

An Interview with Chuah Guat Eng

Malachi Edwin Vethamani

MMOJ Editor Malachi Edwin Vethamani spoke to Malaysian writer Chuah Guat Eng on her continued interest in the late Feroz Faisal Dawson and his collection of short stories (his short story “Fireworks” is republished in this issue of *MMOJ*). Chuah Guat Eng’s review (written in 2020 and published for the first time here) of *Ladder in the Water and Other Stories* follows this interview.

MEV: Like you, I had read “Fireworks” when Ike Ong published it in 1994. I never got to meet Feroz. Were you acquainted with Feroz in person? How did you meet?

CGE: Yes, I knew Feroz personally. I had known his mother, Faridah Merican, for many years. But it wasn’t until the year 2000 that I got to know Feroz as a friend. That was when he phoned to ask if he could talk to me about his short stories. I was delighted and honoured because some years earlier I had read “Fireworks” in *Skoob Pacifica Anthology No. 2* (1994) and was impressed by it. We saw each other quite frequently after that for a few months before he left for Indonesia to take on a job directing commercials. The next — and last — time we met was nearly 10 years later, when he came round for a beer and a chat. That was when he told me he was finally going to get his stories published.

MEV: What struck you about Feroz as a writer?

CGE: When I first read “Fireworks”, I felt that the standard of Malaysian literature in English had been raised several notches. I was struck by his narrative skill. When I was able, later, to read his other stories, I had a better idea of the elements that contribute to this skill. Here are three I value most.

The first is his language palette: his ability to use the vocabularies, cadences, intonations, and colour tones of the various varieties of Malaysian English — from “received” correctness to mangled Manglish — to give his characters (and especially the narrator) their individual vitality. The second is the detail of his fictional worlds: his ability to pick out the particularities of places,

things, and human behaviour, leaving the reader convinced of the facticity of the stories. The third, and for me the most remarkable, element is the narrative persona. Most of the stories are told by a first-person narrator, whose emotional and intellectual responses to the external events — sometimes cynical, sometimes self-deprecating, often witty or humorous — organize each story into a “dialogue” between external and internal realities, between past and present. The result is that several stories are being told at the same time. More than that, the process of telling the story becomes itself a dramatization of the most important story of all: the narrator’s interior journey from initial confusion to some kind of clarity.

MEV: Could you share more about your relationship with Feroz?

CGE: On a personal level, I knew Feroz mainly as a writer. Whenever we met, we talked about his writing, and writing in general. What struck me most about him was how passionately he felt about almost anything he took an interest in. Where his writing was concerned, this passion took the form of a near-obsession with getting it “just right.” I found it very hard to convince him that his stories were good as they were and needed no more rewriting; for him, “good” was never good enough. The upside of his perfectionism is the collection of finely honed stories he has left behind; the downside is that the collection is regrettably small.

MEV: What were his preoccupations in this collection of stories?

CGE: In the Appreciation at the beginning of the volume Feroz writes, “This is a book of fiction, but I thank my friends for giving me ideas and subjects.” That being as it may....

With the exception of “Ladder in the Water”, all the stories are told by a first-person narrator who, if he is not Feroz, is someone very like Feroz: Malay Muslim mother (“No One has Claimed Responsibility”), Indian Christian father (Fireworks”), grew up in the large suburban town of Petaling Jaya, received national school education in Malay but habitually uses English, the home language (“A Drop of Silver”), and further-educated in the US (“At the County Library”, “The Wind Chill Factor”).

Nearly all the Malaysians characters in the stories are the narrator’s schoolmates, people with similar backgrounds. They live in Malaysia within what is nowadays called the “Bangsar Bubble”: ethnically diverse but (at least on the surface) socially comfortable with their diversity, middle

class and privileged, English-speaking, Western-educated, almost wholly influenced by Western culture and values, and ignorant of or alienated from local cultures, including their ancestral ones.

