

ASEAN Literatures: Roads Yet to be Taken

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When we first discussed the aims of having a biennial Asia-Pacific Literature Symposium, nearly forty years ago, Bruce Bennett agreed that the study of ASEAN literatures should be a key component, and supported the hope that it would ultimately enter our universities. Geo-politically, ASEAN is yet to be on all fours with Southeast Asia (SEA) as it does not include Timor Leste which is likely to join. For present purposes, ASEAN refers to the *kongsi* of nations, SEA to the total geographical boundary of the region. Such a development would be part of broader inter- and intra-literary programmes. Planned as a series, they would be based on texts drawn from all our literatures in i) national, ii) national and regional, and iii) international languages, respective examples of which are Thai and Burmese, Bahasa (Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and Singapore) and English (Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, and six of the seven continents). Apart from those in Bahasa, our national cultural-literary roads are currently not connected in the way they are in the areas of ASEAN economics, security, politics, finance, tourism, IT, communications, and other concentrations high on the mutual co-operation list. These – and their extensions such as start-ups, networks for a cashless society – form critical segments of GDPs driven by that unending search for steady nationwide efficiency. Literary pursuits are not. More often than not, they are seen as prickly, irreverent, anti-establishment and, worse of all, of limited relevance. Besides, they are not easily managed or readily evaluated. Remember the fate of the poet in Plato's *Republic*. But we should also recall P. B. Shelly's "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (90), the concluding sentence – and claim – in his *A Defense of Poetry* (1821). That judgement softens to tolerance, then acceptance when conditions improve. Meanwhile that authority is watchful of literature for what it considers good reason, thus ironically re-confirming its power.

A nation's hard-won stability and prosperity can easily be destroyed by racial, religious, and political issues each of which could easily escalate into tragedy. The dangers are at their worse when national foundations are being laid. Students familiar with the religious tensions during the reign of Henry VIII – Catholic

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versus Protestant – and questions relating to his son, Edward VI's successor, would know the potential dangers England faced:

When Elizabeth came to the throne, the treatment of religion on the stage became an especially important issue. In 1559, Elizabeth gave an order prohibiting plays in derision of the Catholic religion, mass, saints, and God. The order was not heeded, and thus she gave another proclamation that firmly forbade political and religious problems to be discussed on stage. (Albright 95)

Writers have almost always been a source of concern, if not worry. There is the instance of Christophe Marlow only getting his Cambridge MA after the Privy Council, that highest of bodies, intervened. They take up positions that are often controversial, endangering the politico-socio order. The potential problems are multiplied exponentially in a multi-ethnic polity such as Singapore, a little red dot in a multi-polar world, adding anxiety to the calculus of issues. For what is tolerable to one group of Singaporeans could easily prove repugnant to another. I know this first hand as I chaired the Ministry of Culture's arts appeal committee for a period. No government wishes to be unpopular. They take unpopular decisions because they have to. Moreover, there have always been writers who push boundary markers, and therefore seen as a threat to social stability, religious feelings, and other beliefs. Pushing the LGBT cause, for instance.

Matters are noticeably different in nations and societies with a long, relatively stable history covering major inheritances, shored up by a network of generally shared traditions. It is not a matter of maturity. They have had Time. Fundamental values, attitudes and reflexes formed, then entrenched themselves. Sharing history and purpose, there is connectivity and inter-dependency. They are a community, accepting rather than acting fractious and niggardly. The result is a homogeneity justifying labels: French, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Maori, British, and so on. They enjoy and are held together by *Satu Agama, Satu Bangsa, Satu Bahasa, Satu Negara*, namely Religion, Race, Language, and Nation. These are portmanteau labels. Take Religion. Think of its impact on society, in the spheres of culture, politics, and education for example, through hard and soft power. Our own experience provides the narrative. We know the extensiveness of its reach. So too, the other *Satus*, each in its own emphasis.

In contrast, new nations that had cardinal parts of their *Satus* disrupted, even suppressed, and regional organisations, as relatively young entities in their present incarnation, have not had that kind of time for people and events to evolve, to gain a shared, overarching identity. But why Literature? Why expand its roads, why new roads?

