Poetic meditations: Two Singaporean poets and a personal reflection

Kirpal Singh
Poetic meditations: Two Singaporean poets and a personal reflection

Abstract
In spite of the fact that technology has moved phenomenally forward in these past few years, the long-haul flights—such as those from Singapore to the USA—still do provide a lot of time for rumination and contemplation. On my most recent such flight that took place about three weeks ago I read, reread and rereread two books of poetry that have just been released in Singapore. The reason why they have attracted my attention with such urgency is that they represent a small, but significant voice in the Singaporean poetic canon, a canon that has not usually been kind to what may be broadly termed the philosophical or reflective. So I thought it might be useful to share my reading of these books with a wider audience, especially such as Kunapipi’s readers who will be somewhat familiar with creative writings from my tiny island republic of Singapore.
Poetic Meditations: Two Singaporean Poets and a Personal Reflection

In spite of the fact that technology has moved phenomenally forward in these past few years, the long-haul flights—such as those from Singapore to the USA still do provide a lot of time for rumination and contemplation. On my most recent such flight that took place about three weeks ago I read, reread and reread two books of poetry that have just been released in Singapore. The reason why they have attracted my attention with such urgency is that they represent a small, but significant voice in the Singaporean poetic canon, a canon that has not usually been kind to what may be broadly termed the philosophical or reflective. So I thought it might be useful to share my reading of these books with a wider audience, especially such as Kunapipi’s readers who will be somewhat familiar with creative writings from my tiny island republic of Singapore.

Allow me to preface my presentation with the observation that Singapore has, especially in the last five years, made a huge international impact on many different fronts and levels: from having the world’s first ever night F1 race to being a nation so highly judicious in its use of financial resources that even the great US of A has called upon the world to follow Singapore’s example in the prudent handling of funds. At the material level of existence and living, therefore, Singapore is a prime example of a nation where discipline, hard work and efficiency have paid off — great dividends plus a high standard of living for all. It would be unwise of me not to boast of Singapore’s attractiveness to foreigners from everywhere (and these include those from nations such as Sweden, Denmark, Australia, Germany, Italy, besides the usual China, India, UK, Canada, USA, Japan) that migration has become a burning issue on the country’s political front.

In one of his numerous chiding speeches when Mr Lee Kuan Yew was the Prime Minister (he is now Minister Mentor while his son, Lee Hsien Loong is the nation’s current PM) he raised the issue of the relevance, or, more correctly, non-relevance, of literature — especially poetry — to a nation bent upon finding its feet on the shifting grounds of economic strife. I remember that speech vividly — it was delivered at the old National Theatre Building to all of us who were entering university in 1969. Mr Lee cautioned against poets resting under coconut trees and waiting for inspiration. What he needed, he reminded us, were engineers, doctors, teachers and other professionals who would work hard to ensure Singapore’s future as an island-nation, a nation-state having no natural resources save for its people. The warning did not escape all of us who were then already having some
stirrings of our poetic beings. But Mr Lee had a way of ensuring that all other voices were subsumed under the major voice of Singapore’s material progress. Looking back I cannot say that he did wrong; certainly as a classmate of mine put it directly and bluntly: money can feed people, art cannot.

Today, more than three decades after that gruelling speech of the elder Lee, the platforms have changed: now there is a real call to have the arts flourish and for Singaporeans to awaken to the more subtle joys of cultural experience. Big funds are now made available for the annual Arts Festival and there has been plenty of excitement just in the past two weeks about the appointment of a Director of Singapore’s Writers Festival, an event now high-pitched to be an important item in the nation’s annual calendar of events. Indeed, we have come a long way.

Yet it is important to observe that while the creation of literary works never truly stopped, some of the nation’s awkwardness concerning its poets and artists has continued to manifest itself in the absence of real engagements with the deeper issues of living in a context wherein poetry is not exactly given pride of place. Most poets here write a shrill note and the more impressive among them adhere to the usual modes of admonishment, lament, sarcasm and predictable truisms. This is not to deny that every now and then some poem does appear which transcends the normal tones and the normal sermons.

