

Speaking Migrant Tongues in Edwin Thumboo's Poetry

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Abstract

Singapore's unofficial poet laureate, Edwin Thumboo, is best-known for poems celebrating nationhood. Not much critical attention has been given to his lyrics on the plight of migrants who are seeking a new identity. The quintessential Singaporean poem on nationhood, "Ulysses by the Merlion" (*Reflecting on the Merlion* 18-19) takes the objective viewpoint of a traveller who observes the settling down of itinerant peoples. The migrant is, in fact, a motif that is juxtaposed alongside the nation in many of Thumboo's works, from "The Exile" (20-21) in *Gods Can Die* to "Uncle Never Knew" (19-20) in *Still Travelling*. Thumboo shows how the migrant's voice, like the nationalist's, may clash with the dominant or official culture. In so doing, Thumboo gives utterance to his or her feelings and beliefs as well as suggests cultural improvisation as a means to convert the lyric into a means of building a nation and nurturing the individual other.

In this paper, I will apply ethical concepts and aesthetic strategies outlined by Zhou Xiaojing in her study entitled *The Ethics and Poetics of Alterity in Asian-American Poetry*. She said that Asian-Americans differ because of their "inherent cultural otherness and subsequent political and cultural marginalization, and because of their apparently successful assimilation" (1). I will explore how Zhou's appropriation of Levinasian otherness may generate an appreciation of the migrants' cosmopolitan experience and social critique in Thumboo's poetry. Otherness as irreducible is also a form of intervention in an adopted society. It requires new ways of looking and voicing the experiences of self and nationhood. This otherness opens up new possibilities for the use of language, imagery and poetic techniques.

Keywords

Migration, Modernism, Postmodernism, Romanticism, Edwin Thumboo, Zhou Xiaojing

1. Altered State

The migrant experience is characterised by discontinuities and multiplicity as migrants seek survival in an "in-between land." This is evident in multicultural

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Singapore and the oeuvre of the widely acknowledged father of its literature, Edwin Thumboo. The island nation is a creative space where the self is continuously interacting face to face with others, say on the subway or its *padangs* (fields), and where the self ultimately desires a form of communion. Academic and critic Elizabeth Jackson observes that African literature, which Thumboo studied for a doctoral dissertation that he completed a year after Singapore's independence, has a "sense of identity [that] is not based on... national origin, or even to a sense of belonging to a... diaspora" ("Transcending the Limitations of Diaspora" 1). Likewise, Singapore literature, especially its poetry, is as varied as its inhabitants whose cultural roots lie elsewhere and who are transforming the island into a dynamic regional hub. Although Thumboo seeks to integrate migrants and their strange languages into a national poetry, he also celebrates their ethnic and cultural differences as reflecting the Singaporean identity.

The prevailing critical opinion on Thumboo's poetry is that it is mainly about nation building and that Thumboo "literally created the nation" (Gwee and Heng, *Edwin Thumboo* 19). That corresponds with the quintessential Singaporean poem, "Ulysses by the Merlion," and others that showcase Thumboo's abiding commitment to society. Like the Modernists whom he studied in the university, Thumboo weaves a tapestry out of the varied threads of daily island life. Thumboo seeks to affirm that Singapore's colonial history has all the complexities of Yeats's Ireland including the journey from a colonial to a national identity. Yasmine Gooneratne says that Thumboo's "Ulysses by the Merlion," as well as the rest of his work by extension, is "a single icon, aglow with electric 'power'... a people's image of itself... at once oriental and modern" (Gwee, *Sharing Borders* 13-14). Thumboo has evidently acted as a conduit for powerful emotions and a raging desire for individuality at the core of the Modernist movement. But he may be said to evade the totalisation of the latter, particularly in the latter's obsession with a so-called subjective aesthetics. He also leaves individuals in his society poetic space to speak about the changes around them.

