

# Reflections on Poetry and the Self: A Personal Record

## Introduction

Edwin Thumboo's *Second Tongue*, published in 1976, allows a convenient entry into Malaysian-Singapore poetry written in the English language. Convenient because, in addition to providing a fairly good sampling of the poems written up to the year in which the volume was published, it neatly divides the poems into several categories, categories which, by now, have become comfortable enough for readers of poems from these two neighbouring countries: Place and Time, Growing Up, Moods and Persons, Folk Ways, Kampong and Town, My Country and My People, and Words. Almost the entire body of this poetry has been written since the mid-fifties of the twentieth century when attempts at creative writing in the English language had their inception in university journals, particularly in Singapore, under the guidance of British or American expatriate lecturers. The best-known of these were D.J. Enright at the University of Malaya in Singapore, and James Kirkup and David Ormerod who taught at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur during the 1960's.

In Malaysia, poetry with certain interruptions, such as those caused by the May 13 incident in 1969 has been continued to be written in the English language. May 13 was followed by drastic changes in the national cultural as well as educational policies, resulting inter alia, in the devaluation of the English language, with certain tragic results in education and culture, particularly in education. The decades between the fifties of the twentieth century and the present have been witness to the work of four generations of poets. The first consisted of the pioneers, people like Ee Tiang Hong and Wong Phui Nam; the second of the contemporaries of the present writer; the third those who were active in the seventies when English began to lose its importance, and the present generation consisting of poets mostly in their early to mid-thirties, who, once again, have the opportunity to use the English language as it struggles back to find a place in Malaysian life, its tenure as yet uncertain.

The number of poets--some highly productive, others with perhaps a mere clutch of poems, while not particularly large, is nevertheless, reasonably impressive; a good number of them work in more than one genre. Over the decades, too, one discerns a search for a style, a linguistic idiom. Today's poets appear confident, discarding some of the awkward attempts of their predecessors at first imitating the language of British poetry and later of blending British English with local idiom, resulting in a form of loose Malaysian English.

## **The Self and the External World as Principal Concerns**

Within the categories defined by Edwin Thumboo in *The Second Tongue*, the principal concerns of Malaysian-Singaporean poetry may be seen. The sum total of themes and issues in the small number of anthologies as well as in the collections of individual poets remains limited. The perspective is generally that of the poet himself, the poet as observer—often too casual an observer—of the external world. The poet's world is an extremely limited one—the writer and his environment: family, friends, the town or village, the writer as journeyman, the writer as observer of nature, and so on. In some ways, then, the bulk of Malaysian English language poetry has to do with the persona of the poet himself, and the world he or she lives in. Having observed or experienced this world, the poet recounts his experiences, comments upon them, reflects upon them; the poems are, in essence, a record of the poet's experiences, tinged by the poet's shifting moods. In the best of circumstances and at their very subtlest, as in the works, for instance of Ee Tiang Hong, the poems may be considered, to borrow a word from music, "tone poems". If there is any criticism—political or of any other sort of reaction to a situation—it is muted; any lesson—be it moral or otherwise—is, with few exceptions, also extremely limited. To all of this, apart from Ee Tiang Hong, the most obvious contrary example is Wong Phui Nam, a poet well grounded in the literary and cultural traditions of the Chinese, as Ee Tiang Hong is grounded in the traditions of the Malacca Baba community to which his ancestors belonged.

