

## BOOK REVIEW

**Mohammad A. Quayum (Ed.) *Reading Malaysian Literature in English: Ethnicity, Gender, Diaspora, and Nationalism*. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd, 2021.**

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The year 2021 was a banner year for scholarship on Anglophone Malaysian literature, as it saw the publication of *Reading Malaysian Literature in English: Ethnicity, Gender, Diaspora, and Nationalism* together with a special issue of *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* (volume 57, issue 5) edited by Grace V. S. Chin and Mohammad A. Quayum on the topic of “New Directions in Malaysian Literature in English”. Readers are encouraged to see both publications as paired and complementary texts: while *Reading Malaysian Literature in English* offers those who have scant knowledge of this literary corpus a comprehensive overview of some important authors, works, and recurring topics in post-independence Malaysian writing, the special issue of *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* (true to its topic) contains essays discussing more newer or emerging authors and genres such as comics and science/speculative fiction.

Mohammad A. Quayum’s editorial introduction to this volume of 14 essay-length chapters offers a concise but salient summary of key historical, political, and social elements in modern Malaysia and links them to important moments in the inception and development of Malaysian writing in English since the 1940s (Quayum 2021). This background is helpful for readers who most likely may not be familiar with Anglophone literature from Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries; it is a regrettable fact that in the academic fields of postcolonial and global Anglophone literary studies, authors and texts from South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean are more prominent. Certainly, as Quayum points out in

his introduction, even among Malaysians there is a dearth of awareness of and support for English-language literature due to several factors. Among them are the institutional marginalisation of literature in English written by Malaysian authors, the treatment of English as an instrumental language creating a reading public less interested in literary works, and extremely limited publishing opportunities for English-language works within the country. These circumstances compel many English-language authors to seek better opportunities abroad even if their works still turn towards Malaysia. This trend is apparent across different generations of Malaysian authors from Shirley Geok-lin Lim to Beth Yahp to Tash Aw. Therefore, when one speaks of Malaysian literature in English, it is necessary to consider diasporic and transnational authors who may seem to be at a distance from the country but who still cherish and reimagine it in their writing. The inclusion of the term “diaspora” in the volume’s subtitle attests to this; Quayum also avers that Anglophone Malaysian literature “will perhaps flourish more in its distant, dispersed locations—the diaspora and host lands” (p. xxi).

To argue for the inclusion of diasporic authors and transnational texts is not to neglect those who reside in and write from Malaysia itself despite unfavourable odds. Quayum’s opening move in his introduction to compare Malaysian Anglophone literature “with the country’s national flower, Bunga Raya, or the hibiscus flower” can be read as asserting that Anglophone writing not only has an important position in the national literary landscape (despite the state’s official marginalisation of English), but also that English-language literature has the capacity to bring Malaysians from different communities together (like the petals of a hibiscus flower) and help them envision possibilities of “unity, inclusivity, and hope for a better global future” (p. ix), and to adopt a cosmopolitan vision while still remaining committed to their country. While some may argue that English is irrevocably associated with British colonialism, in the 21st century this language can no longer be seen solely as a legacy of colonial control and cultural imperialism. Postcolonial authors around the world abrogate and appropriate English in resistant and innovative ways to create their own varied “englishes”; this key argument is laid out in a text Quayum references early in his introduction, namely Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin, and Gareth Griffiths in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989).

While the comparison of Malaysian Anglophone literature to the country’s national flower is an inspired move, I offer a different botanical metaphor to describe the non-linear and somewhat diffuse layout of this

book: the rhizome. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) contrast two types of books, those structured like trees and those structured like rhizomes. Rhizomes exhibit “principles of connection and heterogeneity” as “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order” (p. 7). Furthermore, “a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines” (p. 9). *Reading Malaysian Literature in English: Ethnicity, Gender, Diaspora, and Nationalism* arguably has a rhizomatic formation because the essays are not arranged topically according to the four keywords in the volume’s subtitle. Several contributors engage with two or three of them extensively, while a small handful briefly touch on these topics before moving on to other questions. Quayum himself states that the four key topics “are not studied uniformly throughout the chapters but rather in different combinations in different chapters” and therefore the essays are “organised in chronological order according to the seniority of the writers” whose work is being discussed (p. xxiii). On the one hand, a more topical organisation of the book would have been beneficial. If each topical section began with an overview summarising pertinent sociopolitical moments in Malaysia’s history and existing scholarship on that key topic, this may have saved individual contributors the labour of rehashing such contextual information (especially about Malaysia’s racial politics and ethnonationalism) at the start of their own essays, which tended to become somewhat repetitive. On the other hand, a chronological arrangement does have an advantage. As readers make their way through chapters covering over six decades of Malaysian literature, resonating concerns about ethnicity, gender, diaspora, and nationalism emerge among authors from different generations, who write in different genres, and who reside both in Malaysia and the diaspora. These multiple resonances are why I think Deleuze and Guattari’s figure of the rhizome more aptly describes the organisation of this essay collection. Readers can actively trace topical and critical connections for themselves across the essays. They may reflect on how, for instance, Wong Phui Nam and Rehman Rashid (a poet and an essayist who are unlikely to be mentioned in the same breath) both engage with Malaysia’s physical and sociocultural landscapes in their poems and travelogues, respectively, to think about race and politics (as discussed in Leonard Jeyam’s and Carol Leon’s respective essays). The rhizome’s ability to be broken but then start up again along old or new lines explains why many Malaysian English-language writers who

left the country in 1969 still have strong ties to the country even though they live far away. Moreover, the rhizome's capacity to overcome shattering or breakage by creating connections along old or new lines of relation is a useful metaphor. Rhizome as a metaphor helps explain the abiding connections that diasporic authors maintain with Malaysia even if they left after 1969 due to the political and racial tensions that fractured the country

