

Language and Literature Series

PETALS OF HIBISCUS

A Representative Anthology of
Malaysian Literature in English

Chief Editor

Mohammad A. Quayum

Editors

Rosli Talif

Noritah Omar

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younger writers and propel them to undertake equally challenging and ambitious literary enterprises in future. Shirley Lim's newly published novel, *Joss and Gold*, set partly in Kuala Lumpur but also in America and Singapore, is a credible addition to this rather small but growing list.

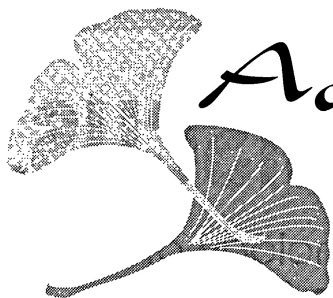
One thing is obvious though, many Malaysian writers in the English language seem to enjoy dabbling in witty journalistic writings rather than engaging in serious literary activities such as the writing of poetry, drama and fiction. Many of the writers listed above are no doubt guilty of this. One reason why Malaysian writers venture more frequently into journalistic/occasional writings than into more serious forms of literature is, perhaps, because it allows them an easier and wider exposure to the potential readership in the country. Given the small pool of readers in English in the country,² publishing a book is an extremely challenging task since publishers avoid, as is generally expected in a profit-driven capitalist economy, publishing works that are likely to incur loss. However, according to Rehman Rashid, the explosion of journalistic writing in the country is in keeping with the local literary tradition, as Malaysia, he says, has a "grand old tradition of journalistic commentary... going all the way back to Abdullah Munshi, no less" ("Foreword," *Generation: A Collection of Contemporary Ideas* xxiii).

One final word on the achievements of Malaysian Literature in English, with regard to drama. In spite of the strict censorship laws in the country, where, as Kee Thuan Chye informs us, "a permit to stage a play is required from the authorities and scripts are vetted by the Special Branch who give the final nod" ("Digging into the Diaphragm" 318), there has been considerable interest in the form from the beginning. Commenting on the early years of Malaysian theatre, Jacqueline Lo explains:

A relative explosion of theatrical activities occurred during this period. The Arts Council playwriting competition encouraged many writers to produce local plays; the newly established Drama Council organised at least two highly successful drama festivals in 1969 and 1970, and the Experimental Theatre in the University of Malaya was used to stage a number of locally written and produced productions including *The Clay Model* by Patrick Yeoh and Goh Poh Seng's *Room with Paper Flowers (When Smiles are Done)*. The proliferation of locally written and produced plays is borne out by the publication of two volumes of plays in 1972 which to date, represent the only comprehensive collection of Malaysian plays in the English language. (95)

2 In an interview, Wong Phui Nam points out that the readership in Malaysia is divided between several languages and "as a language of serious reading, English can account for no more than two or three percent of the population" (Quayum and Wicks 243).





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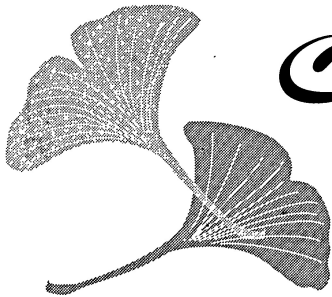
Our debts to our respective families for their assistance, encouragement, and patience, as always, exceed our gratitude.



ii

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	(ii)
<i>Introduction</i>	(vi)
<i>An Overview of Malaysian Literature in English</i>	(xi)

Fiction



Chuah Guat Eng	Two Pretty Men	3
	Jonathan (from <i>Echoes of Silence</i>)	14
Hilary Tham	The Second Mrs Tang	25
NF Abdul Manaf	Princess Kamaliah	34
Kee Thuan Chye	A Sense of Home (from a novel in progress)	38
Lisa Ho King Li	A Matter of Aesthetics	42
M. Shanmughalingam	Free	48
Marie Gerrina Louis	Pakcik Lipas (from <i>The Eleventh Finger</i>)	50
Mulaika Hijjas	The English Tiger	59
Quek Sue Yian	Laughter	73
Wong Ming Yook	Gina Dreams	81



Poetry 

Ajmal M. Razak	The Deserted Soldier	91
	Dry Ideas	92
	Old Friend	93
Cecil Rajendra	The Political Prisoner	94
	Song of Hope	96
	Radiation and The Rubaiyat	97
	Requiem for a Rainforest	98
	Malaysian Love Song	99
Chuah Guat Eng	Anniversary	100
	DemokraTikus	101
	The Mad	102
Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof	Essence	103
	Encounter	104
	Loneliness	105
	Hang Tuah	106
	Wayang	107
	Chulia Street	108
Hilary Tham	On Mishearing the Phrase	
	“By Hook or By Crook”	110
	Flashback	111
	Mrs Wei on Piety	112
	Advice for Married Men	113
	Shadow Cuts	114
	Bird in a Bag	115
Jerome Kugan	Elephants	116
	River Images	117
	Inner Life	118
Kee Thuan Chye	Peace, Progress, Prosperity	119
	A Fairy Tale	120
Muhammad Haji Salleh	Year’s Turning	122
	Prayer	123
	Blood	124
	Death Like Conception	125
	Going Away	126
	The City is My Home	127



