

**T. Wignesan, ed. *Bunga Emas: An Anthology of Contemporary Malaysian Literature (1930-1963)*. 2nd ed. Revised and Augmented.<sup>1</sup> Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2014. 287 pp. ISBN 978-983-3221-49-3.**

Rare and out-of-print for decades now, *Bunga Emas*, one of the country's earliest collections of literary outputs by local writers, is as relevant today as it was when first published fifty-one years ago (1964) for its insights into the lives of immigrants who have chosen to make Malaya (which became Malaysia only in the following year) home, and the way in which literature can be mobilised to articulate their struggles, fears, hopes and dreams in realising this decision. And while many publications of local writings have subsequently continued to express these concerns, this collection remains unprecedented in bringing together poetry, short stories and plays written in English, Chinese and Tamil (the latter two in translation) that not only showcases the nation's rich multiculturalism, but also captures the different and uniquely individual modulations distilling one of humankind's oldest desires – the need for belonging. Not every piece in this anthology reflects this latter concern (such as Wignesan's own contributions, in the English section, of three stories, which deal with topics unrelated to this part of the world like hare-hunting or meeting the Pope, or, in the case of the third, attempts a stream of consciousness discourse *ala* modernist writing with no specific subject matter, and whose main characters and points-of-view are manifestly European), and so for this review, I will focus only on those – the majority – that do.

The English section boasts of the most contributions with a generous selection of poetry and short-stories, some of whose writers have since gained prominence like the poets Wong Phui Nam and Goh Poh Seng, and the late short story writer, Lee Kok Liang (who also wrote a novel: *London Does Not Belong to Me*, 2003). Included here is "How the Hills are Distant," the poem considered by scholars to be Wong's initial *tour de force* that established him as a major voice in the country's literary scene. Written in the pastoral form, it nevertheless bears only slight hints of English (especially Wordsworthian) influence, with its distinctive local atmosphere, jarring metaphors that capture the complexity of diaspora, and loose versification that could simultaneously imply a break away from Western conventions and a sense of being lost usually accompanying new literature in search of a tradition. That the poem (and others) frequently makes references to premodern Chinese poets, such as Li Po and Tu Fu, indirectly evinces this second point, but also suggests Wong's

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<sup>1</sup> This edition also includes T. Wignesan's *Tracks of a Tramp: A Collection of Poems (1951-1961)*, originally published separately, which will not be covered in the review here.

identification with these literary predecessors who constitute the wellspring of his poetic imagination. Wong, however, is one of the very few – at least in this anthology – who attempts poetry with a distinct local resonance; the majority of poets here, such as Oliver Seet, Lee Geok Lan and Awang Kedu (to name three), turn primarily to Western poetics as framework for their creativity, whether in terms of form (like Seet’s concrete poem, “The Tuning Fork,” which resembles George Herbert’s famous “Easter Wings”), diction (“cathedral,” “fathom,” “beldame,” etc.), mood (that often intimates melancholy reminiscent of the Romantic tradition), or more generally, lines that inflect a sense that their poems have more of an English reader in mind. This should not be construed as a lack of authenticity – an accusation that Tan Han Hoe’s poem, “Reader,” seems to anticipate – but a striving towards finding a voice in the wilderness. Without a literary history with which they can negotiate to clarify their own voices, these poets, many of them students of English literature, would naturally draw on what is most familiar to them. Arguably, while still imprecise in attending to local colour, their poetry nevertheless carries such a hint, revealing a conscious aspiration to suit to immediate contexts, and thereby transform, the aesthetic tradition they have borrowed.

Among the short stories, of particular interest is Awang Kedu’s “New Sensation” for both its rarity and its harrowing portrait of the quiet, inchoate toll, in the guise of questionable morality that time and distance from one’s original homeland and its ethical codes can take on the first generations of immigrants. The other equally obscure tale, Ooi Boon Seng’s “Obsession,” tackles what is now the familiar theme of middle class parents’ preoccupation with their children’s school grades, but with ambivalent success mainly because of its two-dimensional characters and the rather weak twist at the end revealing the motivation behind it that is, I think, meant to give the title an added layer of meaning. Thus, a more ambitious closure is sacrificed to effect double *entendre*, resulting to an extent in the narrative’s deflation. The remaining stories are by S. Rajaratnam, purportedly the first Malayan writer to publish a short story in the English language, and Lee Kok Liang, all of which have enjoyed many reprints, for good reasons, in different publications, and thus need no promotion. A third genre included in this section is the prose-essay, which is represented by Lee Kok Liang’s also frequently anthologized “Return to Malaya.”

