

Gregory Nalpon, *The Wayang at Eight Milestone: Stories and Essays*. Ed. Angus Whitehead. Singapore: Epigram, 2013. 186 pp. ISBN 978-981-07-6457-9.

The current vitality of Singapore literary production in English, and in particular of the short story, has been supplemented by a number of anthologies and edited collections with a historicist perspective, retrieving out-of-print works from the past and placing them in new configurations. An excellent example of this is Gregory Nalpon's *The Wayang at Eight Milestone*. As Angus Whitehead mentions in his introduction to the collection, many readers of Singapore Literature now know Nalpon only through a single story, "The Rose and the Silver Key," which was included in Robert Yeo's pioneering collection *Singapore Short Stories*. Through painstaking research tracing both published works and unpublished manuscripts from a family archive, Angus Whitehead has uncovered a rich seam of essays and short stories by Nalpon set in a Singapore moving from decolonisation through merger to the first decade of independent nationhood. In retrieving Nalpon's stories, Whitehead has also unearthed important biographical information on Nalpon that places the stories and essays in the context of the writer's various experiences as a radio presenter, journalist and union activist.

Given Nalpon's union work it is perhaps initially surprising to find a lack of direct politics in the short story and essays. There is none of the social realism attempted by Chinese-language writers of the 1950s, or by S. Rajaratnam and University of Malaya student writers in English such as Kassim Ahmad. The stories are neatly structured, but eschew the modernist experiments of Wang Gungwu or Lee Kok Liang, both of whom published in Singapore in the 1950s and early 1960s. If anything, the world of Nalpon's fiction and sketches of Singapore life resembles that of Goh Poh Seng's *If We Dream Too Long* or Lim Thean Soo's *Ricky Star*. Readers are neither presented with a history seen from above, from the commanding heights of the national culture that Rajaratnam, as Minister for Culture, urged should be actively created as a handmaiden to development, nor subaltern histories from below. Instead, in Nalpon's writings, they see history viewed from the side, from a series of local and regional margins, often refracted through the prisms of folk narrative and popular culture.

This feature of Nalpon's writing is most apparent in the location of many of the stories and sketches. The formal qualities and logics of developmental space in Singapore as a new Asian city that Jini Kim Watson finds in Goh Poh Seng's fiction are engaged with here, but only peripherally. "Impressions of Island Life" records the soon-to-vanish lifeworlds of the residents of the

Southern Islands, while “The One-Eyed Widow of Bukit Ho Swee” documents the after-effects of the 1961 fire through an account of the emptiness and sterility of a government-built flat to which a displaced family have been moved, noting the disruption of both economic and social ties in the transition. Yet most of the stories are on the periphery of development, often in itinerant, temporary or improvised locations: on visits to the islands by city-dwellers, next to a sarabat stall in Bras Basah Road, or in beach-side coffee shops at Changi or elsewhere. These peripheral settings, indeed, extend outside Singapore to Terengganu, Sarawak, and to Langkawi long before it became a package holiday destination.

Within these locations, Nalpon uses a variety of narrational strategies. Many of the sketches and some of the stories are told in the first person, but in only a few, notably “Mei-Lin” is the first-person narrator a central character. In most of the sketches the narrating “I” recedes after a brief introduction and orientation, and then vanishes. The most complex fictions, such as “A Soul for Anna Lim,” are in the third person, and the central consciousness is passed, like a parcel, from character to character. Nalpon’s characters are drawn from all communities and from all strata of society, and yet there is often a folk or mythic quality to their presentation. Characters may be mute, or blind, or simply described in a way that emphasises a certain grotesqueness. Such characterisation, allied with shifting narration and point of view, creates a sense of discomfort and dissonance, rather than an implicit argument for social justice.

It would be easy to classify the inhabitants of Nalpon’s stories and sketches as inhabiting two separate worlds, both peripheral to development in the city-state. The first is a mythical world, represented at its extreme by stories set outside Singapore: the story of Mahsuri from Langkawi, for example, or the apparently supernatural (although ultimately rationally explicable) events of “The Spirit of the Moon.” “These shade into folk and ghost stories that draw on oral traditions in Singapore, and resemble those published in the early 1900s in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*: a good example of this is the tree spirit in “The Mango Tree.” Finally, a number of stories set on a local periphery float in cultural terms, developing a level of abstraction that is almost biblical, as in “Michael and the Leaf of Time.”

The second world is the world that Nalpon himself inhabited as a young man, that of international popular culture and music, of jukeboxes, pinball machines, Tony Curtis, Gerry Mulligan, Bridget Bardot and Dacron suits, and which persisted after self-rule, merger and independence despite state campaigns against “yellow culture” and the “Long Hair Served Last” signs in post offices and other government agencies. The narrator of Mei-Lin arrives back in Singapore and rushes “to the first bar in town to see what I could do

about my thirst”; Samuel Paul in “A Soul for Anna Lim” sees himself reflected, bizarrely distorted, in the shining chrome hubcaps of the cars he cleans.

What is most interesting in Nalpon’s writing, however, is the way that these two worlds come together in peripheral settings through the actions of marginal characters. Samuel collapses on the floor in a dirty samshu shop below two possibilities of transcendence of the mundane: a small Taoist shrine, and an advertisement for stout in which “a girl with red hair and a stunning figure” kneels “on a beach of white sand, sunburnt and smooth and cool” (24). On one level, this is simply a representation of a persistent local cosmopolitanism, and yet Nalpon’s writing foregrounds, rather than smoothing away, such contradictions. The stories often produce a resolution at the level of narrative but keep cultural elements in suspense, a series of intersecting gazes that never quite align.

These features of the best of Nalpon’s short fiction are, in fact, generic features of short fiction itself. Frank O’Connor’s famous comment in *The Lonely Voice* that the short story frequently focuses on marginal figures at the fringe of society seems to fit Nalpon’s work. Similarly, a number of scholars of the short story, notably Austin M. Wright, have noted the genre’s formal recalcitrance, how a sense of questioning persists even after an epiphany or a tying up of the loose ends of plot. Short stories, sketches and flash fiction have been central to Singapore writing in English over more than a century, from fiction in nineteenth-century newspapers to contemporary works such as Alfian Sa’at’s *Malay Sketches* or Epigram’s recent collection of *Best New Singaporean Short Stories*. The short story exists at social interstices, appearing newspapers, popular and literary magazines, and now websites and blogs. It is readily translatable, moving between languages, and, as O’Connor suggests, has a particular ability to defamiliarise the familiar. In Singapore, the short story perhaps has an undiscovered history that refracts multiple narratives of the past, and offers the possibility of writing new futures. Angus Whitehead is to be congratulated both for making Nalpon’s works available to a new and wider audience, and also in the process enabling new perspectives on literary history in Singapore.

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