climb onto the deck and grab a wooden stick that has been left on the ground. I see men being stabbed, pushed to the ground, screaming in pain. There—the enemy with his back facing me. I charge towards him before something in the sea catches my attention amidst the chaos.

Floating amongst the enemies’ long wooden boats, each easily fifty to sixty feet long, is our diya. It drifts in the water before it suddenly burns away, just like when we last saw it on the Ganges. Almost like it



was stuck in time, each flame swaying slowly but surely, the ending all but certain. The beautiful champaca withers, the jasmine blackens and the camellia shrivels to dust right before our eyes, out of our reach, as I squeeze your hands tightly by the Ganges. Your soft, perfect hands, filled with warmth. Knowing that I will never let you go, I caress every arching line on your palm, all leading to me. It's like you never left. I look down at your hands and see that they are no longer wrapped in mine.

Looking up, I see a wild man swinging his spear towards the side of my head and I find myself knocked onto the cold, wet deck. Everything starts to blur. A ringing is piercing my ears. The sound intensifies and punctures my skull. It hurts. I feel it getting closer to my eyes and my body starts to shake involuntarily. I am choking—there is barely enough air left to scream for help.

It is so painful, Renuka.

But it is not nearly as painful as having to leave you in the forest. Not as painful as letting you down. I hold on to my thoughts of you, Renuka, as my consciousness starts to slip. I am sorry that I can't get up and continue to help my countrymen in this fight. The moonlight sweeps in then rolls away as the roar and rumble of the fight fade to silence. In this quiet, my body, prone on the deck, feels every tremble caused by footsteps running past me. Unwillingly, I close my eyes. I don't want to, but just for a moment.

A moment where I fall into a spin thinking about the promise I made to you at the Ganges. I never could figure it out, but I confidently promised you anyway that I would never do it again. Now, I promise to return to you if I make it out of here alive. I promise to do whatever it takes to be by your side again. I promise to always take care of you, be wide awake for you. In the darkness, I am still watching you even when I'm miles away, hurting with my eyes closed.



Do not worry, I am not asleep. My eyes may be shut, but I am far from rest.



“IT’S NOT POSSIBLE... Otouchan cured me,” Oseki whispers to herself as she squirms and grips her undernourished belly that sinks below her ribs. A familiar pain from years ago twists and croaks again.

“Spare me...please...” she gently pleads with the pain as she tightens her grasp.

Fifteen-year-old Oseki’s long and slender frame, adorned in a plain white kimono, curls in discomfort as it knocks against the cold iron bulkhead of the *Takachiho Maru*. The ship bellows and rattles while it battles the stormy seas, while squealing gusts of wind make their way past hidden gaps in the shoddy ironwork to enter the musty boiler room in the bottommost pit of the vessel. The wind unsettles Oseki, but it does not seem to unnerve the other ladies the slightest bit. But this is not a place for a girl like Oseki, who exudes innocence and beauty. Her skin is so white and flawless that if it ever suffered a scratch or a scar, one might assume that the mark would just melt away as nothing ugly could ever be found on such loveliness.

“Leave me alone, kishaku,” Oseki says, and she suddenly covers her mouth, trying not to vomit.

“Who are you talking to?” Hosoi, a lady in her twenties, has woken



up. She uncrosses her legs and stretches her back like a cat. Hosō would be considered pretty if not for her stumpy nose and large nostrils that always seem to stare at you even if you look away. Oseki turns away timidly, not wanting a confrontation.

“Are you deaf?” Hosō grunts before clearing her throat.

“Leave her alone,” Unoko says. She is another of the fifteen of them squeezed into the decrepit boiler room.

“Abazure,” Hosō swears. “I am not talking to you.”

Unoko sighs and looks away, while the other women stare back at Oseki, waiting for a response. Their five-day-old make-up is melting off from the heat of the boiler room. If they wait any longer, their faces would slip right off.



“Nobody.”

Otouchan, do you think I should have replied? I don’t know. I don’t want to talk to these women. They look like the ladies in our village whom all the men like. You know, the kind who laugh and drink outside skinny Juro’s noodle eatery late at night long after it has closed. The kind with kimonos that slip off their shoulders with little care. Sometimes, the kimonos slip all the way down. The kind you told me to stay far away from.

