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The good, the limp and the stodgy

iewed by Pangur Ban

IN his Foreword, Rehman Rashid is quite generous in his praise of the three youngish writers whose essays are collected in this book. In fact, he positively gushes as he ends with the following line: "Personally, I think they're quite wonderful."

It must be difficult to write a foreword for a book like this. You are forced to say nice things about all three writers and you must choose your words carefully so as not to appear to favour one over the other two. I must say Rehman's Foreword is a peerless specimen of diplomatic nicety. He has nice things to say about all three writers.

His reference to Stothard's "iron-fisted political consciousness", Kam's "velvet-gloved, golden-hearted social commentary", and the "precocious" and "peerless" ease of Amir's prose, highlights their respective strengths, and indeed, nicely summarises the essential qualities of each writer.

On the other hand, the obligation to be equally nice to all three writers has led Rehman to generalise in a way that glosses over their strengths and weaknesses, especially the latter. A reviewer fortunately does not have to labour under such an obligation, and I can, for example, point out that the following passage appears to me to describe not all three writers, but just one of them:

They all write very well; these pieces sparkle with literary felicity and thoughtful craftsmanship. Yet, these skills are rarely indulged to the point where style outshines substance.

I am, of course, referring to Amir.

Amir's prose sparkles; that of the other two writers do not. It's as straightforward as that. Both Kam and Stothard have done themselves a great injustice by allowing their pieces to appear in the same volume as Amir's. Their weaknesses stand out in starker relief when their pieces are put beside Amir's, and their strengths are overshadowed by the overwhelming burst of energy that characterises Amir's writing.

Stothard's essays, for example, are marked by a strong sense of commitment towards her subject. If you were to read them on their own, with nothing else coming before or after to influence, however slightly, your impression of them, you might think her writing sincere, down-to-earth, committed, and even passionate, on occasion. Put beside Amir's pieces, however, you cannot help but think how stodgy her prose is in comparison to Amir's fluent writing. You can't help but think that she tries too hard, that she belabours her point, that she loads her prose with too much unnecessary baggage.

This baggage sometimes comes in the form of extended allusion to literary texts. In fact, you would hardly call them allusions, for what you get are synopses of large chunks of various texts. In 'Law and Order', for example, where she makes a very cogent point about abuse of power and perversion of justice, she gives you a description of the character of Angelo, from Shakespeare's play Measure for Measure, and holds him up as an example of someone who abuses his position of authority.

Not only do you get two whole paragraphs given over to this treatment of Angelo, you get in addition one footnote telling you that Measure for Measure is one of Shakespeare's later plays, and that it is usually grouped together with three other plays which she proceeds to list. Finally, she supplies you with the date of the first performance. She also

quotes four lines from the play and you get another footnote telling you where exactly in the text they come from.

Shakespeare turns up again in 'Umno & the Bard', which is little more than a list of Shakespeare plays and characters and brief synopses of three plays.

Take 'Hope & Hypocrisy' as another case in point. The piece begins with a description of the subject matter and theme of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and the writer goes on to attempt to establish parallels between the novel and contemporary Kuala Lumpur. You never lose sight of the novel and the whole piece could possibly have passed off as a Sixth Form or even an undergraduate essay on *The Great Gatsby*.

This all smells very fishy and appears as if the writer is using all these opinion pieces as so many excuses to fob off some 'literature' on you, or, worse, to educate you.

The writer sometimes shoulders her literary and intellectual baggage in a more subtle, but perhaps equally uncomfortable manner, at the verbal level. In a piece talking about the possibility of an Islamic Renaissance in Malaysia, she points to positive signals put out by the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister in two separate speeches and then concedes that "two speeches do not a renaissance make".

There is an uncomfortable marriage here of the traditional maxim - "two wrongs do not make a right" - and an inversion of word order (putting the verb last) which used to be common in poetry and which is still sometimes used as a means of making something sound grand. What you sense here is not style outshining substance, but style flopping on its belly.

Amir sometimes gets dangerously close to letting his style eclipse his substance but let's see what happens when he lets a literary echo slip into his prose. In a piece about journalistic sycophancy, he refers to the Prime Minister as "the voice that launched a thousand editorials". Now, this is a direct allusion to a line from Shakespeare's contemporary, Christopher Marlowe, referring to Helen of Troy as the cause of the quarrel that led to the launch of "a thousand ships" headed for the siege of Troy. You don't of course need to know any of this to understand the phrase as Amir has it in his piece or even to appreciate the humour.

