

The Apprentice Years: Shirley Geok-lin Lim's “First” Interview

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Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1944-), a Malaysian English language writer who has become a “transnational wanderer” (Newton 85) and a “neo-cosmopolitan-globaletic writer” (Gunew), having lived through several literary transmigrations, has given many interviews in her distinguished career spanning more than fifty years. However, the present interview is presumably her first “serious” interview, intended for a literary journal of distinction. The interview was originally conducted in 1985 by Edwin Thumboo and Wimal Disanayke, two prominent scholars in the field formerly known as “Commonwealth Literature” or “Non-native Writings in English,” now generally known as “Postcolonial Literatures.” The interview was meant for a special issue of *World Englishes*, on “Non-native

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Literatures in English: Asian Poetry.” In their letter of invitation, this is what the guest-editors-cum-interviewers wrote to the young Shirley Lim:

As Guest-editors of *World Englishes* (*WE*), we are pleased to say that *WE* is devoting a special issue to Non-native Literatures in English: Asian Poetry. An important feature of the issue will be the inclusion of selected responses to the enclosed questionnaire. The questionnaire is being sent to a carefully assembled list of 12 poets from several Asian countries. You ought not to be surprised that you are one of the select. There will also be an analysis of and comment on the responses we receive by the deadline. This section will be written by Edwin Thumboo.

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We believe that this special issue of *WE* is going to be a vital contribution to the understanding of poetry in English written by Asians. The extent to which this will be so depends a great deal upon your cooperation. Could you please make your response to the questionnaire as full as possible.

For the record, I should mention that the letter was transcribed on a typewriter, as were Lim's responses to the questionnaire. However, when Lim sent the interview to me in early 2017 as a scanned email attachment, the questionnaire was missing and all we had were Lim's responses. I was initially unsure as to what we should do with this "incomplete" interview. But after reading it, I instantly realised that the material was too important for readers and scholars of Shirley Lim to remain unpublished. I have therefore taken the liberty of reimagining and reconstructing the questions based on Lim's replies to the original set of questions. I'm aware that this may have been presumptuous of me, but it was the only way we could bring this important document to our readers.

I have no clue as to why the interview was not published as promised in the letter. Was it because the special issue of *World Englishes* never materialised? Or was it because Lim's relationship with Thumboo became strained over the publication of Lim's second volume of poetry, *No Man's Grove*? Coincidentally, *No Man's Grove* was published by the Department of English Language and Literature, National University of Singapore, the same year (i.e. 1985) in which the interview was conducted by Thumboo and Disanayake, and Thumboo was helping the department at the time. Apparently, the quality of the publication and the book's marketing were not quite up to the expectations of Lim, who, albeit a young poet, had set a high standard for herself, after having received the prestigious Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1980 for her first collection of poetry, *Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems*. Of course, Lim has not shared with me, nor have I asked her, why the interview went unpublished especially after she had put so much effort into it, but in a flurry of email exchanges between us regarding this same interview, she expressed her dissatisfaction on the quality of the publication of *No Man's Grove*. After expressing her happiness that the interview

will finally “appear after so many years” and “see the light of day before I will be giving up the light,” and how much she loves *No Man’s Grove* because it “has perhaps my most Malaysian poems,” Lim goes on to lament in a parenthetical comment that the book was “very very badly produced with an UGLY green cover and NEVER distributed – boxes of it sat in an office in Thumboo’s English Dept!!” (bold in the original).

No doubt we will continue to keep guessing and perhaps will never know for sure why the interview was not published as planned. We will also never know why Lim chose not to publish the interview in another journal soon after she learned of its fate, since there were several other journals of prominence in the field at the time, such as *World Literature Written in English*, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* and *Ariel*. Perhaps frustration and disappointment were the cause, and, knowing Lim, perhaps her mind was too immersed in other creative and constructive projects to dwell on it for long. Regardless, the interview went “missing” and remained “lost” in the stack of Lim’s papers at her residence, until it was discovered recently while sorting her unpublished items for the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) Library’s CEMA Special Collection, which has set up a section for the Shirley Geok-lin Lim Papers.