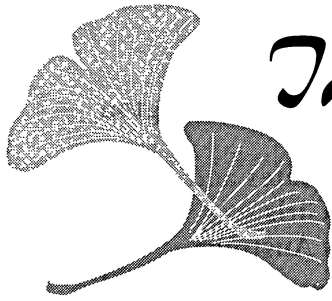
	Balinese Girl	128
	loneliness is	129
NF Abdul Manaf	Standenham Palace, Wellington	130
	MSD Officers	131
	English Dorm Mates and the Muslim Girls	132
	Flinders, South Australia	133
Salleh Ben Joned	The Woman Who Said No	134
	The Ballad of Mat Solo or Mat Solo's Last Stand	135
	Ménage à Trois	138
	Malchin Testament	139
Shirley Geok-lin Lim	Women	141
	On Why I Continue to Write Poetry	142
	Seaweeds	143
	Bad Dream, Good Dream	144
	The Source	145
	Sweetpeas	146
	For My Mother	147
	The Child Who Smiles	148
	The House was Silent	149
Wong Phui Nam	A Poet Beyond the Far South	150
	(i) Huizhou	150
	(ii) The Crossing	151
	(iii) Chaoyun	151
	(iv) Happiness	152
	It's the Eye of God, Some Say	153
	Light Returns	154
	A God Drowns	155
	Kill Me! Kill Me!	156

Drama



Kee Thuan Chye	We Could **** You Mr Birch	159
Lloyd Fernando	Scorpion Orchid, The Play	190
	<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	239
	<i>Notes on Editors</i>	243





Introduction

Soon after my arrival as an expatriate lecturer at the University Putra Malaysia in 1996, I came upon a book edited by an eminent local poet and critic. The book was being used by a fellow colleague for teaching a Malaysian Literature in English course at the University. I was obviously drawn and excited by the title of the book: *An Anthology of Contemporary Malaysian Literature in English* (1988). My exposure to Malaysian Literature in English, I must confess, was limited at that point. I had written one or two reviews of Malaysian books, as a graduate student in Australia, for one of the Australian journals, and taught Lloyd Fernando's *Green is the Colour* to an undergraduate class at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University. I therefore felt curious to discover whether any of these familiar names would appear in the book. What I noticed, however, skimming through the pages, was that it was a collection of contemporary Malay writing in English translation, and gathered, following my reading of the book, that it was indeed an excellent collection of some of the best writers who have chosen the national language as their medium.

There is no reason to dispute that Bahasa Malaysia is the national language and that literature written in the medium concomitantly forms the national literature of Malaysia. Likewise, there is no reason to dispute that Malaysia is a polyglot nation where people choose to communicate and express their imagination and feelings in several languages. Language, as Bernard Shaw has pointed out, is a "divine gift"; it is the stem and leaf and flower of the heart. Thoughts cease to exist in the absence of language, since, in the words of Thomas Carlyle, "language is the flesh-garment, the body, of thought." Ferdinand de Saussure explains the nexus between language and thought using a poignant metaphor: "Language can... be compared with a sheet of paper; thought is the front and sound the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time." Given such broad significance of language, it is important that the writer be free to express himself in whichever



language suits his imagination. Any attempt to curb that freedom would be a cruel blow to his creativity.

In Malaysia, the writer has enjoyed this creative freedom in spite of the country's language policy. No doubt the literature written in the national language, *Sastera Melayu*, forms the central tradition and gets maximum attention from both the authorities and the general people, as it rightfully should, being the language that is most deeply rooted in the country's soul and soil; but at the same time, we see the sprouting of what has been dubbed *kesusasteraan sukuan*, or "sectional literature," in several other languages such as English, Chinese and Tamil. Therefore, any claim to a holistic representation of Malaysian literature ought to be inclusive and take into account writings in all the different languages; otherwise, the claim would be misinformed and culpable of a disquisition of intolerance. No amount of denial, arrogance or narcissism can erase the reality of the presence of multiple languages and literatures in post-independence Malaysia, and the formulation of an all-embracing national consciousness is possible only when this truth is recognised spontaneously and in an encyclopaedic approach.

This anthology makes no claim of representing literature in all the different languages in Malaysia, but represents English only. In 1970, Edwin Thumboo, one of the early generation of Singapore English poets, said of English language literature in Singapore, "although we have had the language for 150 years we continue to be embarrassed by the fact that we have not produced any writers of the first rank." Thirty-three years later, one still has to acknowledge the statement with a sigh in the context of Malaysian literature in English, in spite of significant progress made in the last two decades in all the different genres. Whatever the deficiencies, however, these should not cause frustration, as fructification of tradition and emergence of "first rank" writers requires experience and time. "It takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature," Henry James advised in *Hawthorne*, and the history of Malaysian literature in English, one ought to remember, starting in the 1940s, has barely crossed a period of half a century.