### **Some Constraints**

If one is to adduce reasons for such a situation—to explain perhaps the "outwardness" of Malaysian poetry in the English language, one has to point, firstly to the backgrounds of the poets themselves, and the lack of any strong tradition of "Malaysian" culture comparable to those of China, Japan, South Asia or even of the Middle East. In short many of the poets do not have the kind of "grounded-ness" in a tradition that would make for strong poetry. This is due to the historical background of the country itself, and the illusiveness of Malaysian identity, as something distinct from Malay, Chinese, or Indian identities, to give the most obvious examples, although there are many other such distinct cultures and traditions within the Malaysian mosaic—particularly those belonging to the indigenous communities of Sabah and Sarawak. The poets of these communities continue to maintain a vital tradition of oral poetry, and as yet have not come into the mainstream of either Malay or English language poetry. It should be remembered that Malaysian English language poets, who inevitably belong to one of the principal racial groups, still carry with them, consciously or unconsciously, the baggage of centuries, in most instances considerably watered down, for their education came to them through the medium of English rather than their own mother tongue. Hence there may be seen a vast gap, existing not only in literature but in almost all aspects of culture. In some instances, again as in the case of Ee Tiang Hong, due to his Baba culture, the mother tongue has been all but forgotten. All of this brings with it certain obvious constraints and limitations.

On another level one has to contend, too, with a view of the nature and purpose of poetry, something which in most Malaysian poets have not received enough serious consideration. Thus, overall, the role of poetry has been extremely limited. Finally, there is the generally prevalent attitude that—giving greater importance to what may be called to “public” poetry, regards all personal poetry as private, and therefore suspect. While there may be a measure of truth in this viewpoint, it must not be forgotten that the intensely personal can be, and often is, the universal, as demonstrated by John Donne amongst the “metaphysical” poets and by almost all the Romantics and neo-Romantics. All great art is, indeed, both private and universal at the same time, accessible and yet inaccessible, arising from some hidden and often mysterious wellspring. Once it bursts to the surface like the well of zam-zam it is there for everyone to partake of its unlimited bounties.

Given the situation here briefly outlined Malaysian English language literature rarely rises above the commonplace. Particularly in the drama, but also to some extent in other genres, constraints have been imposed, apart from the one-sided or mistaken view regarding the role of literature, by self-censorship arise essentially from a fear of officialdom. The effects of official- or self-censorship upon the various genres obviously differ, with the most public of the literary genres—the drama—being affected to a greater degree than the novel or poetry. But, almost without exception, the poets have remained within the pale of “acceptable” social conduct and literary modes, even where they are not hemmed in by the constraining law of the land. Thus poetry has turned out to be poetry of observation and reaction, the poetry of mundane relationships. There is lyricism, at times there is beauty of composition or thought, there may be poignancy, but rarely does one encounter depth or seriousness.

Although the sense of self is evident in many Malaysian English language poems, the self interacts with the external material world, which possesses little meaning or value beyond the obviously superficial. Even when the world encountered is the world of Nature, Nature does not, as in the case of Wordsworth, for instance, become a “living presence”. The inner world, the world of the “spirit” is rarely encountered, as are spiritual and psychological conflicts. Typically, then, Malaysian English language poetry does not rise to the level of the spiritual or the mystical. Thus there are a great many dimensions of being and consciousness that remain unexplored, even unrealised.

### **Passages into Other Dimensions of Being**

In this context, if one is, having recognised their existence, to seek passages into other dimensions of the self or even of the greater Self, then the most serious examples come from the work of the present writer. Not that I have not indulged some of the more popular themes already mentioned, those I describe as external, focused upon observation of the external environment. There are examples in *Perfumed Memories*, and even more in *Mirror of a Hundred Hues*, of what I have called observation of the environment, and the exploration of external relationships with the world. *Chulia Street* (*Mirror of a Hundred Hues*, p. 23-24) and other poems may be cited as

appropriate examples. On the whole, however, of my own poems, those that have left the profoundest impressions both upon my self and other selves, are those that have come from the heart and the soul. Edwin Thumboo's Introduction to *Perfumed Memories* lists some of my most important concerns: birth and death, love and separation, loneliness and isolation, the brevity of beauty. These indeed represent the perennial subject matter of literature. Unfortunately readers of Malaysian poetry are no longer able to relate to such themes in any serious way, to retain a sense of their true importance. These themes are regarded as "emotional" or "personal" And because they are "emotional" or "personal" it is considered best to disassociate from them. This is a strange attitude indeed, considering that one still enjoys the intensely personal sonnets of William Shakespeare, or the poems of John Keats, not to mention the highly sensuous or erotic poetry that is presented through the ghazal sung in poetry gatherings (mushaira) or even in Hindustani films. The erotic-romantic ghazal has in fact fast emerged as one of the world's most popular genres of poetry, its strength lying apart from the beautiful turn of phrase, in its layering of meaning.