“Good, then stop talking to yourself. Some of us would like to sleep,” Chieko says. Her name is not actually Chieko. I don’t know her name, but she has a round nose just like Chieko’s. You’ve never met Chieko. She was from Obasan’s village when Okaasan and I had to stay there. Oh, how I wish I could tease Chieko that she is no longer the only person in the world with a button nose. I could tell Chieko that I found her long-lost twin sister. Such nasty thoughts to have! Forgive me, Otouchan. Chieko would never doll herself up so vivaciously like this grumpy lady.

In fact, all the other women in this horrid room were already dolled up when I boarded the ship from Nagasaki.

The ship is so grand. I have never seen anything so big and marvellous before. The *Takachiho Maru*. Do you think it is named after the shrine? Otouchan, it's the one you promised to bring me to see, but never had the chance to. The one where sacred eight-hundred-year-old twin cedar trees reside. Couples hold hands and walk around them three times to receive blessings for their marriage. I remember what you told me, Otouchan. It may surprise you, but I have never forgotten the stories you told me. I just wish I had the time to receive blessings from the trees before being rushed to the port in Nagasaki. It all happened so quickly, I hardly had time to say proper goodbyes to you, Otouchan, and to Okaasan.

Do you think the others are on their way to Singapore to be wed, too? Otouchan, they feel different from me. It could be because they have make-up on. Should I have put some on as well? Or maybe it is because they look a little older than I do. Maybe I am in the wrong room? I don't think my husband-to-be would have approved of my mingling with these women. I knew something was not right once I boarded the ship. I remember seeing these men in uniform who looked like sailors on the deck staring at me, and the further down I went into the vessel, the more I felt trapped by the sound of splashing water closing in on me. Like going into a cave, and the views disappeared. Daylight vanished. I found myself in this boiler room that is dimly lit by a furnace. Here I saw these older Japanese ladies lying down on a wooden crate. They didn't even bother to greet me. It has faded now, but I remember that when I first saw them they had the brightest komachi beni lip paint on. As bright as the kishaku that has returned to my stomach, taunting me again. I don't know how it came back into me, Otouchan. It is not my fault, please don't be angry. I did not do anything.

I'll never forget how it looks, Otouchan. How can we ever forget? It was in the middle of the night and you carried me on your shoulders



to the healer's hut, far from the village. I could barely walk with my unbearable stomach cramps. Otouchan, did you know that it was the words you kept repeating over and over to me as you carried me that kept me calm?



“Big girls don't cry. You are Otouchan's big girl now.” Takashi soothed his only child. Even though he was made of forty years of skin and bones, he mustered the strength of a father's love to carry Oseki uphill on his twig-like legs. A miracle they didn't snap! Sweat dripped down the hollows of his unshaven sunken face, but Takashi hid his exhaustion from his daughter. He took a deep breath, gathered his might and continued until they reached the hut.

“Lie...down...” Takashi instructed Oseki as he caught his breath. The air in the dimly lit hut reeked of a peculiar mix of bitter herbs, sweet alcohol and tangy vinegar.

“Otouchan, I can't,” Oseki said. The nine-year-old girl hugged her stomach tightly. She could barely stand, keeling over with her body after Takashi set her down from his aching shoulders.

“Lie down...for Otouchan...” He eased her onto a bamboo mat in the healer's hut, freshly vacated by another child who was just about to leave with her father. The child, a girl with adorable round eyes and much younger than Oseki, looked at her curiously.

“She is sick like me?” the wide-eyed little girl asked her father. Oseki glanced through her pain at the little girl being tugged by her father out of the hut.

“Open mouth,” a wispy but assertive voice instructed her. Oseki turned the other way and saw an elderly man dressed in a navy blue robe approaching her impatiently. He looked tired, eye bags drooping heavily beneath greyish eyes. Before she could react, he forcefully opened her

mouth with his forefinger and held a lit candle near it. Bending low, he squinted as he looked down into her throat, then immediately shook his head and retreated to the wooden cabinet where many glass jars resided.

