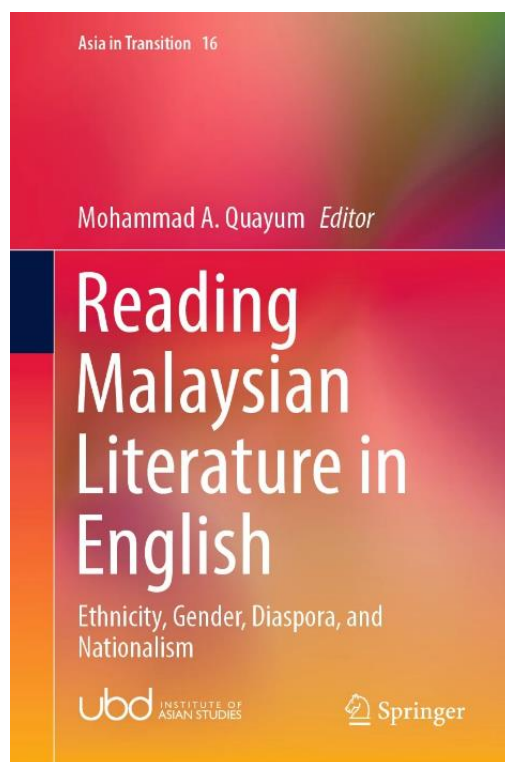


Mohammad A. Quayum (Ed). 2021. *Reading Malaysian Literature in English: Ethnicity, Gender, Diaspora, and Nationalism* (Asia in Transition, 16). Institute of Asian Studies. Singapore: Springer, 216 pp. ISBN: 978-9811650215.



As a vibrant literary tradition, Malaysian literature in English, which began with a group of university students' experimental narratives in the 1940s, captures the polemic of a multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multireligious Malaysia. Within this tradition, the 2021 book of essays titled *Reading Malaysian Literature in English* edited by Mohammad A. Quayum is an important resource material that warrants attention. Malaysian and diasporic Malaysian writers studied in this anthology include Lloyd Fernando (1926-2008), Ee Tiang Hong (1933-1990), Wong Phui Nam (1935-2022), Edward Dorall (1936-), Adibah Amin (1936-), Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof (1939-2022), Salleh Ben Joned (1941-2020), KS Maniam (1942-2020), Shirley Geok-Lin Lim (1944-), Kee Thuan Chye (1954-), Rehman Rashid (1955-2017), Rani Manicka (1964-), Bernice Chauly (1968-), Preeta Samarasan, Tash Aw (1971-), and Huzir Sulaiman (1973-). If nothing else, this list provides a useful introduction to students and researchers interested in the anglophone literary

tradition in Malaysia. The range of poets, playwrights, and prose writers listed include key 20th century and emerging 21st century Malaysian and diasporic Malaysian writers. This anthology signals the importance placed on Malaysian and diasporic Malaysian voices who “do not sing to the foreign harp or feed their imagination of foreign harvests but who take their inspiration from the events and actions around them, whose writing is informed by the myths, reality and history that encompass their daily lives” (Quayum x).

When discussing a literary tradition of a postcolonial multicultural nation-state like Malaysia, one cannot escape debating the representation of key concerns of multiculturalism including race-relations, gendered identity, majority-minority dichotomies, cultural discriminations, recognition politics, equality politics, private and public domains of identity constructions, and heterogeneity and homogeneity of socio-cultural experiences (Raihanah 2009b). Thus, it does not come as a surprise to read that this anthology of essays on Malaysian Literature in English revolves around varying intersections of the following important themes of ethnicity, gender, diaspora, and nationalism.

