

“[T]he most underrated genre”: Malaysian Poetry in English in the 21st Century

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Abstract

The point of this paper is two-fold. Firstly, it will survey all the important volumes of poetry by Malaysian poets writing in English in the new millennium and try to infer the current trends of Malaysian poetic writing in English. Secondly, I will show how the online social media has been wholly responsible in keeping the poetic word alive, especially in terms of the number of young writers who have espoused the form of the Spoken Word sub-genre of poetry. In fact, the spoken word poets seem to have discovered a new poetic “nerve” of the nation that is both exciting and challenging to read.

Keywords

21st century Malaysian poetry, Malaysian literature, spoken word, poetic trends, postcolonial poetry, world literature

The final decade of the twentieth century as well as the few years leading up to it proved to be the most fertile period in terms of the number of poetry publications that appeared from Malaysian poets writing in English. As soon as Wong Phui Nam ended his literary silence with the publication of *Remembering Grandma and Other Rumours* (1989) in Singapore and his first volume of collected verse *Ways of Exile: Poems from the First Decade* (1993) published by the now-defunct Skoob Books in London, the Malaysian poetry scene in English underwent a new surge in interest. This was evident, in spite of Grace Chin calling the local poetry scene of this period “the most underrated genre” (273), in the various national poetry writing competitions as well as the outpouring of published verse in creative writing anthologies and full-fledged volumes (the appearance of chapbooks in Malaysia was only evident in the following decade). With the arrival of the new millennium, English poetry in Malaysia continued to be bravely at the forefront, constantly trying to discover new and rich textures in terms of style and subject

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matter, although the actual number of full-length volumes published could not match that of the decade before. On the one hand, the traditional medium of the printed page was not as prolific as the reading tastes of the Malaysian reader became more and more sophisticated. Yet, on the other, the advent of online blogs, poetry forums, Facebook groups and the ever-popular chapbook has in some ways, in which the traditional medium of publishing couldn't do, ensured the survival of poetry in English in Malaysia. The point of this paper then is two-fold. Firstly, it will survey all the important volumes of poetry by Malaysian poets writing in English in the new millennium and try to infer the current trends of Malaysian poetic writing in English. Secondly, I will show how the online social media has been wholly responsible in keeping the poetic word alive, especially in terms of the number of young writers who have espoused the form of the Spoken Word sub-genre of poetry. In fact, the spoken word poets seem to have discovered a new poetic "nerve" of the nation that is both exciting and challenging to read.

I will begin this paper with an important volume of verse published at the very beginning of the 21st century called *A History of Amnesia* by Alfian Saat (2001). Although born and bred in Singapore, Alfian has always included a Malay consciousness when writing about his multicultural island nation, which often finds many commonalities with the psyche of the Malays living in Malaysia and all Malaysians in general, although in the peninsula the Malay ethnic group represents the voice of the majority whereas in Singapore they are seen as woefully marginalised, a theme that is present in all of Alfian's writing thus far. These psychological underpinnings of the Malay psyche are often similar; the only difference is that the marginalisation of Singapore Malays is seen as more severe than their Malaysian counterparts. Add to this, the very closely shared history of both nations and that Alfian performs his plays regularly both in the English and Malay languages in Kuala Lumpur. In this rather eloquent volume resides a group of poems in the final section entitled "White Light of History" which is unlike any poetic engagement with history from this part of the world (perhaps only Muhammad Haji Salleh's reworking of the myths from the Malay Nusantara world comes to mind). The famous historical characters from classical Malay literature are resurrected to challenge the minds and imaginations of present-day Singaporeans. Although official Singaporean history rarely chooses to resuscitate the stories of the characters of its early Malay narratives, what Alfian has chosen to do is to reclaim some of the lives of these characters so as to "haunt" or challenge the more accepted notions of state history which suggest that the beginnings of the island's history came with the arrival of the British and that which was continued via its straits-born Chinese citizens.

