

Baha Zain, *Postponing Truth and Other Poems*. Trans. Muhammad Haji Salleh. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2008. 200 pp. ISBN 978-983-62-9895-9.

Scholars working in the field of Malaysian literature tend to categorise and segregate their pursuits along linguistic lines: Malaysian literature in English, Malay literature, Mahua (Malaysian Chinese) literature and so on. It can be argued that such an approach is borne out of necessity and convenience: not all of us can or even prefer to read texts written in the various Malaysian vernaculars. Even if we can read works written in the national language, Malay, and one or two other languages, our fields of specialisation conspire to separate the study of these works according to language. In academia, it is an unspoken rule that the fields of learning should not duplicate or overlap with one another. Leave the research and teaching of Malay literature to the Malay Studies Department, and stake your claim on Malaysian literature written in English if you are from the English Department. The consequence of this clear departmentalisation and demarcation of academic boundaries is that gaps inevitably persist in our knowledge of that body of work we call Malaysian literature. Outside of the university, of course, what one chooses to read is strictly one's own business. In such a situation, translated works offer an invaluable entry point into the diverse worlds of Malaysian writing and can conceivably bridge the linguistic and scholarly divide. Scholar-writers such as Muhammad Haji Salleh are to be lauded for making works by Malay-language writers available in English translation.

This is my first encounter with the poetry of Baha Zain or Baharuiddin Zainal, and the experience left me feeling rather edified. Overall, the verse (both the original and translated versions) is thoughtfully crafted with a great sensitivity for lyricism, and the effect is a musicality that echoes in the mind long after one has read the poems. Occasionally, the lines have the quality of a *ghazal*, and this is especially the case in poems which address the beloved/lover who is sometimes a woman, sometimes God. Baha's literary preoccupations are varied. The poetry communicates a wide range of concerns, from social and political injustice to love, religion, culture, nature, and civilisation.

The tone of what can be rightly called his "protest" poems is always bold, forthright, urbane, and honest: Baha's voice does not beat around the bush even as it exudes sympathy for the downtrodden and contempt for their oppressors. The persona is unequivocal in his condemnation of tyranny in all its forms. In "Plea of the Asian Woman," "From Sarajevo to Another Road to Hell," and "Indonesia, On a Return Journey," Baha vehemently denounces the brutal conflicts that have resulted in untold human suffering. In the first poem,

the allusion to napalm and venereal diseases conveys the atrocities of the Vietnam War and the lingering effects which afflict the Asian woman: "What else can I surrender now/ All frangipanis wilt in the fire of the blasts/ You have filled all wombs/ with your dollar/ with your V.D" (10). The imagery is disturbing, but so is the war which has blighted the women who, in this poem, embody all of Asia and not just Vietnam. Her anguished plea is: "What else/ What else/ You have left me/ Heir to germs and destruction/ Let me be" (10).

If Baha depicts Asia and women as victims of white male domination and aggression, the poem "Lament of the European Maiden" chronicles the rape of a sister-continent. Europe, feminised as a maiden, has also been laid barren and waste: "You have defiled all/ sea, air and earth/ you have fouled/ lips, breasts, wombs, and my chastity,/ what remains are mere dreams" (61). The recurring motif of fertility does not signify new birth or regeneration; on the contrary, it suggests violation and degradation. The poem ends with the realisation that "Europe is no different/ it is a house of oppression" (61). This poem seems to be an afterthought to the Sarajevo poem where the same image of impregnation and violation resonates: "These are times of dark history,/ Mothers impregnated with seeds of a thousand hatreds" (59).

