



By Zehra Naqvi

For its fifth annual Festival of Asian Literature, running from the 10th- 26th May, the Asia House is hosting a number of interesting programmes encompassing a vast array of topics from food to politics, including a night of Persian poetry, a storytelling event for families, discussions with upcoming Asian writers and a talk by Hanif Qureshi on 'Culture, Free Speech and Power' which will also mark its end. Zehra Naqvi reflects on her experience of the festival so far with The Samosa.

Recently I attended one of the events with Zaiba Malik and Nikesh Shukla, authors of *We Are Muslim Please*

and

Coconut Unlimited

(the coconut being brown on the outside and white on the inside is a reference to British Asian

identity) in conversation with Sathnam Sanghera. The talk was called 'How to be Asian in Britain,' mimicking the title of a self-help book, which if existed would surely be an odd piece of literature. The evening began with the authors reading excerpts from their respective novels, braving an attempt to execute an Asian accent when reading out their parents' part but succeeding only in entertaining the audience at their inability to pronounce 'table' as 'taibal.' Nikesh Shukla's book is a coming of age tale about Amit, complete with big dreams, annoying parents, first kisses and lots of hip hop, while 'We Are Muslim Please' is a memoir exploring the writer's life growing up as a Muslim in Britain and the reassessment of her religion after events like the London bombings.



The event highlighted some serious issues in a light hearted manner through jokes and funny anecdotes, raising some very important questions regarding the politics of identity and what it means to be British Asian. Nikesh Shukla described 'Asian' as a "lazy label," a tag that he, being a third generation British Asian, could not relate too, apart from of course the Cricket World Cup when he had the extra option of rooting for the better team. While Zaiba Malik described the label as "helpful" acknowledging that her ethnicity helped in getting her book published, providing her with a platform to address other issues pertinent to the Asian community in Britain. This reminded me of a very interesting interview I read between Pierre Bourdieu and Gunter Grass called 'A Literature from Below,' in which they discussed the responsibility of the intellectuals to create disruptions within a dominant discourse or in this case refuting the stereotype of a community by a dominant 'Other.' Bourdieu and Grass pointed out that in order to exercise change the intellectual needed to become established and gain recognition, but in order to do so it was also necessary to abide by the dominant system. Interestingly Nikesh Shukla and Zaiba Malik were accused of doing just that by a member of the audience when in the question/answer session someone complained that the writer's work conformed to the Asian stereotype. However despite being packaged as a South Asian novel, writers can still challenge the very stereotype which propelled them to fame. Nikesh Shukla narrated an incident where a publisher refused to believe that the characters in his book were 'authentically Asian,' unfortunately an Asian novel needs to include "overbearing mothers, sexually repressed Asians, arranged marriages and mango swamps." Thus by accepting the tag enforced on them by society writers can refute representation through their work, by revealing the multiple shades present within their culture revealed through their own unique point of view.

Despite talks of thwarting dominant discourses, it felt good just laughing at some of the stereotypes and I even discovered some which I didn't know existed - apparently Asians don't read fiction novels because we are too busy studying textbooks. This was however strongly negated by the audience. The need for more Asians in fields like writing and publishing was voiced, David Cameron's speech on multiculturalism was condemned and Zaiba Malik stressed on the need for immigrants to learn English describing the problems faced by her mother who spent forty years in Britain without speaking the language. The event did not provide groundbreaking answers on identity politics but it initiated a lively and entertaining discussion.

I would definitely recommend the cultural events hosted by Asia House which functions as a link between the west and the pan Asian countries from Iran to the West of Japan. The venue includes a café and an exhibition space, I was particularly enchanted by the beautiful ceilings in the rooms.