The interview is obviously somewhat dated as it was conducted 32 years ago, when Lim was still a young writer only beginning to discover the full breadth and depth of her talent. She had published just three books at the time, two volumes of poetry and one anthology of short stories: *Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems* (1980), *Another Country and Other Stories* (1982) and *No Man’s Grove* (1985). It was the tip of an iceberg that was to gradually emerge with time. Lim has since published another nine volumes of poetry, two novels, three volumes of short stories, one fairy-tale novella for children and one memoir (and many academic books to boot). Of course, none of these are mentioned or discussed in the interview as it precedes these publications. Even the collection of short stories that had appeared before the interview finds no space in the discussion, as the interview was exclusively about poetry and focused on Shirley Lim the poet – which, by the way, is still her primary identity as a writer, despite her strong presence in several other genres.

Notwithstanding its above shortcomings, the interview remains relevant and important for several reasons. First and foremost, it provides a glimpse into the mind and imagination of a young poet who was still, in a sense, an apprentice wordsmith. Therefore, the historical importance of the document cannot be overemphasised. It also provides an elaborate discussion of Lim’s poetics – her craftsmanship, the nature of composition, as well as the major influences on her artistry during the formative years – which can be a treasure for readers and scholars of Lim alike, especially since, as Lim rightly acknowledges in a private email, she has changed “little” in her poetics. The interview is also important for what Lim says about her identity as a poet, her readership, her experiments with

Manglish, her relationship with classical and mainstream Malaysian literature, her view on the state of Malaysian poetry in English and, finally, her impression of how criticism in English fared at the time.

Interestingly, at this point, Lim saw herself primarily as a Malaysian writer writing for a Malaysian audience. To be “true” to herself and her target readers, she consciously tried to draw “familiar images from the Malaysian culture” and embed her poems in the real experiences of Malaysian people and “their ‘real’ metaphoric world.” Malaysia was still her “native country,” her “home.” However, this view of who she is and who she writes for has undergone metamorphosis as her identity has become more tangled with time. When this interview was conducted, Lim had been away from Malaysia for about 16 years, having left Malaysia for her graduate studies in the US in 1969. Perhaps Malaysia was still relatively fresh in her mind, and she felt considerable emotional and cultural affinity with the people and its culture. Moreover, at the time of the interview, she was residing in Singapore as a Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. This may also have influenced the way she perceived her identity, her role as a writer, what could constitute the subject matter of her poetry, and her relationship with Malaysia.

However, as mentioned earlier, this sense of emotional and imaginative proximity to Malaysia has transmogrified; Lim has increasingly become a transnational and global writer, with a heightened sense of ambiguity in her identity. In a 2003 interview in *MELUS*, I asked Lim whether she saw Kuala Lumpur or California as her home turf; her reply was as follows:

Kuala Lumpur is definitely not my home turf; I am not delusional. But neither is California. As I had said earlier, my work is deterritorialized.... This is not to say that I have no home turf or two. Imagination is a tricky power; it refuses to stay in one or even two places. (87)

This shows the distance Lim has covered over her long career – from a “monandrous” sense of cultural identity to a multiple and “polyandrous” one; from being unitary and monolithic to being fragmentary, palimpsestic and spliced; from seeing herself as a Malaysian writer writing self-consciously for a Malaysian audience to having a “deterritorialized” sensibility, or a sense of belonging to several places at the same time and writing for an international audience.

