The Pitfalls of Writing Stories in English as a Foreign Language

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David Leo, *Wives, Lovers and Other Women*. 2nd ed. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2012. 92 pp. ISBN 978-981-07-1113-9.

David Leo, *Ah... The Fragrance of Durians and Other Stories*. 2nd ed. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2012. 134 pp. ISBN 978-981-07-1025-5.

I was excited by the prospect of reading and writing a review for David Leo's short story collections, mainly because I love the genre but also because I'm on a mission to learn more about Southeast Asian writing. Leo is a prolific writer who has been awarded literary prizes and whose works are sometimes used as classroom texts – this is not an accolade that every writer can claim. When I saw the title of the first book – *Wives, Lovers and Other Women* – I was very pleased and thought to myself: here's a man who's not afraid to ask himself all kinds of questions regarding the opposite sex. Then I looked at the title of the second book – *Ah… The Fragrance of Durians and Other Stories* – and I was convinced that the author endorsed some kind of alterity, or even "exoticism," when he so bravely exulted in the smell of durians. I expected to hear a very distinctive voice that may very well be representative of Singaporean literature.

Chinua Achebe, who recently passed away, is well-known for being a staunch supporter of English as an adopted language for African writers. According to Achebe, it is important not to overlook a colonial language when it can serve as a useful tool for the bridging of social and cultural divides within a nation. However, it is also important when adopting a foreign language not to blindly embrace the culture and history that comes with it. Hence writing may be an art form that demands free reign, but on a different level, learning to write in a different language involves education in the linguistic as well as the cultural sense. It is the job of a writer to teach his readers and make them aware of the cultural translation that takes place when appropriating a language. Singapore,

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like Nigeria, was a British colony and English is a natural second language for many. It is clear that Leo likes writing in English and can do it well. He enjoys experimenting with big words and playing with idioms. His stories are all set in Singapore and there are narrators who voice strong views on their national identity; however, there are times when Leo's fidelity to his own culture is clearly threatened by his love affair with the English language. This is apparent in over-Anglicisation and unconvincing Singaporean portrayals. Sometimes, it is a character who exemplifies this problem but, at other times, it is the writer himself who makes us question his adoption of the English language.

Although Leo writes well most of the time, his texts are littered with ungrammatical sentences. He makes simple mistakes like "I feel responsible *to* help him" (91), "He couldn't have been much older than *we*" (95), "both his wife and *he* worked" (28), "it grieved me *thinkin*g" (*Ah…The Fragrance of Durians* 45; italics added). Maybe we can argue that they are examples of *Singlish*, but I'm not convinced that that was the author's intention. Now, there is nothing wrong with using big words when writing stories, it can actually be helpful to students hoping to widen their vocabulary, but if one does not do it well they run the risk of sounding contrived and unnatural. Leo's long sentences do contextualise words and clarify their meanings, but they also contribute to two of his biggest problems. One is the strange use of words, and the other is the construction of lengthy, awkward sentences that unnecessarily belabour a point. Take "cadaverous silence" for example. This combination is strange, not because we can't be silent like a cadaver, but because we don't usually visualise silence itself as a corpse. We know that people tremble for different reasons, maybe out of fear or because it is cold, but it is odd to describe someone as "trembling with panic." Or, that the sun is "disturbing" the eyes, that "ferocious sunlight" can "crash" into a house and a woman can "obliterate herself into the wall." Words that are used inappropriately sound a little strange but can also be misleading and open to misinterpretation. This is not conducive to students hoping to improve their English and can be quite frustrating for the average reader. Take this example of a woman describing a man: "Behind his genteel frame, she suspected a well of human desires waiting to be expressed" (*Ah…The Fragrance of Durians* 68). Clearly, she is as oblivious as the author to the possible vulgarity of the description. When writing is an art and the writer is so unaware of the connotations behind his writing, then we automatically question his mastery of the language and the soundness of his creation.

Here are some lengthy sentences from the story "The Other Woman":

> It was an embarrassment as the *belligerent, wailing* woman made a public scene, *exhorting* Angela to stay away from her husband and *threatening* to expose her. But Angela refused to be hamstrung by her aggressor's *audacious admonition*. (61; italics added)

We can argue that the italicised words are like synonyms that serve to emphasise the state of the angry woman and what she is doing; however, we can also argue that they have the unfortunate effect of making the writer sound like he is trying to impress with big words. This problem is repeated in other places, where the argument for emphasis and clarification is less convincing: "she lent her voice to read" (*Ah…The Fragrance of Durians* 67), "questioning her madness in volunteering herself to be trapped" (*Ah…The Fragrance of Durians* 65), "above the ominous quiet, all of them seemed to hear their inner thoughts battling within the cavities of their minds, reverberating within the hollow spaces" (*Ah…The Fragrance of Durians* 100), "'He wasn't even sixty,' lamented Peter, protesting" (*Ah…The Fragrance of Durians* 97), "obliterating from their souls the ironically excruciating heartaches of being in love" (*Wives, Lovers and Other Women* 54).

