

BOOK REVIEW

Mohammad A. Quayum and Grace V. S. Chin (eds.).
***The Postcolonial Millennium: New Directions in Malaysian Literature in English.* Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2024.**

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The current collection, comprising of nine essays, that was first published as a special issue in the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* (Chin and Quayum 2021) departs from Quayum and Wicks' earlier work, *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader* (2001), hence, it is a stock taking effort 20 years after the Malaysian Anglophone tradition was first categorised as a corpus requiring serious literary attention. Unsurprisingly then, in its introduction, like its predecessor, the collection charts the history and unease that the local English-medium literary works have experienced with the state, its policies and the spill-over effects on the Anglophone writing tradition of the country.

What is immediately noticeable about this collection, nonetheless, is its inclusion of diasporic and transnationalist writers' works for the purpose of "potentially helping us rethink and resituate postcolonial studies in Malaysia" (p. 1). In the past, writers who did not reside in Malaysia were not considered "mainstream" and were excluded from critical analysis. Abdul Manaf and Quayum (2001), for instance, did not include Malaysian diasporic or transnational female writers' works in their comprehensive volume, *From Colonial to Global: Malaysian Women's Writing in English, 1940s–1990s* because "th[e] study [did] not consider Malaysian diasporic literature as part of the mainstream Malaysian Anglophone tradition" (8). By including literary works written by writers residing outside Malaysia, and as duly recognised in *The Postcolonial Millennium: New Directions in Malaysian Literature in English* (hereafter *The Postcolonial Millennium*), the nine essays have

not only offered a fresh glimpse about what is happening 20 years into the new millennium, but more importantly, have become a new cornerstone for studies involving Malaysian Anglophone works.

Taking to heart Göttsche's (2017) concept of "post-postcolonialism" (120), the volume forwards a fresh perspective by realigning the focus on writings that have been thus far cast to the fringes for not being part of the "imagined community" *vis-à-vis* "mainstream", where, through the act of re-centring, the margin is now normalised as the "inside". The act of re-centring simultaneously dismantles preoccupations with the concepts of homeland and belonging—and as an extension, breaks away from hegemonic hierarchies. The dominant trend in Malaysian Literature in English (MLE), particularly in the past—following the implementation of pro-Malay state policies—had been entrenched in nation formation and ethnonationalism. It was in fact reflective of the race and ethnic polarisation that is still rife in the country. This is why Quayum and Wicks (2001) cautioned at the turn of the twenty-first century, in their book mentioned earlier, that the heterogeneous makeup of multi-ethnic Malaysia, exacerbated by divisive state policies, will continue to be a stumbling block for the creation of a "common pool of consciousness" (xi) hence preventing a sense of inclusiveness in the writings of local writers. To serve this purpose, many of the first and second generation of MLE writers used the decolonial agenda as their main point of reference to textually construct homogeneity and in doing so, tended to promote a collective consciousness. Nevertheless, as the postcolonial cultural theorist, Homi Bhabha, argues in *Nation and Narration* (1990), the "pedagogic" and "performative" (304) double narrative movement will perpetually be in a conflicting state, therefore, any form of nationalising efforts with its crux on anti-colonialism, will be a failed attempt, existing just as a myth in the narrative texts. Such homogenising efforts and attempts are absent in the analysis included in the essays of *The Postcolonial Millennium* (even the article that offers a reading of Llyod Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* and TJ Anthony's *The Search*, both published in the 1970s, is a revisit of the interracial riot that depicts limitations caused by totalising nationalisation efforts). This is a contested take against the existing canonised Anglophone tradition.

Instead, the editors of this collection, Quayum and Chin, posit a consciousness that is based on deterritorialisation, where in-betweenness, hybridity, and multiple belongings are essentialised. Six out of the nine essays attend to works by diasporic and transnationalist writers, while the

last three focus on writings by local writers. There is an interesting chapter by upcoming diasporic writers reflecting on their creative loci in the new postcolonial realm as opposed to the other eight essays that are academically deployed. Such an arrangement of chapters—where the weight is on writers settled outside the country—marks a new epistemology, and, as the title suggests, for postcolonial studies in Malaysia, as well as its trajectory in the new millennium. That the reversals, from centre to periphery, and from identity politics to cultural universalism, is given agency in the book is unfortunately reflective of the nation's continuous interest in ethnocentrism, growing exponentially with the writings produced away from the shores of Malaysia. In short, the growing Malaysian diaspora denotes the increasing polarisation within the nation-state; the trend in current MLE is merely a literary manifestation.