A little-studied thread in Thumboo's canon features fragmentation, dislocation and alienation. Thumboo suggests an openness to the infinity or irreducibility of the other, especially the Eastern one, who is writ large in the everyday experience of art and culture in Singapore. Thumboo shows ethical responsibility by giving the migrant, that social other, a place within the island's literary canon that he himself has helped establish. This is fitting given the island's culture, which sees migration as an indispensable part of history and life (King 6). Indeed, the island-state's culture is characterised by constant flux and a pluralistic identity. Thumboo's creative project gives the multiplicity of Singapore's constituent ethnic communities the stamp of a broad national identity. According to Jini Kim Watson, Thumboo's poems "naturalise and

aestheticise the city as the proper image of ‘our emergent selves’” (194). This typifies the cosmopolitanism that Rebecca L. Walkowitz describes as encouraging individualism (“thinking and feeling in nonexclusive, non-definitive ways”) (2-3). Though not blind to the tensions that cosmopolitanism can generate, Thumboo is too clear-eyed to think as Indo-British Salman Rushdie does in *East, West* that a citizen of a migrant society must necessarily have a metaphorical noose around the neck in order to provoke “a choice between two different cultural identities” (Jackson 3). Thumboo’s poetic subjects do wrestle with the challenge of their multiple cultural identity but arrive close to accepting this state after some self-sacrifice. Yet his migrant subjects do not quite arrive at a final destination or a unifying consciousness.

The drive to legitimise the otherness of various ethnic and cultural groups in Singapore began even before its full independence in 1965. But it gained greater impetus after that when Thumboo and the island-state’s pioneer poets explored what Kirpal Singh calls “various modes and takes on interesting large themes of political struggle, social identity and individual presence” (*Interlogue*, Vol. 2 13). They had specific denotations for the “other.” Consider Lee Tzu Pheng, Thumboo’s academic colleague and fellow pioneer poet, who wrote also extensively about the Singaporean experience as hybrid: “My country and my people/Are neither here nor there....” (50). This literary and civic project continued into the 1990s with younger poets. Boey Kim Cheng, for instance, delineated the Singaporean poet’s experience of home as extending to stints abroad. Boey hinted at the necessity of the Singaporean migrant’s donning a social mask:

...[S]earch out the thread
Stringing together all arrivals and departures
Which our hands will tell, over and over
As if in prayer, as if in peace. (“Another Place” 80)

It is in Thumboo’s poetry where migrant voices in Singapore achieve full expression with Modernist techniques. Their voices resonate throughout his writing career, from “The Exile” in *Gods Can Die* to “Uncle Never Knew” in *Still Travelling*. Indeed, the quintessential Singaporean poem on nationhood, Thumboo’s “Ulysses by the Merlion” assumes the objective viewpoint of a traveller chronicling the settling down of migrant peoples through language. The protagonist’s attitude toward his home society is one of ambivalence. His journey exhibits key elements of contemporary cosmopolitan theory, namely “the analytic (new ways of thinking and feeling) as well as the thematic (new objects of thinking and feeling) and that brings together several gestures of critique – the progress of knowledge, the analysis of progress in history, the

resistance to some forms of progress” (Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style* 28). Thumboo mediates this ambivalence and the attendant responses to it.

Thumboo's migrant voices embody new ways of thinking and feeling in describing their mixed feelings about their origin and new home. They may clash occasionally with the official politics and values of the dominant, Western-influenced culture of their new environment. They exemplify what Paul White lists as three common features of writings about migrants that are analogous to the elements of cosmopolitan theory. These are (1) ambivalence, (2) the experience of flight or exile and (3) ideas of return, which may be real or imaginary. White says, “The migration event may seem clear-cut in the cold tables of statistical information, yet the event itself lies at the centre of a long-drawn-out (alas, perhaps never completed) web of personal reflections, adjustments, reactions and repercussions that start in the individual's biography well before the move and which are played out for many years afterwards” (King, Connell and White 12). Besides baring a seeming fissure between feelings and beliefs, Thumboo also seeks harmony and the flourishing of the individual other therein. Hence, though his art is set on the grand state of nationhood, it is not set off from ordinary life (Brooker 57).