At the same time, the humour deepens for you if you notice the mock-heroic discrepancy between Helen and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as well as that between the thousand ships laden with war-hungry Greek warriors and the thousand sycophantic editorials.

In complete contrast to Stothard, Kam travels light. In the first place, he does not deal with issues nearly as weighty as those which Stothard likes to sink her teeth into. With the exception of two pieces near the end, all the pieces of his which appear in this book were first published in *Men's Review* and *Day & Night*, which presumably have fewer intellectual pretensions than *The Sun*, in which all but three of Stothard's essays first appeared.

You do indeed sense the touch of a velvet-glove in most of Kam's pieces, but at the same time, you will also realise after reading a few of them that it is not so much society that he is caressing with a velvet-gloved hand, but himself. What comes through in these pieces, once you get over the disarming effect of the mildly bluff manner and the coy prose, is the overwhelming sense of someone trying to foist not his intellectual baggage on you this time, but himself.

He goes on about his insecurity over his spotty education; he talks about his imminent 30th birthday the way Madonna, say, might talk about her impending menopause; he talks about his father; he tells us what he would do if he were Prime Minister; he talks about his mother's attempts to marry him off.

The most interesting of Kam's pieces in this volume are the very two that come near the end of the book and, as it happens, it is in these two pieces that you would find those rare occasions where he stops caressing Kam Raslan for a bit and reaches his velvet-gloved hand out to stir things up in the world at large.

Both, we are told, have not been previously published and one of them, a footnote informs us, was "spiked" - newsroom jargon for copy that has been rejected. Innocent as this piece may seem to be to unreformed liberals like you and me, it is quite obvious why the editor shied away from seeing this go to print: it takes a mildly ironic look at the Internal Security Act.

The other previously unpublished piece is a series of loosely connected reflections on the four days the writer spent in a police lock-up. There is no indication in the piece as to the occasion behind this extraordinary event; not even a hint in a footnote. Clearly, one last coy gesture to end a whole string of them.

Stothard however writes about what is presumably the same event in an article conveniently placed a dozen pages prior to Kam's and a comparison of the two shows up the different qualities of the two very nicely.

Stothard begins her piece with a stark account of the demonstration organised by 600 men against APCET II, an NGO seminar on the East Timor issue held in Kuala Lumpur in November 1996 and her arrest along with other participants of the seminar. Yes, the very event which sent shudders down the spine of unreformed liberals like you and me.

Her spare prose here and the starkness of her account brings out the dark irony of the situation very nicely. The rest of the piece is a reflection on the event. She draws parallels between the 600 men calling themselves Barisan Bertindak Rakyat Malaysia and the Nazi youth movement and Mao's Red Guards and then quotes at length from a German intellectual who was harassed to his death by Hitler's secret police. Of course, you get a proper footnote here documenting the source of the quotation.

Her references to Nazism, the Red Guards and Walter Benjamin take up more than half the article and in my opinion overwhelms the piece. The chilling point that she makes about the spectre of extreme right-wing forces rearing its head in this country loses its force under the weight of all that intellectual baggage, and all the verbiage spent in filling in the historical background for her readers.

Not to be left out, Stothard lets us know in a footnote that this piece was "spiked" by two publications before Aliran published it.

Amir Muhammad has no "spiked" article to offer us in this volume but he has absolutely no need to wear this badge of honour. He reaches such outrageous heights in the pieces here (he has a foolhardy editor perhaps?) that only a very obtuse person would question his credentials.

In contrast to the intellectual and literary baggage which overwhelms so many of Stothard's pieces, you will find bits of popular culture, current affairs trivia, bons mots or just plain wickedness strewn artlessly all over Amir's pieces. Unlike the rather woolly social consciousness that occasionally comes through in Kam's pieces (when he's not talking about himself that is), both Amir and Stothard make very cogent, often hard-hitting and usually definite statements about politics and society.

The difference between Stothard and Amir lies in the fact that the latter is completely at ease with his medium and effortlessly bends his prose to serve his purpose, while the former gets too involved with her prose and lets her knowledge of weighty things overwhelm her subject.

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