The Malay "heroes" from the classical *Sejarah Melayu*, or *The Malay Annals*, such as Hang Nadim, Badang and Raden Mas Ayu sit alongside other more real Singaporean prisoners of conscience to try to elicit a meaningful response from

the vast majority of “Numb” citizens who, in the poem “Apathy,” are said to sleep “on headlines/ Plumped like pillows,/ Stuffed with cotton,” wholly oblivious to those who tried to make a difference, those who continue the struggle of those who have come before, “the gaping mouths/ Of the silenced and the dead” (*History of Amnesia* 54-55). The mythical character who stands out amidst the confusion of revolt and history would have to be accidental hero, Hang Nadim. Hang Nadim is the famous Malay boy hero who in classical terms had to tread the fine line between being a loyal subject and the feudal world of the Malay court. He averts a national crisis when he provides a simple solution to the kingdom being attacked by schools of swordfish, but due to the intrigues of the Sultan and the court he is put to death so as to avoid larger conflicts of injustice and loyalty to the Sultan and the future of his kingdom.

Alfian verbalises the moment of the martyrdom of Hang Nadim in this way:

I was a boy with an idea.
 I could have kept mum,
 Watched the folly of a king
 Who would rather lose his men
 Than their loyalty. Instead
 I stood on the beach, my voice
 Louder than the scream
 Of any false martyrs too eager
 To donate their marrow
 To history. My mouth
 Was so large it could have
 Swallowed the sea. And I did,
 Even though in all the records
 They only mentioned how
 It was the sea that swallowed me. (*History of Amnesia* 60)

In the classical account of the myth this boy hero was simply thrown in to the sea and left to drown there. However, by making him paradoxically scream out loud and open his mouth so wide that it could “swallow” the sea, Alfian subverts the historical account to allow for him now to speak up – to speak out – against the many injustices perceived in contemporary society, making him look like a contemporary hero. This rewriting of history, these metonymical engagements of the poet, also suggest that these historical characters like Hang Nadim act also as real, contemporary Singaporeans who, rather than just reclaim an unnoticed space of their cultural history, also engage with the present to suggest that any canonical discourse from Malay literature cannot be deemed unitary, employing a counter-discursive strategy like John Thieme’s which engage and argue the relevance of

the nation's unredeemed denizens, those that are pushed to live on the margins of nation and political history (Thieme 102).²

The metaphorical strategies of the employment of the other figures such as the Malay superhero Badang and the tragic fate of the Javanese Princess Raden Mas Ayu work in the same way, but to say that Alfian was only working with classical history in mind is to give an incomplete picture of his mythical discourse. All the poems in the volume *A History of Amnesia* (2001) seem to have a wider frame of metonymical reference (and this is the genius of the poet). Instead of having a narrow topical interest, the poems here are anchored in the reality of the new nation of Singapore that became independent from Malaysia in 1965. The volume carries an apposite epigraph of "The patient, born in 1965, suffers from a history of amnesia of unknown onset and duration.... The prognosis is uncertain." Which is to say that the discourse of the socio-historical meaning of this volume must be read as part of the larger history of the land, of the contemporary nation of Singapore, which must then include the many voices of the Malay poet himself, political dissidents of the present and the past as well as the many social activists who have helped create a more just and fair society.

Of the Malaysian poets who had poetry volumes at the start of the millennium, Wong Phui Nam would probably be the first. It is rather ironic that for a writer who maintained a literary "silence" for almost two decades in the second half of the twentieth century, Wong has proved to be the most prolific male Malaysian poet thus far. He has come out with two volumes of new poetry and one collected (and revised) volume of mostly published work, as well as two plays in verse. The first volume is of course the very disturbing *Against the Wilderness* (2000) which, according to the poet's preface, was written amidst a cultural wilderness wherein the immediacy of the word can only catch "echoes from places and times when the word was still interfused with the world as presence" (i). In spite of sounding overtly Romantic and old fashioned, such a mission to instil some kind of moral order in the world through poetry bears much fruit. I would go so far as to say that this volume must be the poet's most organised and coherent piece of writing. His main ideas of the struggle to discover some kind of identity amidst the dour socio-cultural and historical landscape, the "wilderness" as he calls it, are all reminiscent of his first volume of verse published more than thirty years before. Even the preponderance to mythologise the landscape is also highly evident.