In this paper, I will apply concepts and strategies outlined by Zhou Xiaojing in her study entitled *The Ethics and Poetics of Alterity in Asian American Poetry* to four of Thumboo's poems on migrants: “The Exile,” “After the Leaving,” “Uncle Never Knew” and “Cry Freedom.” Though not often critiqued, these poems exemplify Thumboo's cosmopolitanism, Modernist techniques and ethical responsibility. Zhou's observation of Asian Americans is applicable to migrants seeking a new home in or away from Singapore, a transcultural megalopolis in the world's fastest-growing economic region. Asian Americans differ primarily in their contradictory experience of “political and cultural marginalization and their apparently successful assimilation” (1). Thumboo holds in common with his trans-Pacific cousins an engagement with the world that does not diminish his hybrid culture's otherness in relation to the dominant Western culture. Also, Thumboo and his fellow Singaporeans have adopted English, an instrument of colonisation and assimilation of the Eastern other, as a native language. They have made English an indispensable means of transacting meaning with the rest of the world and grappling with their sense of national identity. This strategy has come at the price of a fundamental loss of past – migrant – ways of thinking and feeling. Levinas considers this loss of culture as “art [converting] the human into the non-human, spirit into matter” and “poetry [murdering] to create” (Zhou 56). Thumboo is aware of this predicament. He says, “The centrality of the language and its global circulation [attract] ever more talent although sadly at the expense of our literatures in Chinese, Bahasa, and Tamil...” (Gwee, *Sharing Borders* 10).

Thumboo recuperates this loss by incorporating words and artefacts from these “other” cultures in his poetry about nationhood. It is in understanding and even basking in these expressions of alterity that he is able to establish his own identity. This is a task that is not much different from what Asian American poets do. According to Zhou, Asian American poets “reinvent new ways of saying and hearing in... [English], rendering it inflected with ‘alien’ sounds or ‘foreign’ accents” (2). At the same time, Thumboo is expanding the boundaries of Singaporean poetry in English. He is reconfiguring the Modernist lyrical subject by recognising the “fundamentally contradictory status of the colonial subject-agent” (Tong 3). He engages the migrant with responsibility, that is, without attempting the latter’s total subjugation. He displays, for instance, a keen sensitivity to his poetic subjects’ native languages. This can be attributed partly to Thumboo’s hybrid genealogy as well as linguistic practice. Thumboo is the offspring of an Indian (Tamil) father and a Chinese (Teochew) mother.

This paper also proposes Levinasian ethical concepts for re-interpreting and re-appreciating the cosmopolitan nature of the migrant voices in Thumboo’s poetry. The project that is perhaps closest to this in intent is Carlota L. Abrams’ conference paper and article entitled “Native Voices: Comparing the Singapore Poetry of Edwin Thumboo with the Poetry of Native American Indians.” Though touching on ethics, Abrams does not refer to Levinasian concepts but rather to post-colonial theory. A migrant’s response to an adopted society generates novel ways of narrating and critiquing the experiences of self and nationhood. The migrant’s otherness extends the boundaries of acceptable language to embrace in its *saying* the migrants’ native expressions, diverse imagery and poetic strategies. According to Levinas, “the significance of *saying* in the subject’s language-response to the other in speech that is oriented toward the addressee, but which can prevent the other from being absorbed as knowledge or reduced to the object of the intentionality of the I” (Zhou 16). The subject’s *saying* reflects a responsibility for the other stemming from an understanding of the self’s freedom as impacting that of others:

Despite unequal ways,
Together they mutate,
Explore the edges of harmony,
Search for a centre. (Thumboo, “Ulysses by the Merlion” 19)

This responsible *saying* is a means to interpret Thumboo’s poetry on migrant voices, which call attention and aspire to justice in an emerging national society.

2. "The Exile": "Re-actionaries he said"

In an early comprehensive survey of Singapore poetry, academic Rajeev Patke identifies two distinct thematic strands that run through Thumboo's poetry: "the interpenetration of the personal by the historical imagination, and the role of friendship in the private and the public realms" (294). Both meet in the lyrical speaker's subject, a migrant, in "The Exile" from *Gods Can Die*. Leong Liew Geok, by contrast, reads this poem as one of conflict or, more specifically, an indictment of "those who, Judas-like, would betray others to changing times, or compromise their friendship for political advancement" as well as of the subject "who was misled by his idealism" (Singh, *Interlogue*, Vol. 2 41). Both Patke and Leong resort to stock post-colonial critical categories that Carlota L. Abrams alludes to during the latter's interview with Thumboo. This choice, however, unwittingly objectifies the marginalised other and erases the latter's difference to provide a semblance of sameness. The result is a judgment on the migrant's undesirable otherness, a type of violence against the latter that as a theme is also explored in Boey Kim Cheng's poetry.