The **Power of One (PoO)**. Literature, especially through its highest moments as seen by each epoch, and now across languages of multi-ethnic settings, and via translations, has a crucial role in creating mind-sets reflecting the interplay of multiple *Satus*. It creates us. Moreover, between them, and together,

Poetry, Fiction, and Drama provide a most durable, deep, comprehensive, and sensitive means of entering and understanding other national *Satus*, through their dominant literary tradition as defined by key texts. More primary than most other accounts, good literature educates and shapes its readers, at times a whole generation, a people, a civilisation, travelling with it, keeping its spirit and esemplastic power, even as epiphany, it puts down roots in new soil. And in that whole experience of reading, listening, and reflecting, the sum is richer than the aggregate of its parts. Consolidates. Galvanises.

We prepare ourselves for the purposes of our lives. This personal growth as student and teacher – for me they are one role with two names – and poet, is influenced, at times radically, by the work of individuals, secular in thrust, but touched, at times, by the Divine. Recall our own journeys as we become, however modestly, **PoOs**. In big and little ways mine included i): *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Ramayana*; *Monkey*; *The Iliad*; *Beowulf*; the *Mabinogion*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Song of Roland*; *Sureq Galigo*; Hikayats and Serajas. Add the Bible – whether Hebrew, Catholic, or Protestant – the Koran, and the Gita. They are sacred texts, divine revelations, still efficacious in translation. Believers know how utterly central they are to and in their lives. For those whose faith lies elsewhere, they nonetheless urge fundamental values. There are moments of epiphany in such works as. ii): Dante's *Divine Comedy*; Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Coriolanus*; T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*; Jose Rizal's *Noli Me Tángere*, and its sequel, *El Filibusterismo*; W. B. Yeats' "Easter 1916", and "Sailing to Byzantium"; E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*; Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*; and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Either list can go on, their direction depending on the ur-history of where you live, the course of your own life, and the contact generated by your interests, especially those obsessives, and their impact.

The sacred and the secular. The first urges right action and living; the second, of life that can have creative, consolidating moments close to the right path. Such an accumulation, from God is Love....to the flowers springing up where Olwen had stepped. The range of that understanding and its application grow and find relevance in unexpected ways. I read the *Code of Hammurabi* and the *Laws of Manu* to better grasp the early history of the Middle East and India. What struck me was their firm division of people into class and caste, with those lower rewarded far less and punished far more. A permanent lesson on that oppression rampant in history and contemporary life. They were, again, in their own way, a preparation. I was, for instance, able to grasp and appreciate quickly the why, how, and what of apartheid when I read Dennis Brutus' *Sirens, Knuckles and Boots*, and discuss the works of Bessie Head with greater depth and from more angles. Interestingly enough, her most notable novel – strong despite its flaws – is called *A Question of Power*. Insights of this order are invaluable to students of colonialism. We tend to settle on certain writers, adopting them as gurus, attracted by their values and attitudes to life, and qualities such as courage. We trace their evolving

vision, assess it by the position they take on important issues such as of man's humanity to man. At Victoria School, it was Shamus Fraser. Next, E. M. Forster after I read, re-read *Howards End* in 1955. It led me to his essays and the world of his ideas. While H. G. Wells celebrated the advance of science as promising to enrich daily life, Forster foresaw the negative impact of the machine on human relations. Hence the stress on

Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die. (Forster 198)

What would he say of the hand phone? In *A Passage to India*, 'only connects' evolves into the need for self-completion, achieving a wholeness, a self-sufficiency which Godbole has because he had compassion and love for all creation. His essays in *Abinger Harvest* and *Two Cheers for Democracy* – he did not think it deserved three – are unfailingly instructive. His work still speaks to me. It raises his final novel well above Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, particularly in the treatment of the encompassing durability and reach of the human spirit. My other seminal, complementary, less long-distance guru, was Raja Rao through his novels, short stories and, finally, a number of stays with him in Austin, Texas.