The volume has therefore set out to achieve a rather ambitious undertaking. The hostility towards the English language and the volatility in the English-medium literary landscape does not provide grounds for steady output of writings, making it extremely difficult to identify writers who produce works consistently, let alone examine the evolving pattern in their writings; many of these writers produce one-off works and then disappear from the writing scene altogether. More importantly, since the younger generation of writers are not confined to the homeland, it can be a rather difficult task to obtain serious critical essays on these writers. The essays in *The Postcolonial Millennium*, nonetheless, have managed to provide answers to what it had initially set out to achieve, that is, to ascertain the current trend in writings, which is why the collection is divided according to the following genres: novel, short story, poetry, science fiction, fantasy fiction, and webcomic. By organising as such, the volume demonstrates the variety of genres through which MLE is flourishing in the present era, reaffirming the disassociation with nation-centred themes and monolithic constructions of identity.

Even though the idea of bringing together works of well-known writers such as Tash Aw, Preeta Samarasan, and Zen Cho on the same platform with those written by relatively unknown, emerging writers such as Ernest Ng, Jason Lee, and Sreedhevi Iyer may seem as if the scales are tipped and somewhat lopsided, the idea that these younger group of writers do not have to gain international accolades before being accepted as part of MLE, does point to the universal themes and styles in their work that speaks to a wider audience, not just from Malaysia, but also from other English-

speaking countries. This is the deterritorialised consciousness conceptualised by Quayum and Chin to hold the volume together. This is to say that the works by contemporary writers are relatable with the global audience for their hybrid cultural allegiances because, as Elleke Boehmer (2005) in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* rightly points out, “the generic postcolonial writer is most likely to be a cultural traveller, or an ‘extra-territorial’, than a national” (227); hence, these writers, both old and new, whether established or budding, share a commonality because their works are able to rise above fixities based on borders.

That said, although the editors have attempted to include as many different genres as possible for the purpose of representation, the collection suffers from an imbalance in emphasis on prose and fiction as opposed to the other genres. This, in addition to a greater focus on established writers (there are two articles dedicated to Tash Aw’s three fictions, one article is dedicated to Preeta Samarasan’s novel, and two essays are based on Zen Cho’s edited anthology of short stories) make the volume rather disproportionate, calling to question the extent to which the collection has successfully managed to bring the periphery to the centre. Moreover, while numerous new works from local writers such as *Body 2 Body: A Malaysian Queer Anthology* (2009) and *Mata Hati Kita/The Eyes of Our Hearts* (2016) as well as Golda Mowe’s trilogy, *Iban Dream* (2012–2018), have been given due recognition in the introduction section of this volume, the lack in critical essays involving such works, especially when they deal with the thus far unspoken stories of sexual orientation and indigenous community within Malaysia’s local imaginations, on one hand highlights the lack in critiquing when the theme subverts the nation-state’s gender and sexual parameter, while on the other, demonstrates that East Malaysian writers, who occupy a different complexity compared to the dominant West Malaysian MLE writers, are relatively under the radar and often overlooked despite their choice of creative medium in English. This is also the case with works like *Footprints in the Paddy Fields* (Kisil 2010) and *Intriguing Stories and Poems* (KK Writers 2019) which are written by writers from Sabah.

Despite such lack, *The Postcolonial Millennium* is a collection that will serve critics, academics, and students alike for its novelty in a compounded field involving postcolonialism and the relatively small corpus of Anglophone tradition from Malaysia. By providing evidentially supported investigations regarding MLE in the present era, and in doing so, noting that it had travelled

far from its initial scope and focus, *The Postcolonial Millennium* is both crucial and necessary, so that a seemingly huge shift is documented and understood as the country's English writing tradition transitions into the next decade of the twenty-first century.

Kavitha Ganesan

Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia

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