"The Exile" is Thumboo's attempt to speak for a nameless subject's vigorous inner life as it clashes with a pristine, external image that his family and the greater society expect him to project in an adopted home. But his inner life, which defies facile categorisation, cannot be fully fathomed. It conforms to Levinas's understanding of an inner life as "the unique way for the real to exist as a plurality" (58). It poses resistance to pragmatism and social mobility. It also renders the subject of "The Exile" as a socially inept, permanent outsider:

He was not made for politics,
For change of principles
Unhappy days, major sacrifice. (*Gods Can Die* 20)

This subject's political apathy, a manifestation of individuality and a critique of society, is made explicit with the repetition of the epithet "not made for politics." That epithet frames phases in his life as well as, aesthetically, sections of the poem. In the first instance of this epithet, the subject is the site of great, though ultimately unmet, family expectations: job security, marital stability, great wealth and a smug, mediocre existence. But he remains uncommitted to traditional family and social values.

The second utterance of "not made for politics" opens the poem's second section, which is about the subject's estrangement from society. Thumboo expresses his subject's individuality through an ironic adoption of the collective sameness that is Maoist Communism. This ideological position, which runs afoul of Singapore's Confucian traditions, becomes a substitute for loyalty to the domestic collective that is the family.

The exile's ideological difference is expressed lyrically through ambivalence, especially through an opposition between sight and blindness as that between reason and feelings. Thumboo portrays the subject's values and identity as invisible ("There was in him a cool Confucian smile") and his vulnerability as visible ("He stood pale, not brave, not made for politics."). The exiled body is a natural locus for such ambivalence. At the same time, his intellect is capable of transcendence: "He thought to stand his ground, defy the law" (21). Most important, Thumboo acts as a means of *saying* the silent subject's difference. The subject appears traumatised by being exiled thrice – from ideological politics, middle class aspirations and direct speech. Thumboo lays bare the subject's ideological position through indirect speech: "Reactionaries he said" (21). Consequently, Thumboo defies the politics that privileges one ideological body over others and stands up for the individual subject's civil rights and basic freedoms. He does so in an objective manner and providing room for the subject's mystery. After the sentencing of the subject ("the verdict was/ Exile to the motherland") and at the third mention of "not made for politics," the subject is left in a state of silence to contemplate his own concept of self.

According to Patke, history fills a gap between the individual and the group through narrative texts and an ordered memory. In "The Exile," Thumboo allows the individual to experience a duality in his personal history. The individual may repudiate the political control and official history imposed by the social collective even as his outer aspect or body is bound to it. The absence of the first person singular viewpoint challenges the overbearing conventions of the traditional lyrical subject. The viewpoint suggests an objectification of the subject ("Impersonally, the verdict was/ Exile to the motherland..."). Though his difference with the rest of society is not based on material circumstance as Jackson notes in diasporic characters in Nigerian fiction, the exile's predicament is conditioned by social constructs. But still, the exile refuses to surrender his bodily autonomy in the face of the irresistibly powerful collective ("He stood pale, not brave, not made for politics"). It is this clashing with others that establishes his own existence. He is thus, aptly, in a state of becoming as "[a] new reality" threatens to engulf him.

3. "After the Leaving": "Shore, sky and hinterland are yours"

According to Abrams, ambiguity in the sense of loss and act of return is at the heart of "After the Leaving." Thumboo's returning subject, his friend Ee Tiang Hong (a Malaysian artist who moved to Australia), is at home in both Eastern and Western cultures (Thumboo, *Writing Asia* 270-71). Thumboo himself posits and represents Ee as a link between Singapore's common colonial past with Malaysia and the post-colonial present with allusions to multiple landmarks in his poetry (Valles 193). The ambiguity that Abrams observes in the poem is

perhaps the result of the immateriality of the concept of home in "After the Leaving." The artist subject's otherness, which is linked to this elusive home, is expressed primarily through fragmentation and multiple perspectives.

