

Two Asian Dreamers, Doers

This issue of *Asiatic* commemorates the lives and works of two iconic Asian writers, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) and Edwin Thumboo (1933-), and pays tribute to their extraordinary talent and achievements as litterateurs.

At first glance, readers might think that there couldn't be two more disparate writers brought together in a single issue. Rokeya was a South Asian female Muslim writer from the early twentieth century; Thumboo, who was born in a Christian family, grew up in British Malaya and began writing in the 1950s, well after Rokeya had passed away. In fact, as the timeline for the two writers shows, Thumboo was born almost exactly a year after Rokeya's death: Rokeya died on 9 December 1932 and Thumboo was born on 22 November 1933. Rokeya's creative medium was the Bengali language, although her most famous work, *Sultana's Dream*, and several of her essays and letters were published in English. Conversely, Thumboo writes solely in English, and has been at the forefront of re-making English into an Asian language in the postcolonial period. Moreover, although Rokeya occasionally wrote poetry and received a poetry award at a young age, beating in the process several native speakers of the language, her reputation as a writer lies in her polemical essays such as "Woman's Downfall" (Istrijatir Abanati) and "The Female-half" (Ardhangi), and in her satirical stories such as *Sultana's Dream*, "Three Lazy Men" and "Marriage-crazy Old Men." Thumboo, on the other hand, is widely recognised as the "father-figure" of Malaysian-Singaporean (Malayan) poetic tradition in English, and as Singapore's unofficial poet laureate.

These differences are there, yet if one were to look beneath one could find several similarities too. First and foremost, Rokeya and Thumboo are both literary pioneers. Rokeya was perhaps the earliest of female Muslim writers in the Bengali language, and certainly one of the very first to envision a Ladyland (in her story *Sultana's Dream*) in world literature. She began writing at a time when Bengali Muslims were still struggling to find their language identity, "caught between," as Sarmistha Dutta Gupta rightly argues in her article, "'Islamic' Urdu and 'Hindu' Bengali as their mother tongue."¹ Because of its Hindu and Sanskrit roots, Bengali was forbidden to Rokeya in childhood. Her elder sister, Karimunessa, was hastily married off at the age of fourteen, after her father discovered her reading a Bengali novel. Such was the perception of the Calcutta-based elite Muslims (to which Rokeya's family belonged) towards the Bengali language, at that time in particular. Rokeya was also prohibited from learning English because of its corrupting Western influences, although

¹ I too have argued this point at length in my book, *The Essential Rokeya: Selected Works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain*. Boston, Leiden: Brill, 2013.

ironically one of her stepmothers was European. In spite of such childhood taboos, Rokeya grew up to be a writer in both Bengali and English, and even introduced Bengali as a subject in the school she had founded for Muslim girls in Calcutta in 1911, Sakhawat Memorial School (named after her husband, who passed away in 1909). This two-fold assertion of her Bengali identity, as a writer and an educationist, has most definitely contributed to streamlining and consolidating the lingual identity of Bengali Muslims, and to finding honour and dignity in having Bengali as their mother-tongue. It may even have contributed, as Sarmistha convincingly argues in her essay, to the spirit of the Language Movement – which began in then-East Pakistan in 1952, when the Pakistani regime wanted to impose Urdu as the sole official language of the newly independent country, including the largely Bengali-speaking Muslim population of East Pakistan – the Movement that many historians see as a precursor to the Liberation war and the subsequent formation of Bangladesh in 1971. It is perhaps in recognition of such extraordinary contributions to the history and identity of her people, that a university was founded in 2008 by the Government of Bangladesh in the district where she was born,² and named after her: Begum³ Rokeya University.

