

Ecology, Nature and the Human in Edwin Thumboo's Poetry

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Abstract

In recent decades a growing concern for the environment and humans' relationship to it has prompted a group of literary critics, who have since been labelled ecocritics, to foreground *place* in literature as a new critical category. All ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature.

This study attempts to make a case for Thumboo as an ecological poet. It discusses why Thumboo's treatment of the historical theme is distinctive, subversive, and even at times anathematic to progress-oriented national discourses. It will then examine ways in which his poems forge an "organic" synthesis with nature and conclude by discussing Thumboo's eco-critical leanings.

Keywords

Ecocriticism, Thumboo, Singapore, poetry, nature, history

In *The Aesthetics of Environment and Living in the Landscape*, the philosopher Arnold Berleant has argued that the arts and the aesthetic in general have a crucial role to play in engineering an "environmental" awareness through their overt appeal to the senses and their general capacity to embed us in the tissue of the world. Berleant's ideas emerge from a perspective that has, since the mid-1980s, spawned an increased ecological awareness which in turn has initiated the adoption of an eco-critical lens for the study of literary texts. This has meant the foregrounding of *place* in literature as a new critical category. The environment and humans' relationship to it has informed this new critical approach. As Glotfelty clarifies, "[d]espite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that

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human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature” (Glotfelty xix). Glen Love expands on this aspect of criticism: “While critical interpretation, taken as a whole, tends to regard *ego*-consciousness as the supreme evidence of literary and critical achievement, it is *eco*-consciousness which is a particular contribution of most regional literature, of nature-writing, and of many other ignored forms of works, passed over because they do not seem to respond to anthropocentric – let alone modernist and postmodernist – assumptions and methodologies” (emphasis added; Love 230).

While at one level, Edwin Thumboo speaking for Singapore and for Southeast Asia may be termed a “regionalist” and perceived as not over-eager to align his perspectives with the predominantly anthropocentric viewpoint that has dominated Western humanistic approaches; at another level, it might seem odd to discuss one of the pioneering poets of Singapore, who is primarily celebrated for his nationalistic poetry, in the context of ecology. Nevertheless, this study attempts to make a case for Thumboo as an ecological poet. The trajectory of the argument will be as follows: I will begin by discussing why Thumboo’s treatment of the historical theme is distinctive, subversive, even at times anathematic to progress-oriented national discourses. I will then point to ways in which his poems forge an “organic” synthesis with nature and conclude by discussing Thumboo’s eco-critical leanings.

Critics have understandably focused on Thumboo’s fairly predominant theme, namely “nationalism” that runs through and unites his entire oeuvre. For instance, Sharon Teng describes him as “a national poet committed to articulating a cultural vision for a multicultural Singapore” (Teng, *Infopedia*). Indeed Thumboo, having won every major coveted award in Singapore including the Cultural Medallion and the Public Service Star, is often dubbed the “unofficial Poet Laureate” of Singapore. His poetry along with his sentiments stand as testimonies to his commitment to history, which he believes ought to be integral to a poet. His words echo this conviction:

History enters my writing, as it ought to enter the writing of others, because of its importance in our lives. I go back to this point about the historical moments we occupy. As a former colony, a multi-racial one, created by the British, we need history for a sense of things; to re-inscribe ourselves; discover and, in certain areas, define ourselves as individuals, as groups in a multi-racial society. (Teng, *Infopedia*)

Thumboo’s poetic engagement with history is well documented. His engagement with the nation and its history takes many forms ranging from descriptions of the city-state in “The Sneeze” and “Orchard” to a public articulation of its purpose in “Ulysses by the Merlion”:

Peoples settled here,
 Brought to this island
 The bounty of these seas,
 Built towers topless as Ilium's.

They make, they serve,
 They buy, they sell.