As the book's introduction already offers useful summaries for each chapter or essay, I will only provide a brief description of them here. Pauline T. Newton's opening piece focuses on Lloyd Fernando's essays in *Cultures in Conflict* (1986) and his novel *Scorpion Orchid* (1976), assessing how Fernando's intellectual thinking and academic lectures are intertwined with his creative writing. Newton engages with Fernando's essay "Picture of the Artist as a Eurasian" and its description of the author's own double consciousness to set up a framework for analysing the double or dual nature of the main characters in Fernando's novel about postcolonial Malaysia. Newton also observes that Fernando's inclusion of passages from *hikayats* in his novel may challenge Anglophone, Euro-centric readers to question their own nationalistic and linguistic assumptions about literature. Mohammad A. Quayum contributes two essays to this collection. The first compares and contrasts *Green is the Colour* (1993) by Lloyd Fernando and *Joss and Gold* (2001) by Shirley Geok-lin Lim. While these two novels are written and published almost 20 years apart, and the geographical and temporal scope of Lim's novel is much broader, Quayum argues that both authors interrogate a Malaysian national identity that is hierarchical, exclusionary, and grounded in static concepts of race. They push back against this essentialist national identity by imagining the possibility of a diverse and inclusive "Bangsa Malaysia" (Malaysian nation/race). Quayum's second essay (appearing after Leonard Jeyam's) is about *This End of the Rainbow* (2006), the only novel in English by Malaysian bilingual writer Adibah Amin. The topics discussed in this essay are similar to those in the earlier piece: while Adibah's novel is set just before and after World War II before Malaysia's formal independence in 1957, the characters' struggles and experiences can be read as a commentary on the country's post-independence exclusionary racial politics. Ultimately, as Quayum observes, the novel proposes a Malaysian national consciousness that is also cosmopolitical or cosmopolitan rather than essentially patriotic. Leonard Jeyam reads the early poetry of Wong Phui Nam against the grain of established criticism of Wong's poetry by showing how the poet's apparently bleak verse actually points towards a more hopeful and transformative imagining

of social and cultural space that is both within and outside Malaysia as a nation. Jeyam also argues that Wong’s poetry adopts postmodernist and postcolonial strategies of meaning-making, in particular treating language and history as palimpsests. In contrast to Wong’s hopefulness, his contemporary Ee Tiang Hong’s poetry about Malaysia, written from an exile’s viewpoint, mourns but cannot renew or recover the possibility of a congenial national identity.

Moving from poetry to drama, Susan Philip examines four Malaysian plays—Edward Dorall’s *A Tiger is Loose in Our Community* (1972), Kee Thuan Chye’s *1984 Here and Now* (1987), Huzir Sulaiman’s *Notes on Life & Love & Painting* (2002), and the Five Arts Centre’s *Version 2020* (first staged in 2018)—to show how they negotiate and critique the country’s developmental narrative, embodied in state-sponsored initiatives such as “Wawasan 2020” or “Vision 2020” and Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 (SPV2030). Philip argues that although all four plays were written across a fifty-year time span, they share similar feelings of pessimism or at best ambivalence regarding the possibility of Malaysia becoming a more inclusive and just society, especially when it comes to matters of race and class. Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof’s essay is a personal perspective on some of his poetry, short fiction, and three of his plays: *Halfway Road, Penang* (1982), *SuvarnaPadma: Golden Lotus* (2015), and *The Trial of Hang Tuah the Great* (2014). Ghulam-Sarwar summarises each play and highlights how the plays and their staging have been influenced by different dramatic styles such as naturalism, Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theatre, Jerzy Grotowski’s Poor Theatre, and Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty. The playwright also discusses common themes that recur in his poetry, fiction, and plays such as race, religion, citizenship, and national identity in post-1969 Malaysia. Andrew Hock Soon Ng also discusses a play by Salleh Ben Joned, *The Amok of Mat Solo* (2011), using Martin Esslin’s analysis of Absurdist theatre as a framework. Ng argues that Salleh’s play exhibits many hallmarks of Absurdist drama in its thematic content and aesthetic form. An example of the former is the strained yet inseparable relationship that develops between the individual protagonist and his community; the latter can be seen from the alienating effect produced by the play’s non-linear structure and the projection of seemingly random words on a TV screen in performance. These surrealist scenes echo the protagonist’s estrangement from the community and world. Ng concludes that Salleh indigenises rather than imitates Absurdist techniques, adapting them for a local Malaysian context.