However, what is certainly new in this volume is the whittling down of his poetic language to cohere to the demands of the sonnet form. Gone are the long and laborious visions of the land found in his writing from the sixties; now, the poet hones his skill to discover a concentration of thought and words which

² This strategy of reading "against the simplism of seeing canonical discourse as unitary" is used throughout Thieme's seminal study *Postcolonial Con-texts: Writing back to the Canon* (102).

ultimately succeeds in presenting a terrifying vision of what he calls of “these most unpromising of times” (i). In sonnet after sonnet the resources of the soul (or psyche) to discover some transcendental meaning from within the inhospitable landscape are tested with such a brutal examination of history and sense of place, so much so that the reader feels that he or she is reading the verse of *How the Hills Are Distant* all over again. But what was more of the migratory nature of the psyche in that early volume is now given a bodily, human form in this new one, although only to discover and be overcome by the reek of spiritual abandonment. In the sonnet “China Bride,” for instance,

But he never found me even as he rifled, sieved
 My body, smelling out crotch and underarm and drugged
 Himself on bitter exhalations from my woman’s glands.
 He burrowed, a fly into carrion, to seed me with his death.
 (*Against the Wilderness* 9)

Here there is little hope for any kind of spiritual renewal as the generation after is also cursed by the present one of the poem. The fascination with death and the rotting nature of our corporeal selves are as pervasive here as in everything else written by the Wong.

An Acre of Day’s Glass (2006) was the next volume to appear. It did come as a surprise to me that the volume was his second tome of collected verse after the first one, *Ways of Exile: Poems from the First Decade* that was published thirteen years before in 1993. Although it is the poet’s prerogative to rewrite and revise his work over the years, more than one reviewer has highlighted the fact that some older poems were heavily revised compared with their originals. The critic Daryl Lim in the website poetry.sg notes that poems as in the volume *Remembering Grandma and Other Rumours* had undergone substantial revision (np) whereas Shirley Lim is more forgiving by saying that some poetic rewriting is done “in order to articulate his more mature sensibility and vision of the universe, physical and spiritual.” Lim also mentions that some poems like his translations from the Chinese were re-grouped under different headings.

But it is in Wong’s sequence “The Hidden Papyrus of Hen-tai” that the most substantive reformatting and rewriting is to be seen. Appearing initially in the section of uncollected verse called “Of Spirit” (in the form of eight poems of varying length), the sequence underwent one more incarnation in the academic journal *Asiatic* (2009: 130-40) before finding its final form that was published as a volume in 2013.³ The final sequence is also fashioned not unlike the poems in

³ My review of Wong’s published volume traces its genesis in this way: “This latest sequence of poems has an interesting genesis. The footprint of the project first finds light of day in Wong’s second volume of collected verse, *An Acre of Day’s Glass* (2006), under the same title. The introductory ideas of the preparation of a pharaoh’s body for the journey into the afterlife is clearly spelt out there. Then a few years later the poet decided to publish a blueprint of sorts in the online

Against the Wilderness employing a tight, unrhymed sonnet form. And true to Wong's talent to mythologise, it eschews the postcolonial poetic space of contemporary and historical Malaya but, instead, chooses to delve into the possibilities of discovering a more transcendent world in the burial and funerary mythmaking of ancient Egypt. The character of Hen-tai, a neophyte priestess, tries to discover the possibilities of gaining transcendental knowledge from her earthly rituals and religion but comes to nought till she realises that it is within the resources of her psyche and imagination that she is able to avoid oblivion. And she finally does, with the music of a lyre beautifully accompanying her journey of the soul to the afterlife.