Despite unequal ways,
 Together they mutate,
 ("Ulysses by the Merlion," *A Third Map* 80)

When we scrutinise Thumboo's approach to history, however, we realise that it is not only the straight-forward linear narrative of national history that emerges from his poetry but also a more "organic" history where "human and environment" live in close and integral relationships with each other. Nicolas Berdyaev, discussing medieval Christian asceticism in *The Meaning of History*, is persistent in viewing it as a struggle for the liberation of the human from submergence in nature. Berdyaev argues that as it struggled to free itself from its entanglement with nature, human consciousness was forced to objectify nature and thus to prepare the way for its eventual mechanisation. Modern history, he insists, is a record of this process of separation and mechanisation, with all its concomitants, a process which has left an unmistakable impression upon culture (ctd. in Savage 496). A related view is advanced by Carolyn Merchant in her book *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. These views are not surprising given that the entire scope of humanism, beginning with Renaissance humanism with its move away from the supernatural to the later liberal humanism, has been perceived by many posthumanists and ecocritics as a move to establish human autonomy and agency over nature.

In the light of this perception, Thumboo's rendering of history distinguishes itself by being interestingly different. Firstly, in many instances in his poems, history is intermingled with myth. In fact, Sharon Teng informs us that "he describes himself as a myth-inspired poet, and sees myths as ancient narratives and structures which provide a stable point of reference for a multicultural society" (Teng, *Infopedia*). In the poem "Dragon Strikes" this fine balance between history and myth is sustained throughout.

Xu Tingfeng, whose dying
 In Xiangjun's arms, their
 First and last embrace,
 In soft mid-winter snow,
 Surcease of separation, strife,

Watched by the prayers of nuns,
Is pure, simple, unforgivable.

He never measured duty,
The cause of country or
An Emperor full of cunning
And appetite, who squeezed merit
Unhesitatingly, then arranged
The splendours of a feast,
Death by poison in the wine.

Earth and sky protect
The worthy in their quest,
For quiet, unspectacular lives.

(The Best of Edwin Thumboo 16)

Xu Tingfeng is both a mythic hero and a historical figure from ancient China. The poem does not merely refer to the heartrending story of the betrayed Xu Tingfeng but attempts to weave together history with myth, eliminating the conventional dichotomy between the two. This is, in itself, an interesting facet of his writing. But the last stanza also hints at another important perspective that he brings to his documentations of the nation – his emphasis on the ordinary and the marginalised: “The worthy in their quest/ For quiet, unspectacular lives” have a deep appeal for him, showing that oftentimes it is history “from the underside” that appeals to Thumboo, for, the lives of the marginalised, the ordinary, repeatedly grips his imagination. In “A Quiet Evening,” his reigned-in causticity while referring to the “guest of honour” who looked “angry and red” disrupting the previous “surplus laughter [when] we ate among friends” (*A Third Map* 51) ; changing this trust to mistrust and anxiety when “we ate amidst silence” (51) is just one instance where the powerful meet with Thumboo’s disdain. Indeed this alignment with the ordinary is revealed frequently in his poetry. In “The Way Ahead” we have his self-deprecatory description of himself: “I? The average/ Man, the man-in-the-quiet-street,/ Feeling nervous, struggling to free/ Practicalities from dreams, leaving/ A small remainder hopefully sensible...” (*A Third Map* 55).

Thumboo’s prowess in interweaving myth and history and his allegiance to the unpretentious has a corollary that has been less explored: the close integration of his cultural consciousness, which derives, no doubt, from his allegiance to history, with an attentiveness to the environment. Yet in poem after poem, Thumboo repeatedly demonstrates this affiliation. One of his early lyrical poems, “Yesterday,” is a case in point.

Silence growing on a stem,
touch of rustic life:

a thin twig of smoke
 following a dead creeper
 among old branches
 and both twisting
 old thoughts to new ideas,
 betrays a habitation.

Yet walk to the shadow
 Of Mandai mountain
 I will show you a
 sleeping secret stream. (“Yesterday,” *A Third Map* 4)