I have discussed the challenges, achievements, and prospects of literature in English in Malaysia separately and at length in "An Overview of Malaysian Literature in English," as a sequel to this introduction, and prefer not go over them again here. However, let me explain the scope and objective of the anthology briefly.

During the early days, when the young undergraduate students of the University of Malaya, and especially of the English Department, started experimenting in the English language, their best opportunities for publishing their works were in the university supported literary journals such as *The Cauldron* (1947-49), *The New Cauldron* (1949-60), *The Malayan Undergrad* (1951-57) and *Write* (1957-58); and anthologies,



mostly of poetry, such as *Litmus One* (1957) and *30 Poems* (1958). More anthologies followed with the initiative of individual academics such as David Ormerod, Lloyd Fernando and Edwin Thumboo, whose names stand out for their contributions in shaping English-language writing in the region. Thumboo's canon-forming anthologies of poetry – *The Flowering Tree* (1970), *Seven Poets* (1973) and *The Second Tongue* (1976) – were published mostly in the seventies when writers were still writing sporadically and in isolation without being fully aware of the merit and future of their work. Interestingly, Thumboo did not create a strict distinction between writers from Malaysia and Singapore in his compilations and saw them as part of a single tradition. This was either because of the inevitable reason that the literary history of the two countries were one before the neighbours chose to tread their separate ways in 1965, or that the body of writing in English in the two countries were so scanty that separating them would leave the editor with little to work with.

Lloyd Fernando's contributions were more directly focussed on the literary scene in Malaysia. As a professor of English at the University of Malaya, Fernando used to encourage his students to experiment with at least one genre a year. They were given the options of writing either five poems, a short story, a chapter of a novel, a one-act play, an essay, or part of an auto/biography within a period of four months and outside their regular coursework. The direct outcome of this exercise was three anthologies: *Malaysian Poetry in English* (1966), *Twenty-two Malaysian Short Stories: An Anthology of Writing in English* (1968) and *Malaysian Short Stories* (published rather belatedly in 1981). In addition, Fernando edited three canon-forming volumes of drama in English: *Three South East Asian Comedies* (1971), *New Drama One* and *New Drama Two* (both published in 1972). Recent efforts to anthologise Malaysian literature in English include Fadzillah Amin, ed. *Her World Short Stories* (1982), Kee Thuan Chye, ed. *Haunting the Tiger and Other Stories* (1991), Mohammad A. Quayum, ed. *In Blue Silk Girdle: Stories from Malaysia and Singapore* (1998), and Dipika Mukherjee, Kirpal Singh and Mohammad A. Quayum, eds. *The Merlion and the Hibiscus: Contemporary Short Stories from Singapore and Malaysia* (2002).

Petals of Hibiscus is, of course, different from all these previously published anthologies both in objective and scope. It is not limited to a single genre, either poetry or fiction, as is the case with the previous books. For the first time, the volume brings together some of the best writers and works in Malaysian literature in English, in all three genres: poetry, fiction and drama. The book contains several short stories and extracts from novels, sixty-odd poems as well as two plays. Some of the materials in the book have been published previously, but most are solicited, new and unpublished. All in all, the anthology will provide a



feast of good reading for anyone interested in literature from the country, or willing to dip into the consciousness of a rapidly changing society, standing at the crossroads of cultures.

Broadly, three generations of writers are represented in the anthology. First, the pioneering generation: these are writers who grew up under colonial rule but whose imaginations were shaped by events of the Second World War and also the nationalist uprising that followed in the wake of the Japanese Occupation in 1943, an event that shattered the myth of British invincibility for ever; they commenced writing in the 50s and the 60s and include such names as Lloyd Fernando and Wong Phui Nam. Second, the post-independence generation: witness to the period of political transition following the country's attainment of self-rule in 1957, the most significant experiences for this generation were the uncertainties for the English language in the wake of the adoption of the Language Act in 1967, which made Bahasa Malaysia the national language, and the cataclysmic riots of 13 May 1969; they began writing mostly between the 60s – 80s, and prominent among them are Hilary Tham, Shirley Lim, M. Shanmughalingam, Salleh Ben Joned, Chuah Guat Eng and Kee Thuan Chye. Finally, the “new” generation: writers who have flourished in the late 80s onwards and who, blessed by the economic prosperity of the Mahathir era and revival of the English language both intra and internationally, enjoy greater freedom and confidence, but remain vulnerable to the widespread superfluity and complacency current in Malaysia's consumer-capitalist culture. The presence of these younger writers, and the fact that more and more new talents are breaking into the scene every day, some of whom are still in their twenties, suggests a continuity and dynamism in the tradition as well as its burgeoning propulsion. In this regard, the contributions of Silverfish Books – that has published three collections of short stories of late, mostly by local writers, and has yet another in preparation – are significant.