One poet that needs mention but one who has not exactly had any full-length volume of writing published is the young Nicholas Wong. Ever since discovering his early verse and collecting some of them in the Malaysian journal *The Southeast Asian Review of English (SARE)*, I have noticed that the quality of the intellect and his art has never waned but, instead, grown with an added confidence. His poetry is not easy to read or understand, requiring many readings and adequate reflection (as in all great art). But when his world of human paradoxes and the reversals of life fuse meaningfully with the meanderings of the intellect, a genuine world of freshness of insight and depth is to be experienced. In the early poem "House and Man," which I believe was written before the poet's entering university, there's a lovely final stanza that displays an amazing ability to fuse craft and meaning:

... The coin that fell from eternity
 fell on my cheek. And I was struck
 blind to provision's blindness, to how
 A.E. Housman gathered by, mist-
 eyes, perfect, rounded like coins.
 I was afraid to spoil his Greekness,
 those eyes which wept and flickered
 lost time. They were real coins, I thought.
 I guided him to the boat. He didn't flip
 the coins off his lids, but fading,
 cried, "Mo, where, where have you been?"
 I picked up his tears as he slipped
 back to shore. When I looked back, I saw
 the Malay house, calm in the recent storm. (*SARE* 129)

The metaphor of the coin in this poem is suggestive of a spectrum of intelligent meaning within the poem, referring to among other things the beauty and tradition of the old Malay house which is possibly of the older country which

journal *Asiatic* (2009) of what is the first five stanzas of the current poetry sequence, all polished and fashioned using a tighter but unrhymed sonnet form" (Jeyam 36).

many Malaysians still yearn for. The metaphor is also suggestive of the contemporary money politics of the “ugly country” of the poet’s, as well as that imaginative leap into A.E. Housman’s biography and his unrequited, forbidden love of yore for an old university friend (the “Mo” or Moses in the extract). As tradition, modernity and the imaginative vision of the sending back of Housman to the underworld are contained in those rich tropes of the coin, is the poet struck at the very end by an idea of calmness that signifies hope for the nation in spite of the many dark portents? Or are the many portents to be read differently? The possibilities here of the interpretation of the themes of the self, identity and nation are rich and always inspired.

While pursuing his first degree in America, Nicholas Wong went on to publish his newer verse in prestigious journals including the *The Columbia Review*, *Asymptote* and *The Rialto*. He has also won the Arthur E. Ford Poetry Prize (2011) and the Academy of American Poets Poetry Award (in 2008 and 2010). His poem “Zero Copula” also won The Salt Prize for Best Individual Poem in 2012 (as runner-up). His meanderings of the intellect continues in his next two publications, his most recent ones, *Zero Copula* (2015) and *Sea Hypocrisy* (2016). Both these publications come in the form of chapbooks and are some of the most challenging to read in all of Malaysian poetry of the twenty-first century thus far. Coming to terms with most of the poems in these chapbooks is like discovering a new and very exotic dish. And as soon as you have uncovered the reasons for the success of the dish you are told that its true meaning lies in savouring its intellectual appeal rather than its gustatory textures and flavours. If there were a more postmodern appeal to writing these poetry chapbooks, this would be it. The poems might appear to some as a kind of glorious mental masturbation but any keen reader of poetry would be able to recognise their intricate though sometimes abstruse mastery of tone, wit and paradox. Plus, a fascination for form is also evident even though the poems appear to eschew the traditional poetic line in favour of a more prosaic nature of line-making (I will avoid the more arcane term, poetry in prose), but kept within a sonnet-like structure. Take, for example, the piece “Spanish Oak” which was published in *The Columbia Review*.

... my love for you
 is really old, like a solitary oak crowded out by olive trees.
 With sharp funicular arms, it naturalizes every metaphor,
 multiplies with precise needlework Pinocchio’s error, and
 lives what lie the soul is permitted, only avoiding the one
 last noose every lonely dove hangs on. Careless, each bird
 that makes love on branches, becomes the very same cock
 that gurgled “original” on your cornflakes box, or in 1350,
 bore witness to Ramon Arnau de Biure’s famous stabbing
 on Christmas Eve. The tune of death crows louder, finally,
 and it’s not Peter’s insufferably stuffy biblical pigeon. Yet,

to love you as tree and bird collide, is hard, as the concrete nouns inside us must wear different ecological footprints. Yet I write in Spanish: to love, steal the Alhambra's breath from meteors of night, and smell the circular boast of weed in a soap factory nearby, we are already high and flying, no longer holding to the warm sheets in Madrid, the same lives.
(*Zero Copula*)

Purportedly a love poem, it is a free play of mental and fanciful metaphorical associations that hinge on to the controlling trope of the Spanish "solitary oak" tree, meandering within, according to the poet earlier in the poem, "a cosmopolitan anxiety at work."