“Yesterday” is quintessentially eco-centric since it depicts man as part of an ecosystem; he is neither master nor slave to it, but simply one part of an intricate system. Little critical attention has been paid to this aspect of Thumboo’s poetry, despite his repeated preoccupation with natural history, ecological process, and nature. Nicholas Frankel, discussing “The Ecology of Victorian Poetry,” examines Meredith’s poem “The Woods of Westermain” and arrives at the conclusion that Meredith crafts “his poetry’s physique in ways that call attention to the reader’s experience rather than to the author’s intentions” (Frankel 631). This perspective is valid with regard to “Yesterday” as well, from the point of view of eco-criticism, namely, its ability to create a participatory environment, inviting us, the readers, to enter this demarcated space and partake in its recreated world: “Yet walk to the shadow/ Of Mandai Mountain/ I will show you a/ sleeping secret stream.” The conception of nature here is with the sense of the eternal presence of nature; that nature is in man as much as man is in nature and the one impacts on the other. Just as “the silence growing on a stem” has the potential to “twist old thoughts to new ideas,” the participating reader(s) will be transformed by their manifold encounters with a sleeping secret stream. It would be hard to label this as simply “nature writing” since the poem echoes the fundamental eco-critical premise that Glotfelty affirms: “that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (Glotfelty xix). This is not to deny the fact that a text can have no direct relationship with the world and as such nature can only be “a projective fantasy or social allegory” in any literary text (Buell.5). But notwithstanding this claim long substantiated in theory, one can argue that the poem strains towards the enactment of “pure process” by using a number of formal features such as the use of the (present) imperative – “Walk to the shadow of Mandai mountain,” and the future tense: “I will show you...” enhancing the notion of action, agency and participation in a space that is envisaged as a continuum, crucially effecting the idea of an on-going interaction between man and environment.

Thumboo's sense of history is often interwoven with a spirit of nostalgia – what Robbie Goh terms “the emotive and associative discourse of the poet” (Goh, “Address”). This in itself would be unremarkable if it were not for the distinctive circumstances that play out in the background. In order to understand the subversive implications of this otherwise pervasive, indeed commonplace, poetic stance, one would have to place it against prominent and authoritative discourses that were predominant between 1965 and 1980 in Singapore, which placed great emphasis on economic advancement and pragmatism eschewing the arts as a luxury. As Stephan Ortmann points out: First, after Singapore was ejected from the Malaysian Union and became independent in 1965, the government promoted pragmatic values, which were geared toward economic growth (Ortmann 23). These mainly focused on modernity, development and economic success (Kong and Yeoh 219). Lee Kuan Yew, one of the founding fathers of modern Singapore and the first prime minister famously declared that “Poetry is a luxury we cannot afford” while addressing students in the then University of Singapore in 1968 (Lim 37).

It was against this background that Thumboo was steadily fine-tuning his poetic craft. At a time when the act of writing poetry itself appears a seditious act, construed as wasting precious national resource and as countering the aspirations of a growing nation, Thumboo was painstakingly carving a place for poetry in Singapore. This “betrayal” can be seen as further reinforced when one also notes that his nostalgic reminiscences foreground the significance of the “wilderness” countering the emphasis on urbanisation and development. In “Memories II,” he recollects:

A stream in stillness. Brown banks
Sharing sleep, curl as two leaves,
Falling, pair themselves, stir, ripple,
Turn twin haiku's in undulating light.

I stretch tranquility, then see, again,
Grandpa's rugged, comforting face.
Please smile; come out of the water;
Peel chestnuts; seat me on your shoulders.

Like before. But as words rouse memory,

You fade, leaving a hand in mine....
(*The Best of Edwin Thumboo* 124)

One could assert that the strong vein of nostalgia in “Memories II” that harkens to a past, laying greater emphasis on an elemental harmony with landscape and nature rather than on the pragmatic instrumentalism featured in national

discourses, is an ecological assertion in the face of the ruthless call to modernity. Cognised in this context, nature imagery works as a counterpoint, challenging the importance of urbanisation and development.

This tension between nature and culture is once again starkly expressed in Thumboo's lyrical poem, "Leaf":

Years and years ago you fell in shafts
Of light. Your tree was young. Eyes
Tracking that fall, were wonder-filled,
Green innocence.

You danced side to side tilted twisted
Summersaulted inside a puff of wind; then
Floated gentle, soft, silent down. Eyes
Saw a small story.

That patch of earth has changed: you above
Red pavilions that shelter when the sun burns;
Your trunk bigger so my arms can't circle it;
And branches, carefully pruned, predictable.

