

## EDITORIAL

The Swedish academics Nils Hammerin and Thomas Johansson said that “the concept of homosociality describes and defines social bonds between persons of the same sex. It is, for example, frequently used in studies on men and masculinities, here defined as a mechanism and social dynamic that explains the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity.”

But in the complex and slippery relationships of ideas in critical theory, there is no single point A (“social bonds between persons of the same sex”) that cause a single point B (“explains the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity”). There are infinite points between A and B. For example, are the social bonds between persons of the same sex caused by blood ties? friendship? homosexuality? And for another cluster of examples, the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity must have been caused by several individual or even interlinked factors: upbringing by a distant father and an intimate mother, upbringing by a macho father and a docile mother, a series of failed and painful relationships, even closeted homosexuality?

The poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, interviews, essays, letters and reviews collected in the second issue of *Men Matters* show this infinity of ideas. The premier Filipino poet, Alfred A. Yuson, writes a poem about his dear friend, the poet and revolutionary Emmanuel A. F. Lacaba, who was gunned down by the military forces of the late Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1976. Past and present intertwine in this river of memory, and indeed water is one central image in the poem. “Do you suppose the most beautiful/ friendships are those/ flung from both/ sides of the river which lead/ to different cataracts of the same/ poem?”

Elizabeth Marshall also dips into her memories in ‘Ghazal 22,’ a poem that she has rewritten for her PhD thesis at the University of Nottingham Malaysia. Memory is not seen as something fragile but as something lasting and vivid: “In a heart-shaped ring of flowers in silver pewter/ Sits the love bird, the locket gifted by, the *guitar man*/ From a plastic bottle of red oozed the oil I applied/ My nails were strong and polished glittering, *guitar man*.”

Aminur Rahman writes poems inflected by the great literature of the subcontinent. His blue lotus as well as the beloved lady could well be a woman herself, literally, or by transference, the eternal Muse of art.

Salleh Ben Joned also sought the Muse but his guitar man did not strum the strings gently but twanged them, producing stirring songs that soothed some, and caused discomfort in others.

I met him in a literary conference at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) in Bangi in 2003. I happened to sit beside him, and when I learnt his name I braced myself for something strange to happen. But nothing of this sort came to pass. He was delighted to learn that I was from the Philippines and had travelled for more than a thousand miles to stay in Malaysia for ten months to study its literature in English. I also told him that I had already read his poems and he asked, with a wicked gleam in his eyes, “And what do you think of them?” I said, “I think you are the great *imp* of Malaysian literature.” He roared with laughter, to the great surprise of the staff and students assembled that afternoon.

The work collected in *Poems Sacred and Profane* shows the range of Ben Joned as a poet. The moving poem, ‘Ria,’ written for his daughter who had died young, has an epigraph from the Holy Quran: “and We know what his soul whispers within him, and We are nearer to him than the jugular vein.” I remember these lines in the Holy Quran very well, since I also took up modules on Islam and Islamic Mysticism as a graduate student at Rutgers University in the United States. In a parallel vein, the poet implies that his daughter, breath of his breath and blood of his blood, is “nearer to him than his jugular vein.”

‘Harum Scarum’ is the anthem of the writer as a rebel. It deals with the iconic image of the artist asking questions about race and religion, the collective memory that foams and swirls in the mind. The Christian equivalent of this is Stephen Daedalus, seeing the heron at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man*, leading to his soliloquy. In the same vein, Ben Joned’s poem ends, but in an ironic way: “Our one dislike we have to keep/ to preserve our identity;/ so long as we hate pigs and pray,/ we’ll remain Moslem and Malay.”

‘Drifting’ by David C.E. Tneh and ‘Crutch’ by Vincent Heselwood seem like two different sides of one coin. Resonant in these two poems are images of muffled voices and doors tightly shut. On the other hand, Kiran Bhat’s lines are long and sweeping, the better to capture the wave of memory. One of the poems end in a tongue-in-cheek manner: “I am seen by all of my classmates to be like a tortoise,/ but I secretly imagine myself as the swan.”

The poems seem to play with the images of faces, of time phases sliding into one. Abhay K.'s poem called 'Man' is no exception to this. In one startling line, it says: "You cast God in your own image." The poet makes an ironic reversal of the age-old, cross-religious belief that we are cast in the image of God.