Another outpouring of verse comes from the likes of recent two volumes by Malachi Edwin Vethamani, namely his volumes *Complicated Lives* (2016) and *Life Happens* (2017). While the work of Nicolas Wong can confound the reader for being challenging in his literariness, Malachi Edwin's verse appears to be quite the opposite, but that in itself provides a challenge not for the general reader out there but for his critics. In poem after poem in volumes more than a hundred pages in length Malachi Edwin writes about very ordinary insights into life in the most "dressed down" way of writing. I have always been confounded by his lack of metaphorical language in almost all his verse. The oft-imagined characteristics of poetry such as the compression of thought and feeling as well as the use of trope and figurative language confounds a critic like me to wonder whether he had imbibed the virtues of Ezra Pound's imagism so wholly that he forgot about the *form* of literary language altogether. Let me illustrate my point.

It's not the fragrance
Of you I desire.
It's the raw odour
Of you I drink deeply.
The musk and pure
Sweat of you.
In inhaling you
I am drunk to dizziness.
Klein and Givenchy
Can keep the falseness
Of your body scent
They smother.
Their sweetness is not you. (*Life Happens* 46)

Is there more to such a "naked" poem such as this one quite plainly titled "Odour of You"? A critic like the writer Chuah Guat Eng, in her review of *Complicated Lives*, seemed to struggle to go beyond her first instinct that such verse feels like "little more than chopped up prose" but ends with relief by saying that the "tonal

and emotional density” is precisely what such poems are about. Another critic, Wong Phui Nam, explains such a poetic feature much further by correctly saying that, “It is the surface simplicity that deceives, for it obscures, in the strongest poems in the collection, the deeply felt range of complex emotions underneath” (*Asiatic* 259). What compels me to read such poetry in the end is this ultra-delicate balance of language which Malachi Edwin adeptly employs. While his prose-like poems prevent the reader from discovering an emotional centre or intensity that we often discover in fine poetry, yet when read correctly the impact of craft and meaning is finally gained, though the feeling of the poet’s dis-attachment to the world is always present. Therefore, what appears simple is really quite complex, and what makes his two volumes of verse stand out from the crowd of new writing is in the way his critics have to strain sometimes to discover the life’s momentary intensities, meaning itself.

Malachi Edwin was also responsible for another poetry publication, an anthology that is in my opinion the most important collection of verse published thus far in this new millennium in Malaysia. *Malchin Testament: Malaysian Poems* (2017) is a meaningful project which collects all the early practitioners of verse starting from around the formation of Malaysia in 1963 (although Wong Phui Nam early poems were already written the decade before that. The “Malchin Testament” of the title of the anthology refers to a poem of the same name by poet Salleh Ben Joned. That poem pokes fun at the possibilities of Malaysian English slang and idiom being used in the writing of local verse and hence humorously points the way to discovering an identity of its own and democratising the language altogether. The importance of such an anthology is that ever since Edwin Thumboo’s anthology *The Second Tongue* that was published all the way back in 1976 there has not been another comprehensive collection of Malaysian verse. *Malchin Testament* takes this into account and includes all the important poets who wrote before the 1990s, the true predecessors of today’s Malaysian poetry, such as Ee Tiang Hong, Wong Phui Nam, Siew-Yue Killingley, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, Muhammad Haji Salleh, Hilary Tham and Salleh Ben Joned himself. But the newer, emerging voices also gain fair representation in this anthology, though the only sin of omission here is the poetry of Nicholas Wong (or Zhou Sivan).