Works included in the volume demonstrate the latitude and pluck Malaysian writers have acquired in their use of the English language. Their fluid style and limpid flow of sentences; their capability to seize reality with ease, approximation and authenticity, and their creation of native glow in their writing; their depiction of characters with the lines and contours and teasing ambiguities of their inner beings; their expression of a vigorous yet subtly searching intelligence in a gentle lyric grace and fresh simplicity of phrase; their translation of private landscapes into images that have broad public significance; their neat, ingenuous and pungent inquiries against the preponderant moral and political deformities in their society; their sophisticated and delicate negotiations for a new national and cultural identity that is multilateral and futuristic – all these qualities suggest how these writers have successfully adapted the language to local needs and attuned it to the verve, spirit and shades of



PETALS OF HIBISCUS

local consciousness. They have broken away from the leash and tutelage of the West; no longer feel beholden to the Anglo-American canon for inspiration; and their need to lave their imagination in the tarn of Western tradition has ceased. In fact, one might suggest that in spite of its being a foreign/transplanted medium, English has penetrated the imaginative orbit of these writers and occupied the centre of their beings with success.

Thematically, these writers are as diverse as any group could ever be. No two writers are, after all, alike in their sensitivities, perceptions and observations. Besides, no attempt was made to create a thematic unity in the book: the guiding principles in the preparation of the anthology were merit and accessibility. We have tried to put together, what we consider, some of the best work by Malaysian writers since independence in 1957, although perhaps we have not entirely succeeded, as the works of Ee Tiang Hong, Lee Kok Liang and others could not be included for copyright reasons. However, the presence of such up-and-coming writers as Mulaika Hijjas and Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf has amply compensated the loss.

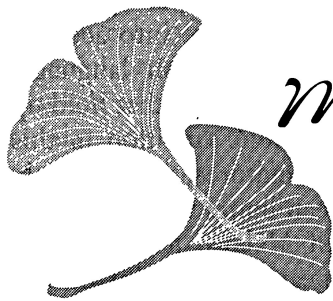
James Baldwin once commented, “The responsibility of the writer is to excavate the experience of the people who produce him”; and in the Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, Joseph Conrad explained, “My task which I am trying to achieve is by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see. That – and no more, and it is everything.” Such expectations/aspirations of the writer are met by the young and old in this anthology as they seek to provide living and vivid images of their society; document the experiences and emotions that their people encounter in their daily business; not necessarily the extraordinary ones alone, but also the simple and ordinary ones: their hope, fear, rage, pleasure, joy; their sufferings and dreams; their moral aspirations and sexual passion; their concord and conflict; and above all, their overwhelming quest to gauge their true depth and find their identity, whether personal, political, cultural or communal. Some of the writers address the issue of the othering of women; others examine the country’s cultural and political history; yet others, its multicultural present and/or the changes caused by modernisation/globalisation; however, most are happy simply to provide a slice from the inexhaustible magazine of life, often experiences that they have lived through themselves. With such diverse interests, the book should appeal to sundry readers, and if, as Horace claimed in the ancient time, the objective of literature is to mix “profit with pleasure,” this book holds the potential to fulfil that.

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM

University Putra Malaysia

May 2003





An Overview of Malaysian Literature in English

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM
UNIVERSITY PUTRA MALAYSIA

Introduction

In spite of the many early challenges and lingering difficulties faced by writers in the English language in Malaysia – challenges and difficulties of a political, literary and social nature, which I propose to discuss later – Anglophone tradition in this newly emergent nation has come a long way, showing considerable dynamism and resilience, since its inception. Critics suggest that Anglophone literature in post-colonial societies generally evolves in three stages. In their collaborative book, *Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, for example, explain these three stages as: (i) “[works] produced by ‘representatives’ of the imperial power,” (ii) “[works] produced ‘under imperial license’ by ‘natives’ or ‘outcasts,’” and finally, (iii) the “development of independent literatures” or the “emergence of modern post-colonial literatures” (5-6).¹

If we apply the above evolutionary model to the local context and leave out the works of the earlier two stages for their overt “metropolitan” bias – works by writers such as Hugh Clifford, Richard Winstedt, Frank Swettenham, Katherine Sim and Margaret Leong, who engaged in diverse literary exercises but mostly as “‘representatives’ of the imperial power,” or the output of such expatriate writers as Gregory

1 Explaining the evolutionary model, in her article “Finding a Native Voice,” Shirley Lim comments, “The theory that post-colonial literatures go through three stages – the first imitative of the mother colony’s literature; a provincial stage when writers turn to local colour and nationalistic themes; and a final stage of confidence when writers are free to explore whatever they wish ¹ has been promulgated by influential writers as diverse as A.D. Hope, the Australian poet; Frantz Fazon, the French-Algerian activist and A.L. McLeod, a Commonwealth Literature scholar” (30-31).



PETALS OF HIBISCUS

W. de Silva and Han Suyin who were presumably not adequately rooted in the local soil to depict the local imagination – and take into account the corpus of “independent” local writings in the English language, characterised by local ideas and local experiences, or writings that hold up a mirror to the local reality, then, indeed, Anglophone tradition in this multi-ethnic society, standing at the crossroads of cultures, would barely exceed a period of half a century. Its emergence can be traced back to the growth of a literary coterie at the University of Malaya, following the creation of its English Department and the appearance in print of *The New Cauldron*, a literary journal published by the University’s Raffles Society, in 1949. According to Dudley de Souza, the process of development of this “independent” Anglophone literature was hastened by consequences of the Second World War, “that weaned the local literati from a complacent reliance upon the colonial power and stimulated the seeds of nationalism” (2).