He reached high up, shifted aside a jar filled with dried gardenia seeds and carefully moved deeper in to retrieve a transparent jar filled with a suspicious, murky yellow liquid. He placed the heavy jar on the table, grabbed a pair of long wooden chopsticks and dipped them inside. Oseki's eyes widened as he pulled out a preserved bug of sorts, the size of a roach. A slimy, brownish red coated its furry body, which had a thick white stripe running from its nape to its black tail. Its mouth was split three ways. This must have been a creature hailing from lore, the likes of which not many had seen before.

"This is in her stomach," the healer claimed.

"What is that?" Takashi asked, approaching for a closer look.

"A kishaku."

"Kishaku?"

"It's a form of yokai."

"So small? I know all about yokai, but I've never heard of one this small!" Takashi exclaimed in disbelief.

"Yokai come in all forms. Not just in the forms of fleeting spirits, humans or hideous monsters." He smirked at Takashi. "The kind you say you know all about.

"This particular yokai is smaller than the usual ones. It is but just one of sixty-three yokai germs in the Harikikigaki medical journal that can enter our bodies and spread illnesses. They can make you very sick from the inside." The healer placed the kishaku carefully back into the jar before Takashi could examine it even more closely.

The healer cleared his throat before continuing: "You must know that this yokai, this kishaku...will cause...an increase in sexual desire."

Takashi looked lost. What was the healer implying?

"Your daughter is almost of age."



Takashi glanced at Oseki with concern and disbelief that his little girl could be all grown up.

“Is there a cure?”

“There is always a cure.”

The healer cleared his throat again. “They are hard to come by and are costly. She has to consume dried tiger intestines for seven days. Once at dawn and once more after her last meal of the day. Boil the—”

“Can I owe you first?” Takashi interrupted him. He couldn’t bear to look at his daughter, knowing he had to let her down again.

“This is not a village noodle shop or some such place where you can owe money for a meal and pay another day.”

“I can’t afford it now,” Takashi said softly. He didn’t want to alarm Oseki.

“She can’t be helped then.” Without an ounce of sympathy, the healer shook his head and walked away to place the jar back in the cabinet.

Tiger intestines were a far cry from what Oseki’s family could afford to consume. She grew up eating melons, barley, potatoes and whatever else was available. When there was not enough rice, Hime, her okaasan, would make do with some flowery porridge. It was called that not because there were flowers in the porridge, but because there were so few grains that whatever little was in the gruel would float like flower petals. It was not a meal Oseki looked forward to eating growing up, but she would love to have a bowl of flowery porridge now for all she had on the ship was a measly crust of bread, so hard that even a tiger would hardly be able to break it apart or swallow it without getting cut. Her stomach growls and twists to the whirling of the boiler room as the *Takachiho Maru* jolts suddenly, the clanging in the furnace rattling louder than before.

Oseki brushes off some coal dust that has fallen on her white kimono. It doesn’t come off. Oseki quickly blows it away and tries to dust it off again.

“Scared of ruining your kimono, Empress Haruko?” one of the ladies jeers at her.

“Why so beautiful? Maybe she is going to get married in Singapore. A grand royal wedding,” Hosō adds sarcastically.

“Yes,” Oseki says timidly, before realising that maybe she should not have answered.

“Yes? Yes what?”

Oseki feels the kishaku in her stomach squeezing her gut, as though warning her to not answer.

“Yes, I am getting married in Singapore.”

Silence for a second before the two women burst out in shrill, mocking laughter, their lips stretched wide and the faded paint on them almost vibrant again.

“She thinks she is getting married? You are one stupid girl!” Hosō scoffs and scratches an itch on her back.

“My husband-to-be is Muraoka Iheiji,” Oseki says. “He is waiting for me in Singapore. Do you all know him?”

“You’ll get married for sure. To hundreds of men, my dear,” another Japanese lady responds bitterly, with a tinge of pity for Oseki and maybe herself. She chokes briefly after speaking, coughing to clear her lungs before sniffing the air curiously. “Do you all smell that?”

Her question hangs in the air as everyone’s attention remains on Oseki, who has reached into her pocket to take out a shining white and hypnotising pearl the size of a pea. The revelation is made more dramatic by the timely clanging and banging from the furnace.

“I do have a husband waiting for me. This is the pearl he gave me when he visited my family.”

Soft murmurs break out among the ladies as their eyes fasten on the mesmerising pearl in her palm.

