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Jennifer Anne Champion



Caterwaul

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Actress, model, performance poet Jennifer Champion's second collection of poetry, *Caterwaul*, stands out locally for being refreshingly odd, exasperating, complicated. In "Nap Time," there is a sense of this poet caught even pre-birth in a far from lost family history/past. That past features an Islam as it locally, authentically once was here and a Christianity as it inexorably persists. Adult family confusion is recalled over whether a grandfather should be buried as a Muslim or a Christian. The supposedly ingenuous line "I/ don't know if Serangoon ever had a mosque but it has five/ churches" (7), begs still pertinent questions. In "Grandparents":

She didn't want to move with him to Hougang.
The food would be too 'Muslim'

For a Hakka-tempered tongue. (13)¹

Elsewhere in “Confessions of an English-Speaking Opium Eater,”

my father bows and makes salat five times a day
in the direction of mechanist ideals (57)

Imagery is generated from local Islamic roots in ways Edwin Thumboo with perhaps even richer mongrel and disparate roots than Champion’s seems less happy to tap. Few prominent anglophone Singaporean writers past or present, Gregory Nalpon and Ng Yisheng aside, have even attempted to cross borderlines and sustainedly touch on this dark side of the exogamous privileged landscape, Singapura’s indigenous minority culture/faith. While it may all be part of a seemingly distant past, now reposing in older aunties, with scant resemblance to the external world of say Alfian Sa’at’s *Malay Sketches*, Champion gestures fascinatingly to a past alternate, richly efflorescing Islam in Singapura as it was and could have been.

In Section iv of “Nap Time,” we witness through the freest verse a deft, complex, wide-arcng shifting from past to present to future linked by a poetic consistency of genuinely wilful resistance to a constricting status quo. That resistance connects a personal unique infancy to present adulthood while bearing witness to the effort required for such resistance. A grandmother seems to be a forbearer of a series of regular negative impositions experienced on domestic-national levels in several poems. In “Axe Oil” and “Dining Table,” for example, older female members of a supposedly post riots harmonious Singapura are resolutely intent on stifling younger ones. But Champion as troubled and haunted girl then or girl now is forever caterwauling – never “needs” to be quiet, cannot be anything but tirelessly too loud even in the face of bullying. “Nap Time” ends with infant joy and Orc-like² rebellion recollected in tranquillity as a little girl rejects such impositions with joyful wilful resistance retrospectively celebrated:

At any rate, I lifted my face and screamed too loudly, ‘No, I don’t!’
And the church that I had built with my body
exploded with light and laughter. (8)

It was only after repeated readings that I pieced together THAT in this jigsaw puzzle of a mini-epic that the little girl is not necessarily responding to her grandmother’s proscriptions but rather her whistleblowing infant classmate’s peaching: “*Lao si! Ta yao s?*” [*Teacher! She wants to die!*] (5). In Champion’s

¹ Perhaps here as elsewhere a reader might catch oblique, Yap-like ambiguous allusions to Lee’s shade?

² Cf. William Blake, *America: A Prophecy*, especially plate 12.

recollections, language as opposed to racial difference are more prominent in animating the mind-forged manacles. Individual rejection of such socially engineered manacles for the masses seems to continue into the adult world of “Am I or Am I Not Interested?”: “Fridges? Administrators? *Pab*” (25). I may be misreading Champion’s poem, but I get a sense of refreshing contempt at the seemingly inevitable crass imposition of “development,” the masculine corporate imposing simultaneously on local nature, local people. That theme/ message of vocally escaping what’s silently forced upon us recalls Champion’s earlier poem, “Lonely Whale.” Champion is certainly no HDB poet, but in this collection there is thankfully little sense of the quite familiar comfortably politic and decorated poet harping expediently, dodging and receding behind literary form and extra-literary good deeds as Venice burns.

It could well be that our core selves are more or less defined by the age of five; in a sense we know fundamentally more by then than we’ll ever learn subsequently. Champion touches on how the anxieties of childhood, poorly appetites, experiences of death, (not) wishing for death, ambiguous sexual identities, bleed poignantly into our respective adulthoods in poetry, in real life, in engagements with the “dead” and “art.” In “HERE IS A REPRODUCTION,” the adult poet, with no false modesty, refers to her infant self’s drawn response to her grandmother’s well framed and hung jigsaw of Jean-Francois Millet’s “The Gleaners” (retrospectively recreated on page 10): “a much more sophisticated answer than cut and dried scribble or jigsaw riddle” (11). Perhaps only a poet as late as twenty-five, Champion locates and reclaims an artistic sensibility and creativity in herself aged five. Perhaps I am overreading, but a closer look at Millet’s painting suggests that in her tribute and gift to Grandma, “little me” has disregarded the artist’s too familiar foreground, in favour of the top left background detail of haystacks, as if sympathetically looking through the eyes of the very small girl in the painting. Yet the child’s gift is wilfully negatively misread by the monomaniacally pious: “the grandmother will tell the little girl that she has/ drawn a church. an awful awful church. why is the cross upside down?” (11). To add further ambiguity, the pitchforks that the grandmother reads as inverted crosses don’t actually feature in Millet’s painting. The little girl in early eastern Christian mystic fashion can as yet only respond in negatives: “notachurch, I answer” (12). Champion again deftly juxtaposes and opposes personal memory past and present, generating mutually, simultaneously illuminating perspectives.

Champion seems locally unique in her seemingly unbroken, at times very heart-on-sleeve, confessional connection with and subversive privileging of childhood, the past, the beautiful and the uncertainly unspacious. And though at times this Serangoon Garden hailing poet seems uncannily on trend, cosmopolitan not least in her literary allusions, at other times she is – perhaps especially in a Singapore context – urbanely, nuancedly old-fashioned, at others

somewhat hippy dippy. Well-heeled, radical, refreshingly fluid, truly gynocentric and wilfully odd both in form and content, one wonders why this original often affecting and unforgettable collection has so far received limited attention compared with her safer, more predictable stablemates.

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