

Malachi Edwin Vethamani, *Rambutan Kisses*. Kuala Lumpur: Maya Press, 2022. 116 pp. ISBN: 9789832737667

Reviewed by Jhiam Chattaraj

RBVRR Women's College, Hyderabad, India

“Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed...” wrote Francis Bacon in the essay, *Of Studies*, 1625. Malachi Edwin Vethamani’s poetry collection, *Rambutan Kisses*, enhances the aesthetic taste of the reader. The poems are an honest exhibition of sensual, earthy and consuming experiences of a flaneur-like soul amidst a varied social, political and cultural milieu. An attempt to critically review a book that is so deceptively simple is often a failed exercise; these are poems as clear as crystals under the sun; one should ideally read and dip into the intrinsic energy of Vethamani’s fluid verse style. The book will be cherished by readers looking for an emotional refuge, ethnic belonging and a resonance with the everyday drama of human existence.

Rambutan is a popular South East Asian fruit. In this collection, Vethamani is purely intentional about his choice of poetic devices. Metaphors swell with carnal juices. Images accumulate into a smooth montage of a man exploring life, body, desire and relationships in their fullest possibilities. The title of the collection sets the tone of the book; an ordinary odyssey into the empire of kindness, belonging and nurture:

Tapau for me your rambutan kisses.

When you are gone

I will take each one out

and be kissed one at a time

alone, by myself.

They will give me solace

in your absence.

Each rambutan kiss,
my silent companion
in my solitude,
until you return
and kiss me.

Brushing your bristle
on my welcoming lips (“Rambutan Kisses,” 23)

Vethmani’s poetry is not for those who seek structural complexity. His poems are primarily free verse with a taut and urbane appeal. They do not delve into architectural intricacies, vague precisions, abstractions, satire, or intense social commentary. They are simple yet, complex. *Rambutan Kisses* is the private world of Vethamani. Each poem unfurls like the petal of a rose; each petal an exploration of a person near or far away from the poet. Vethamani links the inside world of emotions to the outside world of experience, where we meet people and become the sum of our relationships. Indian poet, editor, artist Sudeep Sen, writes of Vethamani’s poetry:

Simplicity of language and phrase-making are the hallmarks of Malachi Edwin Vethamani’s poetry. Feelings, events, non-events, happenings — Life Happens as a natural course of action — and he records them with sensitivity that only an acute poet’s eye and ear can do. More importantly, he explores important issues such as the complications and fractures of longing, heartbreak, exile and sexuality in Malaysian society.

The poet is a hungry lover. He is an Epicurean explorer who not only seeks romantic love but the benefits of ordinary love. A love that encompasses the self, family, neighbours and humanity in general. It starts however from the nerve centre of the self; the self that is kind, empathetic and eager to fill one’s cup. Vethamani’s emphasis on nurturing the self, makes the

book a suitable commentary on modern notions of love and expectations in love. The poet explores contemporary post-covid, post-truth, post-soft power, human condition where anger, and intolerance have become the bedrock common conversations.

Vethamani's poems invite readers into the world of a mature person who finds love in flawed places. Vethamani's words are dipped in a calm sense of detachment. His poetry often reminds one of what Nobel prize winning author Chimamanda Adichie once said:

“I think of people as people, not as abstractions who have to conform to bloodless logic but as people — fragile, imperfect, with prides that can be wounded and hearts that can be touched.”

The poem “Let me be my husband,” is a noteworthy introspection that leads to many other poems where the poet is filled with love, kindness and understanding:

Let me be my husband.

Let me love myself first.

Let me love myself,

as I would want my husband to.

When my husband comes

I will love him,

as I have loved myself.

He will love the way he can,

and if that is not enough,

I still have my love in me.

The fragrance of my love
will suffice where his lacks.

Let me be my husband,
I am my own love (Let me be my husband, 24).

Rambutan Kisses is not only centered around the ethos of self-healing but is also a journey into the past of the poet. Childhood nostalgia and a constant effort to retrieve memories of joy, laughter and togetherness become a recurrent theme in the book. Poems like “Once a Beaming Boy,” “Coconut Pearl,” “The Other Child” reflect on the young poet in the company of school friends, loving neighbours and indulgent mothers and grandmothers. Edwin’s style is crisp and tight. His poetry is like a bird perched on short phrases. The poems focus on the poets’ emotional truth in an objective manner, there is never an attempt to sentimentalise the past:

Amma sits on a low stool
and I opposite her.
In the middle stands
the family aattukkal.
It is worn smooth,
over years of grinding
wet rice and peas,
worked by Paati and Amma (“An Afternoon with Amma,” 84).

Clarity is the hallmark of Vethamani’s writing. Poet Cyril Wong writes:

“deceptively simple and ingenuous, Malachi Edwin’s unpretentious poems risk schmaltz by taking on the largest topic of love: what love can still mean in our age of political correctness, especially in the less knowable ways in which love transcends the body and the interpersonal self.” Vethamani’s treatment of both the personal and the public self is done with sensitivity and care.

A series of poems are dedicated to the pandemic and the consequent lockdown. Instead of a morose and philosophical look at devastated realities, Edwin approaches with humour and mending practical realities such as hugging:

Now that it’s safe to hug again,
hug all those you once hugged.

Those you hugged,
behind closed doors.

Those you stole a hug,
between bookshelves

Those whose hands you squeezed,
hoping you weren’t seen.

Those whose shoulders you grazed,
as is if by accident.

when it's safe to hug again,

hug, hug, hug.

You don't know when virtual hugs

will come upon us again ("Hugs," 113)

Rambutan's Kisses has many high points. Its humane treatment of vulnerability, physical yearnings, and the way they shape the emotional well-being of a person are very well depicted in many of the poems:

I am warmed by his body

as our bodies merge;

my heart is at rest, loved.

Now, it's the cold night air

and the dark room,

a piercing pain

of the loss of him that I love ("Parting for Now," 101).

Vethamani's poems thrive within a small personal world; after all, poetry is the only genre that respects subjectivity. *Rambutan Kisses* is recommended to readers who seek micro-world views from poetry. This is not a collection of grand narratives but loving poetic anecdotes by a poet, a father, a son and a lover.

Works cited

Sen, Sudeep, [Rambutan Kisses – Lit Books](#), Web, 2022.

Wong, Cyril, [Rambutan Kisses – Lit Books](#), Web, 2022.

Adichie, Chimamanda, 'The Problem with Cancel Culture' by Garnett Achieng, DECEMBER 19, 2018, Women's Media Center, [The problem with “cancel culture” - Women's Media Center \(womensmediacenter.com\)](https://www.womensmediacenter.com/uncategorized/the-problem-with-cancel-culture/).