I have already made reference to the some of the perennial themes in my poems. But beyond bringing to the reader the personal experience of the world from an external point of view, my own poems try to reach into the inner core of being. The experience itself is vital, vital for its own sake. But it is only the starting point in the encounter with and the perception of Reality. Every experience turned into memory defies time and space, redefines reality. Every experience transcends reality as generally understood going beyond the physical into the spiritual and metaphysical. The poems thus work on two levels at least as far as their meanings go. At the same time the poems represent a search, a personal search for meaning, a search for a means of perceiving the complexities of my own being, and of Being itself. Allied to this approach are the complexities of language—indeed throughout, there is an ongoing search for a language suitable for this kind of verse.

Rain poem, the first serious poem to be written, indicates some of the directions that my later poems were to take, and the kind of particular language that was to be used. Often these poems, even if brief or apparently simple, need to be interpreted due to their complexity—a complexity that comes through suggestion and resonance:

when the rains come . . .  
look,  
those glittering smiles  
from powdered faces  
will dissolve . . .  
when the rains come.

*Perfumed Memories*, p. 26.

The contents of the poems make considerable demands upon the reader as far as his or her own emotional and intellectual range goes, and the kind of language in which

these poems are set, makes them complex, even obscure. As in classical Sanskrit drama or the Noh theatre of Japan, the reader encountering these poems, without the keys to open the doors (without in these examples of classical theatre understanding the concepts of *rasa* or *yugen*) is bound to feel a sense of frustration or inadequacy for these poems remain inaccessible. We shall look at aspects of language and style further down in the paper.

### **Fusion of Cultures**

The poems in *Perfumed Memories* in both content and style represent a fusion of cultures. In them one finds multiple imageries and sensibilities—the imageries and sensibilities of animism, Hinduism, Buddhism (Japanese Buddhism, to be more specific), Islam. In them one finds the imageries and sensibilities, in particular, of Near Eastern as well as North Indian or Pakistani Islam. In them one finds images, symbols, and myths from diverse traditions ranging the span of centuries. In them one finds the aesthetic values from these cultures, as well as the Malay culture; in them one finds influences from various traditions of mysticism; in them one finds a re-examination of relationships with time and space. The influences, as far as poetry is concerned, come from equally diverse sources including classical Sanskrit literature, Jalaluddin Rumi, Rabindranath Tagore, the Romantic poets, Dylan Thomas, T.S Eliot and of course the local influences, particularly Malay. And then, there is the almost all-pervading influence of the Urdu-Persian ghazal tradition which came through Sufism. All of these make many of the poems in *Perfumed Memories* as well as some of the later ones complex, and often inaccessible both in terms of style and content.

### **Poet as Persona**

As in most Malaysian poetry in the English language, at the centre of these poems is the persona of the poet himself, and the poetry is essentially about the poet. References to encounters between the poet and external reality have already been made. There is external poetry, particularly in the poems included in *Mirror of a Hundred Hues*. These poems represent deliberate shift in style. But the most important poems to me, personally, are those that may be described as “private” poems. In these the explorations into the inner being of the poet are far-ranging, and thus untypical of Malaysian poetry.