Her multi-layered and multilateral identity – or, alternatively, her mosaic, nomadic self – becomes more evident in her subsequent writings, including her two novels – *Joss and Gold* (2001) and *Sister Swing* (2006) – and her collections of poetry, *Walking Backwards: New Poems* (2010) and *Mall Ballads* (2013), as well as the poems she has written on Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement. *Joss and Gold* is, for example, set in three countries – Malaysia, USA and Singapore – while the

settings of her second novel, *Sister Swing*, “to a large extent parallel the geographical shifts described in Lim’s autobiography, from her birth in Malacca, to upstate New York, thence to California and back to New York, this time to Brooklyn” (Dillon). Likewise, in *Walking Backwards*, readers are taken to various places, from Whidbey Island (on the US northwest coast) to California and Hong Kong, as well as to Cambridge, Massachusetts and Kathmandu, Nepal. In *Mall Ballads*, on the other hand, Lim explores the urban landscape in Hong Kong via the setting of a mall, which she describes as a fitting subject “for a new 21st century transnational and metropolitan poetry” (4). Thus, in her later works, Lim is not just a Malaysian poet of Chinese-Peranakan background, but also an Asian-American writer with attachments to a number of places she has lived in or visited, such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Finally, Lim’s comments on the state of English writing and English criticism and their future in Malaysia deserve consideration. Lim’s observation on the condition of English writing at the time – that it was undergoing certain challenges and adversities with the passage of a new Language Act in 1967, which elevated Bahasa Melayu to the status of Malaysia’s national language and relegated English to an inferior position – is quite apt. This was a period when many English-language writers became disillusioned and either decided to stop writing, considering it a futile pursuit, or left the country for a more supportive environment. This second category includes Ee Tiang Hong – a poet whom Lim mentions as a major local influence on her writing and who eventually emigrated to Australia in 1975 – and Lim herself.

However, Lim’s predictions regarding the future of English language writing in Malaysia have not come true. She said that “the small body of emerging writing in English [by the first generation of writers was] approaching a dead-end” and that its continued existence was “doubtful.” She also said that with the relegation of English to a minority language, especially in the education system, future writers in the country would lack the necessary dexterity in the language to write in it with vigour and confidence. Also, since English would no longer enjoy an official status, there would be very little interest in the younger writers to adopt it as their creative medium, although – she adds almost as an afterthought – some young writers with bilingual proficiency “may continue to express themselves in English, as it is the chief international language, giving them access to an international audience and world status.”

From the vantage point of 1985, when Lim was giving the interview, this is indeed how the scenario appeared in Malaysia. It was hard to imagine then that English writing could survive the abrupt displacement of the language and the widespread doubt and disenchantment it created among writers. However, English writing has endured its misfortunes and regained momentum in the last twenty years or so, with many younger writers breaking into the scene, some of whom have received considerable international recognition and major literary

awards. Several publishing houses, such as Silverfish Books, Maya Press and MPH, have been partially instrumental in this revival. They have created an environment in which these writers felt inspired to write again, knowing that if their work met certain standards it could find an outlet for publication. However, one prominent characteristic of this recent phenomenon is that many of these new generation writers are, like Lim, writing from elsewhere, from their diasporic locations, and not from their native soil, although, again like Lim, they continue to visit the homeland to maintain contact with the culture and to revivify their imaginations.

Despite this recent growth, Lim is right in pointing out that English writing has flourished more rapidly in Singapore than in Malaysia due to Singapore's more pro-active policy of encouraging English-language writing. Singapore recognises writers in all four of its official languages – English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil – and offers financial support, based purely on merit, to writers of all four through the National Arts Council and the Arts House. This has helped in the growth of a vibrant body of English-language writers and writings in the island state. In Malaysia, however, since preference is still given to those writing in the national language, writers in English are largely left to fend for themselves and expected not to look for recognition or support from the authorities or government bodies.

A word on Lim's view of English-language critics and criticism. She suggests that since most of the critics in the English language were trained in the West, they upheld a high standard in their work, although for lack of opportunities they published mainly in local journals, which were few and declining in number. This sounds a bit optimistic and magnanimous. I don't know which critics Lim had in mind while making this statement. There were hardly any critics at the time writing on Malaysian literature in the English language. Most of the criticism was authored by the writers themselves, a small circle of four or five people who were either writing about their own work or the works of their fellow writers: Lloyd Fernando, Ee Tiang Hong, Wong Phui Nam, K.S. Maniam and Lim herself. There was nothing that could be called detached, objective and independent criticism, which is vital for the growth of a robust and dynamic literature. Unfortunately, this situation has not changed very much. Except for a handful of books and articles by a small number of critics, there is hardly anything that deserves mention. Perhaps one incident will help to clinch my argument: In 2014 I put together a special issue of *Asiatic* on Shirley Lim to commemorate her 70th birth anniversary, and of the fifteen articles published in the issue, only one was written by a local critic – indeed, the rest of the articles came from Australia, Austria, Canada, France, Italy, Singapore and the USA. Is Malaysian literature in English getting more attention from critics outside the country than from within its borders?

