

**The Old People by A. J. Perry**  
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*Reviewed by*

Shahizah Ismail Hamdan  
[sha@ukm.edu.my](mailto:sha@ukm.edu.my)  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

How do you tell a story of the beginnings of a people? You do it like A. J. Perry in his second novel, *The Old People*. In a strange kind of way the beautifully crafted tale of the past is reminiscent of Doris Lessing's future fable *The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter Griot and the Snow Dog*. Perhaps it is the dream like impression or maybe it is the strong sense of the land. Either way Perry's old people – *the hole digger, the storyteller, the knot maker, the seeing man, the descendants of the quarry, the people of the salt, the woman of first water, the adze maker, the tree cutter, the first wood carver, and the midwife*– reminds us of who we were, the core of our being. No frills, no thrills, only what's basic and primal. However, if one is looking for a mythical, primordial adventure then one is not going to find it in this novel. There are caves and cavemen but they are no tribal wars. There are men and women with different roles to play but there are no power struggles. Perhaps the clue is in the title – *The Old People*. As wisdom is a privilege that belongs to the old, the priority is on calmness and not calamity.

So calm is the general feeling that one may miss the plot, if one is not diligent in the reading of this piece. So, no, *The Old People* is not "plotless", it just feels like it. In three short sections – *The Knot, The Digging* and *Fire* - the story gives voice to a traditional way of life that is now mostly invisible and perhaps forgotten by the modern world. The laborious, repetitive narrative echoes a story being told orally. In that voice one will also hear a sense of resistance, subtle though it may be, as the tale does not have the usual conventions of a plot structure of a novel, a genre that found its shape and form in the West. It has no exposition, no rising action nor climax, no falling action and no resolution. Instead it presents a simple narrative of a simple society but with complex interconnectedness. As such, the young must be born and the old must die and in between each member conscientiously plays his or her role to ensure the cycle of life continues. One might be tempted to say that it is similar to modern living. However, Perry's narrative highlights the interconnectedness between each member's role and the importance of ritual to the survival of the whole society. In contrast, modern living is fragmented, each to its own. If there were any sense of communality, it only extends to as far as the nuclear family.

The characters in *The Old People* are faceless but they are a face-to-face society. They are also nameless but their characteristics are unique. Kinship is important and can be seen through the knot metaphor but Perry does not focus on "tribalness" as "tribe" is a colonial construct. The characters speak but there are neither dialogues nor debates, their only concern is the cycle of life:

"Do you think it will rain tonight?  
There are no clouds.  
But there are so many fires to be made.  
And stories to be told.  
But what if the blood of this birth turns to dust?  
It is not easy to dig a good hole." (p. 68)

Nevertheless, Perry is kind. In the end one realises that the tale does not predict the end of man. It is not tragic. It is not nostalgic. And this is where *The Old People* departs from Lessing's *The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter Griot and the Snow Dog*. The latter is a dystopian tale of discontinuity but the former only stresses on the strength of the old people and their tenacity for continuity.

#### **BIODATA**

Shahizah Ismail Hamdan is a senior lecturer at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Her research interest is the future of humanity especially in Science Fiction but occasionally she looks at the past.