In a break from and as a critique of the Modernist tradition, "After the Leaving" creatively tears down the solipsism of the lyrical subject by articulating an artist interlocutor's memories of home. Baudelaire, regarded as the father of Modernism, valued the ontological essence of poetry above all: "A poem should have nothing in view but itself" (Brooker 61). In "The Exile," the dramatic speaker is concerned not about himself but an artist interlocutor. The latter experiences a binary opposition between his heart (invisible feelings) and mind (thoughts drawn from sensible reality) that is played out in his divided loyalties to Malaysia and Australia:

There are two countries here
One securely meets the eye;
The other binds your heart. (*A Third Map* 138)

The migrant subject is psychologically stranded in a nowhere land. Thumboo renders this state sensuously and, as he is wont, with a bold voice:

This is Perth, and yet Malacca.
Outside, suddenly spring arrives
In many wild, surprising flowers.
But no chempaka, no melor
Show that beauty of the heart. (138)

It is telling that the flowers described in the poem belong to the subject's homeland and not to his adopted country. This affirms yet again the strong ties that bind an individual to a motherland even in exile. Thumboo's encounter with alterity in this poem appears in dialogue form, which is close to what Levinas calls "*saying*," between the dramatic speaker and his migrant friend. This *saying*, regardless of what is said, is a prelude to the self's movement toward greater responsibility. It is "an ethical response when an encounter with the other takes place in speech" (Zhou 29). The lyrical speaker neither objectifies nor imposes on the invisible interlocutor whose name appears parenthetically after the title. The interlocutor, however, emerges triumphant with the poem itself being a dialogue with him.

In a critique of travellers in Thumboo's poetry, Bruce Bennett affirms that even settled peoples therein remain in a state of flight. They are "neither coming nor going but rather... *away*, in a state of flux and possibility, between places of fixed abode" (Singh, *Interlogue*, Vol. 2 77). Bennett observes that unlike his friend Ee, Thumboo is not at all torn between loyalties to countries. Thumboo's ontological status, after all, is hybrid. But Bennett says that

Thumboo is capable of empathy with the migrant condition, “observing its pitfalls and pleasures, the shared memories and the new openings” (Singh, *Interlogue*, Vol. 2 82). Indeed, Thumboo and his generation were practically exiles at the founding of the republic. They were pressed to shun self-reflexivity, put order to politics and write the island’s history.

Thumboo’s empathy for the artist migrant and his desire to respect his integrity are expressed in the ordering of a catalogue of images from both the interlocutor’s origin and new home. When the interlocutor is in Australia, he longs for Malaysia, and the reverse is true. This conscious oscillation between the two aesthetic spaces leaves the artist interlocutor in perpetual anguish:

You cried in the days of blight,
To leave again, after seven generations,
You must know so bitterly,
Is surely to return. (139)

This anguish is symptomatic of a desire to escape from the dichotomy of the heart and mind. But this makes the other lose his privilege of immateriality:

The Dream-time, purifying deserts,
Shore, sky and hinterland are yours. (139)

He is rendered vulnerable to possession by memory and suffers in the process of transformation. But so is the dramatic speaker who is engaged in conversation with the subject. Thumboo is the one tasked with re-collecting the fragments of the artist migrant’s world.

4. “Uncle Never Knew”: “Intoning Li Po, Tu Fu, and Reading Mao”

Originally published in *Still Travelling*, this poem is the first of four by Thumboo in the recent canonical compilation *& Words*. It is also perhaps his most personal work: a poetic *bildungsroman*, so to speak. Wimal Dissanayake claims that “Uncle Never Knew” bears “all the hallmarks of Thumboo’s poetry – the Yeatsian sensibility, the complex world of inner emotion, social awareness, a sense of melancholy... an alluring stoicism and a cosmopolitanism, and the interplay of symbolic geographies” (215). Dissanayake adds that this poem’s cosmopolitanism denotes both “the idea of universality as well as rootedness” (Thumboo, *Writing Asia* 215). These contradictions are located in an individualistic subject, Thumboo’s uncle, who is a mentor and role model who discovers his identity and bliss in solitude: “Always alone but never lonely” (19). This Uncle is also pre-eminently a poet as he conjures up a hometown and an entire culture in his imagination.

