

**Lee Chiu San, *Buy My Beloved Country*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2014. 371 pp. ISBN 978-981-07-9556-6.**

The title of Lee Chiu San's *Buy My Beloved Country* (2014), apparently patterned on that of Alan Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country* (1948), gives a satiric twist to the theme of "love," or lack of it, for one's own country. The title has its origin in the comment of a character who makes an observation on the rumour about the sale of Singapore to the United States of America: "I think I need another drink. May be a stiffer one. 'Cry – The Beloved Country' or to the USA, 'Buy – My Beloved Country'" (98). The word "Buy" which rhymes with the word "Cry" serves to replace the strong emotional content of Paton's work with an overtly commercial one. The use of the word in an inebriated condition – the speaker was at that point of time at the Cavern Bar of the Claymore Club of Singapore – is suggestive of the proposal being the ravings of a drunk (or mad?) man. For at the centre of the San's novel lies the imagined proposal of the United States of America to buy the tiny Southeast Asian country Singapore which is strategically positioned and is therefore in the eye of storm. The work negotiates widely divergent responses the proposal evokes in Singapore, its neighbouring countries, China and the USA. The questions such a situation generates are related to, among others, loyalty, patriotism and political stakes of local and world leaders. The ultimate issue boils down to power play and resource grabbing. The novel concentrates more on inter-national issues than domestic socio-cultural ones. Although Singapore is the central focus, the authorial gaze pans through its neighbouring countries and the superpowers like the USA and China who show an active interest in the region.

The innovative nature of the theme is bound to create the reader's interest. Journeying through the book we get a realistic picture of the historical and socio-political background of the Southeast Asian region for which a lot of research has been done. The region, as we know, has been the hotbed of intense conflicts between nations for a long time. Even a few days back Chinese attempts to build up military installations on reclaimed islands have drawn attention of the world. A national daily from India – *The Statesman* – in its 15 May, 2015 issue carried a news item on a situation of conflict between China and its much "smaller and militarily weaker neighbours" who recently lay claim to Spratly and Paracel islands: "The countries locked in littoral disputes on the South China Sea include China, Japan, Philippines, South Korea, Russia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei" (10). Then it goes on to mention that most of the nations "directly oppose China's growing aggression in the region" which China resorts to "by claiming land, building operational bases, and intruding into smaller islet clusters, whose territorial ownerships are still in doubt" (10). The geopolitics of the region is such that smaller nations have to

do tough tight rope walking at the political and diplomatic levels, trying not to rub the Big Brothers the wrong way. In a chapter (“Big Bang”) of the novel under review too we see how a Chinese trawler intrudes the territorial waters of the Philippines near “China’s Nine-Dashed-Line” and how two Philippine fishermen who were involved in “dynamite fishing” in the sea threw dynamites at it and disabled it. The trawler was later placed under arrest but the sense of hesitation on part of the authorities has been conveyed in the novel.

It is in such troubled waters that the super powers want to fish. They want to extend their power base, seek countries which would agree to the establishment of their naval or air bases and try to explore ways and means for exploiting the economically and politically weaker countries. Lee Chiu San contrives and develops a plot with this background in mind, a plot where Premiers, Presidents, Ministers and big bureaucrats are characters who play active roles in their multi-layered projects of exploitation. They have the façade of benevolent agents but they really mask hypocrisy, egoism, chauvinism, jingoism and imperialist motives. They carefully craft their projects and engineer plots for the smooth implementation of the projects. Smaller nations might complain and protest but their effectiveness remains questionable. We can see in the novel how differences of opinions on the controversy of China’s role in the South China Sea agitate different nations. In the ASEAN meeting “one country after another asserted their rights to areas that China had unilaterally encompassed as part of their territorial waters within their infamous ‘Nine-Dashed-Line’” (32). China goes on to disregard other nations’ rights and the United States continues pursuing ingeniously invasive projects. The US President Frasier works overtime to prepare a proposal to incorporate Singapore as the 51<sup>st</sup> state of the USA with the ulterior motive of establishing a “really large [navy] base” (37). The American perception is that “Singapore will plug a gaping hole in our intelligence-gathering ability” (43). The American sale proposal spells that Singapore will operate “with an extraordinary level of autonomy.” It will supposedly retain its “systems intact for a fairly long transitional period, “à la Hong Kong vis-à-vis China” (120-1). It is what is proposed as a “one country, two systems approach” (108). The US proposes to buy all public assets, including Singapore’s “reserves and sovereign wealth funds, for the sum of three trillion dollars, but on condition that the entire sum is distributed to Singapore citizens on a tax-free basis” (121). Getting winds of the development China devises its own plan to checkmate the US move: “Well, we can make a similar offer. Singapore as a third SAR [i.e. Special Administrative Region, like the Hong Kong]. We can allow the same autonomy the USA has offered to Singapore” (174). The real purpose is revealed when Chinese President Lu observes, “We can project military power in Southeast Asia. Cut the Indians down to size, deprive the USA of a strategic naval base, make sure Malaysia and Indonesia do not do silly things to their Chinese

