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**'Video' by Meera Nair; Pantheon Books (\$21.95)****BYLINE:** By Rebecca Banks Zakin**SECTION:** ENTERTAINMENT NEWS**LENGTH:** 474 words

I usually find short stories frustrating and unsatisfying; just when I become intrigued by the characters the author ends the story and snatches them away from me. Not so with **Meera Nair's** first collection, "**Video.**" **Nair** introduces her characters with an engaging warmth and affection and, at the end, leaves a taste of just enough possibility so that you can close the book and roll the story around in your mind for a while before picking it up to read the next.

Born and raised in India, **Nair** writes of people on the cusp of change, deeply rooted in tradition but turning to meet the new world head-on. There is Dilip, a young man with a gifted epicurean nose who has become successful working for Motorola in America but still asks his mother to find him a bride back home. **Nair** describes the bride as follows:

"A tall, slender girl with skin the color of milky tea and curious, unafraid eyes, holding the dark green curry leaves like an offering under her chiny. ... She walked past the window with her head bowed in deference to the elders in the room and a tendril scent from the leaves floated in. Dilip sat there smiling. Then a cousin nudged him and he put his young-professional-from-America face back on."

Describing young and old, individuals and whole villages with equal care, **Nair** tells of their naivete with an almost maternal love. Chik-Chik, the delivery boy in "The Lodger in Room 726," relishes a youthful fantasy that the man he brings breakfast to every morning is an infamous murderer on the run. In the title story, a marriage is shaken and restructured after one partner learns about wilder sexual practices.

In "A Warm Welcome to the President, Insh'Allah!," the small village of Joipura is electrified by the impending visit of the American president: "When the announcer mentioned Joipura and the president's name in the same breath there were whistles and cheers. The shouts grew louder when we saw the great man himself. Tall and broad-shouldered, he stood in his gray suit and red tie on the lawn of a five-star hotel, towering over the men and women circling around him. His gray hair glittered in the sun and his wide, full-fleshed face was ruddy in the heat. A few of us even threw coins at the TV. It was as if we were at the local cinema and our favorite action hero had just stepped onto the screen."

With brushes both broad and fine, **Nair** paints a clear picture of a culture very different from our own. And yet the emotions, actions and thoughts of her characters are universal \_ longing, hope, despair, frustration, curiosity. Get acquainted with the people in **Nair's** stories and you will be left with the feeling that perhaps you have met them somewhere before.

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