Essentially the themes in *Perfumed Memories* are about existence, existence to the broadest possible extent, existence at several different levels as experienced or observed by the poet. With the external experiential world the poet has to come to terms, but has not altogether surrendered. He is in fact in conflict with this external world, placed in it “by an oblivious cosmic whim” without even knowing why (Honolulu Airport, *Perfumed Memories*, p. 91). In this world he is a stranger. This is the poet’s dilemma. This is also Man’s dilemma, perhaps his greatest, although Man does not think about it or even realise its presence, engrossed as he is in gross materialism. At the worst, on the other extreme, as in the work of the Absurdists, the

dilemma represents a sense of hopelessness and futility. In my poems it is not so. Here there is a sense of apparent meaninglessness or confusion because Man has come from another Reality, an infinite Reality with which he has lost touch but into which he gains occasional insight as seen in much mystical poetry. That is the continuous search and his search takes Man along many paths, in different directions. There are many means at his disposal as was recognised from the earliest times by prophets, philosophers and poets. Poetry is just one path. Like religion, then, true poetry is inspired and comes from another dimension of being. It has the potential of bringing about a better understanding of man's own true and essential nature.

Realisation that one is in this world but not of this world can have a negative as well as a positive effect. It is inability to come to terms with the situation that leads to frustration and depression. Despite the sense of depression, and hopelessness-- into which a poet can get mired and never rise any higher--there is much to be gained if these situations can be transcended. There are many poems in *Perfumed Memories* that manifest such an obvious sense of depression and hopelessness. *Midnight in a Japanese garden*, *Perfumed Memories*, p; 52) There may be a handful that give a sense of comfort, of the "glory and the dream" through the "visionary gleam" (*Piano*, *Perfumed Memories*, p. 72 and *Beautiful evening*, *Perfumed Memories*, p. 27) The poems thus have an important role in bringing about an awareness of the diverse realities. In situations where negative perceptions of reality tend to overwhelm, poetry has the potential of serving as a means of catharsis, as a means of providing hope and comfort, as a means of reuniting Man with the true Reality. This, to some extent, is what the poems in *Perfumed Memories* attempt to do.

If in the past, in *illud tempus*, there was any ongoing contact between this world and the higher Reality that contact has diminished, perhaps even ended. The world to which the poet tries to relate or come to terms with is an immensely complex one. Given the poet's own emotional, psychological and spiritual complexity, the contact between the poet and the world can, under the best circumstances, attain to levels of mystical fusion; under the worst circumstances the contact can be totally devastating. Obviously there are figures, often unnamed and symbolic rather than real, with whom the poet is able to establish an external, even at times a fairly serious relationship. But the relationship, or rather more accurately the connection, if it is physical at all, is by its very nature momentary and transitory (*travellers*, *Perfumed Memories*, p. 90) In the material world of everyday "reality", as we generally understand reality, there is no such thing as permanence; there is only flux. The moment now coming into existence is in an instant turned into the past. Our experiences and our own very natures are thus nothing but memories, memories experienced personally as well as inherited from the vast pool of unlimited existence. We are the product of accumulated memories. As said earlier in this flux there is no permanence, only a false sense of permanence. A permanence of sort is established in the memory, the recall, at times with its full force of emotion. The poems are thus almost all nothing but the product

of such memories that flash across our “mind” leaving behind impressions that are further added to the pool of memories. (drop, Perfumed Memories, p. 45)

In the external poems, the figures such as those of the satay seller (Midnight Satay Vendor, Perfumed Memories, p. 64-65) and those who appears in the more approachable poems such as Chulia Street are highly accessible, colourful, and even at times memorable. Their worth, however, does not lie in their being present in a particular situation, at a particular moment in time, but in transcending the moment to live in the memories of the poet. There are many others.

So we have the relationship of the writer with the world of existence established on four levels— (a) The Poet and the external world of experiential Reality, (b) The Poet and His Self, or his own Inner Reality, (c) The relationship with the General World of Created Beings and (d) The Writer and his Relationship with the Invisible World.

The Writer and the external world are familiar enough from the work of many a poet, including the present writer. As indicated, this is the world of the social and cultural environment. Personally I am interested in these aspects only to a limited extent due to the artificiality and impermanence or transitoriness of such encounters. They are important, but not vital; they are important only in so far as they shape the inner being. This transpires through the preservation of selected experiences which become part of his memories, experiences that can be recalled, particularly when the poet is in a certain frame of mind. They are essential for these memories, and only for them, for they become the triggers to the innate or latent undeveloped emotions, the shtayai bhava, to borrow a term from the Natyasastra. This idea is related to the poet’s sense of time and space, which has played an important role in shaping his work.

