

A Literature of Their Own

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Heng Siok Tian. *Mixing Tongues*. Singapore: Landmark Books, 2011. 45 pages. ISBN 9789814189293.

Heng Siok Tian. *Is my body a myth*. Singapore: Landmark Books, 2011. 27 pages. ISBN 9789814189286.

Angeline Yap Gek Meng. *Closing My Eyes To Listen*. Singapore: Landmark Books, 2011. 45 pages. ISBN 9789814189309.

Heng Siok Tian's *Mixing Tongues* addresses the subject of crossing worlds, and of creating new worlds with "brave new words" ("Mixing Tongues"). This is a self-reflexive collection of poems in which the poet expresses a quiet awareness of having to negotiate the plurality of her literary heritage, striking a fine balance between appropriating other worlds, and maintaining a sense of her own cultural identity. The title poem describes this heteroglossic and polyvocalic process of creating new worlds as one that is fraught with conflict. The poet finds herself drowning between worlds, but upon being revived, comes to understand that being between worlds is an inevitable consequence of cultural survival where "words grow as penicillin/ culturing new strains" ("Mixing Tongues"). But "mixing tongues" does not mean diluting differences, or losing what is distinct of each of these worlds, whether literary, cultural, or geographical—Pakistan, Norway, Sweden, Singapore and anywhere else in between. In poems that detail her trips to other lands, the encounter with difference is treated with respect and an affinity based precisely on acknowledged differences. This attitude is most evident in the poignant piece, "An 'Other' Line", in which the persona seeks identification with others, only to realise that the "sameness" she shares with everyone else is the fact of their shared "otherness." Heng's other collection, *Is my body a myth*, a lyrical exploration of the poet's relationship with her mother, focuses almost exclusively on matters concerning the body they each possess, and the values they place on their respective bodies. Comprising three lyrical poems, the collection sees the two women negotiate their relative differences on their bodies—bodies they share as women, but simultaneously, bodies that differ, being situated in different historical

moments. The poet's attitude towards her mother is one of admiration for "[her] resilience acquired with a baptism of fire," ("Mother's Gold") even as she attempts to come to terms with her mother's inability, and sometimes reluctance, to escape the gendered expectations of traditional patriarchal Chinese society. While this results in conflict between mother and daughter, it is also through their female bodies that both share the common experience of being the second sex in a patriarchal society, past and present. This is explored in the third poem "Is My Body a Myth", where her mother's past suffering as a woman, and her own "present suffering" as a woman, are mirrored throughout. Their shared, yet distinct, experience of being women is best evoked in her mother's lament, "She is my daughter and not mine. / She is my body and not mine", shadowed by the poet's own realisation that "She is my mother and not me. / I am her body and my body." ("Is My Body a Myth")

Angeline Yap's latest collection of poems, *closing my eyes to listen*, is about learning to shut one's eyes in the presence of things to do and tasks to fulfil, in order to listen and to be affected, rather than to effect. These poems treat sight with its associative reason and desire to impose order and meaning on everything, as a hindrance to personal growth. This is best seen in her spiritual poems whose address to God is reminiscent of John Donne's religious poems, expressing a strong desire to let oneself be affected by a power or force beyond human understanding. In poems like "I want to be still" and "crickets", there is a discernible conflict between being still on the one hand, and on the other being constantly drawn towards things to do, a conflict most poignantly explored in "After 'Schindler's List'" where the creation of any list is a conscious choice to do some things and not others, "every choice/ implying an exclusion." While these "to do" lists at the beginning of the collection refer largely to mundane tasks, by the end of the collection, we realise that focusing on the daily grind of "a list of greeds" bears the heavier consequence of "the good i would/ i do not do" ("After 'Schindler's List'"). What initially appears as a collection of poems meditating upon individual faith and personal conflict, in fact relates to larger existential matters regarding the choices that one, as a human being, makes and the responsibility one owes to others. Humanity has progressed precisely on doing; might we perhaps stop doing, to begin to listen instead? Might we allow the world to affect us, to listen to an other attempting to speak, and perhaps then be able to make better choices that extend beyond personal interests? With her use of conceits and play with form, Yap's verse is surprising even as it is sometimes challenging, but rewarding, to read. But perhaps in reading Yap, we are called not to "read", but to surrender ourselves to listening and to allowing her poetry to affect us.

Like many women poets, Heng and Yap write from a female perspective usually based on an autobiographical impetus. While intensely private at times, their work successfully avoids an over-investment in the personal, unlike, for instance, the work of the confessional poets. Heng and Yap never lose sight of a world outside

of their experiences, one which might not always agree with them, with which they jostle and negotiate their identities as women. These poems not only speak to women, but more importantly, speak to women as part of a larger humanity. This is what makes Heng and Yap, along with other important women poets like Lee Tzu Pheng and Leong Liew Geok, central in efforts towards establishing a local, and female, literature of their own.