

Malachi Edwin Vethamani, *Complicated Lives*. Petaling Jaya: Maya Press, 2015. 111 pp. ISBN 978-983-2737-51-3.

It may seem surprising to say that the poems that make up Malachi Edwin Vethamani's *Complicated Lives* are difficult poems. 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. These arise from the experience of time and change and their effect on human relationships, of human failings and alienation in even the most intimate contacts in sexual love, and the occasional consolations in remembrance and in acceptance of loss due to the efflux of time. Although there are a few miscellanies on unrelated subjects such as "It Was a Wondrous Sight!" suggesting national integration, overall, there is a unifying thread running through the collection. It is the poet's (by which I mean the speaker of the poems or the poet's persona) pervading consciousness of change. In this, it may be remarked, that Edwin shows an unexpected affinity with Buddhist thought. Even his expression of acceptance of the situation he has arrived at late in life points in the direction of the Buddhist idea of non-attachment.

The collection is comprised of three sections: "Rising Complications," "Lives Complicated," and "Complicating Lives." In the first section, change is seen through its deleterious effect on the poet's mother. There is no overt lament expressed over the loss that comes of it. Rather it is evident in the poet's giving us contrasting images of the mother in the prime of life and in old age suffering physical and mental disabilities. From being "a beautiful butterfly.../ tall lovely lady" in her sarees, she declined into something "small and shrivlled/ in her final bed" (14). The lament is in the image of his mother lying on her deathbed close to her sarees, once proudly and beautifully worn, now left "quietly" on the shelves of her cupboard.

Going beyond lament, he evokes compassion for the mother who, he describes, has now to be fed by a stranger:

The Indonesian maid is spooning her meal.
She is now cheating mum with her veggies.

But Amma is in no hurry
She is going nowhere.
She sits and stares,
opens her mouth as the spoon
gently prises it open. ("Maternal Moment s" 15)

And has become her own daughter's "doll":

Amma yawns.
 She is tired of sitting up.
 Is she tired playing my sister's mother doll?
 My sister does not seem to tire. ("Mother Doll" 17)

To feel deeply about the much diminished condition of a once "tall and lovely" mother is a natural human reaction. But the poet here takes this further in his expression of unbearable pain by simply saying, "I look away." Yet, in that pain, there is also a guilty suggestion of distaste:

I can't bring myself to hold the spoon
 to put food in my mother's mouth.

As if to apologise, I touch her arm
 but pull away quickly.
 She is skin and bones. ("Maternal Moments" 14-15)

Further "rising complications" in the poems come from the poet's sense of guilt mixed in with his sorrowing for his mother. He entertains the un-filial thought, for instance, as to whether he should return for the funeral should his mother die while he is travelling: "*She is dead and won't know anyway*" ("Wicked Thoughts" 19). Then he remembers that "When my mother could speak/ I wished that she wouldn't" because she sometimes had a sharp tongue. After she died, he wonders to himself, because she had loved him, "Has my wish come true?" The poet is also haunted by his having prayed for his mother's death as a release from her suffering and, for the family, release from the pain of watching her suffer. His intention was one of love, but he cannot put away his doubt. To his brother, he thinks it might seem that he just wanted her to die and be done away with:

If my brother knew my thoughts
 he might not forgive me. ("Our Prayers" 22)

Underlying all the poet's mixed emotions, ultimately it is love, love for his mother and love for his family. It is fairly common in human nature, I think, for one to love and grief over, and at the same time, to have guilty thoughts about the person they love.

The rest of the first section, with one exception, is made up of weaker poems that tell of nostalgia for family gatherings and life in the Brickfields of his boyhood. The poet's attempt at re-creating the atmosphere of the "good old days" is too consciously done, re-counting his relatives' busy preparations for the celebration of festivals and in enumerating places, things and events. There is a consequent falling off of tone in these poems. There are other lapses in lines like, "My younger brother already about/ caught up with his presents/ opened by

midnight by the Christmas tree/ has no time for me” (“One Christmas Morning” 30). Note also that in an instance like this the syntax is awkward and the verse rhythm breaks down. The exception to these poems is “Appa.” It is an expression again of deep love for a deceased father simply stated, although there could be a better word than “flounder” in the last lines, “Given your moorings/ we don’t flounder” (24).