### **The Poet and his own Self**

Between the writer and himself or rather his own self, there is a complex relationship, infinitely more complex than between him and other members of his society. This complexity is centred in the perennial questions “Who am I?” and “What am I?” The search, demonstrated in the poems, often a highly painful search, reveals several possibilities.

under the tent of watchful sky, a wanderer  
i am brother  
to green blades of quivering grass  
and birds of singing twilight (reverie, Perfumed Memories, p. 57)

lovely dancers drowned in leis  
who can claim we’re not the dreams  
the gods on high frame  
articulate hula hands? (Perfumed Memories, p.81)

This particular poem in fact demonstrates several of the principal themes addressed in this paper: the identity of the poet, the poet's relationship with the rest of creation, the sense of loss and the sense of dilemma, and perhaps to some extent the sense of rediscovery of his true nature in the greater Nature around him. The "darker" poems in *Perfumed Memories* reveal a relationship that is immensely complex for the world does not consist of merely the writer and other people.

The poet cannot live in isolation, for his living is enmeshed with everything that lives, and not just the human beings with whom he develops his connections and relationships throughout his life. The poet in fact finds human beings a bit of a nuisance, with their lack of direction and purpose, with their highly limited sense of their true being. They are, after all "fallen" beings, unaware of their true nature and purpose in existence. The poet is able better to relate with other animate beings: the blade of grass, the birds and flowers, and so on. In their company he finds a degree of comfort rarely provided by human beings. In the poet's vision the range of "living" beings expands considerably.

And there are categories some traditionally featured in religious or mythological systems.

### **The Poet's Relationship with the General World of Things**

Beyond that the relationship extends, in surprising ways with things that in the general perception of reality are generally regarded as inanimate—the grains of sand, the drops of water, the clouds and so on

i am the grain of sand  
that rides the tide  
in am the drop of rain  
that falls  
rhyming  
the dark the silent  
rhythm  
of the ocean ( rhythm, p. 42)

The images that appear in the poems are numerous, and not just from Nature, although Nature, as an all-encompassing medium of existence plays an active part in the poems, interacting with the poet, and influencing his being. Reality is transcended or rather expanded. (images, *Perfumed Memories*, p. 32)

At the next level comes the creation as a whole, this time involving the invisible Spirit of Being in its multifarious forms. There is no such thing as emptiness, as the created things, or rather beings, including the poet himself, come into invisible contact with each other. Our own mundane, visible reality touches the invisible in interesting ways. Creation is a continuum, creation is built from the same building materials, the

difference between the human and the non-human existence is not that great after all, especially if it is remembered that the entire creation, seen and unseen, comes from the same Source. There is contact, communication, even communion between different realities, between the physical and the non-physical, between the seen and the unseen.

### **The Writer and his Relationship with the invisible World**

From this level Man goes to the logical final stage in his relationship, that is his connection with the invisible world, with all its stratification, or to use a traditional metaphor, the Higher Reality, the Cosmic Sense or Cosmic Consciousness, etc. The lower levels of invisible creation beginning at the anima or lowest soul interact with the poet in various ways. Beyond this we have seen the relationship between animal spirits and the human soul. Next comes the Highest Reality. Given the nature of Being and the total fluidity of Beingness, can this, the highest Reality be far off? It is impossible that this should be so? In the Holy Quran we have the statement by Allah that He is closer to man than man's jugular vein. I do not think that God intends this to be taken in any literal sense for that would require a change in God's essential nature. It must then be taken in a metaphorical sense or, going beyond that, in the mystical sense. Perhaps no more than once or twice in my poems I have used the word God in my poems for this Ultimate Reality—merely because this was the most convenient way of referring to the Ultimate Reality. At times, as in *god's rain*, (*Perfumed Memories*, p. 47; *death of a god*, *Perfumed Memories*, p. 31; and *the wild god*, *Perfumed Memories*, p. 30), the standard or normal images of God appear, but with a certain new perspective. The poems are not intended to be religious, religious according to any one traditionally accepted belief system. They are "spiritual" but by spiritual is not meant religious although symbols and images from religion have been appropriated. The Ultimate Reality is akin to Plato's "Mind" or Wordsworth's "Presence". The poems use imagery from various cultures, traditions and religions familiar to us all, they transcend all images and reach for higher universal symbols. The symbols themselves, used in unique ways, attain never meanings, often several meanings simultaneously in even the simplest of poems, for instance those in the last section of *Perfumed Memories*, entitled *carvings on a grain of rice as well as essence* (*Perfumed Memories*, p. 43).

