

Cyril Wong, ed. *Here and Beyond: 12 Stories*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2014. 258 pp. ISBN 978-981-07-7991-7.

With globalisation and transculturalism in the postcolonial era, it is a fact widely known that Queen's English has long lost its hegemony and Englishes of various flavours have captured the world market, both in commerce and in literary studies. This anthology is a commendable collection of twelve unique Singaporean short stories written between 1958 and 2012 that are representative of this small nation-state. As Singapore is a relatively young country, the goals of its citizens have been shaped by geographical, economic and political factors. The Singaporean imagination is accustomed to negotiating between the historical past and the modern day present; to not just dreaming beyond the local, but also beyond the borders of realism or practical demands. As the title of the collection suggests, the stories here portray negotiations between the "here and beyond" within the context of an ever-changing society with constantly shifting and conflicting demands. The authors included are S. Rajaratnam, Yeo Wei Wei, Goh Sin Tub, Simon Tay, Stephanie Ye, Alfian Sa'at, Suchen Christine Lim, Wena Poon, O Thiam Chin, Claire Tham, Philip Jeyaretnam and Felix Cheong, and they hail from different ethnic backgrounds – Indian, Chinese, Eurasian, Malay. The ethnic diversity of the writers and the variety of subject matter of their stories also help the reader to understand that Asians have moved away from creating what was known as a generalised "Oriental" fiction.

Getting an insight into different cultures under the homogeneous umbrella term "Singaporean," we get stories with both positive and negative values. They chart the emotional ups and downs of protagonists who strive to find meaning against the backdrop of negotiations between the local and the global, between the past and an ever-changing urbanised present, between reality and fantasy, between here and the hereafter, extending beyond into the realm of the supernatural. While some writers talk about the quest for happiness, harmony and justice that is desirable for the human soul, others delve into death, greed, selfishness, betrayal and all things that are of negative value. One also notices some common themes like the relationships between genders, sexes, generations, races, religions and classes, the evils of patriarchy, intricacies of the husband-wife relationship, the aspirations of Singaporeans to migrate to the West for better living conditions, the idea of a "home," etc.

The opening story, "The Tiger," by S. Rajaratnam is a strange story about motherhood as perceived by an actually pregnant woman and her chance sighting of a pregnant tiger in the village. While the villagers hound the animal out, the author shows us how Fatima's fear of the tiger turns to sympathy and compassion for the animal. The contrast between the ineffable serenity of the

natural world and the self-absorbed agitation of human society becomes the backdrop for a subtler and more poignant parallel between the two mothers. Yeo Wei Wei's "Here Comes the Sun" casts a different light between people and the natural world as wrought through the perspective of its psychologically troubled protagonist, Mdm Goh Lai Peng who lives in an abandoned rubber plantation and develops a relationship with a speaking mynah. Goh Sin Tub's short narrative "The Shoes of my Sensei" reflects on the more universal bond of friendship between student and teacher, as well as the private sacrifices enacted in courageously preserving that bond regardless of what others might think or what consequences might result.

Displacement is by no means specific to those who have moved elsewhere – it lives within troubled souls who must chart their own paths to peace of a kind, developing maps for journeys even as they are travelling them. Three stories tell us about Singaporeans in other parts of the western world. The protagonist Emma in Stephanie Ye's "City in C Minor" has a keen interest in classical music while her father struggles financially to support her passion. When Emma fulfils her dream to move abroad for her studies, an ambivalence sets in and a disconnect opens up between past desires and present realities. Distance from her home country grants the protagonist a new perspective that she might not have gained if she had not left in the first place. In Alfian Sa'at's "Visitors" the protagonist has left Singapore to be educated in New York but instead of focusing on the perceived advantage of studying abroad, Hidayah grouses about the difficulty of explaining her ethnicity to others. But it is by meeting her parents at last that she is able to gain a new-found confidence in her own identity and she comes into her own after having grappled with notions of home and selfhood in a foreign land.

The third interesting story of what it means to exist meaningfully in a new country is found in Wena Poon's "The Shooting Ranch" where two groups of relatives from Singapore who have adapted to a foreign country (the US) with dramatically different results are portrayed. The Chinese narrator and her mixed-race daughter, two cosmopolitan urbanites presently based in New York, travel to meet their less polished Singaporean relatives; the latter reside on a farm with an attached shooting ranch in Nevada. Over time, the narrator and her daughter progress to sympathising strongly with their female relatives upon learning about their psychological and physical abuse at the hands of the sole male character. The narrator's compunction at not being able to help is soon overtaken by helplessness and resignation.

A very pessimistic but extremely moving story is "Gloria"¹ by Suchen Christine Lim where a Filipino domestic worker is overwhelmed by the disparity between the luxurious materialism of Singapore and the poverty of life

¹ This story was first published in *Asiatic*, in December 2007.

in her homeland, and the class barriers between her Singaporean employer and herself. Eventually she makes the mistake of shop-lifting, and this threatens her livelihood and her freedom. The absence of productive communication and the failure of an empathic connection between Gloria and her employers suggest that meaningful relationships become tragically impossible across barriers of class and nationality.

Again we have a story that features specific socio-cultural issues and focuses on the lament of a cultural ennui engulfing contemporary Singaporean life where traditional family values are being forgotten. "My Cousin Tim" by Simon Tay is set against the backdrop of a funeral where the protagonist recounts his days growing up with his cousin. Despite not having undergone a Western education, Ek Teng has a smoother path in his studies and career while the risk-taking Tim drops out of school and squanders his father's money in attempting to get an education in London.

A very optimistic story is O Thiam Chin's "Grasshoppers" where the narrator remembers being raised single-handedly by his mother, a *popiah* seller, and having learnt a life lesson about moving forward in the face of adversity through the grasshoppers he played with. In Clare Tham's "The Judge" the central protagonist is a judge with an estranged relationship with his son, a fact that manifests during a family meal when the latter brings up a case in which the judge has to decide whether to mete out the death penalty or not. Guilt also informs Philip Jeyaretnam's "Campfire" where the narrator reluctantly confides in his campmates during National Service about his girlfriend, her positive impact on his life and about her sudden passing. The last story in this collection is "True Singapore Ghost Story" by Felix Cheong where the narrator is a businessman who begins to "die" from the moment global markets crash. Using economic success as the central barometer for a meaningful life, the narrative centres on an individual whose life becomes nothing beyond the materialistic and hedonistic lifestyle that he craves.

Thus rediscovering the self and the value of relationships form the focus of these tales, which range from the realistic to the surreal, with the occasional epiphany about one's morality and the meaning of existence within the bustling city. In other words what we get from this volume is a new global Singaporean identity that is reflected in such stories. The sheer diversity of the tales showcased here means that a single overarching theme is impossible to identify. The glossary of words that have ethnic flavour of Singaporean English and are unknown to foreign or young readers, the explanatory notes at the end, and the study questions that are designed to generate discussion in reading and teaching groups are clear indications that the editor Cyril Wong and the publisher Ethos Books want this anthology to be part of the school/college curricula. The declaration that the book has been published in collaboration with the Curriculum Planning and Development Division, Ministry of Education,

Singapore endorses the belief. But even if not read as a prescribed text, one can vouch that the anthology is a valuable addition to the fast growing canon of Asian Englishes and will be cherished by anyone who loves to read short stories.

Somdatta Mandal
Visva-Bharati University, India