“Lives Complicated” (Section Two)) is of people who complicate their lives by getting themselves entangled in love relationships. Such relationships include marriage entered into by people whose “love” goes little beyond sexual passion. At their most successful, such relationships are consummated in the partners feeling that they have become one in a kiss:

We become one
as our lips lock
and our bodies press together/

It’s not what’s in a kiss
but who’s in the kiss?
We are the kiss. (“So What’s in a Kiss” 65)

But the partners will eventually tire of each other and become mutually indifferent and alienated from one another. Even when they are married, they come to tolerate each other’s entering into casual liaisons with third parties. The ultimate breakdown in sexual love is in erstwhile lovers abandoning their partners, inflicting on them deep suffering. All these phases of sexual love are told in the poems in this section (Section Two). They may be called love poems in the sense that they detail the relationships of “lovers.” But they are not really love poems. Taken as a group, they, in fact, constitute a map of suffering in a profound Buddhist sense.

The suffering of the speakers is overt in poems where they tell of a partner’s desertion, or indifference, or simply being beyond intimate emotional reach. Suffering has already come about from change. In the poems that tell of declines in relationships or of casual sexual encounters the suffering is muted, with the partners not even consciously knowing that they are unhappy. And to those caught in the throes of sexual passion and exclaiming, “We are the kiss,” the pleasure or even joy they feel, is only a set-up for a reversal of their condition in time and thus a condition for eventual unhappiness. There is a human agency to all this, and it is in human weakness. Human beings cannot help but bring about their own suffering by being prone to clinging to things, places, relationships, even the sense of one’s self, as if everything permanently stays the same over time – as if nothing changes. That is attachment. The question that arises is: Are the poems then pessimistic and therefore should be regarded as negative art? My

reading of them is that far from being negative, they show cognition, which is the first step towards letting go and psychological freedom.

“Lives Complicated” is carried over to “Complicating Lives” (Section Three) in several poems on sexual love. These form a connecting link that passes over about half a dozen poems on little related subjects to the collection’s concluding poems, which present some resolution to the “complications” spoken of in the preceding sections. There are the poems which overtly recognise the passing of time and poems on the remembrance of people in the past whom the poet truly loved on non-sexual terms. The remembrance poems serve him as a source of consolation. Written with great simplicity, in unadorned deeply felt language, they, taken together with the earlier poems on the poet’s mother and other members of his extended family, are the real love poems in the collection. In the concluding poems of Section Three, the poet goes beyond consolation to acceptance – acceptance of life as it is. And from then on to letting go i.e. to non-attachment: “Now am past/ love/ hate/ joy/sorrow/ pleasure/ pain/ and you” (“Requiem” 110).

A unifying thread that ties *Complicated Lives* together as a collection is Malachi Edwin Vethamani’s deep experience of change and its effect on lives and human relationships. In this, he shares with the classical Chinese poets a keen awareness of time. A common theme in the Chinese poets’ writings is that human life is all too brief, and life comes all too soon to an end. Time is therefore so precious that “an ‘inch’ of gold will not buy an ‘inch’ of time.” In a major strain of the classical tradition, there are many reclusive poets like the great 5th century poet, Tao Qian, who gave up all worldly ambitions and “returned to the wilds to farm an acre or two.” Others took to itinerant, poverty-stricken ways or led quiet scholarly lives. Malachi Edwin Vethamani’s experience of the flux of time, on the other hand, is one of loss. Parents grow old and are cut off by age or illness in their own inaccessible world, or die; siblings go their own ways and lose a common happy childhood; old neighbourhoods turn into unfamiliar places; and lovers betray each other. Yet the poems do not depress. They are a record of Malachi Edwin Vethamani’s complex (even ambivalent) emotional reaction to time and change. Towards the end of the collection he begins to move towards a resolution of these complexities as he expresses a psychologically liberating acceptance of life as it is.

The collection as a whole succeeds through simplicity. Simplicity, where it succeeds, gives a poem clarity and strength as an utterance of poetic truth as, for example, poem “At 58”:

At 58 I think
of death.

I think of things

I would do for the last time
and not repeat.

I think of things
I would never get to do
and have no yearnings for them.
At 58 I think
of closures.

I want no new beginnings
I begin to yearn for stillness.

At 58 I am letting go,
letting go
and know the present will suffice. (107)

For the poet, however, this strategy of writing simply is a risky one, particularly when it also relies on incomplete sentences to realise a concision of effect. By his strategy, it is all too easy for him to over-step the fine line between simple poetic and merely ordinary prose statement. This is evident in *Complicated Lives* in the occasional instances of a falling off in tone of the verse line. However, these occasional lapses may – because they are basic to the style of the writing – be taken as integral to the structure of the collection viewed as a whole. In this regard, the collection is an achievement. It explores difficult areas of human experience that test the sensitivity and intelligence of the poet. Malachi Edwin Vethamani has met that test.

Wong Phui Nam
Malaysia