The self remains central to these poems, as observer, as participant in the unfolding cosmic drama. The self again does not belong but to one level. Instead there are several gradations of Self from the minutest to the mightiest. By virtue of the themes just indicated, the self, as commonly understood, the I of most of the world's poems is but a tiny being, thrown into the cosmic drama over which he or she, or more accurately it, has little control. Hence the non-capitalisation of the letter I in the poems. This is the self on one level. On the other and more important level, the self is not just the writer or the human being, but a universal Self incorporating all of Creation, the visible and the invisible, for there is no such thing as a permanent separation. Even the thought of such a separation does not make any real sense. Created out of the same

invisible substance or the elements the diverse beings or diverse manifestations of Being are in essence inseparable, and even those that are usually considered as non-living come alive. All separation is but momentary and temporary. At the essential level all of Creation shares a common “Beingness”. Thus derived from a single Source, all of Creation is bound, and it is love that binds the universe, moves all things. This is the principle theme in my poems, particularly those included in Perfumed Memories.

### **The Language and Style**

The language with which to express this Self and its manifestations, has to be a distinct kind of language. The poems represent an appropriation of many cultures, their values, their myths, symbols and metaphors, their aesthetic principles. This is also the case with language. No common language will be sufficient for this task. The alternative possibility is to use the established vocabulary of mysticism. In the poems such language does come through here and there. But here there is the need for another sort of language, perhaps something that can be called the language of the heart. This results in the poetry being intimate, passionate. Technically in the poems many devices are used—transferred epithets, symbols—those for instance from nature with water and rain (itself symbolizing many things) being dominant ones. The poems are visual as well as tonal or aural, for there is a great deal of exploitation of sound in the poems. In a sense they are also ideograms. The language used then, is not only the language of myth, not only the language of mysticism, but also the language of the heart. Perfumed Memories tries to exploit the full potential of words, with their extremely compressed usage as is done in the haiku and short poems. The attraction of the haiku lies in its ability to squeeze within fourteen syllables a concentration of meaning, a sense of multiple reality and a sense of time and space that is expansive rather than limited. Apart from haiku, the poems in this volume as well as others make use of the style and sense of the favourite Middle Eastern and northern Indian romantic and lyrical genre, the ghazal. The poems share emotion, linguistic, aesthetic and broader cultural values with this highly popular genre of sung poetry and poetry put to music. It is interesting to note that in the poems, then, are combined various cultural traditions spanning centuries, perhaps even aeons of time and spaces as well as dimensions unlimited.

### **Conclusion**

If poetry is a means of understanding the world, and the poet is the “still centre of the turning world”, to use Eliot’s familiar phrase, the world in fact revolves around the poet, while he in turn revolves around it. He is both the centre and the periphery, he is the world, as is every molecule, every atom in every living being—and there can be no such thing as a non-living being. The encounter between the poet and the World is a dramatic one representing infinite possibilities from the mundane to the metaphysical. This encounter is bound to bring pleasure and pain, to bring a sense of utter dejection, while containing within itself the germ of extreme joy. There is some confusion, as the material monkey mind tries to grapple with the Reality. But the

search goes on, and my own poems represent such a search. In them there is only the journey. There is as yet no arrival. (travellers, Perfumed Memories, p. 90)

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