Pre-eminent among the absent voices is the voice of serious philosophic reflection and probing. When I read Chandran Nair’s *Reaching for Stones: Collected Poems, 1963–2009* and Cyril Wong’s *Satori Blues: A Poem*, I felt the need to reread and re-reread immediately. Here were two books written by two Singaporean poets who could not be more different in age, orientation and background which contain almost wholly this meditative voice of serious philosophic reflection. Nair, the older poet, has not lived in Singapore for more than twenty-five years now, having made his home just outside of Paris. Wong, younger than Nair by some three decades lives in Singapore but in an oblique kind of way — preferring to stay in the shadows and making his stand/s usually when outside of Singapore — such as that when he decried Singapore’s lack of sympathy/empathy for gays at the Ubud Writers Festival a few years ago.

A major worry for the pundits of Singaporean literature has been the close connection(s) between the poetry and the poets’ biographies. Little wonder that most of the poetry published here fights shy of delving into the reality of the human condition — for how can one articulate the deeper meanings and truths of life and living if one is constrained for bringing into focus one’s own experience(s)? This is what these two poets resist: in their poems lies their life — or at least significant aspects of their life.

Let me first take Nair’s book. He dedicates this to his wife Ivy, for whom the majority of the poems seem to have been written.

thirty years

stand back
contemplate surrender
understand the subtlety
of forever receiving
time and love and pain
she not only surrendered
she also gave (144)

Those of us who know the Nairs-Chandran and Ivy, know the traumatic times they went through in trying to get together as a couple united in romantic love with a passion so consuming that we all worried for them. Now, years and years later, the call is to ‘stand back’ and look back — contemplate ‘time and love and pain’. Most Singaporeans will find this unsettling because we are not educated in this area of living, preferring always to pretend that everything’s honky-dory. Or, at best, that this is not the kind of experience/narrative that one ought to share with others. So how can the Singaporean mind fathom time and love and pain? Or, consider this:

his dreams curve along her body
hardening in print they violate
sanctuaries in which she placed
loveless days when words against eyes
lashed darkening images
once upon a timeless island, torture
heightened the beauty of suppliants
ravishing a tired old man blunted by impact
he remembers tiberius disputing caligula
who correctly guessed the time, subtly arranged
an adopted father’s desire for immortality
with equal gentleness he puts
a pillow to his dreams (129)

Caligula and Tiberius? Together in a poem where ‘his dreams curve along her body’? What is the meaning here? What nuanced communication/s do these lines/allusions contain? Most Singaporeans would not, today, have heard of Tiberius or even of Caligula and most will have great difficulty trying to understand the metaphoric underpinnings of this poem. Why? Because for the most part Singapore’s pragmatic, goal-targeted, grade-achievement educational system has left precarious little or no room whatsoever for the larger cultivation of sensibilities. While our young win Olympic gold medals in math olympiads most have never come across the classical names or been taught what a metaphor is, what it does and what power it can wield. Hence the difficulty of promoting poetry of this kind to the vast majority of Singaporeans whose basic goals are to earn enough to carve out a comfortable living in a city which is fast becoming one of the most expensive in the world.
I will take just one more short poem from Nair because it helps to illustrate what the younger poet, Wong, is not going to ruminate on:

rehearsal

against love’s gentle wind
rehearsing the lines of her many parts
he listens to her closing chords
subtly transcribe

his condition (151)

The majority of poems in Nair’s *Reaching for Stones* are about love and its variations upon themes rehearsed and re-rehearsed. Nair is unrelenting in his honesty and spares no emotions when confronting hard realities. This has always been his forte — the capacity to absorb and make whole pain and suffering and then express this in poetry — there is such beauty and subtlety contained in the lines which result. Nearing 70, Nair has lived a life rich with meaningful lessons and it is good that he now shares his journey with his readers. His poetry will not, clearly, be appreciated by all but its value cannot be negated—Nair is one of Singapore’s prized poets and ought to be recognised and regarded as such!

Cyril Wong, on the other hand, is a poet who has won national recognition and awards. Indeed, he received the coveted Young Artist Award years ago, when still only in his very early thirties. So when he publishes a book which is one long meditative poem, it is imperative that we as readers listen carefully and sensitively to try to understand what this gifted young writer is sharing. Unlike Nair who is healthily heterosexual, Wong is a self-confessed gay — a condition about which he has written much and of which he takes complete and total ownership; that is, he refuses to blame this on biology or some other mis-alignment, taking, rather, full responsibility for being gay by choice. This in itself is tough in any country, let alone one where for years homosexuality was a crime and where the specific law pertaining to this still remains in the books even though the Prime Minister has declared in Parliament that the law will not be used. If there are ironies here they have not escaped Wong whose lengthy poem reflects chiefly on the strange convolutions that Love brings.

