

Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, *Tok Dalang and Stories of Other Malaysians*. Singapore: Partridge, 2014. 158 pp. ISBN 978-1-4828-2757-6.

There is a rich and now quite substantial tradition of Anglophone Malaysian literature, which sadly does not get the exposure it deserves, certainly not in Singapore anyway. The recently published short story collection *Tok Dalang and Stories of Other Malaysians* is a unique and valuable addition to that tradition. Its author, Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, is an accomplished veteran Malaysian author, an authority on traditional Southeast Asian theatre, with an impressive list of publications in all genres, as attested to at the back of this charming, quietly beguiling volume. Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof also has deep interests in Asian literatures, folklore studies, Southeast Asian cultures, comparative religion, mythology and sufism. Many of these interests surface significantly in *Tok Dalang and Stories of Other Malaysians*. I was intrigued by the volume's publisher, Partridge, whom I had never encountered before, with its very attractive logo, apparently a Southeast Asian subsidiary of Penguin Random House. If only they had been more careful in their copyediting; the small and large typos are an unnecessary distraction..

As the blurb states, Ghulam-Sarwar's "stories deal with a range of characters and issues that are unique in Malaysian fiction in the English language." These stories are, as the book title perhaps suggests, intriguing, deft, often satirical character studies of a variety of Malaysian, often middle-aged males, such as Tok Dalang, Pak Dollah, or the old dictator, Batuh. But the stories are also unique not only in "touch[ing] upon aspects of... traditional members of the minority communities" in Malaysia, hitherto often glossed in representations of the national narrative, such as Malaysia's Sikh community. Ghulam-Sarwar's own cultural identity, his North Indian-Pakistani Muslim roots almost certainly have helped shape this facet of the collection. In stories such as "Lottery Ticket," "Sujjan Singh," "Meditations on a Charpoy" we gain sympathetic portrayals of working class Malaysians and migrant workers, some crossing the dark water, perhaps "on the S S Chidambaram"(30) to reach Malaya, a seeming land of promise. The fact that alongside several portraits of the local elite, we also encounter stories with privileged, foregrounded labouring class lenses brings a refreshingly democratising, socially conscious dimension to this collection.

In all, we have nine intriguing, often quite long stories (arguably approaching a novella in the case of "Sujjan Singh" at 35 pages long) about Malaysians past and present, and in at least one story seemingly both. These stories were composed over the few decades, a third of them originally appearing in an earlier collection. They are often characterised by an emphasis

upon the narratorial voice rather than any character's speech.¹ Here it seems the art of a traditional storyteller comes to the fore, reminding me at times of the gentle tongue-in-cheek mockery of Charles Dickens' *Sketches by Boz* (1836). In "The Old Dictator" and "Datuk Hang Tuah" we encounter social satire on Malaysian officialdom, politicking and business. Indeed the documentary quality of narratives, the rich fulsomeness of everyday detail, means some stories are on the verge of resembling a celebrated Malaysian literary genre, almost wholly undeveloped by its southernmost neighbour, the essay. By the third or fourth story, I had become acclimatised and satisfyingly sympathetic to Ghulam-Sarwar's gentle, mocking subtle humour, which at times makes me recall the stories of fellow Malaysian writer Che Husna Azhari.

Particularly successful and striking are the pedestrian, local, quickly transformed into mystical, supernatural stories which are framed by traditional performance. "Tok Dalang" features an ageing Indonesian shadow puppet master, thus touching on the Hindu elements feeding into Malaysia east from Indonesia, rather than west from India as we find in other later stories. Here we encounter syncretism as well as tensions between old imported, now indigenous Hindu and Muslim traditions, and between Islam and magic. In a similarly themed story, "Mak Yong Dancer" (influenced surely by the author's own theatrical background and scholarly fieldwork, is set off by simple, evocative sentences, "A family of fowl foraged for food in the loose brown sand" [44]). A journalist interviews a veteran dancer ("I may have been the first Malaysian, Malay or non-Malay to talk to Mak Su Zainab about mak yong" [53]) and while watching Mak Su dance, "hear[s] the voice of God" (59).