At the risk of over-interpreting, I would say the narrator's preoccupations are the existential dilemmas of this group of Malaysians — cultural hybrids, who, like “ladders in the water”, are oddly out of place, don't lead anywhere, and seemingly serve no earthly purpose.

I shall stop here and let others read the stories and reach their own conclusions.

MEV: Did his short stories strike any chord with you — as a short story writer yourself?

CGE: Several aspects of Feroz as a writer strike a chord with the writer in me in the sense that I can identify with them. One is what I see as his preoccupation with the issues of cultural hybridity and not belonging anywhere. The second is his dogged search for the precise words to express what he really wants to say. The third is his readiness to abandon conventional narrative structures (e.g. the Aristotelian plot) and find new ways of telling stories.

But in other ways, we differ. Feroz is essentially a miniaturist. He draws mainly from his personal life and experiences, and the setting of each story is limited to one or two small places that actually exist. Maybe because I am basically a novelist, I use larger canvases for my short stories, and my characters and events are totally imaginary. Another way we differ is in our attitude to our work. Feroz had a great deal of patience. He took so long to publish his stories because he kept reworking and rewriting to get them to the state of perfection he had in mind. I am less patient, or perhaps expect less of myself; at some point in the rewriting process, I feel the need to stop, let go, and move on. The reason I publish my stories is so that I can't go back and make changes, let the critical dice fall as they may.

MEV: What is your response to Feroz's comment: "I don't like the fact that most Malaysian writers are journalists, lecturers and lawyers. For our literature to be vibrant we need criminals, maladjusted youngsters and psychotic housewives to write fiction. Then we'll raise some eyebrows."

CGE: When I first came across the above quotation in 1995, I felt an immediate bond with Feroz, although I didn't know him as a friend then. I knew exactly what he 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*), driven by dark despair about the increasing inter-ethnic resentments, religious extremism, money politics, crony capitalism, repressive police actions, and undermining of the justice system that had beset the nation since the early 1980s. I also knew exactly what Feroz meant about the non-vibrant state of Malaysian writing in English. 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.

The Feroz I met and befriended a few years later was exactly as his remark about Malaysian literature in English had led me to expect. Passionate, as I have said, about literature, about great literature, and about the honest emotional engagement with life and living that makes literature great. In person, as in his writing, he was honest, forthright, saw through superficial behaviour, and did not suffer gladly the snobbery and posturings of the English-language literati of the day.

In the early 2010s, while researching the development of the Malaysian novel in English from 1965 to date, I realized that Feroz was speaking not only for himself but for a generation of new Malaysian writers who began publishing from the mid-1990s onward. These writers included women, the young, the straight, the gay, and the trans. They were engaged in business, management, accounting, advertising, IT, public relations, music-making, film-making, drama, and art. And they unabashedly used popular fiction genres such as romance, crime, and horror to tell their stories.

In August-September 2015, I wrote up my research findings in a series of 10 fortnightly articles for *The Star* newspaper ("How to Talk about Malaysian Novels in English Without Reading Any"). In the fourth article, I had occasion to cite Feroz and the above quotation. This is what I said, "His voice — non-conforming, non-mainstream, and anti-highbrow — became the signature voice of the [Malaysian English-language] writers who made their debut from 1994 onward."

Whether Feroz knew it or not, Feroz had, in 1995, placed his finger on the pulse of the new age and (one hopes) flowering of Malaysian literature in English.

MEV: How did you get hold of Feroz's book and what led you to write this book review?

CGE: I bumped into Faridah at an Italian choral concert held at KLPAC at the end of November 2019. She told me then that the book had been published in 2012 but has not been reviewed. I got a copy of the book from her a few days later, read it, and thought it deserved a wider readership. I knew, however, that the chances of one of the daily newspapers publishing a review would be slim because the book had been published so long ago. This review was written on 17 February 2020 (Feroz' birthday) in memory of him, and as a personal gift for Faridah.

MEV: Thanks, Guat.