

Malachi Edwin Vethamani, ed. *Malchin Testament: Malaysian Poems*. Kuala Lumpur: Maya Press, 2017. 386 pp. ISBN 978-983-2737-53-7.

In *Malchin Testament*, three generations of writers are brought together, with their poems serving as representatives of their respective oeuvre while also providing inkling of their thematic concerns and to a lesser degree but perhaps more tellingly, their styles. To the first (my categorisation differs slightly from the editor's) belong poets now considered canon in Anglophone Malaysian literature such as (but not only) Ee Tiang Hong, Chin Woon Peng, Muhammad Haji Salleh, Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, Lee Geok Lan and of course, Shirley Lim, who is also the most internationally recognised member of this elite group. Unsurprisingly, these writers preoccupy much of the volume's space as many of their respective poems are showcased. Examples of writers comprising the second and smallest group are Bernice Chauly, Leonard Jeyam and Charlene Rajendran; the remaining majority are third generation practitioners, some of whom have only a single or couple of accompanying poems in the anthology.

As a result of these disparate groups of writers being placed alongside each other, a propensity for comparing their works becomes inevitable. A stark feature immediately obvious is the fact there is a distinct correlation between quality of poems and each generation, with the best exhibited by mainly the first and to some extent, the second, while those with the least substance by the third. Unlike this third group, whose understanding of poetry seems to end with *what a poem is*, the first and second generations of poets demonstrate a conspicuous appreciation of *how it works* as well. Poetry, as American poet Archibald McLeish famously said, "must not mean but be"; distinct from the novel and the short story, the poem's potency lies more in its form rather than its content, which is secondary. Form is not just the features of a structure indicating poetry, but that which points to how the poem should be read and which also enhances its meaning. Accordingly, poetry is not about writing strange lines of somewhat grammatically clumsy sentences packed into blocks called stanzas, while being concordantly mindful of musicality (assonances and alliterations) and rhythmic sense (its meter, or pattern of beats). Admittedly, doing just this is sufficient to construct a poem, but one that is fundamentally inadequate – a circumstance I find consistent across the poetry of third generation writers. Additionally, although words are often stretched in poetry – due to its economy of words and strongly symbolic propensity – making a poem bear multiple meanings *via*, for instance, puns and irony, i.e. a clever play on words is neither the hallmark of poetry nor constitutive of good poetry. All this does is display the author's linguistic ability, even as it potentially reduces a poem to a gimmick or word-play, or in the case of "Poetry Paralysis" (38), betray the poet's failure to distinguish between poetry as metaphor signalling the beautiful and as aesthetical medium.

The works of first and some second generation poets demonstrate palpable sensitivity to and perspicacity in the deployment of form when constructing a poem. The number of lines per stanza, for example, is never arbitrary for these poets, but a decision made through careful consideration of why that number, not more or less, is necessary; the same goes for decisions regarding certain metrical patterns (like the pentameter), rhyme schemes (whether internal or and at the end of each line), diction (word choice), and more basically, which type of poem to write (e.g. a haiku, a pantun, a villanelle, or a sonnet?) that will help meet one's objective best – all of which must contribute towards the poem's meaning while enhancing its aesthetical quality at the same time. Every formal feature of a poem, from the tiniest grammatical unit like a punctuation mark to, say, the pervasiveness of sibilant sounds, is there because it is necessary to the poem's overall effect and meaning. To read content (the words) alone would compromise the poem's power invested by its form and hence considerably reduce the reader's aesthetic experience.

To illustrate my point about the difference in quality that corresponds with the generation to which a poet belongs, I will briefly compare two poems: the first, and quoting only stanzas one and two, is Ee Tian Hong's "A Poem":

Is a poem
No matter what its breed
Or the language
It speaks.

It will say
What it must
Notwithstanding the threat
To silence its throat (63)

The first line, obviously a continuation from the title, clearly suggests the title is not a feature separate from, but is part of, the poem proper, thereby immediately interrelating content and form. The manner in which each line is broken also evokes measured speaking to denote the dignity of the subject matter. It is as if someone is making a defense of poetry, ensuring his every word is clearly articulated. That the lines are also short – or more accurately, clipped – and predominantly constituting voiceless plosives (p), fricatives (s, th) and nasals (m) both imply a forceful stance made, however, in a conciliatory tone befitting of a gentlemanly debate. Indeed, when the poem is read aloud, it does not sound unnatural despite the arrangement of its diction. Apart from enhancing the poem's meaning, its form also improves the visual representation of the two stanzas by introducing an overall symmetry to them. This is achieved by inverting the second and third lines of each stanza making both stanzas into mirror images of each other.