The mystical is occasionally magically fused with the sensual. I must make special mention of "Dewi Ratnasari," a wonderfully written story, quite different from Ghulam-Sarwar's other stories, as represented here. Ghulam Sarwar's representation of this momentarily solitary, alive Indonesian woman reminds me of the magical realism of Gregory Nalpon:

There she stood, by the French Windows, for an incalculable length of time, mesmerized, her gaze fixed on nothingness. The dampness of the rain reached out to every fibre in her body, merging with the red stream of warm consciousness within. The living rains and the raging tides of blood sang to the same infinite tune. (125)

If other stories at times seem to resemble novellas, essays, this is a poem.

In Ghulam-Sarwar's collection, even a corrupt has-been Datuk aspires to his own form of ecstasy, albeit one diluted and cheapened by aggressive

¹ Though Ghulam-Sarwar can convincingly evoke the speech patterns of a range of different minorities such as that of the émigré Tamil Muslim Aboo Bakar Maraicar in "Lottery Ticket."

capitalism and modernity. Floods and dreams are evocatively repeated images and themes in many of the stories.

Much of the locale remains consistent: in and around Georgetown, Penang, as if these stories complement each other in comprising a world. The sheer detail here is impressive, notably the streets and emporiums of the Little India of yesterday's Georgetown captured from before. Elsewhere, we encounter Kapitan keling mosque, or the presumably fabricated coffee shop Krishna's Place, albeit at a very specific, real location, "at the junction of Market Street and Queen Street" (101). Everywhere are charmingly evocative details captured in a sentence: "Two young Malay women were haggling over the price of several pieces of Javanese *batik lepas* with Mohini" (106). Ghulam-Sarwar painstakingly includes details that few writers could capture, or would bother attempting to capture, in representing this part of Malaysia, such as detailing all the petty business an Indian shopkeeper has to see to in his Penang teashop before sympathetically rejoining his troubled old friend-patron at his table. Through time shifts and sleight of hand we also find ourselves beyond Malay/si/a: in Calcutta, and memorably in "Birthday," a teacher training institute in Wolverhampton. The middle aged, momentarily unmarried, if fairly heterosexually experienced Pak Dollah drives that most little English of manifestations, a Morris Minor 1000 (64), one of the few if telling historical markers in Ghulam-Sarwar's stories. All other car allusions in seemingly later settings seem somewhat less evocatively eastern as in a journalist's Honda Civic.

As I read, I was genuinely impressed by each story's full immersion in the local and traditional. This seems testimony to one of the author's many hats as a conserver and recorder of national-regional culture, the many traditions, languages and cultures of Malaysia. I relished encounters with "crore-pati," "kaki limah," "gone ibu," "poho peringin," etc: an embarrassment of riches. I just wish I could have also rediscovered them all in the book's glossary.

While we get empirical minute particulars we also encounter satisfying traditional ambiguity: is Tok Dalang a revered Hajji, or devotee, even incarnation, of the ancient and wise Javanese clown god, Semar? Is the turbaned storyteller Mangoo Chacha Sinbad the Sailor or Nabi Nuh? In Mangoo Chacha's hands the boat journey to Malaya becomes the stuff of fairy tale, like Ghulam Sarwar's own stories, "amazing in detail and rich in metaphor" (139), especially when recounting an Indian othered "fairy-land of British Malaya," where:

everyone was rich, most of them in the towns lived in *pakka* houses, and even the village houses were made of good wood, for money grew on trees.

'Really?' asked someone. How incredible! You mean real currency notes?'

‘Don’t be stupid,’ said Mangoo Chacha. I’m talking figuratively.’ (142)

There are also deft ambiguities in the crafting of these stories. I am not sure quite how seriously to take the piety of the narrator of “Birthday” or “The Old Dictator,” which at times seems a little tongue in cheek adding to the gentle humour: “He was convinced that this change in name and identity had certainly been one of the factors behind his meteoric rise in the world of local politics. But Allah knows best” (81). In fact as a mat salleh reader, with an embarrassingly limited first-hand knowledge of Malaysia, I wonder am I missing local “in-jokes?” What to make of “Kampung Dodol?” (65), Kuala Mas? (81); Datuk Hang Tuah and his Filipino business diploma? Or indeed the names of the lazy and lecherous Datuk’s businesses, such as “Syarikat Sinar Bulan Gemilang Berhad (BGB)” or “Hang Setia Sdn Berhad” (164). “[Hang Tuah] was not a very common Malay name, but that was about it. He certainly thought it was better than being named Abdul or even Muhammad something” (164).