It is no doubt interesting to note that English writings in the Malayan Peninsula, unlike in other post-colonial societies, such as India, took its roots only prior to the retreat of the Raj to its native shores and not during the heydays of colonial rule. In India, Anglophone tradition spans almost two centuries starting with such early writers as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, whose appearance in the Indian political and literary scene broadly coincided with the violent de-Orientalising and Anglicising period between 1835-1855. A significant landmark in the history of English education in India was of course Macaulay’s Minute on Education in which he recommended that the best way to “civilise” the Indians and to create a permanent bond between India and England was to introduce English education. Following upon Macaulay’s recommendations, it was resolved by Lord William Bentinck on 7th March 1835 that

the great objective of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India; and that all the funds appropriated to education would best be employed on English education alone. (Qtd. in Iyengar 27)

The introduction of English, and of English literature in particular, to the Indian education system was a deliberate attempt by the colonisers to perpetuate their supremacy through the dissemination of Euro-centric values and concomitant erosion of indigenous ideals among the colonised people. Gauri Viswanathan explains:

British colonial administrators, provoked by missionaries on the one hand and fears of native insubordination on the other, discovered an ally in English literature to support them in maintaining control of the natives under the guise of liberal education. (17)



It is somewhat baffling though that in spite of such strong convictions on the role of English and English literature in the continuation of the colonial process, and of so much emphasis on the implementation of an English education policy in India, the British were so slow in adopting a similar policy in Malaya, where English literature was introduced as an academic subject only in the 1940s. From a political point of view, this was, perhaps, a boon, as people were spared cultural and ideological contamination and consequently a more rigorous colonisation of the mind than, for example, in the case of India. But, ironically, from the point of view of English literary writings, it only serves to explain why India has produced so many world class writers in the English language such as R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Nirad Chaudhuri, R.K. Ramanujan, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Kamala Das, Vikram Seth and Arundhati Roy – with still more talented younger writers breaking into the scene every day, with Jumpha Lahari, a Bengali-American, who received the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, being the latest in a long string of gifted writers – while Malaysia can only optimistically hope to match that envious list sometime in the future.

Achievements

Perhaps it is unfair to compare the achievements of Malaysian literature in English to those of India, as the cultural and political circumstances in the two countries have been widely different throughout. However, even compared to neighbouring Singapore, the quantum of creative writing in the English language in Malaysia looks discouragingly small, if not downright negligible. This is in spite of the fact that the literary history of the two countries shares a common origin, which continued to remain one until the island's departure from Malaysia to become a republic, in August 1965, when Anglophone literature in the two countries assumed separate courses.

Notwithstanding this somewhat arrested growth, there has no doubt been, and continues to be, a tenacious stream of literature in Malaysia that is written in English and is being published. The major writers of the tradition include Wong Phui Nam, Lloyd Fernando, Lee Kok Liang and Ee Tiang Hong as pioneers, and Shirley Lim, K.S. Maniam, Cecil Rajendra, Kee Thuan Chye and Hilary Tham as second generation writers. Of these, Shirley Lim, K.S. Maniam and Kee Thuan Chye certainly seem the most prolific and versatile. Shirley Lim, currently a professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara, for example, has four volumes of poetry, three volumes of short stories, one novel and one memoir to her credit. K.S. Maniam, on the other hand, has

PETALS OF HIBISCUS

published three novels, four volumes of short stories and four plays, while Kee Thuan Chye has three plays, two volumes of prose, a few poems and a novel in the making.

Among the “older” writers, Wong Phui Nam has four volumes of poetry to his name; Lee Kok Liang, one novel and two collections of short stories; Ee Tiang Hong, five volumes of poetry; and Lloyd Fernando, two novels, one of which was also made into a play. Although Fernando’s creative contribution might seem relatively small, his contribution to the overall development of the tradition cannot be underestimated, as he was instrumental in instilling inspiration in many of the younger writers when he was a professor of English at the University of Malaya. His several edited anthologies also played a significant role in the formative years of the tradition. Moreover, Lloyd Fernando is perhaps the best known of the Malaysian literary critics in the English language, having published numerous articles both at home and abroad.

Of the writers discussed so far, Malacca-born Nyonya activist and feminist, Shirley Lim and Malaysian-Indian writer K.S. Maniam are perhaps the best known internationally. Shirley Lim has received several international literary awards, including the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize in 1980 for her first collection of poetry, *Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems*, and the American Book Award twice, in 1990 and 1997 respectively, while K.S. Maniam was awarded the Raja Rao award for Fiction by the Indian Sahityya Academy in 2000. Wong Phui Nam and Ee Tiang Hong have not received any prizes but they are highly regarded in the region, with many considering them as two of the best poets in the English language in ASEAN. Lee Kok Liang and Kee Thuan Chye have also received considerable critical attention both locally and internationally but, of the two, Kee is the more politically active voice in Malaysian literature, often challenging the status quo and appropriating the role of the “other” in Malaysian political binarism. In a recently published collection of critical essays, *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, the first of its kind exclusively on Malaysian Literature in English, Peter C. Wicks and I pay tribute to some of these better known writers by focusing on critical appraisals on their writings.