The anthology is based on the model of anglophone literature, especially the aspect of independent postcolonial narrative, introduced by Ashcroft et al (1989). As Quayum states in the Introduction to the book: ‘I have focused on the third category of writers in this paradigm, who have been instrumental in initiating an “independent” Anglophone tradition in Malaysia’ (x). As a student of Malaysian literature in English, I appreciate the editor’s choice to focus solely on writers who set out to forge an “independent Anglophone tradition in Malaysia.” My own research into this literary canon echoes the value of celebrating local writers’ “authorial-defined social reality” (Raihanah, “Malaysia and the Author” 55) towards better situating them within the map of Malaysia’s literary growth. The authorial-defined social reality is the licence literary writers have in the way they observe and contextualise their narratives within the nation’s history, politics, and culture. Thus, using the concept as a lens in exploring Malaysian writers’ representation of the nation-state of Malaysia, readers and scholars may be better prepared to “appreciate the writer’s public persona within the nation-building project.... Being an observer, the writer’s authorial-defined social reality then becomes the voice of conscience for the nation” (Raihanah 55). Malaysian writers have been known to revision and envision a Malaysia that at times challenges the “authority-defined social reality” (Shamsul). Their contributions to the nation-building project continues to be relevant today at a time when the country appears to embrace a new polemic of a politically diverse government.

In addition, the choice of contributors in this collection is telling. There are works by Malaysian scholars of the literary canon including Andrew Hock Soon Ng, Carol Leon, Leonard Jeyam, Shanthini Pillai, and Susan Phillips, whose views on the anglophone literary canon of the country may be informed by their insider/Malaysian perspectives. The context of their readings into Malaysian

narratives revolves predominantly around the importance of understanding the history and polemic of the multicultural, multi-ethnic, multireligious, multilingual, and post-colonial nation-state that is Malaysia. Such a context-based reading of any Malaysian narrative is not only relevant, but crucial in understanding Malaysian writers' authorial-defined social reality.

A very unique insider/Malaysian contribution comes from by the recently deceased Ghulam-Sarwar Yusof in his essay entitled "Ethnicity, Multiculturalism, and National Identity in Three Malaysian English Plays: A Personal Perspective." This contribution is in line with the tradition of Malaysian writers who wrote critical essays discussing their creative process and product (see Maniam 2001, Kee 2001). Unlike other Malaysian scholars in this anthology, Ghulam-Sarwar Yusof is a playwright-critic and is able to take the insider perspective even deeper and present us the authorial-defined social reality through the backstory of how his literary works are developed.

This anthology of essays on Malaysian Literature in English also includes works by non-Malaysian scholars like Elisabetta Marino, Pauline T. Newton, Rajeev S. Patke, and Walter S. H. Lim who present comparative outsider/non-Malaysian perspectives. This insider-outsider dichotomy is further compounded by contributions from Mohammad A. Quayum, Vandana Saxena, and Sanghamitra Dalal who despite being non-Malaysians, have the outsider/insider perspective from the sheer fact that they have had the experience of living and working in the country. These non-Malaysian scholars through their engagement with Malaysian narratives showcase their "horizon of expectations" (Jauss, 1982) as readers finding points of convergence with narratives which are removed from their contexts. In addition, their scholarly essays also signal the accessibility of writings by Malaysian writers who are able to speak both to Malaysians and to the Other.

The insider/Malaysia vs. outsider/non-Malaysia dichotomy is neither a unitary nor an all-encompassing binary perspective. Rather it echoes Trinh Minh-ha's conceptualization in which '[d]ifferences do not only exist between outsider and insider—two entities—they are also at work within the outsider or the insider—a single entity' (218). Every scholar in this anthology provides a perspective based on their horizon of expectations as a critical reader of the anglophone literary canon of Malaysia. Collectively, these insider and outsider voices make the anthology of Malaysian Literature in English valuable for researchers and students.

The fourteen essays in the book present a significant exploration of the Malaysian and diasporic Malaysian writers' authorial-defined social reality vis-à-vis the intersecting themes of ethnicity, gender, diaspora, and nationalism. All the same, I disagree with the editor that "[c]riticism on Malaysian Anglophone literature is lacking" (Quayum xxvii). At the start of the new century when I was conducting my doctoral thesis on Malaysian literature in English, the amount of

research and publication on the anglophone literary canon of Malaysia was fairly limited. Today thanks in part to the heightened interest in the canon as well as the visibility of Malaysian and diasporic writers of this literary tradition, there are a significant resource material including journal articles and books on Malaysian Literature in English. As such, we need to make time to celebrate the growth of the literary canon through such concerted efforts of promoting scholarships both from within and outside the country as captured in this anthology of essays under review.

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