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As a non-native writer in English, what changes or modifications do you make to appropriate the language? Tell us about the nature and extent of these changes/modifications and about the way you craft your poetry.

I am not sure what is meant by this question. Every poet makes modifications to the language she uses, sometimes slight variations of style, sometimes major innovations of form, as with W.C. Williams' variable foot. Yes, I have such modifications, none of them major innovations, but the sum of them, I think, contributing to a specific style which I hope is recognisably mine.

One of the first modifications I made in the late 60's was to control the inherent laxity of the pentameter which is still involuntarily my most favoured rhythm/line. I was most influenced then by three major American poets, W.C. Williams, J.V. Cunningham (who was my teacher at Brandeis University) and Theodore Roethke.

From Williams I learned to discover other forms of organisation than strict rhyme and rhythm. I looked for "sinews" in phrase lines and breath lines; the concept of the "variable foot" was exciting to me. I learned to extend meaning, ambiguity and irony of choice placement of words: this is by short tight lines and by syntactical movements.

From Cunningham I learned the importance of formal shaping. It is not difficult to copy a stanzaic pattern. I had learned much about the forms of poetry in my teens when I was reading texts like *Saintsbury's*. But it is not easy to unify

form and content, so that the form would seem to arise naturally and inevitably from the force of emotion and thought. From both Cunningham and Williams – two very different poets – I learned to use words as sparingly as possible; from Williams the avoidance of traditional “poetic” diction, the age-old clichés; from Cunningham “the exclusion of rhyme.”

And reading masses of Roethke’s poems then, I trained my ear for the music in lyrical poetry, the intense emotional arousal potent in the sounds of words, in the non-rational nature of images. Of course, having been weaned in the Malaysia of my childhood on Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* and on the music-soaked poetry of Tennyson, Walter de la Mare and John Masefield, Roethke’s poetry was a natural delight for me.

I attempted to control the slack rocking-horse rhythm of the pentameter by adopting a more dramatic stance for the persona in the poem. For example, in “Night Perspective” (*Crossing the Peninsula*), the first line contains a question and an affirmation: “A world here? Why not. The night/Will cast perspectives...” (33). In a number of poems, I adopted a persona who is clearly *not me*, as in “Romance” (64) where the speaker is a callow and calloused male romantic. And I frequently tried to give a dramatic cast to the poem by presenting scenes of conflict whether explicitly as in “My Father” (39), or implied in the images and sequence of ideas, as in “The Unforgiven” (37). Some poems were “fictions” where I attempted to create a sense of character (“Danny Boy” 44), retell a story (“Queens” 67; “Daphne” 66) or shape an autobiographical impulse into a new tale. This turn to dramatic devices helped me to leash the lyrical, elegiac and romantic (as in Keatsian infatuation with the music and high emotions of poetry) impulses to a more objective, externalised – because dramatised – narrative form.

With the attempt to leash the lyrical and romantic was an attempt to find an appropriate level of style. I began considering using more and more “prose” turns of phrases, incorporating contemporary idioms. I found “poetic” language in the sense of conventional expectations more and more repugnant. I wanted a middle level of plain speech: a style of diction closest to spoken English but made dramatic, stripped to maximum clarity and minimum obstruction of meaning, yet capable of intrusions of emotion and sudden flights of metaphor.