So far this article has given the impression that there were no female poets of note who came out with published volumes in this new millennium. That, however, is far from the case. Writer and poet Bernice Chauly has been especially prolific with her string of books which have found a large, popular audience. Her notable ones would be her autobiographical *Growing up with Ghosts* (2011) and novel *Once We Were There* (2017). She also had two poetry collections published, *The Book of Sins* (2008) and *Onkalo* (2013). Alina Rastam also has two poetry volumes published, namely *Diver and Other Poems* (2009) and *All the Beloveds* (2011). The multi-talented Shirley Lim too has been as prolific as ever in this new

millennium. Although positioning herself again and again as an American poet, she has published three volumes of writing in Singapore not too long ago. The first was the anthology called *The Shirley Lim Collection: Passports and Other Lives* (2011) which collects all her previous fiction and poetry, spanning an amazing fifty years. The second and third volumes were both published in early 2015 by Ethos Books, titled *Ars Poetica for the Day* and *Do You Live In?* The latter volume demonstrates why Lim is more the global writer than just American. While her poetry up till the new millennium often focusses on the many unresolved antinomies between migration and home, between America and Malaysia, *Do you Live In?* for instance re-sites the issues of the *unheimlich* in not only Malaysia but also Singapore and Hong Kong with the force of history and politics of the region never seen before.

So how do we judge Malaysian poetry thus far in this new millennium? If at all that there needs to be an answer to that question, it would seem to me that the future of poetry written in English in Malaysia will eventually be found in its new centre of gravity within the Spoken Word form.⁴ While almost all the poets reviewed above belong to some kind of academic institution in one way or another, the next generation of Malaysian poets are discovering their voices through the very act of *performing* the word, where the written word is embodied by a literary performance to succeed. Primacy given to the written word on the page is today slowly being superseded by the need to perform the word as speech, recited aloud, giving a new audio-visual appeal to the traditional form. Amongst the millennial poets the need to perform up on a stage at open-mic readings, poetry slams, “prose” monologue readings or through the dissemination of recordings on online media such as YouTube videos has never been more significant.

The Spoken Word scene has a short and rather recent history in Malaysia. I am told that they began with the British Council sponsoring and bringing in various writers who promoted this somewhat new art form in Kuala Lumpur, which began around 2007 and the year after. Poets such as Jacob Sam-La Rose, Charlie Dark, Benjamin Zephaniah and Malika Booker, amongst others, were the first to inculcate in and encourage this new art form amongst a very millennial audience. These newbies to the form were then encouraged to set up various collectives of their own. There was also the Singaporean Chris Mooney-Singh who worked with some local writers, running mainly poetry slams in the capital city. Now some 10 years later we do see the establishment of various spoken word collectives taking root. Amongst them Jamal Raslan has created such a group with local art college students called The Poet’s Passport. Another poet

⁴ Much of my knowledge about the local Spoken Word scene in the Klang valley derives from my various conversations via Messenger with Catalina Rembuyan, who has actively participated in various open-mic events and published a chapbook entitled *Spokes: A Poetry Chapbook*. She currently teaches at the School of the Arts, Singapore.

Sheena Baharudin has started organising open mic events called Numinous, which features various spoken word acts. Another poet Melizarani T. Selva has run the If Walls Could Talk poetry event after watching a few American spoken word poets perform at a local mall. Journalist Terence Toh reports that there are many other events like *Jack It*, *Malam Sayu Berpuisi*, *Bakar Purgatory* and *KL Poetry Share*, and that “each event has its own style and format, featuring different kinds of performances.”

Both Sheena and Melizarani are the two spoken word artistes to have come out with full-length poetry collections of their own, published under the imprint of Selut Press called Perfect Binding. Despite the meagre output from this art form, I am told that most of these younger poets have published various chapbooks, a type of publication that appeals mostly to all the millennial poets writing today in Malaysia. The urge to write and publish might be eagerly taking on new modes and fashions but all of this bodes well for the future of the Malaysian poetry in English. The academics, as always, will continue to write and publish as part of their calling in that field, while out there on the web and the impromptu stages the younger voices will still be heard, often in very new and innovative ways, often in ways that will challenge old notions of poetry, especially our expectations of what poetry is or isn't. As this new “nerve” of the nation is uncovered, they have discovered a form that is neither repressive nor distorting of reality, a form that allows for their individual selves to speak about and within a society that has been feverishly evolving ever since the turbulent new face of politics in the new century, which in all honesty has provided an impetus to discover newer perspectives of a still fledgling postcolonial nation.

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