Now consider the first nine of the seventeen-line poem, “Devi, I Have Sat Before You” by Padma Chee:

Devi,
 I have
 sat before you
 just gazing
 I have
 danced
 as I have
 never danced
 looking at your gaze. (32)

Unlike in Ee’s poem, the title in Chee’s is undoubtedly separate from the poem proper, whereby it is repeated as the first three lines to intimate division between form and content. The poem begins well enough formally, isolating “Devi” to suggest her singularity in the eyes of her gazing lover. However, it is difficult to see how the various other formal qualities of the poem could inform its meaning since their deployment, to me at least, lacks reason. For example, not only are the pauses in “I have/sat before you/just gazing” unclear in their motivation (they cannot suggest an event occurring in a sequence because “I have sat” is past participle), they also cause the lines to sound unnatural when read aloud. Also, what poetic effect is meant to be engendered in transitioning from gazing to dancing, and in turn, from the gazing to looking at his beloved’s gaze? And are looking and gazing synonymous? If yes, why change terms? Lastly, while the poem’s circularity could perhaps imply the intimate bond between the two lovers, what of its repetition of certain words? One possibility is that it figuratively recalls dance moves (which are repetitive), but this interpretation is unconvincing since dancing is not the principle trope (which, if going by the title, is sitting) and appears only in the four lines quoted above and once more in the last, this time no longer as performance, but merely a desire to dance. Juxtaposing Ee’s and Chee’s poems clearly reveals the coherence reflected in the former, whereby form and content are symbiotically linked to effect meaning and foreground artistry. Alternatively, Chee’s seems like juvenilia, and is a poem only because it resembles one.

My aim with the above discussion is to debunk the view that writing poetry is relatively “easier” than other genres because it is apparently shorter, can be completed quickly (even in a single sitting) and less demanding. That a poem’s form must be carefully interwoven with the content to engender meaning already suggests the extent of difficulty involved in writing effective and meaningful poems, as it is not merely words that must be carefully chosen, but the formal devices needed to make the poem not just work, *but work towards establishing and/or enhancing meaning*. Returning to the book under review, to include poems of

questionable quality in an anthology claiming to showcase the best of Malaysian poetry in English seems, as such, rather self-defeating; I would rather the collection just focus on the first and second generation poets – a number of them are still writing – than try to be so encompassing to the point of undermining its overall quality.

Bad poetry, however, is not the anthology's only shortcoming. Apart from a "one-stop centre" type edition from which the reader can sample a wide range of local Anglophone poetry, there is little else that, *Malchin Testament* offers as resource. The entire work seems hastily cobbled together, and the editor offers no introduction to the poets or some contexts for reading them. The only guide provided is the brief introduction to the collection, but even this is poorly executed. Claiming the hybrid language of Engmalchin – a term derived from Salleh ben Joned's poem, "Malchin Testament" (257) – as Malaysia's contribution to world Englishes, the introduction goes on to say how the collection precisely showcases this unique variant of the English language in action, before winding the discussion down with incidental information on publication issues and concluding with some general themes preoccupying the poems. But when turning to the poems themselves, two things become speedily apparent: first, in Salleh's poem, (eng)malchin is an object of derision, not celebration, as the persona laments how it is a national embarrassment and a mockery of a language he loves. Second, only a handful of poems actually use engmalchin, and nearly all of them by Antares Maitreya (or Kit Lee), with telling titles like "Tao" (8) and "Aisodonolah" (10). The rest, or around ninety eight percent of the collection, comprises poetry that abides by Standard English rules, with negligible intermittent straying in terms of awkward, but not incorrect, use of grammar, usually effected so that words may be rearranged for rhyming purposes. In this regard then, the editor's introduction is actually more misleading rather than helpful.

The volume would have been an invaluable source for both scholarship and casual readership if it (a) had been better conceptualised, with a brief biodata of every poet and the issues with which his or her poetry is concerned provided before the poem(s) are presented, and (b) had included a thoughtful, carefully researched introduction that discusses, for example, the development of Anglophone Malaysian poetry since, perhaps, the 1970s, the issues faced particularly by both its writers and the genre itself, and the state of the genre's future based on current trends. As it is, the volume instead reminds me of a text featuring a Shakespearian play but without a single annotation to help the student navigate its otherwise complicated terrain – nice to have, but can do without.

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