Thumboo's contributions are no less significant, although they may not yet seem as tangible, owing to his proximity in time. With Rokeya, we have the benefit of hindsight; we can connect the dots to create a full picture. Besides, her physical absence allows us to be more detached and objective towards her work. But with a living writer such advantages are not there, and we feel relatively constrained in measuring his impact on his people and society. Yet it can be said with conviction that Thumboo has been instrumental in transforming and shaping the cultural landscape of Singapore and, to quote an article from Singapore's *The Straits Times* (2008), in "spearheading the creation of Singapore literature in English." Through his writing, his canon-forming anthologies, and in his capacity as Head of the Department of English Language and Literature at the National University of Singapore (sixteen years), Dean of the Faculty (eleven years), and the first Chairman and Director of the university's Centre for the Arts from 1993 to 2005; through his membership in various government and statutory bodies, and in his role as a civil servant for the first ten years of his professional career, he has significantly influenced the formation of cultural and national identity of Singapore, which, as he said in an interview with me, "has always been one of my central concerns" (*Peninsular Muse* 48). As a result, he has become the voice of his generation, an iconic figure in Singapore literature, so important and influential that, as Gwee Li explains in his article, "he is deemed as the touchstone for understanding an entire written

² Rokeya was born in the district of Rangpur, now part of Bangladesh.

³ Begum is an honorific in Bengali used for highly respectable Muslim women; a lady.

culture... no commentator on Singapore's literary scene can be considered well-informed without having demonstrated a legitimate opinion on his verse." His poem about national self-fashioning, "Ulysses by the Merlion," published in 1979 and, since 1994, displayed on a plaque next to the statue of the Merlion facing the Marina Bay, is perhaps the most central document in Singapore literature; it has prompted many younger Singaporean poets to come up with their own Merlion poem, to the extent that it is often said playfully that one cannot be taken seriously as a Singapore poet without having first responded to Thumboo's Merlion poem. This canonical role of Thumboo and his Merlion poem has been discussed in some detail by Ian Chung in his article, comparing the poem with Lee Tzu Pheng's "The Merlion to Ulysses" and Alfian Sa'at's "The Merlion."

Another affinity between the two writers is the historical circumstances in which their writing careers began and flourished. Rokeya began writing in 1902, at the young age of 22, when Indians were becoming aware of their identity as a people and the Indian nationalist movement against the Raj was gathering momentum. 1905 marks a watershed in Indian history; Calcutta was the capital of India then, and much of the resistance to the imperial rule was organised from this part of the country. In retaliation, the British divided Bengal into two in 1905, creating a new East Bengal (which later became East Pakistan [1947], and subsequently Bangladesh [1971]), with its capital in Dhaka (and in 1912 India's capital was moved from Calcutta to Delhi). The British justified this arbitrary act by citing reasons of administration and religion, that Bengal was too large to administer and that Muslims in East Bengal deserved a capital of their own. The latter reason was intended to sow the seeds of communal hatred between Hindus and Muslims, in sync with British policy of divide and rule, and they succeeded in this overwhelmingly. Riots broke out between the two religious groups, not just in Bengal but also in the rest of India, resulting in the formation of Muslim League in 1906, which began work on the creation of a separate identity and homeland for Indian Muslims.

It is against this backdrop that Rokeya began and continued with her writing. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the themes of India's political future, finding harmony between the various religious-cultural groups and establishing self-rule preoccupied much of her writing. She was concerned about her Muslim identity, but equally concerned about her Bengali and Indian identities, so, although she spent much of her energy in propelling forward the Muslims, who were caught in a vicious cycle of superstition and ignorance, she never did it in an exclusionary way to rival any of the non-Muslim groups. Creating a multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-religious India that would treat all its citizens fairly and with justice, is what she envisioned in her writing. Above all else, she believed that India could not seize its destiny as a nation, free from colonial rule as well as all internal oppressions, without establishing gender equality; this could only be

achieved by educating its women and giving them all the rights and privileges that they deserved as members of society. Thus the concept of slaying the demon of patriarchy occupies the centre space within her nationalist vision. In essay after essay, story after story, she takes aim at the age-old Indian patriarchy, showing how it had unscrupulously victimised its female-half, reducing them, both literally and figuratively, to paupers and slaves, left utterly at the whims and mercy of men – a point that is explored in most of the articles on her in this issue, looking either at her religious identity as a Muslim or at her ethnic/nationalist identity as a Bengali/Indian.

