

## Reading Malaysian Literature in the Twenty-First Century: Familiar Concerns, New Directions

Before introducing the essays, we want to first touch on this issue's apparent limitation, which is an imbalance in terms of focus. Of the seven contributions, only two (Aveling's and Ng's) discuss non-anglophone Malaysian literature, with one of them (the latter), moreover, only partially. The reason for this is twofold: the first has to do with the lack of scholars who are proficient in both the target language (especially Malay and Tamil) and English. The second, on the other hand, relates more to logistical issues: due to various complications, we were unable to arrange for the participation of well-regarded sinophone Malaysian literature critics like Alison Groppe, David Der-Wei Wang and Carlos Rojas – all of whom write in English – at the symposium that was organised towards producing this special issue of *Asiatic*. That there are not more articles is also attributable to this latter reason that has to do mainly with a mismatch between potential invitees' schedules and the date of the event.

The abovementioned shortcomings notwithstanding, the essays featured here nevertheless provide a broad coverage of what Malaysian literature signifies and where it stands in a century defined by global interconnectivity, transnationalism and multiple belonging. Discussing fiction, poetry, plays and the memoir, they acknowledge the vibrant development of a postcolonial literary heritage whose multilingual characteristic was once (and to some extent still is) considered detrimental to nation-building and hence culturally delegitimised by the state in the attempt to privilege literature written in the official language (i.e., Malay). This has caused, as Mohammad Quayum notes, the “quantum of writing” hitherto in Malaysia to be “puny, if not downright negligible” when compared to “the postcolonial writings of other newly emergent nations such as India, South Africa, West Indies or even neighbouring Singapore” (Quayum 34). Admittedly, Quayum is talking only about English-language works, but what he says is equally applicable to sinophone and Tamil literatures, which like their anglophone counterpart, have had to struggle to survive in a cultural environment devoid of incentives (like state sponsorship and recognition), mass readership and publishing opportunities. That non-Malay language writings nevertheless continue to be produced and have since thrived in the present century, as the essays in this issue directly or otherwise attest, is thus nothing short of remarkable and undoubtedly serves as an inspiring story of cultural tenacity in the face of racio-political discrimination.

As mentioned, what the essays in this issue lacks in breadth is arguably offset by the broad range of topics they interrogate from transnationalism (alongside its corresponding concerns over belonging, identity, living in diaspora and so forth) and literary resistance, to genre development and environmentalism. Walter Lim's

article, for example, considers how the notion of the transnational is represented in the works of two Malaysian Chinese writers: rather positively (even redemptively) and as a response to reductive nationalism in Shirley Lim's memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces* (1996), and alternatively more ambiguously and as an effect of globalisation in Tash Aw's *Five Star Billionaire* (2013). This is because while the former intimates the transnational as a means of escaping to a life where one has an equal opportunity as everybody else to make something of oneself, the latter suggests that it is engendered by a desire for fortune and success, which are often elusive and ultimately never guaranteed. Still on Shirley Lim is Boey Kim Cheng's contribution, which however focuses on her poems instead and in comparison to those of Wong Phui Nam and the late Ee Tiang Hong. Revisiting the notion of the exile, Boey demonstrates that although the idea may seem "outdated and remote" in an age of "transnational mobility and flexible identity, where it is increasingly common to have multiple affiliations with two or more cultures and countries," for writers who have chosen to live in an adopted country like Lim, Wong and Ee as a reaction against ratio-cultural discrimination in their homeland, being an exile is a perpetual reality that does not dissipate over time. Related to the exilic condition is the state of being interstitial, whereby belonging is divided between two cultural and ideological spaces. Bernard Wilson's piece on Tan Twan Eng's two novels, *The Gift of Rain* (2007) and *Garden of Evening Mists* (2012, winner of the Man-Booker Prize) that draws on Homi Bhabha and Michel Foucault for its theoretical framework explores precisely how such a liminal experience shapes, and is in turn, shaped by history and memory, and what effect(s) their interconnection fundamentally has on identity.

Then there is Andrew Hock Soon Ng's article on how anglophone and sinophone Malaysian literature, whose function he postulates is reminiscent of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of minor literature, exercises creative resistance against the state's promotion of cultural hegemony by adopting what he terms "authorial insularity" to indirectly foreground the nation as a dynamic, constantly evolving entity (what Homi Bhabha calls "the performative") rather than a static, state-directed one ("the pedagogical"). Harry Aveling's essay, on the other hand, and the only piece on Malay-language writings, posits a convincing argument for the novels of Singaporean author, Isa Kamari, to be considered contemporary Malaysian literature before presenting a critical survey of how Islam is variously evoked in them. Rounding up this special issue are Chitra Sankaran's ecofeminist reading of *The Crocodile Fury* (1992) by Malaysian-born Australian author, Beth Yahp, and Mary Susan Philip's discussion of local crime fiction. The primary aim of the former is to show how Yahp's novel "exuberantly enacts [a] symbolic connection in multidunious ways, prompting an examination of the links it forges, between women, animals and subdominant humans." This, in turn, would then shed light on the mechanism of oppression subtly instigated by the twinned metanarratives of patriarchy and colonialism as represented in the

story. The latter, which uses the film term “noir” to designate the category of popular narratives under investigation, argues that the emergence and growing reputation of the genre in the Malaysian literary scene may be reflective of a possible unconscious need in writers and readers “to confront some unsavoury truths about the city – truths which seem to be at odds with the vision of gleaming towers and glitzy malls [symbolising a progressive, modern nation] but which more accurately represent a part of city life that many people have to encounter” but refuse to admit.

A final addition to this issue is a review article by Leonard Jeyam on the Anglophone Malaysian poetry scene in the twenty-first century. Jeyam contends, in the final analysis, that its development seems promising due especially to the keen interest amongst the new generation of writers today in the spoken word subgenre of poetry.

### **Works Cited**

Quayum, Mohammad A. “Malaysian Literature in English: Challenges and Prospects in the New Millennium.” *One Sky, Many Horizons: Studies in Malaysian Literature in English* [2007]. By Mohammad A. Quayum. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2014. 33-51.

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