

Gwee Li Sui, *man/born/free: Writings on the Human Spirit from Singapore*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011. 103pp. ISBN 978-981-08-8277-8.

The associations between South Africa and Singapore may not perhaps be immediately apparent to all. Yet both countries share a uniquely multicultural history and identity, and both continue to emerge from the long shadows left by colonialism. As Gwee Li Sui's short but significant recent anthology of twenty seven politically and morally engaged Singaporean literary works written over the last half century or so demonstrates, post-colonial South Africa's struggle, including the life, imprisonment and liberation of Nelson Mandela, sheds new, much needed light on Singapore's own history and continuing journey.

The title of Gwee's anthology, compiled and published on the occasion of [the] "Spotlight Singapore" event in Cape Town, earlier this year, derives from Jean Jacques Rousseau's observation that "man is born free yet everywhere he is in chains" (41). As Gwee observes, "while human achievements are too vast to recount, many old-age problems continue to haunt us to this day. Still no country can afford to proclaim the eradication of poverty – although the [Singaporean] academic and former diplomat Kishore Mahbubani has done so quite happily in Singapore" (7). Indeed the theme of glossed over but ever present injustice in spite of (or because of?) state sanctioned progress and economic development seems especially pertinent in Singapore. In his most significant editorial introduction to date, Gwee traces from Rousseau – via Mandela – to twenty first century technologically advanced and prosperous Singapore the persistently enduring notion that if human dignity and freedom are really more important than the mere acquiring of wealth then vigilant commitment to materially maintaining those ideals is the responsibility of us all: "we have surely all become the children of Nelson Mandela and siblings to South Africans, through whose momentous struggles we find an image for every struggle against discrimination" (7). Tellingly, the call for Singaporeans to step up and exhibit such vigilant commitment crops up repeatedly in this collection.

Like Mandela and numerous fellow South Africans, during the period c. 1965-90, a number of such Singaporeans were imprisoned without trial for comparable periods in Singapore, notably Said Zahari (detained for 17 years), and Chi Thye Poh (32 years "for allegedly conducting pro-communist activities against the government"), both of whom loom large in this volume. The latter is the subject of a poem by Tan Jing Quee, who enumerates the qualities of Mandela, Chi and other political detainees: "Pure, resolute, unyielding," never doubting that ultimate justice though still deferred, is "a coming vindication"

(69). Tan's juxtaposition of the jubilation at Mandela's liberation and hush at Chia's speaks for itself. The poet's simple recording of the localities of detention and torture is similarly affecting: "Outram Prison, E Hall, RB Block,/ Moon Crescent,/ Whitley Holding Centre/ Central Lock-up/ You have endured them all" (70).

Prison as Singaporean experience and national symbol resonates through this collection notably in writings by James Puthuchery, Aaron Lee and Alfian Sa'at. Gwee's inclusion of Edwin Thumboo's familiar declamatory retrospective "May 1954" alongside a handful of other cautiously mediated pieces may be understandable, but it is the rawness of political prisoner and exile James Puthuchery's less well known, "on the spot" poem from prison "The Steel Door Opens and the Warden Cries" that resonates more tellingly. Changi's simply observed quotidian frames and casts a prophetic raking light over a supposedly free citizenry's passively collaborative acceptance of the status quo:

Decay is the fate of the woman of fashion
Of the flower on the lapel of a fool
Of the coy cat curled on a cushion
Of the incubator of life that others rule (20)

Similarly, almost sixty years on in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Hanging," (A telltale reference to Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Bird") Alfian quietly draws our attention to the regular deployment of colonial means of capital punishment (hanging) as a sanction for young drug dealers in twenty-first century Singapore. The minute particulars betraying both personal and national self-unawareness might be funny if they weren't so chilling: the "caged" Television kindly introduced to the condemned's cell four days before dawn hanging on Friday, thirteen studio photographs of the condemned generously taken for the family, motivational posters for the condemned, the "elaborate artifice" of forcing the hanged-man-to-be to wear a tie in his last photograph, switching off the lights on grieving visiting relatives in order to get rid of them. In a telling contextual footnote: "Under Singapore's drug laws, anyone caught with [more than fifteen grams of heroin] faces a mandatory death penalty. The judge has no discretionary power to consider other circumstances before sentencing the offender to death" (75, n 1) Alfian (or Gwee?) represents a system in which even the lawmakers' hands seem tied. However, tellingly, the condemned "protagonist," Ricky, even in such hopelessly restricted circumstances chooses to seize strategic means of resistance and control.¹

¹ A further recurrent theme in this collection, exhibited in Alfian's story, is the individual's inability to breathe in an authoritarian context.

In his introduction, Gwee extends the prison symbol beyond incarceration to encompass other kinds of prisons explored by Singaporean writers in this volume: colonialism, the disenfranchised (admirably represented by the not well enough known Tamil poet Elangovan), racial discontent and the violence of modernity (one thinks of the hundred odd village communities in Singapore forcibly expunged in a decade or so in the name of “Progress,” and forcefully commemorated in Amiroudine’s sardonically titled “Urban Riches”)² and gender inequality. While Singaporean women, half a century after the Women’s Charter, still await full equal rights with men, one thinks of examples of female writers and critics of the past challenging Singapore’s patriarchal powers-that-be, notably Koh Tai Ann’s plucky riposte to Devan Nair in the early 1980s after his hysterical attack on Kirpal Singh and other Singaporean writers and literary critics for daring to explore political matters, or Catherine Lim from the 1990s to the present day, despite public reprimand from politicians, speaking her own political mind. It seems unfortunate then that women are so poorly represented in this volume: just two works out of 27 are by women, the most recent dating from 14 years ago (Lee Tzu Pheng’s powerful “New Country”). Surely there was room for a few other, more contemporary female voices? In addition, despite the inclusion of a piece by Ng Yi-Sheng no writings reflect on the experience of outlawed sexual minorities in Singapore. In the light of the theme of this collection this seems an opportunity missed: in South Africa gays and lesbians have only very recently gained the legally sanctioned rights still denied them in Singapore. Nevertheless, while Singapore’s precise location on the long walk to freedom may be a question of debate, this collection, published two months before the “landmark” 2011 election in Singapore, belies its drab, confusing cover, and charts inspired steps in a long, continuing revolution. As Tan concludes in his paean for Chia Thye Poh,

What price victory or glory,
When liberty was strung
With lengthening chains
Across ever widening circles
Decade after decade. (70)

² See also Isa Kamari’s “The Koran Chanter of Geylang Serai” in which Kamari ventriloquizes a mangling authoritarian rhetoric of urban renewal and eugenics: “Malay village since born had a deformed soul/ Will be demolished as decreed in urban renewal plan” (88).

Works Cited

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