At 4 am one morning, Raja Rao knocked on my door and asked if I would join him for a walk around the grounds of the East-West Centre, the University of Hawaii. A rare privilege. He asked me to wait for him in the lobby as he had to go to his room to thank his machine. I was taken aback. But it was Raja Rao. So, I started thinking why. I knew he was prone to serious attacks of asthma since childhood. His life depended on the machine. He was expressing thanks to and for a principle, a source of vital help. A deep personal gesture of thanks, and a reminder. The capacious, intricate turns of the Rao mind and sensibility of which this was a hint, are evident to those who have read, re-read, and meditated upon *A Cat and Shakespeare*, *The Cow of the Barricades*, and *The Policeman and the Rose*. And *The Chessmaster and His Moves*.

Perhaps the most important lesson was their tact and modesty despite their enormous, unique achievements. I remember his enigmatic sentences that included 'It is there, yet not there' and 'Absence is presence'. And the place of modesty. Ego management, as I recently reminded myself.

Beyond...

river mouth, jade-green valley door,
bird on the wing, crinkles in our lives,
is a some-how room. Without walls,
cracks, keyboard, compromise, report.

There, behind shutters, ego-id-super ego
 argue to unlock, control, deploy, relay
 revelations. Free of echoes and semantic
 by-ways, they get re-born. Revise their Tao.

Ours too. Harmonious once more, my heart
 and inner self scale down. My shirt is simple.
 My pen, soft-tipped black. My poems less
 Knotty, shorter. My mind balanced in deep
 glow where clear waters up-lift rainbows.

Closed by fresh imagining, my eyes see
 clean. Starlight is brief. Days are fervour.
 New towns bloom lilac and jacaranda. Little
 India is Tivali. Orchard Road Chrismassy.

The news is economy, share indexes, fusion,
 upgrades, the Next Fifty. We project, scenario
 plan. Shave margins of error.

I will not be here.

Except for words, leave nothing. Shift for clues
 to that room. You need it. It is you...and us....

Que Sara Sara.

We want ego *sine qua non*, but it should know when to be still. Perhaps one meaning of ‘Absence is presence’.

Like those I mentioned, every writer has their *Satus*, distilled into their works. Each makes their contribution. Those comfortable in English(es), have the greatest range of *Satus* available through their literatures. Firstly, through translations from all the major world literatures, requiring a few lifetimes to read just a selection. Secondly, the literatures in English(es) of nations freed in the late forties and early to mid-fifties from British colonialism, continue to add remarkably to contemporary reach, variety, and strength of that *kongsi* of literatures.

When gathered in conclave, a conference or parliamentary setting, the **PoOs** compose a formidable power, the **Power of Many (PoM)**, some aspects of which are harder than hard. Whether writer or critic – ‘and’ preferred to ‘or’ – a gathering of **PoOs** from the different *Satus* for the intense analysis, discussion, debate, agreement, and disagreement regarding this text or that theory, add considerably to the range of approaches and insights we need to deploy. This last is crucial, for we learn, extend ourselves far less when examining the similar when looking into the workings and results of cross-cultural contacts, when *Satus*

collide and negotiate, mesh. The benefits generated by differences are far greater, more exciting, and revealing. Remember what W. B. Yeats said:

We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry. (“Per Amica Silentia Lunae” 411).

How else to manage for those with English as their sole or main language? They have a prodigious store to quarry, a store accumulated when Britain was the greatest colonial power. English then expanded and is expanding her grip as the pre-eminent international language through which the past and present life of many nations can be tapped.

A shared language is the basis of shared understanding. That was the experience of SEA. This powerful capacity to profoundly shape us at the deepest levels of our being – and therefore our identity, society, and nation – is inherent in literature that explains the Hindu-Buddhist penetration and rooting. It created a SEA environment, a dialogue lasting with notable intimacy to the 15th century. Our region has always attracted attention of big nations because of its natural resources and strategic, geo-political importance. Either suffices to attract and sustain big-power interests, and therefore their impact on the region and its internal geo-politics. While resources deplete and demands for them change, the second is ongoing, kept alive, and lively unfortunately, by major global powers vying for influence and control of the region. As the late Prof. Wong Lin Ken first put it, the region lies between two oceans, the Indian and the Pacific. The Malacca Straits which links them is vital. This is evident in the rivalry between the Western colonial powers and, most recently, in the emergent, reflexive strength of China. The desire to ‘control’ our *kampong* remains as strong as ever. Sympathise with the grass when elephants fight. The means have evolved with the times, adjusting, moreover, to the re-configuration of the interests and intentions of major players, currently Chinese and American, the former clear cut, rising, the later revisionist, withdrawing:

In 2003, then-President Hu Jintao drew attention to the potential threat posed by “certain major powers” aiming to control the Strait of Malacca, and highlighted the need for China to adopt new strategies to address this concern. (China Power, “How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?”)

