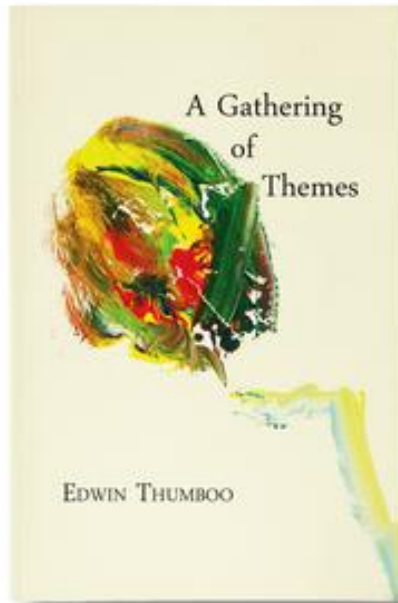


Edwin Thumboo, *A Gathering of Themes*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2018. 280 pp. ISBN: 978-981-11-9809-0.



As the title indicates, this collection of poems encapsulates some of the key themes of Edwin Thumboo's massive output as a poet. In some ways it reflects his development as a poet when it comes to his style as well and content. Beyond that it also records Edwin Thumboo's own growth as a person.

In keeping with the subsections in the rather large collection, with slight variation, its theme may be seen in terms of the following" into which the volume is divided: Chin, Tribes, Togetherness, Cultures, I to I, By Quiet Waters, and Words. The divisions are uneven in length as well in other ways, understandably so. For in some ways they reflect Thumboo's interests or concerns. Significantly, the last section, Words, is the shortest given that the whole exercise of poetry depends on words. Yet this is apt for words are the tools used for the expression of all that this work and others contain. As seen in the few poems in this section, there is always the need, when dealing with language as such to end up being technical. The poems in this section make this quite manifest. Interestingly too, the whole collection and the particular piece ends it, entitled "To a Young Poet," serves as a parting gift, a piece of advice for future generations of writers. It includes key elements such as the sources of poetry, and how poems are made. Yet, this piece is a recapitulation of Thumboo's own development:

I too had dreams. Sixty years older, frayed around

Edges, unlike yours... but hopes are steadier.
They followed me. A few proved hollow. Others apt,
Flush with twinkling stars. ("To a Young Poet" 241)

Returning to the other sections, of themes in the volume, since it's a large collection it will be possible only to select certain pieces for comment. The section entitled *Chin*, named after Thumboo's wife, is certainly personal, with references to members of his family and at times romantic.

The second section, *Tribes*, is in some ways the most significant and powerful in the volume demonstrating both Thumboo's strong interest in and grasp of history as such and the past and more recent political connections at most times uncomfortable, between Malaya and Singapore, in particular. History is seen in terms of the colonial impact represented by Raffles, Alfonso and other Western figures, as well as the significance of the Chinese and other races within it. What is important for him in all these changing fortunes of Singapore is the "belongingness":

To us, early Singaporeans
The first and real insiders mind you—this is our
City, where the diamond of our Eurasian days abides,
Where our children find themselves, compete, reach
For the Sky....
History, the merging of the tribes as we start
Another hope, another vision, another journey...
(“Alphonso at Tea” 31)

This piece, like many others, demonstrates Edwin Thumboo's fierce "Singaporean-ness": the fact that Singaporeans have developed into a new "tribe, multicultural in character, beyond the narrowness of race." His sense of utter belongingness to the place; and not just to its present but also to its past as seen in poems like "Ancestral homes" its multiplicity, and his place within it, a multiplicity which embraces all races and cultures. This is an ongoing theme in Thumboo's poems, as reflected in the present collection. Many of the poems in this section deal with local issues. They include historical figures, politicians, academics, writers from far and near, some of them closely associated with him, and named in the poems in the next part, *Together*, which is essentially about his relationship with these persons both in Singapore and beyond.

The section entitled *Cultures* in some ways carries on with the same themes and ideas contained in the previous section. This time, however, while still keeping an eye on Singapore, Thumboo explores other lands, still connected with the idea of history, while bringing into his poems his own experiences and reflections as he travels into local places as a highly observant traveller. He visits Melaka and Port Dickson in Malaysia, and internationally to such places as Macau.

Essentially these record his experiences, and have little in them about cultures, although they do reflect back on certain aspects of history and local identity.

Once again this section deals with the local scenes and Singapore setting indicating the poet's place within that setting. Again local elements predominate, but this time Thumboo reflects upon himself within the contexts already familiar to readers in the previous poems. It is still all about Edwin Thumboo, and Singapore. But there are glimpses of changes as nature, symbolised by the leaf has given way to other things in a highly regulated society.

Years and years ago, you fell in shafts
Of light. Your tree was young. Eyes
Tracking that fall, were wonder-filled
Green innocence.

You danced side to side tilted twisted
Summersaulted inside a puff of wind; then
Floated gentle, soft, silent down. Eyes
Saw a small story.

The poem goes on to refer to the changes that have come to the very soil and in the environment:

No wild flowers. Only regular N-Park rows.
Corners are for barbecues. You still fall, my
Vivid leaf. I watch again, wondering. Eyes
See smart and probe.

Yet sadly wish for wilder green. ("Leaf" 150)

The poems in the next section, *By Quiet Waters*, deal essentially with themes drawn from the Bible, with prominent figures, including Batsheba, David, Jonah, Joseph and others featured in individual poems. Overall, while retelling stories connected with this section demonstrates Edwin Thumboo's own spiritual growth and development. This is best seen in "The Convert," which reflects very passionately, the new faith and the still ongoing struggle with the past:

I am the way, the truth and the life,
Says the Son. My new Trimurthi. I must
Walk their path, with clean feet.

The Om still echoes Amen. Be my God
Send that ancient, habitual sound into silence
Among the trees and fields behind this house. ("The Convert" 225)

This quite comprehensive and, in some ways remarkable, volume encapsulates Edwin Thumboo's work and development as a person as well as a poet. It is a representative volume. What emerges, apart from his own personal relations with people and the world at large, is his massive exposure and experience and his insight particularly into the region in which Singapore is placed, and his utter sense of belonging and loyalty to it as a multicultural nation. If any discomfort comes to the reader it is likely to be from the more "personal" character of certain poems. On the whole, the collection demonstrates Thumboo's vast knowledge, experience and exposure to other lands and cultures. They are insightful. Selected from a wide body of work written over several years, something reflected in the style and the language of which Edwin Thumboo is a past Master.

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