

M Ravi, *Kampong Boy*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2013. 272 pp. ISBN 978-981-07-5755-7.

When I agreed to review M Ravi's *Kampong Boy* I knew nothing about the writer or the book. So, I asked some of my friends in Singapore about him. Much of what I heard was negative, some even derisive. I decided to do a quick Google search to see what I could find; I discovered that there are as many people willing to condemn him as there are to praise him. I could not understand why an intelligent person fighting a very just cause would provoke any kind of criticism. Was it just his personality that was problematic or was there something else at play? I eagerly turned to the book for some possible answers.

Kampong Boy is an autobiographical account of the author's journey from a poor *kampong* boy to a successful human rights lawyer. It describes his formative years and how that led him to challenge the government and the laws of his country. He writes with candour about his feelings for his parents, the difficulties of growing up in poverty and why all the events in his life have made him the man that he is today. Ravi's family lived in one of the poorest *kampongs* in Singapore, but it was also the most ethnically mixed and that taught him much about neighbourly love and ethnic harmony. As the sixth of seven children, he did not suffer the brunt of poverty in the same way that his older sister did: she had to scavenge for food at the age of five and started working as a maid at the age of nine to support the family. Ravi believes that he learned all the things he did not want to be from his father and all the things that he could be from his mother. His often violent father was an alcoholic and a petty criminal without any career prospects; this left his long-suffering mother to do heavy manual labour that finally ruined her health. Later in life, she commits suicide to avoid being a burden to her children. Behind all of Ravi's achievements and undertakings is a sensitive mind that constantly weighs all the rights and wrongs, all the happiness and the sadness, all the stability and the fluxes of life itself.

Growing up in a culturally diverse environment instils in him a strong sense of equality; supporting and sharing with each other in the family and within the community teaches him about kindness and generosity; watching his mother struggle with an abusive husband and seeing her selfless love for her children ignites his passion for justice. *Kampong Boy* attempts to explain why Ravi fights for the poor and the underprivileged, why he fights for the weak and the naïve and why he is not afraid of his opponents whether they are rich, devious or seemingly all-powerful. However, there are consequences to facing such foes. The financial strains of working *pro bono* cases and the pressure of working high-profile cases which sometimes receive a lot of international media attention takes its toll on his physical and mental health.

Ultimately, *Kampong Boy* may be read as an apology from Ravi for his more recent erratic behaviour in public. It is almost like a lawyer pleading insanity for himself. Saying that, the book is not a plea for forgiveness, neither should it give us reason to doubt his judicial capability, especially with regard to what he has already accomplished. Indeed, it makes us ask what faith must one have to fight for the abolition of the death penalty for drug traffickers in a country where chewing gum is banned and can be acquired only under prescription? Who would willingly stand up for gay rights when there is a law specifically stating that any homosexual act, carried out in public or in private, is illegal? What courage must it take to summon to court under charges of corruption a head of state that has been in power since the country's independence?

The simple answer may be that it takes a fool or a madman, but I think we can agree that it takes someone special, someone with a vision that is different from those around him. As Edgar Allan Poe famously wrote in "Eleonora": "Men have called me mad; but the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence – whether much that is glorious – whether all that is profound – does not spring from disease of thought – from moods of mind exalted at the expense of the general intellect" (635). Like Poe, and many famous people throughout history to the present, Ravi suffers from a mental illness called bipolar disorder, also known as manic depression. It is only in recent years that rigorous diagnoses and a clearer understanding of the condition have led celebrities to overcome the stigma and share their experiences with the public.

Darian Leader, author of a book, *Strictly Bipolar*, states that "If the postwar period was called the 'age of anxiety' and the 80s and 90s the 'antidepressant era,' we now live in bipolar times. A diagnosis that once applied to less than 1% of the population has risen dramatically, with almost 25% of Americans and around 5% of people in the UK estimated to suffer from some form of bipolarity" ("Bipolar Memoirs"). According to Leader, when a person is in the manic state they tend to undertake projects that revolve around helping others, solitary pursuit is frequently abandoned for a more encompassing endeavour that has social good as its goal, and no matter how egotistical the person's actions may seem, there is always an ideal on the horizon. The reason to this, he claims, is the question of debt that lies at the heart of manic depression. "In case after case, we find a dilemma about responsibility at the level of preceding generations. It is often the parent of the manic-depressive person who will have experienced the tragic loss of a child, a sibling or a parent, and the responsibility for this death remains unresolved. The guilt that cannot be assuaged for one generation will haunt the next" ("Bipolar Memories").

Ravi describes his mother as a soothing presence for other mentally ill patients at the hospital where she works as an attendant; however, it is here that

her own mental health declines. Ravi cannot bear to see her suffer and indirectly feels responsible for her decline. Despite investing a lot of his energy and earnings on her treatment, she gradually worsens. Not long before her death, Ravi believes he receives a message to help the needy, the poor and those in poor health and has a vision of angel wings on his bedroom door. He prefers to call his own experience of bipolarity as an “awakening” or “transformation,” a “heightened spiritual mode” that allows him to experience presentiments and religious visions. He believes the bipolar condition is a gift, “But it’s a gift that we must work to realise is a gift before we can fully appreciate it.... I personally believe that bipolarity allows us to channel this energy in very creative ways – if we also know how to control and use it” (250-51). Although it is true that holistic treatment involving social support, lifestyle changes and therapy is necessary to help control mood swings, avoiding medication as Ravi advocates is a dangerous option, especially if the condition worsens, for suicide is often the result.

After reading the book, I have a better understanding of why Ravi garners as much praise as he does criticism. For one, he has an intense personality that is relentless in its pursuit of something it regards as important. While this is largely a laudable trait, it can easily come across as selfishness and arrogance. In light of his public outbursts, coupled with bad press (which he suggests is at the disposal of his opponents i.e. the government), it is easy to overlook the causes he endorses. While the book does not make a gripping read, it is engaging in its own way. I have enjoyed learning more about Ravi as a person, but I have also gained a very unique insight into Singapore’s politics and judicial system. Whether we approve of Ravi’s personality or Singapore’s laws, I feel that the most compelling message in *Kampong Boy* is about making the best of what we are given. If it is our choices that define us in life, then the harder the choices we have to make the better our chances for living a fuller life.

Works Cited

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