The second section of the collection is devoted to translations of *mahua* (overseas Chinese) literature by Malayan writers, and comprises poetry, short stories and excerpts from novels. With regards to the first, as with the authors in English whose work mirrors the aesthetics of Western tradition, the poets here look to oriental traditions for literary guidance, borrowing variously their form (such as Tung Hung’s haiku-type piece, “Picture”) and metaphors (usually relating to love), but relocating them to work in a new scenario. A stark example

is Wei Pei-Hua's "Stone Lion," with lines like "the fire-rose in the east" and "Of lighting the cannon by the sea," working alongside images of fluttering bats and a Malacca tree to culminate "on Cheng Ho's hill." This stylistic intimation of disjunction (that is, a tradition deployed for a purpose unrelated to it) perfectly captures the dilemma of diaspora, whereby the subject is torn between loyalty to original homeland and the impulse to establish roots in the new one. The two short stories offered here, Miao Hsiu's "Hang out the Red" and Wei Yun's "The Dusk," are exceptional for their narrative maturity, poignantly capturing in different ways the profound alone-ness experienced by immigrant Chinese in their adopted home country. Together, they subtly reveal that for a people struggling with unclear belonging, community is but a loose notion that can be quickly abandoned or refused to certain members, thereby leaving them suddenly without ties and an anchor to establish identity. The idea of brotherhood, so integral to the Chinese people's view of themselves as one large extended family, holds little meaning in diaspora where everyone is levelled down to the common denominator of liminality, which inevitably compromises values and traditions. Less remarkable are the excerpts from two novels, Sung Ya's *The Green Leaf* and Ho Chin's *The Little Thatched Hut*, due respectively to the immigrant characters' appraisal of their new homeland that seems affected and exaggerated, and the editor's curious decision to thread together an excerpt from different parts of a work, resulting in incoherence. Despite these setbacks, these excerpts are, without question, important literary and historical records of diasporic lives endeavouring to adapt to a fresh environment that is also a young country.

Tamil literature (in translation) takes up the third segment of this collection. Compared to the contributions in the first two sections that evince a quality that is more or less consistent, those selected here are rather unbalanced. Take, for example, N. Palanivelu's poem "Ant-Man-Nature," whose theme of the relationship between human and nature has long been a hallmark of Indian literature, and B.S. Narayanan's rather dismal radio play, "Love of Eyes": while the former reveals a polished elegance that puts it at par with the best Indian poetry, the latter is a clumsy piece that religiously imitates the tragi-drama of Indian cinema with its predictable longsuffering wife who sacrifices herself in the end to financially redeem her equally predictable wayward husband, who as a result turns over a new leaf, all of which combine to deliver an altogether predictable plot. The inclusion of both in the anthology suggests a dearth of creative writings by Malayan Indians, whose uneven creative merits are possibly attributable to their education history. Unlike the writers in the English and Chinese sections, all of whom had received formal education, with some up to tertiary level, the Tamil writers vary in their backgrounds, ranging from no or uncertain, to limited (possibly up to secondary) formal education. From the bibliographic notes given at the end of the collection, it is clear that Palanivelu

belongs to the latter category, while implied is Narayanan's affiliation with the former. But the lack of formal education can be surprisingly useful to an author attempting to realise home in a foreign land *via* his writing; such is the case with K. Perumal's, whose unusual piece, "Accusation" is a play/poem hybrid that ignores the strict generic borders disallowing inmixing, thus innovating literature to complement the start of a new tradition. The remaining pieces, short stories by Perumal ("Destiny"), T.S. Shanmugam ("Sprouting Young Leaf") and R. Karthigesu ("The Plaintain Tree") are also worth the reader's attention, notwithstanding their lack of originality and, in the case of "Destiny," excessive philosophising that overshadows the narrative. My complaint against some pieces' weaknesses is not, however, made without a high regard for their writers, most of who are self-thought and thus achieved their measure of recognition with much difficulty.

There is a fourth part, a postscript section, that contains a trinity of essays, each complementing the literatures written in the three languages, on the state of Malayan literature in the 1960s. Written by the eminent Professor Wong Gung-Wu (literature in Chinese; Wong also translated all the Chinese poems for the collection), and the editor himself (literatures in English and Tamil, although, as a note of interest, Wignesan was wrong in his reductive assessment of Lloyd Fernando), they provide an insightful perspective on the development and challenges encountered by local literary products and their practitioners. Both Wong and Wignesan are in accord in claiming that these works indicate the flowering of a tradition, which, given time, will surely grow into maturity and become a recognised voice in world literature. Sadly, however, their prediction remains unrealised to this day; with Singapore's split from Malaya in 1965, the event of 13 May 1969 and the fraught political scene in Malaysia during the 1970s, racial relationship will increasingly and substantially sour to affect even the country's literature. With the promotion of Bahasa Malaysia, the *lingua franca* of the majority race, as the National Language, the other languages is directly made to assume a secondary status, with literature written in them thereafter sectionalised (each literature to its own race) and considered without tradition (or literature of the lost, because it is, as far as the rhetoric of the powers-that-be went, neither Chinese/Tamil/English or Malaysian), and perhaps worse of all, viewed as of no worth to nation-building.

But before all this historical inevitabilities transpired, there was *Bunga Emas*, an anthology of literary outputs by Malayan writers bearing much promise of greater things to come. Half a century later, this anthology is once again made available to perhaps signal the renewal of this promise, which will hopefully come into fruition this time. But in a way, part of it perhaps already has. Malaysian literary works in non-Malay languages have come a long way since Independence, with those written in English winning global acclaim and international book prizes, and those in Chinese now recognised as part of

Chinese literature, and so it is only right that Malaysia – to complete the promise – finally acknowledges their superlative worth and undeniable contribution to the country's cultural wealth.

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