This is a quietly gripping collection, a gentle joy to read. Perhaps only halfway through “Sujjan Singh” did I find my attention flagging. Among other qualities I would describe the stories as technically clever, strange, fragmentary, masterful. I also relish the clever, slightly disorientating endings of the stories, especially “Meditations on a Charpoy.” I also liked the representations of women, class, Malaysian masculinities, and men and women interacting with one another. Ghulam-Sarwar dryly recounts straight-faced young women of yesterday, and perhaps the present, advancing their careers in Malaysia, whether in film or boutique businesses, through the kind help of appreciative older businessmen and politicians. Other women seem vulnerable in a still traditional patriarchal world. But we also get a sense of at least some Malaysian men’s wish for equality and justice for women in Malaysian post-war years, as Murli respectfully advises his older friend,

Yes Chachaji. You know [Jaswant] is an intelligent girl, brighter than all her brothers. Chachaji, please forgive me if what I am about to say upsets you. I beg your pardon in advance. I think she deserves a better deal than what you have in mind for her. (120)

And as Mangoo Chacha tells Elam Din, “It is the girls we have to worry about” (148). But what of the procrastinating, womanising Datuk’s privileging of his Chinese secretary Sally over her equally efficient colleague Rohana, supposedly based on the old myth of local incompetence in business, despite the official Bumiputera policy. As the story progresses we see the preference for Sally has little to do with her efficiency. Just like the mythical, possibly non-existent, “Chinesey” Malay hero Hang Tuah, modern Malay movers and shakers, while long emancipated from British colonial privileging of the Chinese seem again in danger of losing all, seduced by attractive Chinese princesses:

As he danced in the New Paradise with Sharon, and she warmed up to his embraces, he could not but be convinced that this encounter with Hang Si-To was in fact but an echo of that ancient meeting Sultan Mahmud Shah and Hang Li-Po; that here were the beginnings of another 'conquest of Melaka' by the Chinese. Only this time it was Datuk Hang Tuah and not Sultan Mahmud Shah who was succumbing to silken glours of Chinese seduction, and the beautiful seducer was not Hang Li-Po, but her reincarnation, Hang Si-To. (181)

Malay men of power seem fascinated by local film starlets in the way Dorian Gray is fascinated with Sybil Vane: "because" they seemed to live at the same time in several levels of illusion and reality" (167). Sex, corruption, businessmen, politicians making a fortune out of spun plans for supposed social development via the gratifying lubricant of a round of golf and the consumption of alcohol in Malaysia are all dealt with discreetly, tellingly. "And woman's beauty he could obtain by means other than marriage, as he had done throughout most of his adult life" (166).

If there is something almost late nineteenth century, pre-modernist about these stories, Ghulam-Sarwar is clearly a consummate, funny storyteller including some very deft segues into different times, places and consciousnesses. I was also impressed by the shifting of tenses in "Sujjan Singh" and "Meditations on a Charpoy." There is an energy about the writing, particularly when Ghulam-Sarwar evokes moments of spiritual intoxication and healing. His comedy often as not, contains a slightly moralistic satirical, ironic flavour: "Like most Muslims he ritually omitted the five obligatory prayers every day" (27).

But there is also sadness, particularly evoked in the last lines of the last story. We have a tension between, or more accurately perhaps a giving way of past to a present shaped by capitalism from China and the west, corruption, a nouveau riche, as well as puritan Islamic forces threatening the richness of traditional Malay culture. The intoxicating pre-Chinese dominated wayang, the potent keris, Malay flavoured Islam, a culture immersed in a myriad number of cultures' literature, a love-hate relationship with the colonial British and the English language ("Mutiny, my foot!" [95]), especially in Indian Penang ("Yes, the Indians were proud of their Angrezi, and they used it with a flourish lacking even among the British" [94]), superstitions, religious, healing dance performances, only surviving on recordings, the old Malay royalty, a Malaysian time shaped by five calls to prayer, passing away: "things were changing" (109). And yet there is a sense that despite all this something in essence Malaysian will always endure:

That was many years ago. The little giggling girls who at that time ran about naked in the kampong have all grown up. The village has become a

little township, with a market of its own. Tok Dlang's grave is, to this day, visited by many who treat it as a *keramat*. Some claim to have heard on occasional nights the sounding of faint gongs or the sad strains of a *serunai*. One wandering in its vicinity can see, on almost any day, numerous flowers strewn over it, smell a faint whiff of familiar perfume, as if the surrounding gardens and trees have themselves conspired to make Tok Dalang immortal. (26)

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