Of course, in addition to those we consider “major” writers, there are others both old and new. They include Muhammad Haji Salleh, Adibah Amin, Chuah Guat Eng, Lee Geok Lan, Salleh Ben Joned, Nirmala Raghavan, Ruth Ho, Karim Raslan, Marie Gerrina Louis, Lee Su Kim, Ché Husna Azhari, Dina Zaman, Rehman Rashid and Amir Muhammad. Some of the female writers mentioned here have been discussed in considerable detail in a book I co-authored with Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf, *Colonial to Global: Malaysian Women’s Writing in English*



1940s – 1990s. However, many of these writers are bilingual, suggesting an allegiance divided between English and their respective mother tongues. Furthermore, the output of most of them is very limited, generally to a collection of short stories (as in the case of Dina Zaman and Karim Raslan) or a volume of occasional writings (as with Karim Raslan, Rehman Rashid and Lee Su Kim).

Muhammad Haji Salleh, Adibah Amin, Salleh Ben Joned and Nirmala Raghavan are all bilingual writers. Muhammad Haji Salleh, for example, started his career as an English language poet but later changed his mind to concentrate on the national language as the only medium for his creative imagination. After the passing of the Language Act in 1967, Muhammad gradually came to view English as the language of colonisation and quizzically concluded, “Should I lick the hand that strangles my language and culture?” (qtd. in Nor Faridah and Quayum 124). Adibah Amin is widely known as a Malay language writer but, interestingly, she started writing columns in the *New Straits Times* (NST), a local English daily, under the pseudonym “Sri Delima” in the 1970s, when English was going through its most difficult phase. Her articles were later put together in book form and published under the title *As I Was Passing* (Vol. 1) and *As I was Passing* (Vol. 2), in 1976 and 1978 respectively. Salleh Ben Joned, a former lecturer in English at University Malaya and currently a freelance writer, is widely known as a rebel who stands against the grain of accepted social and political norms. Although his reputation lies mostly in the boldly defiant newspaper articles, published under the title *As I Please*, in 1994, a second book, his only collection of poetry, *Sajak-Sajak Salleh: Poems Sacred and Profane*, consists of poems written in both English and Malay. Finally, Nirmala Raghavan, a writer who was born in Madras, India and migrated to Malaysia in the 1960s after marrying a Malaysian, is best known for her Tamil works, but she has nonetheless consistently written feature/occasional articles in the *New Straits Times* since the 1980s and, to date, has more than 200 such pieces to her name.

Among female writers in the English language, Chuah Guat Eng and Marie Gerrina Louis are, perhaps, the best known and most accomplished, apart from Shirley Lim. Although Rafiah Yusuf and Karamiah Haji Saadon, writing in the 1940s, are recognised as the pioneering female novelists in Malaysia, both of them were Malay language writers. The first English novels by Malaysian ‘women writers were published only in 1994 when Holograms brought out Chuah Guat Eng’s *Echoes of Silence* and Heinemann, in Singapore, published Louis’ *The Road to Chandibole*. In 1995, Heinemann brought out Louis’ second novel *Junos*. It is expected that this breakthrough will bring inspiration to



No doubt, with the English language going out of favour after the Amendment Act of 1971, which made it illegal to dispute or question the status of the national language as provided for in Article 152 of the Malaysian Constitution, drama, like all other forms of literature in the English language, suffered considerably in the country. But there has been a revival since the mid-nineties, with new plays being successfully performed on a regular basis. However, in spite of the presence of many talented writers in the theatre, one problem of undertaking a serious study of Malaysian drama in English is the crippling sense of modesty of the writers themselves, who often shy away from publishing their work or lending their script to researchers, sometimes even after the successful staging of their plays.

Challenges

There are many challenges encountered by English language writers in Malaysia. The most difficult of these is, of course, with regard to their creative medium. Malaysia is a plural, polyglot society in which English is one of the marginal languages spoken by a small group of Eurasians and English-educated middle class. Owing to its historical connection with colonial rule, the language has never been able to fully rise above the many images of oppression and exploitation it invokes, and assert a strong cultural and emotional bond with the vast majority in the country. Moreover, the roots of the language are not deep enough for literature to flourish freely, and the speech community of the language is also not sizeable enough to provide the political and intellectual props required for the hearty growth of literary activity.

This problem of the alien quality of the English language and its lack of claim over the local cultures was no doubt compounded by the language policies adopted by the Government in the post-independence period. The passing of the National Language Act in 1967 and the Amendment Act in 1971, which were meant to unify an ethnically fractured nation through the use of a common language, did not auger well either for English or those writing in the language. It created a feeling of alienation and marginalisation in many of these English-educated writers and stifled or threatened their creativity. The raised status of Malay as Bahasa Malaysia, the national language, also meant that *Sastera Melayu* or Malay literature, because of its symbiotic relationship with the language, would become the national literature, while literatures in other languages, including English, were but *Kesusasteraan sukuan* or “sectional literatures.”



