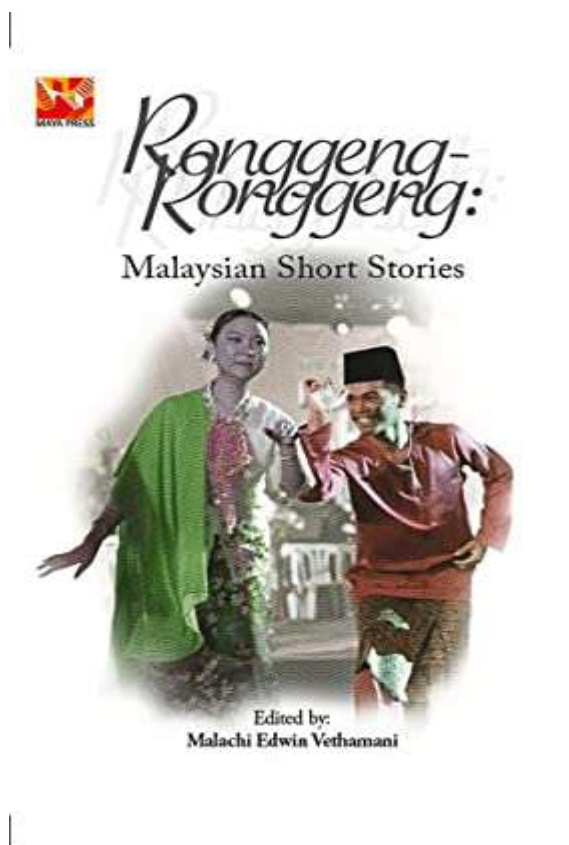


Malachi Edwin Vethamani, ed. *Ronggeng-Ronggeng: Malaysian Short Stories*. Petaling Jaya: Maya Press, 2020. 326 pp. ISBN 978-983-2737-59-9.



*Ronggeng-ronggeng* is a collection of 28 short stories, written from 1959 to 2018. This range allows the reader to wander from stories which try to grapple with the newness of an independent, multicultural nation, to those which express smaller, more intimate realities. Many of the stories are linked by the fact that they deal with ideas of belonging, whether in terms of nation, family or society. These are ideas with which Malaysians have struggled since the beginning. What this collection shows is that the struggle continues today, though the issues may have changed somewhat.

The earliest stories approach issues of race, culture and belonging through individual experiences. In Awang Kedu's "A New Sensation" (1959), a son confronts his immigrant father's intellectual dishonesty and degraded values,

refusing to accept his father's apparent belief that "freedom and equality and civilisation and revolution... are meant for somewhere else" (12). The son's rejection of the father's values (or lack thereof) represents a commitment to the betterment of Malaysia. Kassim Ahmad's "A Common Story" (1959) also reinforces this idea of commitment, but expresses it through the protagonist's rejection of the security that a university degree and a city job could get him, in favour of a return to his village. To him, returning to the land and the people represents salvation for his soul. This story finds an interesting counterpart in "Till Their Blood Ran Dry" by Noraini Md Yusof (2001), where a father's defiant refusal to sell his land to a large company comes to nought when his son, beset by financial problems, has no choice but to sell. Much like the rubber trees, the protagonist feels that he has been bled dry. He did not want to take over his father's plantation, but his obligations have now left him poor and frustrated. Frustration is also felt by the protagonist of K.S. Maniam's "Haunting the Tiger," who wants desperately to hunt a tiger (a symbol of the nation) but is unable to because he brings "foreign" smells with him on the hunt – a reminder to root oneself in the homeland, to "fit into the place where the tiger lives" (62).

Zen Cho takes this whole idea of belonging to hilarious new heights in "First National Forum on the Position of Minorities in Malaysia" (2014). The delegates at the Forum are forced to literally confront an "invisible minority" (234). While the story is funny, it takes on some significant points – the clash between urban and rural, between religion and superstition/folk belief. Cho uses these points to critique a society which is growing increasingly intolerant. And at the heart of the story is a touching tale of an unconventional romance which cannot be rekindled because of the simple responsibilities of everyday life. Also amusing is Paul Gnanaselvam's "Drifting Azaleas" (2014), in which an Indian wife goes to Putrajaya to take a citizenship test. While her mastery of the National Language is questionable, is that the true test of commitment? Asked by the officer if she intends to live permanently in Malaysia, she wonders "*I have made a choice. Turn back the clock, could I?*" (255). Sreedhevi Iyer's "I.C." (2016) recounts the experiences of a multiracial group of friends, at the time when Identity Cards were first introduced. The act of being categorised by the colour of the card, or by the information written on it, suddenly highlights difference and makes the friends starkly aware of whether or not they are perceived as actually belonging.

Another take on "belonging" is brought out in Brian Gomez's story "What Do Gay People Eat?" (2009), a very funny and moving story about a father's journey towards acceptance of his gay son. When the father bumps into a homophobe at the barber's, he must confront his own bigotry and try to overcome it. His attempts are clumsy and hilarious, but underlined with a moving sincerity and love for his son. Pang Khoo Teik's "Cream of the Crop," a quietly affecting story, also follows the journey of the protagonist, from nervous schoolboy tentatively exploring sex, friendship and politics with his schoolmates,

to young creative artist grappling with the realities of modern-day KL, negotiating friendships and the deaths of friends, and finally ruminating on the idea that all of them have died young because of the pressures on them to succeed. Perhaps rather than showing belonging, this story tells of just how difficult it is to belong, as you, your society, your friends and life's circumstances, all constantly shift and change.

As a whole, this anthology is well worth reading, especially as it brings together such a diverse range of voices, allowing us to gain a multi-faceted view of the issues concerning Malaysia and Malaysians, whether at the national or personal level, over the past sixty years.

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