minorities” (177). And what an innovative rationale for domination of the South China Sea is offered by the Chinese Defence Minister Zhang who explodes, “Just look at the name of the sea between Singapore and us. The South CHINA Sea! Not the West American pond” (172). Ultimately, after a long-drawn discursive sessions at different levels, a referendum is held in Singapore to decide the fate of the following proposal:

With regard to the Proposition to sell the public assets of Singapore at the price of five trillion dollars, and to join ANY one of the following: (a) the USA as the 51<sup>st</sup> state (b) China as a Special Autonomous Region or (c) Malaysia as a state: enjoying special privileges and autonomy for the next 50 years or more, as laid out in the Singapore Gazette. (342)

People vote overwhelmingly in favour of a merger with the USA. The novel ends with the ex-President Tiwari expressing a strong vindication of the people’s power: he “had bestowed upon Singaporeans the greatest compliment of all. The gift of trust. That they could be trusted to take care of their own futures” (368).

*Buy My Beloved Country* is an imaginative rendition of such possibilities. The idea of the plot came from the author’s friends Victor Ang and Dr. Henry Yeo Peng Hock who are mentioned in the Acknowledgement section. The former “painted a boldly outrageous, yet perfectly logical scenario” and the latter “revealed the concept to old school friends, including myself” (369). The “purely imaginary” scenario and the arguments underlying it, San argues, have been used “as the base to spin a story which, though entirely fictional, could just come true” (369). The possibilities, as Chandran, a participant in the informal debate at the Cavern Bar of the Claymore Hotel mentioned earlier, were voiced by the founding Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kwan Yew who, in his early political career, felt that the country may not survive alone (91). The sense of insecurity that is deeply embedded in the Southeast Asian psyche is faithfully represented in the fiction. San is also able to convey the essentially multicultural background of Singapore with all the subterranean tensions that multiculturalism implies. The names of the Singapore ministers, the President and the ordinary citizens suggest that they are of different ethnic origins. That they work together in peace is suggestive of how well the multiculturalism works in the country. The dedication page, which is of course outside the fictional world of the novel, contributes to the feeling of comfort and ease. But at the same time there is an anxiety among members of some specific ethnic groups that they perhaps are a bit marginalised. This anxiety seems to be manifested to a certain extent in the character of Helmy, a Malay, “the original, native race of Singapore, now a minority” (82). His passion it is to push the members of his group up on to the success path by training them properly. Considering the facts of the geopolitical region the novel projects and of the

characters who populate the national space there, we may regard *Buy My Beloved Country* to be a truly Southeast Asian novel. It is informed of the forces of both regionalism and globalism that operate within the ambit of the nation and its populations.

But the novel as a genre is a construct that necessarily depends on flesh and blood characters who whine and groan, smile and laugh, grow sad or feel elated, reach out to family members, relatives and friends in their weal and woe – like real human beings. San's novels lack such characters. They are mostly flat, one-dimensional ones with not much of psychological depth or dimension. I do not know whether the author deliberately does this to paint an absurdist picture of a fictional society or of a 'postmodernist' time. Whatever the case, it may be a laborious reading for the ordinary reader. The novel written in a diary-like format (with time and day mentioned but no particular year) serialises, rather mechanically, the political developments and their impact on the members of the public who have not been individualised enough. Lack of familial or social setting renders situations predictable and artificial. The book cover has the wonderful image of the blood soaked country (Singapore) being driven in a shopping cart. The barcode signifying saleability fills up the entire space of the shopping cart and encapsulates the image of the country in the cart. This part of the paratext conveys the message of the book very effectively. The overall production quality of the book is excellent.

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