In the face of dramatic changes in his new environment, this Uncle is able to preserve his difference as a subject. Like Thumboo himself, his “[m]emory is full and whole” (20). The dramatic speaker’s face-to-face dealings with his Uncle and the Uncle’s desire for a semblance of home are both heartfelt and fragile. In his loving description, the speaker undermines stereotypes of the ideological other that is his Uncle and gives him room for expression. The Uncle continues to struggle (“He lived – if you could call it that” [19]). Though alienated in a profound way (“Tranquil as leaves left in a tea cup” [19]), he enjoys a rich inner life (“Always alone but never lonely.” [19]). As in his other poems about migrants, Thumboo sets off his enigmatic individualistic subject against the canny ways of his adopted society:

Great houses are history, clan, essential unity; belief.
A way of life which brooks no breaking of fidelity.
Rooted comforts reaffirm; nothing is extinguished. (20)

Thumboo portrays the other as silenced but creative and able to express himself on his own terms. The Uncle and the poet speaker are united in the act of “watching”:

Stroked his undernourished beard. Spoke to clouds,
Not people. The moon climbed roofs as he waited
For glow-worms to signify the darkening bamboos.
Communing with self, he was his favourite neighbour. (20)

The Uncle’s isolation preserves his sense of self. This then becomes a lesson for the maturing poet. Thumboo also suggests the impossibility of speaking for the other and calls attention to the limitations of the self. By interrogating the self and, more important, society’s preoccupation with reducing the other into oneness, Thumboo creatively communicates an ethical relationship. He caps this by making the lyrical speaker come to terms with his calling as a poet in the presence of the Uncle in the speaker’s imagination:

When I am by you, river, I feel Uncle watching me.
I hear much from inside his spirit, his affirmations.
Old Country stories re-surface, tell their tale. (20)

At the point when the attention shifts from the Uncle, in the lyrical equivalent of his death, the lyrical speaker’s imagination is incited. This magical space is where “writing begins” (Zhou 199). In Thumboo’s work, the Uncle’s home is invisible. It transgresses stereotypes and boundaries, even those of memory (“That House I’ve never seen, tries to sketch itself” [20]).

5. “Cry Freedom”: “To my beloved, and our children, my last prayer”

In a study of Modernism, especially that of Yeats’ compatriot James Joyce, Rebecca Walkowitz affirms that Modernist cosmopolitanism comprises a “dual identification... with the conquerors and the conquered.” She argues that Joyce’s anti-colonialism is grounded in a model that gives primacy to “triviality” and “promiscuous attention” (55-56). A child of Modernism, Thumboo likewise exalts a national culture through careful attention to detail in his poetic narratives. But, as in the previous poems, he locates this culture in individuals in the little-studied “Cry Freedom” from *Still Travelling*. They fight for political and literary space for themselves and their emerging nations. This poem demonstrates how poetry can add beauty to evils such as wars and advance ethical responsibility.

“Cry Freedom” is a homage both to India, the provenance of Thumboo’s grandfather and an ethnic minority in Singapore, and to the quiet nobility of the politically subjugated Eastern other. The poem’s cosmopolitan nature is highlighted by a shift in setting from New Delhi to Singapore and back to New Delhi in a collage of places and names from their cultures. The poem also affirms Elizabeth Jackson’s view of cosmopolitanism as “transcending the limitations of nationality or national origin as a category of identity” (1). But Thumboo’s poetry advocates the self’s responsibility to the other not to correct any imbalance in the ownership of means of production. It champions the other rather for the sake of freedom, both political and cultural, that necessitates crossing borders and fighting complacency (“Give me your blood and I will give you freedom” [44]). The subjugated other, according to Levinas, expresses vulnerability in the openness of his or her face. In “Cry Freedom,” this openness elicits a range of emotions from compassion to rage. The subjugated other, however, offers the self as a gift, “without demanding reciprocity” (Brooker 64). This is matched by the other’s descendants reminiscing the independence campaigns in early 20th century India.

The other’s self-donation is a requirement of what Walkowitz calls the need for unity in a national movement, especially during times of conflict (46). In “Cry Freedom,” Thumboo upholds that by underscoring the difference between the imperialistic English (unspeakable and referred to only generically as “they”) and his nationalistic poetic subjects (Indians seeking or defending nationhood). The Indians’ existential situation could be described in what Levinas calls “totality encompassing the same and the other” (38). Though known from stereotypes propagated by the Western self, the other nonetheless does not yield his difference.

In terms of historical content and poetic style, “Cry Freedom” mirrors to some extent that of Singaporeans. The fragmentation of colonial authority in the poem mirrors its lack of a unitary perspective. This strategy suggests a

discontinuity in English literature that makes room for new literary styles and conventions from India and elsewhere.