For such a middle level plain style I adopted a diction of commonly used and simple words (with very occasionally an uncommon word for maximum impact). My preference was for shorter words, words of concretion (“No ideas but in things,” Williams said); I wanted to create direct images, dramatic and active emotions, so I avoided adjectives, abstractions, prepositional phrases, and looked for the strong verb, the specific noun, the direct statement. None of these modifications are original, but I have to keep working at them, for it is easy to slip into a pseudo-poetic style, to be seduced by an elegant turn of phrase, to pretend that subjective, private, or difficult language a la “The Wasteland” is what

we mean by poetry. I think that with difficult poetry, the difficulty comes from the emotions and thoughts expressed, not from the use of language.

Thus, often when I write I look for a straight forward, clear, speaking voice, in which grammatical accuracy carries with it an emphasis on syntactically created meanings, meanings counter-pointed by line division, enjambment, alliteration, rhyme (most often pararhymes or approximations of consonant sounds) and rhythm. That is the basic underlying structure of many of my poems, on which sometimes is superimposed a conventional poetic form, such as the sonnet or the quatrain. On this basic structure I load multiple effects of word association, imagery, irony and so on.

Using this style level, I can heighten and intensify (by increasing the poetic elements of repetition, rhythm, rhyme, imagery, etc), or I can deliberately slacken to achieve a more low-key prose approximate (by omission of the above devices, by incorporating more idiomatic turns). For example, in an early poem, “Modern Secrets” (*Crossing the Peninsula* 50), the first stanza has straightforward diction, plain, heightened only by the syntactical arrangement:

Last night I dreamt in Chinese,
Eating Yankee shredded wheat
I said it in English
To a friend who answered
In monosyllables:
All of which I understood.

The thought and emotion which this little scene provokes become explicit in the second stanza, where the style is heightened by metaphors and images:

The dream shrank to its fiction.
I had understood its end
Many years ago. The sallow child
Ate rice from its rice bowl
And hides still in the cupboard
With the china and tea leaves.

For heightened emotion, I turn to the conventional resources of strong rhythms and rhyme, metaphoric intensity, while still maintaining the middle level of diction choice. Thus, in a poem expressing an intense sense of excitement and uneasiness –

The August heat breeds unseemly
Thoughts, images like crickets mating
In the sun, drawn by sense, vibrating,
Crowding in the throat and belly.

What a nuisance is this lust
Lying like an assassin in the dark
Silent, intent, and the park
A sudden wilderness thick with musk.... (*No Man's Grove* 5)

– the attempt is to both evoke arousal and the control of this sensual intensity by the strict observation of the stanzaic form. The control itself both contains, keeps the emotions in their place and contributes to the heightening of effect.

At about the same period as I was experimenting with Williams' style of *vers libre*, I became convinced that the strong poem is one rooted in metaphor. I was never much interested in the Imagistes whose poems show them going overboard on a brilliant insight, and was perhaps more influenced by practices from fiction, as in Wayne Booth's dictum that the story must show, not tell. I felt that the poem which told of feeling was not as good as the poem which showed, i.e. dramatised feeling and in so doing evoked in the reader an approximation of that original feeling (of course, Longinus had long ago explained the effects of the Sublime thus). Since I was not about to write dramatic verse or even ballads, I discovered in metaphor the kind of dramatic activity which would make a poem exciting and rich. The really good metaphor is never static: it excites associations, collisions and collusions of meaning; it extends feeling and idea in a concrete, visual and sensory manner; and it operates in areas outside rational understanding, at a level actually beyond logical or conscious thought. The swiftness and involuntary nature of its operation is what "enraptures" the reader and recreates the involuntary swift nature of feelings and irrational (or pre-logical, subconscious, intuitive) understanding.