On the other hand, 'Untouchable,' the one-act play by Mahesh Dattani, deals with the body electric between two men having an eyeball after meeting each other in an online gay dating site. Rakesh and Sagar leap across the chasm of caste in a 'sexually-charged game' of seduction and conquest.

The obverse of this issue is shown in 'Masculinity in Crisis: A Foray into the Dark World of Nonconsensual Pornography and the Indian Community in Malaysia' by academics Ron Jeyathurai Backus and Paul GnanaSelvam Pakirathan. It deals with the distorted shapes of desire stoked by photos and videos of women stolen from toilets, hotel rooms and such. The authors tie in the issue to the tradition-bound ways by which Indian men in Malaysia still construct Indian women.

Conquest is also at the core of the novel excerpt from *When Yesterday Calls* by Arthur Foo. But the conquest is for the self that is slowly dying, as the old men John and Darren plan a trip in the Orient Express. This fantastic dream trip is followed by a road trip to nowhere in Andrew Sia's 'The Crocodile and the Steel Pole.' Wry and funny, the story plainly seethes with rage as two men set out on a trip that ends in a word war in the borderless world of cyberspace.

If this struggle was face-to-face and online, then the one in 'Mind Battles' by Uthaya Sankar SB happens within the mind. Our narrator, a Grab driver, tells us the story of Arjunan who is caught in a family inheritance saga. In one fell swoop, this short story captures in microcosm the history of Tamil Indian migration to Malaysia and the family problems in its wake. I won't tell you the ending, but it's a kicker!

The past is another country. This is the landscape charted by 'Cream of the Crop' by Pang Khee Teik, which was first published in *Body to Body 2: A Malaysian Queer Anthology*. This is a charming coming-of-age story about bright Malaysians studying in a Singaporean secondary school, and it's written with daring and with dash.

If the earlier story is about beginnings, the one by Feroz Faisal Dawson is about endings. How does one deal with the complex character traits of an Indian Christian father? Why should we attend funerals only out of a sense of duty? Dawson wrestles with these in a story notable for its density of detail and language of many layers.

Tentative answers on forging homosocial links in everyday lives are shown in Christina Yin's creative nonfiction essay, 'How to Convert a Hunter or How to Turn a Hunter into an Expert Binder and Conservationist.' How, indeed? "By working together in the spirit of mutual respect, the conservationist converts the hunter through jokes, accidents, and daily routine observations of wildlife over the course of two years — without relying on overtly didactic or prescriptive lecturing."

My fellow editor, Malachi Edwin Vethamani, also has a far-ranging interview with Malaysian novelist, Chuah Guat Eng. The inimitable novelist said: "I knew exactly what he [Feroz] meant about psychotic women writing fiction because I was one of them. Just a year earlier (1994) I had spent eight frenzied months writing and publishing my first novel (*Echoes of Silence*), ... Before I started writing my novel, I had read as many contemporary Malaysian novels as I could find in local bookshops and public libraries. There weren't many, but they were all written by elderly male journalists, lecturers, and lawyers. And, more to the point, I didn't enjoy reading them." Chuah Guat Eng also contributes a clear-eyed review of Feroz Faisal Dawson's book, *Ladder in the Water and Other Stories*.

Wong Phui Nam gives a succinct summary of the critical writing of Salleh Ben Joned in a delightful essay while Susan Philip reviews the play, *The Amok of Mat Solo*, by Salleh Ben Joned. The play deals with the seeming 'poverty of leadership' in the country.

There are three companion pieces in the sheaf of tributes to the late Salleh Ben Joned. One is 'A Posthumous Letter to SBJ' by Antares written from his home beside the Magick River. It recounts his friendship with the maverick writer. The second is 'My Che Guru' by J. K. Asher, which gathers together, as in a bouquet, the main themes in the writings of the Salleh Ben Joned. The third is Amir Muhammad's short and witty 'Salleh's Delightful Cameo', which predicts that Salleh will live on in our memories despite not having any faculties, roads or buildings to his name. Malachi Edwin Vethamani rounds out the section with his obituary, where he casts a wide-ranging eye on the achievement of the imp of Malaysian literature.

All told then, we are offering a fresh and varied array of writing in the second issue of *Men Matters*. In their colours and concerns they echo the words of W. H. Auden when he said: “We must love each other, or we die.”

Thank you to all our contributors and peer reviewers for this issue. My thanks and appreciation to Augustine Chay, the journal Copy Editor, and to Kayven Chew Kian Tatt for his technical assistance with the journal website.

Happy reading.

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