PETALS OF HIBISCUS

These developments, though deemed healthy for “homogenising” the nation, put the English language writers in, in Ee Tiang Hong’s words, an “invidious position,” forcing some of them to leave the country and others into a state of permanent or protracted silence. Ee Tiang Hong himself, for example, left the country in 1975 to take up residence in Australia, while Shirley Lim moved to the USA in 1969. Muhammad Haji Salleh decided to give up writing in the language, following these political developments in the country, in order to avert a cultural betrayal of his people as well as to help restore the lost native culture, while Wong Phui Nam entered a phase of prolonged silence. Wong’s first volume of poetry, *How the Hills are Distant*, came out in 1968 and it took him a long twenty-one years to bring out his second volume, *Grandma and Other Poems*, published in 1989. Krishen Jit, an eminent figure in Malaysian drama, crisply sums up the distraught state of English language writing in the country in the aftermath of the language policies adopted by the Government, in his following comment on the dwindling state of English language drama:

The battle for the national language has been fought and won, and English no longer threatens the paramouncy of Bahasa Malaysia.... By the end of the mid-1970s, local playwriting was a spent force – defeated by the nationalistic forces unleashed on May 13, 1969. (Qtd. in Quayum and Wicks, “Introduction” xi)

It needs to be mentioned, though, that the circumstances have changed considerably since the mid-1980s, as Malaysia increasingly recognises the importance of English in the era of globalisation, especially for the purpose of fulfilling the national vision of 2020, when hopefully Malaysia will enter the elite league of developed nations and become a leading player in the international financial and technological markets. Apart from this pragmatism, perhaps time has also been a healing factor, as, with time and the development of new concerns both locally and internationally, the earlier hostilities towards the language, fresh from the memories of colonial oppression and exploitation, have slowly eased and subsided.

In addition to this excruciating challenge arising from the circumstances of English, there are other challenges confronting writers in the English language in Malaysia. One of them is the absence of a local English language writing tradition, and another is the heterogeneous make-up of the national population. The absence of tradition makes the task of writers particularly difficult as they depend on tradition for their examples and inspirations. The local writers cannot draw from European tradition, of course, although their medium is European. To do so would



make their literature redundant, rendering it inaccessible to local readers. As a first step towards establishing tradition, the writers will need to alter the language by giving it a more local flair and by infusing more “local blood” into it. This will require considerable negotiation skills and creativity on the part of the writer. It will also require of writers the utmost patience, as traditions are not formed easily and overnight. One might recollect that it took American literature more than two hundred years to find an independent voice and a separate identity from that of European literature; the Pilgrim Fathers landed in New England to set up American civilisation in 1620, but the nation attained its cultural and literary independence only in the 1830s.³

The heterogeneous make-up of the population stands as a major stumbling block to the process of forming a local tradition. Given that writers are from diverse cultural backgrounds, their imaginations and value systems are likely to be different. This means that they will need to loosen the bonds of their rigid cultural systems to create an environment of “horizontal comradeship,” or of one and yet many, and slowly learn to empathise with one another’s cultures and thereby contribute to the formation of a common pool of consciousness. This is again a matter of time and will require writers to step out into a “historyless” zone (Walcott’s phrase), as an effective “contact zone” between diverse cultures essential for the building of a common body of symbols and myths for writers to draw from, can only become possible through a protracted “history of minglings” between the groups, allowing room for a shared, collective memory.

There are some additional challenges to the ones mentioned above, but they are not specific to writers in the English language. These challenges are political and cultural in nature and they affect writers, and literature, generally across the board. The subject of a closed political environment in the country, resulting in widespread lack of freedom of speech, has been addressed adequately by Salleh Ben Joned and Kee Thuan Chye, and perhaps there is no need to go over the issue again

3 Harold Beaver, for example, explains that even in 1831 America had no “national literature” (53), and adds, “But the 1830s, which first introduced the expatriate and international themes... were also the decade of America’s declaration of literary independence” (64). The following passage from Emerson’s “The American Scholar” (1837), is often cited as America’s declaration of cultural independence:

Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests. Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves” (564).



here.⁴ However, something needs to be said about the challenges arising from the cultural state in the country. Malaysia is a tradition bound and yet modernising country. This push and pull tendency cuts the writer and his imagination both ways. Tradition encourages a closed culture for the sake of its own perpetuation. This means new ways and behaviours are not welcome and people are expected to condemn in the harshest terms anything that violates the norm. This is very unhealthy for the development of literature as writers like to experiment and search for things that are different and new. One example of how tradition and cultural orthodoxy create a hostile environment for the writer can be found in the following complaints by two local writers. Lisa Ho, for example, has complained that she has been “gossiped about by spiteful women and men” and accused of “living the sinful lives of her characters” (qtd. in Nor Faridah and Quayum 336-337) because she has created a female character with some sexual fantasies in one of her stories. On a similar note, Nirmala Raghavan comments, “When a woman writes a story about another’s affectionate feelings for a man, or so much as mentions the word ‘sex,’ she is instantly looked upon with suspicion. Her family is justly concerned for her reputation” (*NST*, 23/3/93: 11). This is how an orthodox society, entrenched in tradition, brutalises the imaginative freedom and creative sensibility of the writer. I believe male writers are also confronted with several problems associated with tradition, but perhaps of a different nature.