The poem itself may be divided into three parts. The first contrasts British colonialists with the colonised ascetic, Gandhi, as well as the latter's compatriot soldiers. Thumboo adopts the latter's viewpoint in this section. The colonialists are upbraided for a preoccupation with the self as expressed with opportunism in a grotesque Caesarean sense ("They came; they saw; they stayed" [43]), lying ("Divided, ruled through subterfuge; cunning in high places" [43]) as well as cruelty ("While relentless regiments marched, coerced and crunched" [43]). All this is intolerance of and a desire to circumscribe otherness. By contrast, Gandhi, an Indian who was for a while a migrant in Africa, lives in relation with others ("spun cloth, made tax-free salt, fasted" [43]), abides by justice ("His spirit, creed and path unleashed that quiet disobedience" [43]), and practices boundless charity ("Unthreatening, pure non-violence that blunted brutish force" [43]). Gandhi represents tradition as he is an Eastern sage and a mouthpiece for "many voices from Kanya to Kailash" (page). At the same time, he typifies something new; a pan-Indian political vision. Gandhi opens the door for Indian soldiers, and perhaps even Thumboo as well as other Singaporeans, to adopt *satyagraha* or passive resistance as a means of fighting for creative freedom. This sacrifice entails a figurative disembodiment: "But a nation's blood, brighter than red coats, tempered again/ By the sun's fire, cleansed by ash and singing bones...." (43). This loss extends to physical space as they are shipped all over the Eastern colonies by imperial writ. The only possession that these soldiers and nationalists retain is immaterial: a vigorous imagination ("Who fought, once, for King-Emperor, in Hong Kong, Malaya,/ Then Singapore, now dreamt of green fields and open waters" [43]).

The poem's second part supplants the British colonisers with Japanese invaders, an Eastern other usurping the unitary dominance of the Western self. Thumboo hints at the Japanese betrayal of their species being by adopting the ways of the Western coloniser. He punishes them by rendering them as nameless and invisible. The subjugated Indian soldiers and their families, in turn, are described as forging a national consciousness. They retain their virtues and symbolically regain wholeness in a fight for freedom ("By faith, hope, love, colonial memories, they travelled north" [44]). The images in the final couplet of this section point to the Indians' sacrifices made for their families and nation in the face of oppression. Unlike their invaders, they hold on to both body ("To the sky my last look; to the earth my last touch" [44]) and soul ("To my beloved, and our children, my last prayer" [44]), their land and irreducible alterity.

In the poem's third and final part, the Indians' struggle for freedom is vindicated. Thumboo describes both India and its progeny, including migrants

to Singapore, as preserving the memory and heroism of their forebears. They do so by restoring the materiality that their forebears had surrendered to colonisers. They communicate again with bodily gestures (“[A] nation’s salvation in her timeless, rich embrace” [44]) and public monuments (the Red Fort). Most tellingly, their faces are revealed to be “happy... looking at the Red Fort, knowing each day ever/ Is now theirs...” [44]). Thumboo explores the wholeness that freedom and nationhood, a break from the colonial past, can generate. But he also details the sacrifices made by individuals in the construction of Singapore as an ideational and poetic space. In this space, Thumboo celebrates the difference of former subjugated Eastern peoples.

6. Conclusion

Modernist poetry calls attention to ignored voices, muffled noises and unfamiliar faces. Thumboo’s poems belong to that tradition. One thread in his poetry seeks to establish unity in nationhood. That is intertwined and not opposed to another thread that expresses responsibility toward individuals, including migrants. Thumboo performs poetic ventriloquism for these migrant voices in his work. He does so with Modernist strategies such as shifting perspectives and collage in order not to totalise them but to respect their difference, which cannot be fully accounted for.

Thumboo’s poetry suggests a concept of nationhood that extends beyond ethnic lines and geographical boundaries to encompass those with similar, though sometimes officially disapproved, values. Those values are freely embraced rather than imposed by genetics or ethnicity. Indeed, Thumboo’s representation of ambiguity in the migrant voice makes his work authentic in delineating the migrant’s being.

This project inevitably raises ethical questions, especially of justice and Levinasian responsibility, that could yield an alternative reading and a re-appreciation of the work of Thumboo and other Southeast Asian poets. The articulation of difference, just like the unravelling of the face, may elicit a strong response such as compassion or rage. But this articulation may be used as a means to reorder the fragments of the past (say Modernism and memories of all places one can call home) and to induce the flourishing of all, including migrant, voices.

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