

**Irene Ng, ed. *The Short Stories and Radio Plays of S. Rajaratnam*. Singapore: Epigram Books, 2011. 242 pp. ISBN: 978-981-08-7848-1.**

While researching for a biography on S. Rajaratnam (1915-2006), Singapore's former Deputy Prime Minister from 1980-1985 (he was a member of the cabinet since 1959), Irene Ng (who deserves the reader's gratitude) stumbled upon a treasure trove of short stories and radio plays written by this extraordinary individual that, in my opinion, will substantially redefine Singaporean (and to some extent, Malaysian) literature in years to come. Gathered in this modest edition are seven of Rajaratnam's short stories, all of which were written in the 1940s, and radio plays composed in conjunction with Malaya's independence. A hitherto unknown part of Rajaratnam's life, his years as a creative writer reveal a different and vital side to him that further reinforces the symbiotic connection shared between literature, politics and nation building.

Although few in number, Rajaratnam's fiction contains a kind of power that evinces his maturity as both a writer and a thinker. This may also explain why his stories and plays seem to be, respectively, aesthetically and thematically ahead of their time. Their profound vision did not go unnoticed, however, for several of his stories were once internationally acclaimed writings that testified to this region's capacity to produce superlative writers. As Irene Ng tells us in her introduction, "The Tiger," which was Rajaratnam's first narrative to be set in Malaya, was (re)printed at least three times in both British and American literary journals and magazines, and was touted as "an example of modern Malayan writing" by the *Mirror* in 1948. His other story, "The Drought," which first appeared in the September edition of the well-regarded *Asia Magazine* in 1941, was subsequently chosen as one of the world's best story in 1947 when it was reprinted in *A World of Great Stories: 115 Stories, The Best of Modern Literature*, published by the University of Michigan Press. This anthology remains in print today from Gramercy publishers.

What is especially prominent about Rajaratnam's short stories is their capacity to arrest the reader's attention almost as soon as they begin. Reminiscent of the minimalist style often associated with Hemmingway, Rajaratnam's stories go right to the heart of, and remain focused on, their subject matters, forsaking laborious details that could potentially derail the narrative flow. As a result, these stories are short and crisp, but rich in interpretative possibilities. The brevity of these stories also point to an allegorical dimension, thus adding another important layer to the plenitude of meanings that they already yield. As indicated by the titles of the stories, nature is an important element, which Rajaratnam deploys as both setting and character. In fact, as tale after tale attests, it is often unclear when nature as setting ends, and as character begins; this is because the natural backdrop has

the tendency to textually metamorphose, as the story develops, into its human occupants' double, thereby becoming a clarification of, or a criticism against, the latter's attitudes and choices.

Consider "The Tiger," for example: its harrowing denouement, which juxtaposes a human mother about to deliver her child, and a female tiger being butchered by villagers for allegedly threatening the village when it was only protecting its cubs, presents a searing commentary on the *nature* of man – brutal, selfish and merciless. That the tiger had earlier spared the human mother when it chanced upon her bathing in a nearby lake, further reinforces the despicable tendencies characterising human beings, who perpetrate destruction often without reason or warranty. The same interpretive vein runs through "The Locust," whose ironic conclusion is unmistakable. Although the swarm of locusts has spared the village's crops that are ready for harvest, the farmer, Thulasi, grows pensive over the memory of how a locust was crushed by a fellow farmer. This memory occurs concomitantly to his anxiety over what "the moneylender," "the tax collector" and "the Brahmin priest" (20) would do to him should he fail to meet their demands. In the space of just five lines rendered through dialogue, the story effectively shifts natural disaster to human indifference and cruelty, and abruptly ends thereafter to reinforce the point. But not all of Rajaratnam's stories treat humankind in disparaging terms. In narratives like "The Drought" and "Famine," humans become nature's victims in the struggle to survive drastic climate situations that deprive them of necessary subsistence. These stories reveal a deep compassion for those living in impoverished circumstances; depending on nature, these people's lives are often thrown to chance and fearful twists of fate.

Rajaratnam's stories are outstanding works of fiction that provide a window to their writer's philosophy, value system and creativity. They fill an important gap in the history of Singaporean (and Malaysian) literature, and demonstrate the vitality of this region's cultural heritage even before Independence. While these stories are expressive of the writer's British education, they are manifestly Asian not only in what they convey, but in mood and tenor as well. Or, to phrase it in a slightly more colloquial manner: the words may be in English, but the "feel" of these stories are unmistakably Asian. And like many British-educated Indian writers of his time (such as Mulk Raj Anand, whose stories also focus on the socially deprived, and whom Rajaratnam knew), Rajaratnam infuses universal themes into his tales, thus accentuating their appeal and urgency. That these themes often also bear strong, if subtle, political messages, may perhaps already intimate the direction his life would eventually take.

Less successful, in my opinion, are his radio plays. First, they seem written with less care than was given to his stories. This may be attributed, on one hand, to greater technical circumscriptions placed on the composition of radio

plays that limit the writer's creativity, and on the other, to the haste in which they were written in order to coincide with Malaya's Independence. Second, they sound somewhat polemical in their insistence on the relevance of Independence, and as a result, suffer in terms of character development (they are consistently two-dimensional) and storyline (it is more accurate to say that these plays *lack* one). I need to emphasise that my quarrel is not with the plays' message (for I am all for Independence), but with their aesthetic faults (after all, even polemical works can be aesthetically elegant, as Anand's powerful political realist novel, *Untouchable*, would attest). Their overt prejudice renders the supposed debate about the pros and cons of Independence pointless, for while proponents of Independence range from a university professor to Ptolemy and the Spirit of History, its opponents are an unthinking critic and racist politicians, among others. Also, staged as a debate-cum-history lesson with a nationalist slant, these plays become completely bereft of a play's primary characteristic: a story. In truth, if not for the presence of characters, these plays would sound more like an extended documentary, (the first is written in six parts) than a story, about Malaya coming of age.

Still, Rajaratnam's plays are worth reading for the farsightedness they afford with regard to nation-building, racial harmony and postcolonial identity formation. Some of these insights were, as I have noted earlier, ahead of their time, and for this reason, would therefore speak to us more resoundingly they did to their original listeners. In fact, as Singapore and Malaysia continue to grapple with issues affecting postcolonial countries, it is timely that Rajaratnam's stories and plays have resurfaced to help us rethink our directions as nations and peoples, in order to help us better consolidate our identities.

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