

Adeline Lee Zhia Ern, *Lethal Lesson and Other Stories*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2009. 175 pp. ISBN: 978-983-3221-24-0.

It was a pleasant surprise for me to learn that the author of *Lethal Lesson and Other Stories* has just completed 18 years. As I went on reading the stories one by one, my regard for this precocious girl went on increasing because of her grip over the story form, her insight into human nature, her keen observation of the subtleties of life, and the mastery of the language that she has shown.

The collection (first one at that) comprises of twenty stories (some of which may be described as mini-stories) exploring the various aspects of human relationships – like the ones between grandmother and granddaughter; father and daughter; husband and wife and so on. Some of them deal with the supernatural themes as well. They hold mirror to the changing values of the modern Malaysian society. Most of the stories are written from the woman's (or girl's) point of view.

There is a lot of variety in the themes of the stories. "I Love You Grandma" is the story of an old woman, Chow Chee Ying, who is on her death-bed and remembers the saga of her entire life and finally dies. "Hands to Hold" deals with the problems of old age like loneliness faced by Uncle Lim in old folks home and his strained relationship with his son. "Belonging Somewhere" shows the generation gap between a grandmother and her granddaughter and the change of values from conventional ones to the Western and modern ones. The grandmother tries her best to fit into the modern society of Malaysia in spite of her disapproval of it. "A Father's Love" delineates the theme of growing estrangement between the father and the daughter due to the father's addiction to gambling and smoking after the death of his wife. Khai Swan leaves her father, earns and learns and becomes an accountant. She returns to her fishing village after 5 years and learns that her father has cancer like her mother did.

"The Evil One" is a psychological story depicting the relationship between two girls characterised by jealousy, revenge, and violence. Carmen, a 17-year-old girl, who is very fat and weighs 80 kg is constantly nagged, teased, and insulted and called a whale by her classmate, Su Ping. Carmen, who is shy by nature, endures the taunts for some days, but one day she takes revenge upon Su Ping by wounding her with a broken whisky bottle. The theme of revenge is depicted in "No Regrets" as well, but the context is quite different. Mark, the protagonist, and Hui Ting befriend each other unexpectedly and live in sin for two years. Hui Ting insists upon his marrying her. He buys a silver band for her, but she is unexpectedly killed in a car accident by Kong Kee Hung, who is consequently sentenced to 8 years' prison. However, he is released after only 5

years for good behaviour. Mark is very sad about his girlfriend's death and reads about the criminal's release in the newspapers. He identifies Kong Kee Hung and murders him in the bar, but feels no regrets about it.

There are two stories in the collection, which deal with the theme of the supernatural element in life. In "A World of Her Own," Weng Yan suffers from agoraphobia, loneliness, and inferiority complex. She is an average student in school. She is teased by her brother and sister for her shyness and eccentricity. One day she buys an old diary in an antique store and carries it everywhere. The diary seems to be haunted by a spirit, which inspires her to overcome her shyness and diffidence and helps her to express herself and be a writer. Whereas the supernatural element plays a beneficial role in this story, it plays a negative role in "Imaginary." San San, daughter of Kok Meng's first wife Ai Yoo, does not call her stepmother (Huey Ling) mummy, but keeps on talking to an imaginary girl, Emily, and not knowing that it is the ghost of Emily. One night she is scratched in the face and, therefore, cries. On some other day she visits the graveyard near the house. On yet another day, she tumbles down from the staircase and is hospitalised for treatment. Huey Ling, in spite of being a non-religious lady, visits a temple and consults an old monk about San San's strange behaviour. Then the old monk tells her that her house is a haunted one and that by an angry spirit. He gives her a talisman to counter it. After returning to Taman Meru, Huey Ling burns the grass beneath the swing in the garden near her house in order to burn the ghost of Emily to ashes. The writhing spirit of Emily grabs her foot and claims San San to be her own. When the grass is burnt fully, the spirit of Emily lets go of her foot and is now truly dead. Consequently San San is finally exorcised of the spirit of Emily. This story may be said to be a successful ghost story.

The title story, "Lethal Lesson," is a criminological story about a teenager-criminal called Qing, who remembers the slaughter of her family members by somebody. The Chinese Master saves her and trains her as an assassin in his academy. One day Master assigns Qing to murder a certain old man of a medical store. When Qing goes to the spot at night and knocks on the door, the old man comes out. Qing raises her knife to kill him, but chances to see the wallet of his victim containing a few photos. Then she discovers that her victim is none other than her father. So Qing returns to the academy without killing her father. But Master punishes Qing by engaging her and Li Yang in a battle and asks her to either win or to die. Qing is unfortunately overpowered by Li Yang and dies an undeserved death. While the story reminds us of terrorist camps, violent acts, and suicide bombing, it also disturbs the reader by not showing the poetic justice.

The other stories in the collection deal with the themes of happiness ("Define Happiness" and "The Score"), mental retardation ("She Will Always be One of Us"), sympathy for animals ("The Difference I Make"), depression

(“Wounds in the Soul”), nostalgia (“A Letter From the Past,” and “Tidying Drawers”), divorce (“Rock Bottom), joy of motherhood (“To Love You”), and the haste of modern life (“Where am I Heading so Fast?”). Though simple, these stories hold mirror to the writer’s contemporary consciousness and fine lyrical sensibility.

All the stories in this collection, whether relatively simple or complex, testify to the fine, lyrical feminine sensibility, contemporary consciousness, keen observation of society, an insight into human nature and above all a sense of literary form expressed by the precocious girl. Even granting the fact that the editor of the publishing firm has polished the language here and there, the teenage-writer shows a mastery of the English language, which is apt and appropriate to the genre of the short story. There is brevity and unity of theme, clarity of motivation, and method of articulating the problem not through explicit statement, but through the guise of narrative art. All these rare qualities show that this young writer has a bright future in the literary world. With greater maturity and wider experience of life, she can easily become a great Malaysian writer one day. *Kudos* to Adeline Lee Zhia Ern!

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