As the Straits is bracketed by Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore, all sovereign states, the alternative is to control the South China Sea.

Up to the advent of Western Colonialism – Diogo Lopez de Sequeira, the Portuguese Admiral, and subsequently Governor of Portuguese India, arrived in Malacca in August 1509 – and long before ASEAN, SEA shared a great deal as a result of Indian-Hindu-Buddhist penetration and influence over at least one and a half millennia, and even longer according to some sources. They covered key areas ranging from spiritual, intellectual, political, economic, literary, and linguistic, adding to their substance, processes, and development. I repeat a point

I have made before, namely ASEAN had all the major ‘modern’ colonialisms: Portuguese, Spanish, British, and Dutch, then French, German (close by in New Guinea and Micronesia), then American, and, finally, Japanese. Although for only a brief three and a half years – from Feb 1942 to Sept 1945 – only the Japanese ever brought the whole of SEA – except for Thailand – under a single rule. This soft power shaped religious practices, the nature of kingship, brought literary texts and language resources, mathematics, the sciences, town planning, dance, sculpture, architecture, shipbuilding, and a slew of associated areas essential to building and sustaining an advanced civilisation. They composed a common world view.

The imported software was indigenised, with remarkable results manifest in the achievements of three kingdoms: The Shailendras (circa 650-1025), Srivijaya (650-1377), and the Khmer Empire (802-1431). That the word for ‘language’ throughout SEA is the Sanskrit ‘bhasa’ is the best indication of the deep, extensive, and fundamental nature, of the Indian-Hindu penetration. It created a shared discourse, a common and overlapping underpinning that was simultaneously part of Greater India. The value of that sharing is recognised, especially its cultural aspects, particularly as manifested in dance, music, and literary texts. I do not for a moment suggest that the key areas listed earlier are not vital. They obviously are as contributors to the wealth of nations. Man does not live by bread alone. And the house of culture has many rooms, including a large one labelled Literature. Unfortunately, in certain circumstances, hopefully temporary, it is more remembered than acted upon, sidelined by other urgent issues in national development, as in moving out of the Third World, into the Second, then the First. For instance, at their 2017 meeting, the ASEAN-India Dialogue Relations summed up their Socio-Cultural Cooperation to date as follows:

Over the years, ASEAN-India socio-cultural cooperation has been expanded to include human resource development, science and technology (S&T), people-to-people contacts, education, health and pharmaceuticals, transport and infrastructure, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), tourism, information and communication technology (ICT), agriculture, food security, biodiversity, climate change, disaster management, energy and Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI). (Kheng-Lian 1124)

Some ‘Socio’ perhaps, but where is the culture of which literature is a significant component? Despite the rubric, programmes are bent to visibly contribute directly to GDP, quantifiable in dollars and cents.

Each nation in ASEAN needs to be as strong as possible. That is obvious. We live in troubled times. That too is obvious. What is equally obvious, and constantly pressing, is the fact that even ASEAN’s largest members of are relatively small fry in the global list of nations. Coming together, increasing

closeness, and strengthening shared interests would consolidate the advantages of a common front to enhanced bargaining power. Obviously, the greater the unity, the greater that power.

Together, ASEAN's ten member states form an economic powerhouse. If ASEAN were a single country, it would already be the seventh-largest economy in the world, with a combined GDP of \$2.4 trillion in 2013... projected to rank as the fourth-largest economy by 2050. ("Greater India-ASEAN-Seven Things You Need to Know")

As an open, ongoing process, slow and fraught with obstacles, some very tricky. Nonetheless, that unity, that identity, hyphenated, is 'a consummation devoutly to be wished'. The over-arching hope within ASEAN, the declared ambition of the collective is

One Vision,
One Identity
One Community

The Arts in the past were part of the first, and strongly present in the seconds and third. We live in the age of KPIs which are extremely hard to apply in the case of intangible assets. How do we evaluate, quantify the experience of looking at the Mona Lisa in the Louvre, or being stilled into silence in Borobudur, or hypnotised by S. L. Haldankar's 'Lady with the Lamp' in the Mysore Palace Museum?