Another problem with Leo is his fondness for colloquial expressions. His characters love using words and phrases like buster, heck, holy cow, bull, for Christ's sake, Jesus Christ, yuck, man. When they don't utter it, they think it! Hence it often feels as if the author is intentionally trying to bring a bit of humour or familiarity into his writing. Whether he is successful may be a matter of opinion. Below is an example from the story "Obituary":

> In the car on the way home, Peter suddenly spoke. "Anyone we know died while we were away?"
>
> Holy cow! As a matter of fact, someone close did pass away. The children looked at each other in disbelief. Lily shuddered at Peter's premonitory remark but he merely sat back, adjusted his coat lapel and said calmly, "Who was it this time?" (*Ah…The Fragrance of Durians* 100)

Who is it that says "Holy cow!"? Clearly, it is not Peter, Lily or the children. There is no narrator, so is it the author? If Peter asks the first question, why is he asking the second question in response to himself? This peculiar use of colloquialism only serves to show how hard the character, or maybe even Leo, is trying to sound like a native speaker. A similar example can be found in "Farewell to an Island," where the director of a large company says this:

> Now, now, you don't seem to understand. It's either him or you. Naturally I value you more than that clod. Can't you see that I'm trying to help you? You can't just throw your career away like that! For Christ's sake, think, Marcus, think. I'm having the report on your indiscretion at sea quashed, and you should be thankful. Imagine the press getting hold of the story! Jesus Christ!...For heaven's sake, Marcus, get him out of your mind. (*Ah…The Fragrance of Durians* 32-33)

Personally, I find the "now, now" and "think, Marcus, think" a little too theatrical and, with all the blasphemous exclamations and even the use of the word "clod," I still don't find his speech natural or convincing. Furthermore, we would say "forget him" rather than "get him out of your mind." Ultimately, inappropriate colloquialism is not only off-putting to read but also reflects badly on the writer's skills.

In "The Other Woman," a mother and daughter have a conversation over the phone. They take turns saying "Angie" or "Mum" after every response. "He loves me, Mum." "That's what you think, Angie." "Are you pregnant, Angie?" "No, Mum, I assure I'm not." Then in one long reply, Angie calls her mother four times.

> Stop telling me to reconsider, Mum. I'm grown up, I'm mature, I can think for myself. I love Edward and I want to live my life with him. I'm sorry about that, Mum, but that's the way I want it to be. We'll get married – and that's legal – as soon as his divorce is in place. Thank you, Mum, for all the advice but I really can't see how I could be happy giving him up now. It's too late now, Mum. (*Wives, Lovers and Other Women* 60)

People do not refer to each other after every sentence, not even in very polite and formal conversations; it would be totally unnecessary, and unnatural, in any dialogue spoken in any language. In "Farewell to an Island," the Indian watchman speaks English in exactly the same way as his manager who supposedly studied in England. The narrator of "Grandma" is a seven-year-old yet this is what he voices: "But I was not sure if we had done the right thing. The saplings that sprouted were weak and soon withered. The cat disappeared and caused much anguish to the family. Grandma had said that nothing in this life was permanent. Letting go was painful. Holding on in vain was even more so" (70). Would a seven-year-old really think or speak like that? Although Leo is in a wonderful situation to portray multiculturalism – his characters are Singaporean, Malay, Chinese, Indian, Korean, Japanese and even Taiwanese; they belong to different social backgrounds, gender and age-group – yet they all seem to speak and think in the same identical, unnatural fashion. This is the result of poorly rendered speech, which makes all the characters sound alike in the worst way possible.

Like all keen learners of a second language, Leo is fascinated by idioms and likes using them frequently, or even allegorically. In "The First Day," the protagonist is a retiree who is trying to stay optimistic about the future. He declares that "rise and shine" has always been one of his "obsessions" and he always "looked on the bright side of things," so much so that he literally cannot stand drawn curtains and once, when he was in Tokyo made his colleagues laugh by "continually cross[ing] the road each time we turned round the corner,

[in order] to be in the sun" (*Ah…The Fragrance of Durians* 39). In "The Escape of Art," the idiom in play is "butterflies in the stomach." The protagonist refers to "flitting butterflies" in his stomach and at one point describes them in this manner: "The flitting butterflies in his stomach began beating their wings, this time even more restlessly, longing desperately to be free" (*Ah…The Fragrance of Durians* 59). Giving such banal expressions such artistic treatment made me cringe a little. Do butterflies in the stomach, or even butterflies in general, long for freedom? Sometimes what Leo regards as idiomatic flourishes are extremely cliché, for example, when he says a womaniser is a "tiger" and like "[l]eopards don't change their spots" (*Wives, Lovers and Other Women* 21), and describes a beautiful woman as "the toast of the parties" (*Wives, Lovers and Other Women* 122). Overusing and working clichés have the unfortunate effect of showing the writer's unfamiliarity with the language. Because he finds them new and interesting, he over-interprets them and as a result loses the readers.

I apologise if this review reads like an essay assignment, but I felt that I owed it to Leo and to myself to analyse the causes of my disappointment. As I mentioned, Achebe has said that writing is an art but equally it can be educational. I really wanted to be able to say: what Leo's writing lacks in originality, it makes up for by being educational. But, not only did I find myself questioning his works as good language-learning material, I began to have doubts about his artistic and cultural merits. Has he done his society an injustice by conveying it in English? Do his stories sound trite simply because he has told them in a "foreign" language? Are his lacklustre portrayals of Singapore the result of something getting lost in translation? I found myself, as a reader hoping to learn more about Singapore, rapidly losing interest with each story I read. Although all of them were straightforward and easy to follow, they felt predictable and unimaginative. I admire Leo for his spirit to experiment with different characters and situations, like he does with the technicalities and expressions of the English language; but like his badly constructed sentences and his penchant for clichés, I found a lot of his characters stereotypical and his plots unconvincing. Thus I am very sorry to conclude that Leo's language skills are a giveaway of his story-telling skills.