The speaker's scathing criticism of the inequality between East and West and the discriminatory attitudes and assumptions which create imbalances of power and privilege is somewhat tempered by the realisation that tyranny is humanity's common enemy. "Indonesia, On a Return Journey" records the struggle of the Indonesian people for freedom and justice in the course of their volatile history. The poem also extends the struggle to include that of many other nations: "This land is witness to tyrannies, each single one,/ Each tyranny bore a thousand children of the revolution.../ For the voice of truth carries the same meaning in all places,/ In the north pole, Palestine, in Myanmar, in Indonesia, and in/ Malaysia the good must overcome the treacherous" (116). In "The Prisoner of the Word," the speaker recognises that language and discourse can also be oppressive: "But what is more tormenting/ Than being a prisoner/ Of attitude and prejudice/ Of terminology and words" (123)? "What do Words Mean?" is an indictment of the hollowness and inadequacy of language when words are manipulated and "make no differentiation/ Between the director and the corruptor,/ Between minister and thief,/ Between patriot and traitor./ Between friend and foe,/ And between the genuine and the fake" (181).

Baha's poetic vision for the human race may sometimes appear bleak and cynical; nevertheless, amidst the ruins of civilisation and human ideals, the pervasive disillusionment, frustration, corruption, and betrayal, hope springs eternal. Love and God are never far away in Baha's universe. The love and religious poems, couched in elegant verse, are inspired and evocative. In "Only You," we encounter an omnipotent and omniscient God whose knowledge of human affairs is comfortingly absolute: "Only You know/ Each leaf that falls/

Each sincere word of regret.../ Only You know/ Each second that departs,
each second that stops” (93). In “I Speak Your Name, Always, My Love,” the
depiction of the lover, divine or mortal, is infused with passionate longing. The
poem is a love lyric which can be read metaphorically as expressing humanity’s
love for God, God’s love for humanity, as well as a man’s love for a woman.
The Edenic garden provides the backdrop for this intense desire: “... invite me
there/ To your bedside/ In the gardens, where/ Water, milk, wine and honey
flow/ Never changing their flavour and colour/ Let me be drunk with passion/
Dissolve in your eternal embrace,/ My love” (177).

On a more secular note, Baha’s “Merdeka” or Independence poems are
eloquent expressions of a nation’s freedom and how, confronted with new
forms of colonisation and subjugation, there is a pressing need to question and
challenge the status quo in the interest of integrity and justice. Baha has also
produced many travel poems, and the journeys are recorded in poems set in
places like Paris, Ann Arbor (Michigan), Cairo, Istanbul, London, and Paris.
The varied experiences and reflections gleaned from travel are nuanced with
emotions ranging from the wonder of first snow to feelings of loneliness in an
alien city.

Baha’s treatment of cityscapes is inflected with a sense of desolation and
foreboding. “City of Toilet Paper” is a critique of urban life: a life characterised
by boredom, chaos, filth, anxiety, and dejection. The toxicity of the city is
evoked in these lines: “In the mist of dust and soot.../ A white morning to
awake in/ Eventually to surrender to the poisonous night.../ We cannot
escape from ourselves/ We build and hate this filthy city/ That devours the
encircling green./ We cannot escape from the boredom/ Though it offers life
for another day” (33). Such a civilisation is a “tissue paper civilization”: flimsy,
morally bankrupt, and sterile. In “The City’s Exile,” the “stalled and
suffocating” (143) Kuala Lumpur underscores the mechanised and exilic life
that many urban dwellers live. The toxic city points to ecological destruction
and loss. In “The Dust and the Anger of Nature,” the speaker warns of
“adventurers waiting/ With chalices and weapons/ Of poison and dust” (145).
Avarice has precipitated the “Burning [of] all that is greening,” but “nature
avenges” and “Now it is their [the animals and insects] turn/ To strangle us, we
who are trapped in the city and village” (145-46). This poem raises the question
of environmental ethics and responsibility, and the crisis that is, to a large
extent, caused by those for whom “Richness is all/ Propped by power.” Their
“fingers [burn all] to cinders/ Wrapped in dust and sin” (145).

In all this and no matter where the road takes him, the poet Baha plays
many roles as chronicler, witness, critic, empathiser, and most of all, a lover of
humanity and of God.

Agnes S.K. Yeow
University of Malaya, Malaysia

© Copyright 2009 Asiatic, ISSN 1985-3106
<http://asiatic.iium.edu.my>
<http://asiatic.iu.edu.my>
International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)