Finally, the challenges arising from the process of modernisation. Though, ideally, modernisation by helping to open up the culture should create a more congenial atmosphere for literature, ironically, it does more harm than good. By creating a culture of “getting and spending” (Wordsworth’s phrase), in which people are more preoccupied with money and matter than the finer things of life, modernisation itself becomes a stumbling block to the growth of literature. When commerce and culture in a society do not converge, commerce slowly consumes the culture, leaving people with the bare practicalities of life and writers as useless entities, with little to contribute to a surrounding that is steeped in its own appetite.

Prospects and Future

In spite of the many challenges and the relatively slow growth experienced to date, the future of Malaysian literature in English looks

4 See Salleh Ben Joned’s “Malay (Malaysian) Writer’s Dilemma” and Kee Thuan Chye’s “Dilemma of a Dog Barking at a Mountain.”



full of promise. Especially with the changed circumstances of the language, writers now enjoy greater freedom in expressing their imagination. They don't feel the political and cultural pressures that were endured by their predecessors. English is now no longer seen as a part of colonial hegemony, disrupting the formation of Malaysian post-colonial national identity. In a recent interview with Bernama, the country's Prime Minister, in his characteristic dynamism, redefined the role of English in Malaysian nationalism:

Unfortunately, some people feel that you should neglect English entirely if you are a nationalist. If you are a Malay nationalist (they say), then you should learn Bahasa Malaysia.... We believe that a nationalist is someone who has acquired all the knowledge and mastered all the skills and is capable of contesting against the rest of the world. That is a true nationalist. (NST, 29/12/2000).

The impact of such a positive environment, where writers can choose their medium without feeling unduly conscience stricken, is already evident in the proliferation of Anglophone literary activity in the country since the nineteen nineties. Drama and Biography, which were lagging behind, have also made a strong comeback in the last decade or so.

Another element that should help boost Anglophone literary activity in the country is the slow demise of nationalism and the rise of an international and a neo-universal world-culture. Nationalism has been the dominant force in global politics for the last two hundred years and was instrumental in creating a sense of identity in the once colonised societies, helping them to attain freedom from the hegemonic rule of the British. Now, however, it is being superseded by multinationalism and globalism. Timothy Brennan comments, "we often hear that nationalism is dead" (45). Daniel Bell is of the view that the nation state is simply too small for the big problems of life and too big for the small problems of life. Given this changing circumstance, in which the world will increasingly acquire an intranational and international syncretic culture, Malaysian writers in English who have chosen the global language as their medium, and *ipso facto* have chosen multiple ways of life and a sense of a multiple belonging, are well poised to depict the Malaysian "mosaic" reality for the growing readers of a transnational world.

One common criticism against Malaysian literature generally has been that it is too communally oriented and inward looking. Explaining the lack of a holistic outlook in Malaysian writers that would enable them to rise above "pride and prejudice, irrational attachment to things, people or causes or blind loyalty arising from habit and custom," Cecil Rajendra, in a recently published article in *NST*, in commemoration of Merdeka Day, most cynically and sarcastically asks, "How many Malaysian writers



PETALS OF HIBISCUS

are truly independent and have the courage to stand by their convictions? How many Malaysian writers do not have a blind loyalty to their language and race?” (NST, “Literary,” 29/8/2001: 5). In the same article and published on the same occasion, the former head of the DBP’s publishing department and chief editor of *Utusan Melayu*, Johan Jaafar, comments:

After 44 years of independence, Malay literature as evidenced in the genre of the novel is still intractably Malay-centric.... Malay writers seldom explore the world outside their cocoon. (NST, “Literary,” 29/8/2001: 6)

Such comments imply that Malaysian writers have not been able to contribute to nation building in the way expected of them. Writers in a multi-ethnic society should preferably address national issues objectively and impartially, and dismantle all prevailing hierarchies for creating an all-inclusive nation, founded on a broad-based understanding and mutual recognition of differences between the various ethnic groups. I believe this is a responsibility the English language writers in Malaysia should be able to fulfil easily. Because of their inherent multicultural make-up – as they are often multilingual and exposed to more than one culture – they should be able to rise above the psychological and cultural moorings of their respective communities and appropriate a more balanced and equilibrated sensibility, gradually paving the way for them to make due contributions to the formation of “Bangsa Malaysia,” or a holistic national identity, that will eventually allow Malaysia to rise above provincial nationalism and seize that glorious future, as part of a global community, that awaits the nation. After all, as Fanon astutely said, “[i]t is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows” (247-248). Every modern nation-state, in order to fulfil its destiny, ought to appropriate this sense of dynamic “twoness,” that allows the nation to experience a feeling of a separate identity and yet keeps it open to possibilities of connectedness through a progressive unsettling/erasure of a monologic/monolithic sense of nationhood and/or a totalitarian sense of identity.



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