The way is every place. Love appears as nothing when we begin to know it, nothing that is not its opposite, or whatever opposites mean, in this case — coming and ebbing, a kiss and heartache.
The place where no love waits is also love… (5)

This is the opening of *Satori Blues*. Now I googled ‘Satori’ and this is what I found: satori refers, generally, to the sudden awakening of spiritual awareness usually associated with Zen Buddhism. So if we define ‘blues’ as being the music of pain, especially pain in and of love, we can approximately say that the title
of Wong’s book can be paraphrased as ‘spiritual awareness as suffering’. Wong mentions that his long poem owes much to the writings of such luminaries as Shunryu Suzuki, J and UG Krishnamurti, Alan Watts and Thich Nhat Hanh. As I read this powerful document of love-as-pain, love as no-pain, it dawned on me that the writer I had studied for my PhD — Aldous Huxley — must also be somewhere present in Wong’s discourse. For both Huxley and Wong emphasise attention as a key mode for transformative spiritual awareness. How can ‘the place where no love waits’ be also love? Writing, almost speaking, in riddles and opposites, Wong teases us out of our complacencies and directs/guides our thinking along the long, hard route to self-awareness:

A votive without motives in a moment
without distinction. The revelation stayed
long after the high was gone, that there
is a way to observe each chiseled body
as something foreign or terrifyingly
new. I took part in the orgy, but instead
of being ploughed by lust, I wanted
all of you to abandon self-hatred
for joy. Sometimes love is unfulfilled
vanity: touch me, hold me, fuck me. (14)

‘Ploughed by lust’; ‘Sometimes love is unfulfilled vanity’: can — does — the ordinary mind uneducated in the niceties of Zen take hold of the meanings embedded in lines like these (to be found almost on every page of Wong’s book/poem)? I assume this would be a difficult question to answer by any one and I do not doubt that the poet himself may well also respond quizzically if grilled and drilled about the deeper understandings that lie beneath the many allusions and figures of speech. Is the poet also seeking to change us and make us less self-centred? It is not uncommon to note that most of his fellow citizens these days are seen to be focussed only on the self — a tiresome and worrisome preoccupation that is now starting to haunt the higher echelons of leadership in Singapore. Wong touches on what he senses as being the real challenge for most of us as we try to reach out for a larger frame of reference to make meanings of our discontinuous worlds:

the mystery can be solved if you would
lower the gun or magnifying glass.
The molester who was arrested had
asked victims to place their hands
on his chest to ‘feel’ his heart.
The hardest part is admitting that no wrong
has been committed. Thank you
for loving me in spite of yourself. (28)

How many of us thank those who love us for doing so in spite of themselves? For a young man, Wong writes profoundly. Perhaps personal crises and meditations upon one’s contextualised existence does tend to make most humans wonder about
the quintessence of living. Perhaps. But there might well be a simpler, neater, cleaner and clearer answer to this:

What we talk about when we talk about loss
are the catastrophes: walls collapsing
and the terrible flood. What we forget is what
we fail to detect: the line opening like an eye
from one end of a dam to another;
a startled look and the averted vision
at a wrong word at yet another wrong time.
Loss is an ever-growing thing. The same
is true of how we win… (35)

Another nudge for attention: the wise men of old (they were mostly men) advised gently— let go, let go especially of that which we love. Find release. The Lord Budhha said, I come to show you sorrow and the ending of sorrow. The Lord Jesus said, be in the world but not of it. Wong’s words, because he is also a talented singer and song-writer, ring in our ears a tune which we must of needs confront and come to terms with. His is a demand for engagement — not a side-stepping which the older poet, Nair, seems to be okay with, at least sometimes. So Wong’s poem ends:

Listen to what I’ve said.
If the truth agitates, perfect! If not,
sing along — this number is for you. (39)

Hence ‘blues’. Hence the extraordinary attempt to seduce the reader into somnambulance-via-rhythmic, rhymic language, the language of meditative poetry.

As far as I can tell Nair and Wong do not know one another: it would be interesting to have them meet and exchange notes about their understanding/s of human nature. Who knows: Singapore may yet be saved by its soothsayers — the poets.

WORKS CITED