Thumboo also began his writing career during the most tumultuous period of Singaporean/Malayan history, when the country was shaken by several race riots in the wake of its struggle for self-rule. In Rokeya's India the ferment was over religion, in Thumboo's Malaya it was over race. As the time for independence drew near, the various races began to stake their claims in the formation of the future nation. The Malays, considering the land as "tanah Melayu" and themselves as "children of the soil," wanted to have an upper hand over the other races, while the Indians and Chinese demanded equal citizenship for all. This resulted in a simmering tension between the groups, boiling over into explosive riots, particularly in 1954 and 1964. There was an even graver consequence to this dissension, as it subsequently broke up Malaya into two countries, similarly in the way India was broken up into two on religious grounds. Malaya was given independence in 1957, while Singapore became independent in 1963. Soon after its independence, Singapore joined the Federation of Malaysia to "create a larger and more powerful economic base" (Lee Kuan Yew, qtd. in Ongkili 159), but two years later this merger failed, again over the race issue, resulting in Singapore's acrimonious "divorce" (to use Lee's metaphor) and emergence as a sovereign nation on 9 August 1965.

Thumboo's writing began and grew against the backdrop of these traumatic events. He started "experimenting with words: trying to compose, making verse... putting quatrains together" (*Peninsular Muse* 36) in 1950, when he was a student of Standard Eight. Soon after, he got involved in student magazines and reading circles, such as *Youth* and *The New Cauldron*, writing editorials urging "the creation – and study – of a Malayan literature" (*Peninsular Muse* 55). In 1954, inspired by the nationalist movements in India and Indonesia, and the Communist-inspired Chinese mainland nationalism, Thumboo got involved in left-leaning student politics. He was arrested and tried for treason after writing the editorial of the university's Socialist Club magazine, *Fajar* (Dawn), in which he openly advocated Malaya's independence from colonial rule. His first collection of poetry, *A Rib of Earth* (1956) came out while he was still a student at the University of Malaya in Singapore, and he has since published several other volumes including *Gods Can Die* (1977), *Ulysses by the Merlion* (1977), *A Third Map* (1993), *Friend: Poems* (2003) and *Still Travelling*

(2008), which collectively have established his reputation “as a national poet committed to articulating a cultural vision for a multicultural Singapore” (Teng).

For Rokeya, language was a predominant issue, as in childhood she was not allowed to learn either Bengali or English, her chosen imaginative mediums. For Thumboo, too, language became an issue as he came to express himself in the tongue of the colonisers whom, paradoxically, he was trying to oust from his homeland. But this was a matter of necessity rather than choice for him, and it eventually turned out in his favour. Thumboo was born in a family of a culturally mixed marriage; his father was a Tamil Indian and his mother was a Teochew Chinese Peranakan. Therefore, although he was exposed to several languages in childhood, English naturally became his first language as it was spoken more often at home and in school than either Tamil, Teochew or Malay. In this regard, Thumboo explains: “English is the only language in which I had some strength. As time went by, Teochew was used less and the little Malay I had receded. Meanwhile English grew, systematically, daily, as my world grew. If I wrote poetry, and I wanted to, it had to be in English; there was no alternative. As I have said more than once, poets do not choose their language; the language chooses them” (*Peninsular Muse* 38). This adoption of English and his attempts to appropriate it as a local language helped him in later years to have a hand in the gestation of the nation’s culture, where English gradually emerged as the pivotal, bridge language. It also helped him to cast his net of friendship across all the races, as he was not limited by the language of a particular ethnic/dialectic group, but instead equipped with the country’s lingua franca. In his article, Thumboo explains how these friends from childhood to adult years acted as conduits for him in understanding and appreciating their respective history and culture, and thereby enabled him to better comprehend/configure Singapore’s rainbow composition.

One final point of similarity between Rokeya and Thumboo: they are both dreamers, visionaries, who have sought to make the world a better place through their ideas and writings; but they are also doers, with a sense of practicality, who have acted on their visions to bring real change in society. Rokeya did this by establishing a school in Calcutta and by setting up a women’s organisation, Anjuman-i-Khawateen-i-Islam (Muslim Women’s Association), which worked in the slum areas of Calcutta to provide free education to both Hindu and Muslim women, as well as extending material help to improve their living conditions. Thumboo has done it in his various administrative capacities as Head, Dean and Director; by organising seminars, conferences, exhibitions; by establishing linkages between various institutions within and outside Singapore; and by inspiring many young writers, poets and academics, in Singapore and elsewhere, through his own example and by giving concrete guidance to them over the years. This is something that sets them apart from many writers before and after them, creating a “blessed unity” of a dreamer-

doer, idealist-realist, who would be swept far out by his/her enthusiasm and vision but remain anchored to reality from one side.

Works Cited

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