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Selections from Contemporary Malaysian Poetry

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obvious symbols that destroy the subtlety of Aprieto's theme. He handles his theme much more skillfully in "Flower Bed."

National Book Store deserves a word of commendation for reprinting the Cruz-Aprieto collection and making the stories once more available. The book is handsomely printed and bound, although better proofreading would have avoided the obvious errors that betray the proofreader's (editor's?) ignorance. Androcleus and the Lion (p. 83) and an obvious misprint on the back cover blurb stand out, but there are also glaring misprints and errors in idiom throughout (e.g., pp. 6, 7, 10, 11, 17, 18, 19, 23, 30, 57, 58, 59, 60, 62, 69, 70, 72, 73, 82, 87.) It is regrettable that Philippine writing is so often marred by poor editing and ignorant proofreading.

The cover blurb on this National Book Store edition comments on the authors twenty years after the stories first appeared:

their home in the suburbs may be worlds away from the once familiar esteros and alleys of their childhood haunts. Tondo, however, remains a presence made romantic, one suspects, by time and distance. *Tondo By Two* sums up that memory.

Perhaps time does inevitably romanticize, but it is a tragedy, I think that Tondo has become romantic and that these two authors no longer write of the real Tondo. It is saddest of all if these Tondo stories are only memories. Tondo in 1981 needs more than memories. It needs another generation of writers like Cruz and Aprieto.

Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.

SELECTIONS FROM CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIAN POETRY.
Selected and edited by Muhammad Haji Salleh. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit
Universiti Malaya, 1978. 118 pages.

The introduction will strike a familiar note to readers of Asian poetry:

When the first poets began to write there was an obvious restlessness in their poems, romantic perhaps in their manifestations yet solid and socially committed in their tone and purpose. The young poets were a new generation of Malays, leaders among their own people. From the time of these beginnings poetry has been social in its commitment.

And indeed as the Malaysian poet sings of life and celebrates the loves and hates that surround him, he molds into his lyricism an awareness of the abject state history has imposed on colonized countries like theirs — and ours. Latiff Mohidin, for example, writes poignantly of loss:

when your banks slide away
when your villages slide away

give your tears of desolation
to the jungle dogs
who have lost the moon they hunted
to the messenger birds
who have lost the continent they loved ("Old River").

In another poem he says:

behind my house
falling rain brings
the voice of a gypsy
who has lost his horse
the voice of a mountaineer
who has lost his mountain ("Voice").

Inherent in the lines is a sense of deprivation and longing for things essentially, rightfully their owner's – jungle dogs and the moon, a gypsy and his horse, a mountaineer and his mountain. Could this be their cry for identity, as our own writers have cried for theirs?

In another poem, the merging is between romantic love and patriotism. Samad Said writes of a young woman waiting for her sailor lover to come home. He is long delayed and she sobs:

"Have you no heart, my love
that even from this journey you have not returned,
is it that you have found a new love on those
beautiful islands?"

At last she sees the boat approach and

she runs to the edge of the shore, her heart dances:
"My dear, is that you my love?"
"I was waiting for you, dear love. Why was your
return so long delayed?"

When her beloved answers, it is to punctuate their love with a greater cause:

"At sea the savage waves, the violent storm and rain
tested me, but I faced them
In the waves, the storm and rain I heard a resounding
'MERDEKA' I return for freedom!"

The loving sentinel understands:

and the sweet maiden sinks tenderly into the
embrace of her beloved oh, her eyes are full
of light, her heart full of love! ("Return of Her Sailor's Boat").

Reflected in these Malaysian poems are the same growing pains our developing nation feels. Quick dollars, widespread poverty, the antithesis between the university and the world outside, between ideals and life, preoccupy the creative artist. This lament could have been ours:

I am confused
 tourism amounts to
 women in jeans and blouses
 my friends the ex-nationalist undergraduates
 change cars and houses
 busy themselves with official entertaining
 shall I go to the dot hotel for the hot local girls
 or is it better to have aside
 the heated discussions of old.

.....
 is the university dead,
 burying me under books
 while over there life breeds vipers
 with heads stirred by things material (Mahub Ali, "Whispers in Kuala
 Tenganu").

And so also could this:

petrol fumes, tractor smoke
 flats, massage parlours
 women and hotel – prostitute
 mascara, eye-shadow – floor show (Baha Zain, "a 'modern movement'
 collage").

Baha Zain has yet stronger images to dramatize the oppressed state of his country's women. In compressed lines he sharply etches the portrait of the exploited brown woman:

what else can I give
 all frangipanis wilt in the fire of the blasts
 you have filled all wombs
 with your dollars
 with your V.D.

what else
 what else
 you have left me
 heir to germs and destruction
 let me be. ("Plea of the Asian Woman")

Elsewhere in the collection Usman Awang pictures (in "Banana Hawker in the Pathway") the plight of the sidewalk vendor whose heart beats in fear when the inspector comes ("Hey, where's your license? / Blocking the way, eh?"), whose baskets are taken away and whose children are waiting at home as "they" drive her off "in a guarded van." Meanwhile the persona of the poem makes a rush for the bus but there is no room for him: "limousine glides by, its owner seated in comfort." Muhammad Haji Salleh assesses the intellectual as having no choice "between the pain of emotion and thoughts that breed in the mind . . . only the responsibility of the gift." And the amazing Usman Awang (grand old man of Malaysian poetry, the poet of the people, educated entirely in Malay and only up to the elementary level at that) briskly, brusquely paints the portrait of "Old Utih . . ."

His hands rough as hide
 Are ever ready for toil
 Old Utih, the noble peasant.

.....
 In the city the leaders speak
 Of elections and people's freedom —
 Of a thousand-fold prosperity in a sovereign state
 The golden bridge to the hereafter.

There are banquets and festivities everywhere
 With delicious roasts from the villages
 That are promised prosperity.
 Old Utih still waits with his prayer
 Where are the leaders going in their limousines?

Shades of Amado V. Hernandez? Of Efrén Abueg, Virgilio Almario, Rogelio Mangahas, Elynia Mabanglo? Perhaps it should not matter, although the similarities establish an immediate affinity with the Filipino reader. What matters is that a literary collection of this quality has reached us, each written originally in Malay and translated into English, allowing us a significant view of contemporary Malaysian poetry. The writers in the collection are mainly in their thirties and early forties; save for Usman Awang who started writing in the mid-1940s. The poets represented here are writers of the decade of the sixties. One can therefore deduce that the thoughts and style they represent are truly of the contemporary scene. To the scholar, teacher, and student of literature, this collection is a boon; to the recreational reader and ordinary lover of poetry, this book is a revelation and a delight.

Nenita O. Escasa