Every age and every society has its accepted set of images (or symbols), and there are certain sets of sensations and images which carry similar associations universally (as Jung argues in his theory of archetypes). In trying to find my own language, I turned more and more to images drawn from my native country, believing that as a Malaysian writing for Malaysians, I could be truer to both myself and my audience in embedding my poems in their "real" metaphoric world. This turn made me sensitive to the dangers of aping English or American poetic language, and while I use the natural landscape of the United States when it is appropriate, I avoid as far as possible using images and metaphors drawn from a culture alien to my audience. An early poem, "Mother's Song" (*Crossing the Peninsula* 38), illustrates this attempt to plumb the Malaysian or Chinese Malaysian world for metaphoric significance. The poem sketches a mother's emotions as she watches her son grow from infancy to full maturity, and her responses, tied to his development, are expressed in a sequence of metaphors. At each point, wherever possible, I looked for familiar images from Malaysian culture: the boy's shoulders are like golden carp; his eyes are slit; the mother swallows her doubts as if swallowing the harsh medicinal tea favoured by Chinese Malaysians. While I

don't find this poem particularly remarkable, it marks a point when I began to be sensitive to the resources of local landscape, local culture and customs, and native themes: that is, of an identifiably Malaysian world.

Only recently have I also become interested in using the resources of Malaysian English (which is closely linked to Singlish, English as spoken by Singaporeans). My experiments are up to date timid and not very successful. In "Inheritance" (*No Man's Grove* 52), I adopt the fractured grammar of Malaysian speakers (especially in an informal non-academic context, Malaysians move registers to a grammatical structure affected by the dissimilar structures of Hokkien and Malay). The opening line, "Master, he dead," I found in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; but the fractured grammar does seem a little artificial in the light of the idea of English as the magical Phoenix capable of expressing universal experience: "common grief."

I attempted a similar pidgin style in "Pidgin Loves" ("No Man's Grove" 52), where the short choppy sentences, syntactical collapses and grammatical dislocations, I hoped, would echo and express the passive, disorganised attitudes of the speaker, obviously a product of a colonial society and demonstrating the colonised mentality of pidgin English speakers. Again, I think this is a failed poem, for its major interest lies in its language experiment, and the language, I think, does not succeed in moving the reader to a larger importance.

I have an as-yet-unpublished poem where I insert a Malay phrase and I find that this kind of insertion of Malaysian phrases works better for me. The local register of English is too defined, is itself a result of limited experience with the English language, showing an impoverishment in the resources of diction, syntax, nuance and so on, that I find myself incapable of using it to express a wide range of difficult or subtle experiences. Malaysian English, at this local level, was chiefly a language of convenience, commerce and instruction, used in limited social settings for limited purposes. While I am positive that it is capable of expressing poignant emotions and dramatic situations, I think that its use will be much more effective in the theatre, where meaning is simultaneously conveyed through gesture, lighting, costume, music, spectacle, dance and so on. In a poem, where language is all, the restrictions on syntactical suppleness and nuanced diction are burdensome. Such Malaysian English is probably most effective for humour or satirical purposes.

And yet, a poet like Derek Walcott has been able to incorporate some features of his West Indian patois into his poetry!

Also, recently, I have become more relaxed about introducing more rhetorical elements, such as the exclamation, repetition, the sweep of coordinated sentences; I am not so hung up about syntactical neatness and tightness. Even the stanzaic patterns I use are freer, so in a poem written in quatrains there may be no regular pattern of rhyme. I am willing to let the natural flow of thought and feeling carry the poem onward. I don't think it is because I have lost interest in

form as such, but that I find that form is more natural when less restrictive. My interest now is often on the naturalness of the utterance, a loosening of art in order to permit a fuller expression of thought and feeling, without any additional prolixity. Thus, in a late poem, "Hardwood" (*No Man's Grove* 87), I conclude by following a thought to its natural conclusion:

We are meant to be sheltered domestic
orchards for human habitation,
our flesh should be pounded, our hearts eaten.
We should not know horror or strength
but nourish each other like vines from
a mother root. We should want cultivation,
not flourish, unattended, ironwood, wild.

The poem, in retrospect, reminds me of the cumulative expansiveness of Whitman's style. The spare and sparse diction of earlier poems has been abandoned for repetition, fullness as given by synonymous phrasing, parallel structures and coordination. I'm certain this is not where I shall end my development as a poet. I think that the forms and styles of Mathew Arnold's "Dover Beach," Coleridge's "Ode on Dejection" and Pablo Neruda's middle period are where I am heading.