Shifting from drama to fiction, Shanthini Pillai looks at two works by K. S. Maniam, his novel *The Return* (1981) and his short story *The Kling-Kling Woman* (2002), and reads them against the grain of dominant depictions of ethnic Indian women as labouring subjects bound to plantations created during the British colonial period. Pillai focuses on how the women protagonists in the novel and short story remember their ancestral homeland, negotiate domestic and public spaces, and assert their autonomy in the face of communal and national interpellations. Pillai argues that Maniam's fiction successfully sheds light on Indian women's experiences occluded by stereotypes linked to plantation labour. Elisabetta Marino discusses Shirley Geok-lin Lim's collected short stories in *Two Dreams* (1997), which have not received as much scholarly attention as her novels and life writing. Marino pays special attention to how these 19 stories, written from the 1960s to the 1990s and set in both Malaysia and the U.S., deal with problems related to gender and ethnicity, as well as national identity and transnational displacement. Marino concludes that taken as a whole, the stories offer mixed perspectives rather than clear solutions regarding these problems, but in some stories the act of reading literature appears to console and empower the female protagonists. Another essay by Walter S. H. Lim looks at Shirley Geok-lin Lim's life writing alongside that of Tash Aw's. Lim sees an important similarity between Shirley Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces* (1997) and Tash Aw's *The Face* (2016): both write about their education as constitutive of their subjectivity as ethnic Chinese diasporic individuals in post-World War II and postcolonial Malaysia. However, a key difference between Lim and Aw lies in their treatment of ethnicity and race; whereas Lim more pointedly takes issue with Malaysia's racial hierarchisation after 1969, Aw (being from a different generation) pays more attention to matters of class and social mobility. Life writing and travelogues are also the topics of Carol Leon's essay on three books by Rehman Rashid: *A Malaysian Journey* (1993), *Peninsula: A Story of Malaysia* (2016), and *Small Town* (2016). Leon shows how Rehman writes about his personal life, his travels across Malaysia's various states, and his reflections on Malaysian society in ways that intertwine personal, political, and national registers. Central to Rehman's writing, Leon argues, is the conflict between a diverse and multifaceted history of Malaysia and the official Malaysian state narratives of national identity and culture.

Instead of looking at several works by an author, Vandana Saxena offers an incisive analysis of a single novel by Rani Manicka, *The Rice Mother* (2002). Saxena reads it as a family saga that ties domestic and inter-generational relationships with the fate of a nation and argues that *Rice Mother* departs from the conventional father-son trope seen in many postcolonial family sagas and instead represents a matriarchal and matrilineal narrative. By depicting memories of migration and trauma but also moments of resilience and intersubjective reconciliation between individuals and different ethnic groups, the novel offers a fictional counter-history of the Ceylonese community in Malaysia, a community that may be subsumed under the state's official categorisation of its people as Indian. Rajeev S. Patke uses Lionel Trilling's distinction between sincerity and authenticity to perform a detailed textual analysis of some poems by Bernice Chauly. Patke's hypothesis is that sincerity and authenticity in a poem are not polar opposites but complementary elements when it comes to conveying or provoking emotional responses. Patke tests this hypothesis by discussing four of Chauly's poems; after a brief gesture towards broad trends in contemporary Southeast Asian English-language poetry in Southeast Asia, he makes the general claim that poets must work with and through sincerity in order to meet readers halfway in the middle ground of authenticity. Finally, Sanghamitra Dalal's essay explores Preeta Samarasan's novel *Evening is the Whole Day* (2008) through the twin tropes of history and home or homing (Dalal's coinage). Paying close attention to the postmodern and magical realist moments in the novel, Dalal shows how they illustrate the tension between national and diasporic histories (on the one hand) and a sense of home and belonging (on the other hand). Then, Dalal focuses on numerous scenes of arrivals and departures in the novel to argue that the novel represents home not as a fixed location but rather a process of homing, of tracing links between stories and histories that may offer temporary respite from impermanence and dislocation.

While one distinctive strength of this 14-essay collection is the wide range of authors and textual genres discussed by the contributors (not to mention the diversity of critical approaches and theories employed in their analyses), there is an absence of contributions regarding Malaysian comics and graphic narratives, science or speculative fiction, and spoken word or performance poetry. These are literary genres that have gained popularity in the past decade both in Malaysia and the diaspora; a good

example is Zen Cho's edited collection *Cyberpunk: Malaysia* (2015) that contains short works of science and speculative fiction by authors in the country and abroad. Readers interested in such writing may wish to consult the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* special issue on Malaysian literature mentioned earlier in this review. Also, because the lack of publishing opportunities for English-language literature was highlighted as an important circumstance in the editorial introduction, it would have been productive to have an essay about or an interview with Malaysian publishers such as Silverfish Books and Buku FIXI who do bring out Anglophone works in order to consider this problem from those directly involved in Malaysia's book trade. Nonetheless, *Reading Malaysian Literature in English: Ethnicity, Gender, Diaspora, and Nationalism* is an important collection of scholarship that is recommended for students and scholars of not only Malaysian literature but also Southeast Asian and postcolonial or global anglophone literature in general.

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