“Is it real? I have never seen one before,” one of them asks, now wide awake.



“Let me see,” Hosō demands.

Oseki immediately shuts her hand like a clam.

“Okay, I’ll just take it from you then.” Hosō stands and tries to balance on her geta on the rocking ship. She hobbles over to Oseki and grabs her fist, prying her fingers apart maliciously with her long, sharp fingernails. Oseki struggles but keeps her hand tightly shut around the pearl.

“Give it to me!” Hosō shouts. Some women have rallied around her, like vicious hyenas hungry for a kill.

*Klang! Klang!*

The ship violently shudders. There is a ruckus in the furnace, followed by the strong smell of smoke. Everyone in the room loses their balance and falls. The pearl slips through Oseki’s fingers and onto the ground. She quickly goes on all fours to crawl to it as the other women lose interest, distracted by the pungent fumes. Hosō is on high alert, sniffing the air with her bulbous nose. The pearl rolls into a tight crevice. Oseki lies flat on the floor and squeezes through the gap, her slender frame just narrowly fitting. She reaches out for the pearl, the tips of her fingers almost touching it.

“This ship will be the death of us!” Hosō howls as sparks suddenly fly from the furnace and black smoke fills the room. Hosō yanks the boiler room door open, only to wobble out to more smoke in the tight corridors. The others start to scream in panic as they scramble to get onto their feet and out of the room while the ship rocks furiously. The women have no choice but to hold their breath and escape to the deck, but not all of them have the courage to move.

“You fool, get out from there! We have to go!” Hosō has turned back for Oseki, the only one left, her feet peeking out from the other end of the boiler room. Oseki, oblivious to everything going on, continues to stretch her arms to reach for the pearl.

“Come on out!” Hosō yells and looks back into the corridor. She

has to leave. It is now or never. Oseki tries her best to reach for the pearl but is unable to. She is stretching as far as she can.



“Oseki, come out.”

I heard you calling me breathlessly as I uncurled myself and crawled out of the bushes I was hiding in. The sky was dark and it was drizzling. You were looking back at me and scratching the side of your face nervously as you pressed something hidden beneath your yukata against your chest.

“Otouchan, what’s going on?”

You did not reply but instead grabbed me by the arm and dragged me away. I turned and saw the healer running towards us, brandishing a wooden stick in the air.

“You scoundrel! Come back here, you thief!” the healer shouted.

We ran as fast as we could, until the pain in my stomach became unbearable. I lost my grip on your hand and tumbled down into the mud. I looked up and saw you continuing to run ahead.

From the crevice, I peep over my shoulders at the women coughing and trying to escape from the boiler room. Some fall to their knees, crawling. They scream without sound, out of breath as the squealing of the furnace gets louder, as though any moment it might burst. I reach out one last time and finally feel the pearl. I hold on to it tightly, but it is too late to try and escape. Around me, sparks rage on like firecrackers, a sign that I don’t have much time—or any at all—left. I move deeper into the crevice, thinking of you, Otouchan. All I can think about is how much I hope you can come and save me. Like you did when I fell down onto the wet soil, and you turned back and ran towards me as the healer approached. You looked at me like I was your everything. I know you will save me, Otouchan. I am right here.



Otouchan, I feel an immense heat that I have never felt before as I curl myself into a ball. The pain in my belly clenches and strikes again.

Otouchan, please come for me, I am scared.

A thunderous shake.

Bright lights.

Then, the most beautiful silence consumes me.