How should the non-native writer in English be categorised – in terms of their nationality, as international writers in English or as part of the mainstream tradition of their adopted homeland? What is your preferred nomenclature for this category of writing?

Any writing in English, whether from Nigeria or the Philippines or Canada, finally belongs to that all-embracing body of world literature in English. To think of the mainstream literature as only British and American is to falsely accept an imperialistic version of literature, for even in the so-called English mainstream exist minority literatures (Anglo-Irish, Scottish, Welsh) which call to question what is meant by mainstream. In contemporary American literature, the struggle of ethnic literatures (Black, Jewish, Asian American and so on) to be included as part of the mainstream is evident in the academic and literary worlds.

I would also reject the idea of "international" literatures in English if by that term is meant all other literatures in English excepting British and American. As the English language increases in range and power to become a truly world language, it will become more and more difficult to distinguish "international" from "mainstream." The case of Henry James and T.S. Eliot points to the porous division between English and American: writers such as V.S. Naipaul, Derek Walcott, Salman Rushdie, N.V.M. Gonzales, Czelaw Milosz and Vladimir Nabokov (and more and more writers are approaching this condition of statelessness, or expatriation, or exile, or dual loyalties, or transcendence of

national boundaries), among the most exciting modern writers, are in a very real sense both rooted in their original source and rooted in as deep a bedrock of World literature. They use traditions that are definitely not narrowly “national” (as in Indian, or African) but which come from the whole body of human expressiveness (Rushdie using techniques perfected in *Tristram Shandy*; Naipaul learning from Charles Dickens; Ezra Pound’s pseudo-translations of classic Chinese poems; Fitzgerald’s translations and re-creation of Omar Khayyam’s *Rubaiyat*). Literature is human speech and speaks to all humans; political divisions of nations may inspire some writers, but many more will, as James Joyce said, “fly by those nets.”

I see my work as rooted in my original source, in Malaysia and Southeast Asia, yet embedded in the traditions of world literature in English; I write of a colonial tropical Christmas in a sonnet; of visiting my ancestral home in quatrains. I believe my poems are as accessible to Australians, Americans and Indians as they are meant to be to Malaysians.

To what extent has your imagination been influenced by the Malay classical literature and how do you see yourself vis-à-vis the mainstream Malaysian literature?

I don’t believe my poems relate to traditional and classical literatures in Malaysia. I have read very little Malay literature, except for some contemporary writing translated into English, and although as a child I was exposed to the stories of Sang Kanchil and the exploits of Hang Tuah and even went as far as making up legends and tales concerning these ancient heroes, I have not pursued assimilating these Malay materials into my writing.

I believe as a child I was more innocent, my imagination less restricted by political and social factors. These Malay tales I thought native to myself, and since my mother spoke Malay at home and wore Malay costume I did not feel estranged from this traditional body of literature. A British education administered by Irish nuns led me to a very different tradition, and the socio-political path taken by the nation to a painful un-ease in my original naive sense of nationalism. At this point, I cannot claim that my work derives from or contributes to traditional or classical Malaysian literature, especially in the light that only literature written in Bahasa Malaysia is officially recognised as national literature.

I have, however, been deeply influenced by Malaysian writing in English, a modern phenomenon which is basically only two generations old. Among the earliest Malaysian English-language poets I read was Ee Tiang Hong, whose Malacca-based poems (I spent the first 19 years of my life in Malacca) roused in me a glimmer of a desire to do likewise, that is, to write of my experiences. He had taught my brothers in Malacca High School, was known as an eccentric, and wrote poems which were recognisably about a place I knew well. Here obviously

was a poet I could relate to, whose model spurred me to admitting my ambition to write.

In the University of Malaya, I took a Commonwealth Literature course (initiated by Professor Lloyd Fernando who is himself a novelist) which included more local writers among West Indian and Australian figures. I read Wong Phui Nam's *How the Hills are Distant*, which impressed me by its use of local landscape and imagery. Also Lee Kok Liang's collection of short stories which appeared then, *Mutes in the Sun*, shocked me into recognising that the materials and the resources for a locally produced literature in English were there for me. I had wanted to be a writer since about the age of ten; and here were the models to show me that it could be done!