The same trend marked by urgency to meet the demands of a continually developing world that dominated the ASEAN-India Dialogue noted earlier, underpins the work of the ASEAN COCI (Committee on Culture and Information). The principles set out in its Charter include the promotion of an ASEAN identity, a most challenging undertaking to say the least. The value of literature as a unique conduit, a generator of cross-cultural understanding, while recognised, has not been tapped in any systematic way. The one significant effort was the Anthology of ASEAN Literature initiated by the Philippines in 1982, the member countries then being Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. The twin aims were to represent national literature(s) and provide the means to do comparative studies of ASEAN literature. The singular, literature, is significant. I attended all the meetings bar one. We discussed at unusual length as to whether it was 'ASEAN literatures' or 'ASEAN literature', finally adopting the singular, as like ASEAN itself, that literature was a hope in progress.

The hope was not novel then. Nor should it be now. Frankie Jose Sionil urged it, this re-knitting of SEA, when we first met in 1967. As founder, editor and publisher of *Solidarity*, he pushed his vision – ASEAN was future tense – in which the nations were fraternal, even close, after the blunt, aggressive rivalries, antagonisms, and conflicts were resolved, scars mellowed, and nations able to move beyond them. And they have. Out of necessity. Vietnam. The USA. The

worst of enemies; now reasonable friends. Such are the vagaries of international politics and relations.

Malay is used in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore; Tamil in Malaysia and Singapore; English in the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia. Apart from these internal links, both Chinese and Tamil, have thriving literatures in China and Tamil Nadu, respectively. The former reaches back to the Eastern Zhou (770-256BC). Moreover, the *Four Books and Five Classics* were chosen during the Sung dynasty as key texts for the Imperial Examination. These nine books formed the core of the educational system, surely irrefutable evidence of literature's central importance.

The roads yet to be taken. When conceived as pan-ASEAN, there are three main ones at least. The first of national literatures, one each but two for the Philippines and four for Singapore. A course description and reading list of primary and secondary texts and materials (e.g. films, websites) for a semester, covering:

- 1 Background: a) Culture ii. History: Pre-Colonial, Colonial, National;
- 2 Literary history:
 - a) introduction highlighting special/unique forms e.g. Pantun;
 - b) where applicable, the relationship between the national/official/major languages and their literatures;
- 3 Other art forms connected to Literature, e.g. dance as exemplified by the *Ramayana*;
- 4 Texts
 - a) i) traditional ii) modern/contemporary texts covering poetry, fiction and drama;
(Where the literature is robust enough separate courses for a) i) and a) ii) and each genre)
- 5 List of secondary sources

Other courses could be based on

- a) Literature in Bahasa – Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Southern Thailand, Southern Philippines;
- b) Spread and Development of English as a Literary Medium;
 - a. Relationship between Literatures in English and National/Regional Literatures in the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia;
 - c) Major Themes e.g. Colonial Experience, Challenges of Modernisation, Country vs. City, Critical Approaches;

- d) Comparative Literary Studies, e.g. Singapore Literature in Malay, Chinese, Tamil, and English;
- e) Critical Approaches.

These headings may not be always appropriate, and there will be others that have to be introduced.

Between these and their realisation is the perennial problem of long-term institutional adoption and financial resources to create, develop, and sustain. First, a pool of qualified staff. We have then but not in all of ASEAN, or to the same degree and level, as institutional support for literary studies can vary significantly. We need them as, second, these lists should be drawn up by specialists who will modify the suggested template as necessary. Third, at the same time, a list of books and other materials for the library. Fourth, some of these courses will only be feasible after the more basic, foundational ones have had their impact. Fifth, assembling an introductory package of, say, 100 books, to be sent to two or three tertiary libraries through ASEAN. Sixth, identify, say, a library each in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand to co-ordinate and disseminate bibliographical lists and news.

Obviously, there is more to suggest, and above all, to get other views. Convening an ASEAN Literature Working Group, hosted by the International Islamic University Malaysia or the University of the Philippines, would be a start.

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