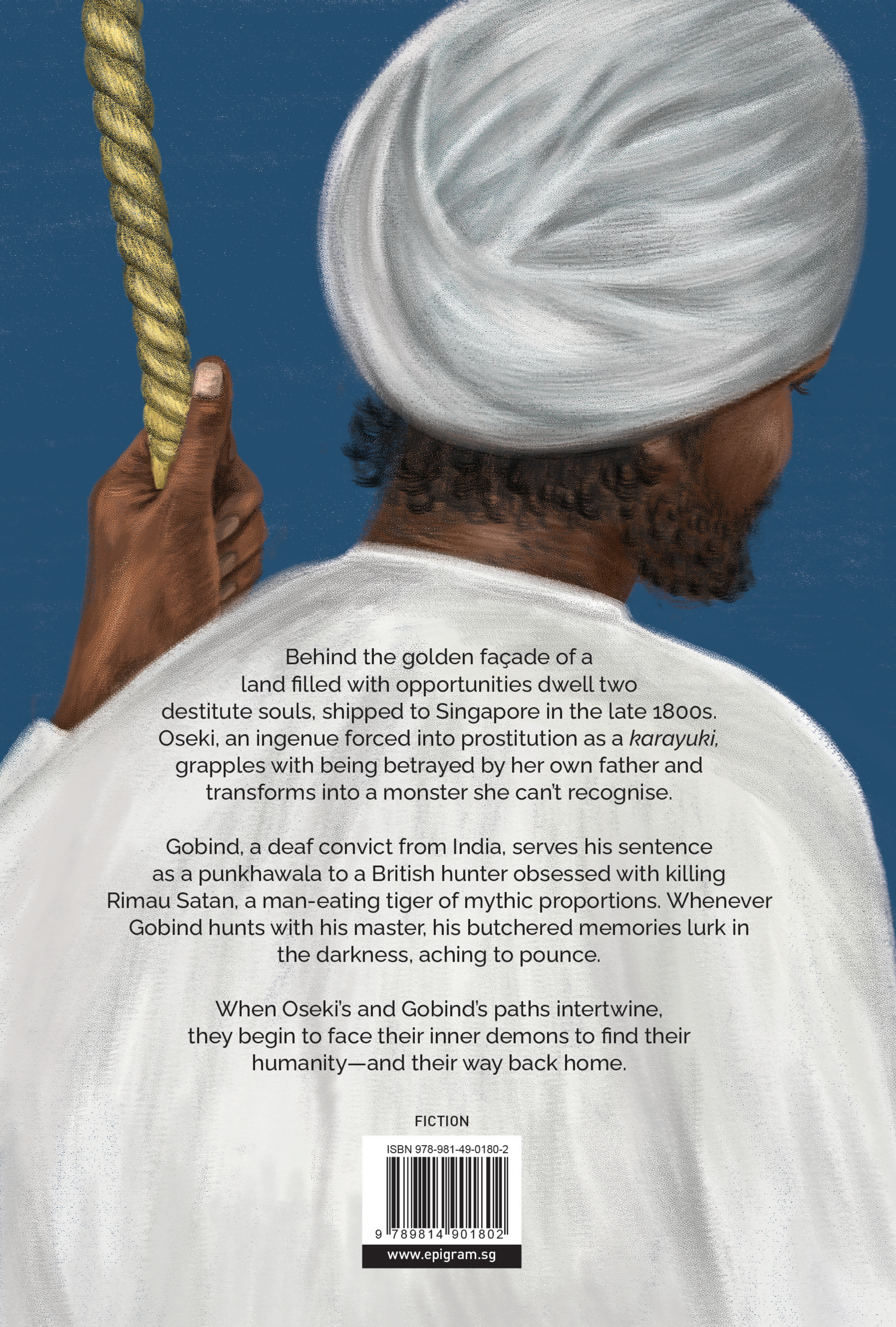




## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Wesley Leon Aroozoo** is a filmmaker from 13 Little Pictures and a lecturer at LASALLE College of the Arts. He is the author of the novella *Bedok Reservoir* (2012), which was also adapted for the stage and performed at Goodman Arts Centre. A feature documentary companion to his second non-fiction novella, *I Want to Go Home* (2017), had its world premiere at the Busan International Film Festival, and was later adapted as a experiential art installation co-curated and designed by Mural Lingo and The Arts House.





Behind the golden façade of a land filled with opportunities dwell two destitute souls, shipped to Singapore in the late 1800s. Oseki, an ingenue forced into prostitution as a *karayuki*, grapples with being betrayed by her own father and transforms into a monster she can't recognise.

Gobind, a deaf convict from India, serves his sentence as a punkhawala to a British hunter obsessed with killing Rimau Satan, a man-eating tiger of mythic proportions. Whenever Gobind hunts with his master, his butchered memories lurk in the darkness, aching to pounce.

When Oseki's and Gobind's paths intertwine, they begin to face their inner demons to find their humanity—and their way back home.

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