The fact that I have three books (of verse and short stories) published in the region is perhaps the best evidence that the work is contributing to this modern tradition of writing in English. Pressured by the decline or neglect of and active attacks on the status of the English language in Malaysia, the small body of emerging writing in English appears to be approaching a dead-end of non-publication. It is for the critics and scholars to decide what contribution my work makes to that small emerging body.

What is the state of poetry in English in Malaysia? How has the tradition developed since independence?

Yes, poetry has developed further in post-independence Malaysia, but it is chiefly poetry written in the national language. As for poetry in English, its status has diminished radically and its continued existence is doubtful. Recently, the *New Straits Times* began a Poet's Corner in its Sunday section, and has had no problems finding poems in English of quality to publish. Whether this signifies a continued activity (albeit among amateurs) in poetry in English is uncertain, for it is not always clear if the poems are from foreign nationals. It seems logical to believe that if any poems in English are being written in Malaysia, they are being produced by an older generation of English-educated Malaysians unaffected by the language policies instituted after 1970 which saw English down-graded to a second-language and no longer required for academic qualifications. It is doubtful whether the younger generation, proficient and comfortable in Bahasa Malaysia and deficient in English language skills, will write poetry in English, as in fact there is little reason why they should do so! However, those young Malaysians who work hard at maintaining a bilingual proficiency may continue to express themselves in English, as it is the chief international language, giving them access to an international audience and world status.

Of course, if we take the post-independence period to mean the period after 1957, the irony is that poetry in English was much more active (although strictly elitist in nature, confined to university students and professionals) immediately

after independence. It is only after 1970 that it has become neglected. It sounds immodest to say this, but together with Ee Tiang Hong and Cecil Rajendra I am probably the most active Malaysian poet writing in English (and I am by no means prolific or single minded in my art, having to earn my living by teaching), and like Tiang Hong, I no longer reside in the country.

If any developments can be observed in this rather gloomy literary scene, it is perhaps the move away from preciousness which was a trait of university adolescent writing, away from imitation of British poets, towards more social commentary. Paradoxically, whatever English-language poetry will come from Malaysia will benefit from the precipitous collapse of its elitist walls, metamorphosing (I hope) from an alien art more concerned with how it is said to a native voice which must discover its self-sufficiency in the what of context.

You mentioned earlier that the readership of poetry in English in Malaysia is very limited. Given this circumstance, what are the options left for the poet? How is criticism helping the growth of English poetry in the country?

The readership for poetry in Malaysia had always been very small. The reasons for the absence of a wider audience are obvious. English was a foreign language limited in use to a minority (mostly urban) to whom it was chiefly a language of commerce, service and convenience rather than a language of choice for self-expression. The early poets, from the students of the University of Malaya then in Singapore in the late forties and fifties, probably had an audience of no more than a few hundred (if that many) made up of similarly elite groups. This group has probably shrunk further in Malaysia with the down-grading of English, but it has probably grown much wider in Singapore which has adopted a policy of encouraging English-language writing, together with writing from the other three official languages – Malay, Tamil and Mandarin.

If the poet aims to write for the masses, s/he will have a hard time finding his/her audience in Malaysia, for the masses' mastery of the language has declined perceptibly. If s/he aims to write for English-educated literary Malaysians, s/he may yet succeed, for the hunger for recognition, for self-expression, is as sharp with this group as with any other. Art is a validation of existence.

The standard of criticism has not declined in Malaysia just yet. The group of English-language critics writing in Malaysia today were trained in the pre-seventies and continued training in foreign universities in Britain, the United States, Australia and so on. Thus, they have imbibed an international standard of literary values. How long this standard will remain firm is unclear; unfortunately, because of their isolation, these critics seldom publish in international journals, and the numbers of local journals which they can publish in are decreasing.