No wild flowers. Only regular N-Park rows.
Corners are for barbecues. You still fall, my
Vivid leaf. I watch again, wondering. Eyes
See smart and probe,
Yet, sadly, wish for green. (*Gods Can Die* 37)

The poem opens the possibility of new futures where the fates of human beings and of the environment are no longer separate concerns but are bound together as conjoined in history. For instance, note the alliterative effect produced in the first few lines that describes a natural motion: "Years and years ago you fell in shafts/ Of light. Your tree was young." Furthermore, this mundane fall of the leaf is crystallised in verse as a moment akin to still-life portraiture and set against a child's life, yet again linking the human, the observer, to the natural world through the use of consonance: "You," referring to the tree is then subtly linked to "Eyes." These "Eyes" that invoke a multitude of "I's", signals a collective rather than a singular experience, and is shown to move from a childlike "wonderfilled" state of green innocence – a state that links both tree and child, to a later, shrewder, more worldly-wise stage with Eyes that "see smart and probe" but are nevertheless filled with yearning for the receding natural world that "Yet sadly, wish for green." The formal poetic features reiterate the "consonance" of the human with his environment.

Also, in the final analysis it is important to admit, as George B. Handley does in his study of New World Poetry that sometimes “poetry’s meaning exceeds the history of the poet in the same way nature exceeds metaphor” (Handley 5). Thumboo’s poem “Bamboos,” another lyric where myth and history are wedded, appears to begin with the humanistic impulse, the natural world within cultural discernments: the bamboos “Facing northern winds, they sing/ Like clustered lyrics in the sun” (*Gods Can Die* 49) but as the poem progresses we realise that far from subordinating nature to culture, the poet paints a world of sweeping historical changes “Into which the poet dips his thinning brush” (49). The hesitancy of the poet depicted in the verse, when his “Ink flows with a second spirit” is subordinate to nature, for it is nature that takes over the narrative, not the poet: “Look up into the wide blue benediction;/ Gather into your arms and savour irregular/ Clouds: they tell a story” (49). Indeed as the poem progresses, it is clear that the overarching power of nature subsumes the puny efforts of the human:

The temperature is charged; the evening sky
Has more colours, but no crags to help it glow.
Moods re-arrange. Ink flows with a second spirit.
Stars have new names; winds rise into a rolling,
Plaintive call; strange incense fills the air.
Twilight creeps across blue-burnish waters
As the riding monsoon brings out kindred
Memories. No lark but a final seagull cries
To baleful dog-star high above the curving
Slide of dolphins hunting the turning tide.

You hear water swish when caged carps breathe;
Ripples where crabs slip tactfully into pure stillness.
No crocuses in spring; no spring; no plum blossoms
Waiting for a poet. Only spider orchids for company
In a land where man and nature is a different history. (*Gods Can Die* 49)

Thumboo’s “Bamboos” not only underlines respect for the sweeping movements of human history but iterates a kind of ecological deference for the dynamic motions of nature. His poems succeed in highlighting the need for forging imagined communities that do not overreach their social bounds or underestimate the force and centrality of the natural world “[i]n a land where man and nature is a different history” both co-existing, neither giving in.

If Berleant’s belief that the arts “embody their continuity with other human domains” such as the natural world (Berleant xii), can be taken as a manifesto of sorts and an ecological endorsement of the arts, then we can argue that many of Thumboo’s poems eminently qualify as ecological addresses if not statements. In his poem “Uncle Never Knew” from his collection *Faces of*

History, he foregrounds the natural world which becomes the primary referent for the uncle: “When I am by you, river, I feel Uncle watching me./ I hear much from inside his spirit, his affirmations” (*The Best of Edwin Thumboo* 19). This reversal of human and environment, where the latter becomes the primary and only touchstone to invoke the human, reinforces the idea of an organic synthesis between human and environment in Thumboo’s poetry.

To conclude, Thumboo was well-positioned to witness the interaction between rapid urbanisation and the fate of the land. His love of nature combined with his commitment to the march of history generates a vacillation between recording busy human activity and registering the call of the “wilderness.” This essential dialectic lends strength to his poetic endeavours. Thumboo’s frequent welding of humankind and nature challenges humanism’s, indeed lyrical poetry’s premise of the primacy of the autonomous individual, either the author generating the verse or the reader standing outside the text cognising it. Instead, these poems appear more intensely concerned with the readers’ encounter(s) with the text, which need not necessarily be unfold, to have them freshly transformed by this meeting of human, the projection of landscape and a new experience, which it would not be remiss to label “eco-centric.”

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