

**Agnes S.L. Lam, *Becoming Poets: The Asian English Experience*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2014. 337 pp. ISBN 978-3-0343-1486-2.**

The critical mass of Asian voices in English has of late attracted a flourishing range of readership, academic interest and institutional attention. In addition to the indigenous writers with their original or translated works in English, the expatriates sojourning in Asian countries as well as the migrants and diasporic writers of Asian provenance have contributed to the growing corpus of Asian literature in English. The palpable rise in the number of such multi-generic voices is underpinned by the consolidation and steady spread of English in Asia. The production and reception of local/non-native literatures in English may of course vary from one Asian nation to another with a different flavour of “Asianness” in the writer, but the community of these writers has grown large and substantial enough “for them to form a community of their own and thrive on their own poetics with their own literary critics who may understand their cultural propensities and philosophical bearings a little better” (Lam 60). Also, the evident continuum of literary communities engendered by these voices ranging across ethnic, national or regional Asian borders partially resolves the issue of coherence and authentic cultural representation in this specific body of writing.

The book under review focuses on the longitudinal development of the learners of English in Asia who have grown into published writers. It goes into the process of composition in greater detail and depth with several study variables. As a well-acknowledged Chinese poet in English, Lam has reliable experience and expertise for this critical inquiry. She is of the view that teaching creative writing is a productive and fruitful undertaking and as such the exercise of tracking Asian experience into literary composition is a rewarding classroom engagement. She uses her own writerly experience with that of others along this track to reach credible and crisp conclusions.

Fifty Asian poets in English comprehensively covered in her study comprise ten from each location, namely Macao, Hong Kong, Singapore, the Philippines and India. Some of the key concerns driving Lam’s study of the English language based creative activities are: Is there some commonality which can be postulated as a universal model? How does a writer relate to a certain speech/literary community? Are language/literary communities geographically located or “imagined” (reminiscent of Benedict Anderson’s postulate in his landmark treatise, *Imagined Communities*) ones with no material boundaries – virtual, transnational/global? Lam revisits the concept of “speech and literary community” with a fresh gloss. To measure a poet’s longitudinal growth Lam applies a five-stage model based on her own writing development that includes emergence of English literacy, secretive writing or apprenticeship,

publishing as initiation into a community of writers and readers, awareness of one's identity as writer and one's voice, and mentoring other writers. These lines of inquiry inform the essential content of Lam's book which can be stated as (i) the developmental experiences of poets, (ii) the interaction between poets and their literary communities as well as their creative preoccupations and (iii) their linguistic concerns and views on poetry.

The methodology used by Lam includes the individual profiles of ten poets selected from each of the five Asian nations, stages of their development, their community, their themes in their poetry and their views on language, aesthetics and poetic practices. Having cleared the theoretical ground of her study in the first two chapters, Lam begins with a specific discussion on the developmental experiences of ten poets in Macao, which has the youngest literary community and corpus of English writing among the five into focus, in the succeeding chapter. The poets featured include: Christopher Kelen, Debby Sou Vai Keng, Lili Han, Jenny Oliveros Lao, Agnes Vong, Elisa Lai, Amy Wong, Petra Seak, Hilda Tam and Iris Fan. Lam's interview with these poets focuses on their evolution as well as the shaping coalition with their milieu. These poets demonstrate awareness of the dialectics of writing in a second language and have successfully overcome any inadequacies in producing vibrant poetry.

Lam's analysis of the profiles of these poets indicates that without efficient English literacy it is not possible for the poets to make confident creative attempts in the language. Readiness to think in English among its non-native speakers requires a reliable command of the language. Only then the poets could initiate writing poetry. Further, before getting their poems published, the poets did some amount of practice writing by way of premature or false starts. Getting their poems published spurred them to write more and secure existential validation as well as public recognition. The sense of achievement gives a fillip to their identity formation, professional concerns and social commitment. The cumulative gain of these processes of creative growth fosters collaborative interaction among the poets, conducive to a cross-cultural ethos and identification with the immediate social world.

Unlike Macao, Hong Kong has seen a deep penetration of English over many decades since the British cession of its territories in the nineteenth century. The language has seeped into intimate domains of society and has a substantial institutional presence in higher education and prominent service sectors. The ten poets profiled by Lam are Gillian Bickley, Louise Ho, Elbert Lee, David McKirdy, Judy Keung, Madeleine Slavick, Timothy Kaiser, Arthur Leung Jennifer Wong and Tammy Ho. The English education and exposure of these poets in an international city facilitates the synergy between expatriate voices and indigenous talent. The readiness to think in English arrived earlier in the case of these poets than that in their Macao counterparts and so they began

writing at an early age. Excitement emanating from publication and peer endorsement further built their confidence to enjoy their creative attempts and write more for “enhanced interaction with a community of readers and other writers” (130). With wider access to readers and the rising curve of their recognition, these Hong Kong poets have wrestled with the language, refined their craft and acquired a particular resonance with their society, community and the world.

Like the Hong Kong poets, the ten Singapore poets profiled in Lam’s study have had early English literacy and valid motivation for their poetic practice as well. The poets include Leong Liew Geok, Kirpal Singh, Madeleine Lee, Heng Siok Tian, Felix Cheong, Gwee Li Sui, Aaron Lee, Alvin Pang, Eddie Tay and Aaron Maniam. Most of them, like Kirpal Singh, felt inwardness with the language from around primary school. With positive peer response and Singapore’s supportive “official environment” (193), they have pursued their urge. Their poems have a larger range of themes than those of the Hong Kong provenance and a noticeable dash of Singlish – a local variant of English – for more authenticity in certain situations. In addition, some poets such as Madeleine Lee, Felix Cheong and Heng Siok Tian draw on the resources of Chinese to capture the indigenous flavour of their experience. Lam tests her five-stage model on the corpus and quality of the Singapore poets in English and finds the enterprising and confident poetic community in a state of “inter-generational transition” (200).

Compared to the long spell of British colonisation in Hong Kong and Singapore, the Philippines was colonised by the Americans for forty-five years (1901-46) during the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, English has attained an institutional status along with Filipino as the national language. Felicity with English is claimed by the poets, namely Gemino Abad, Alfred Yuson, Marne Kilates, Marjorie Evasco, Isabela Banzon, Danton Remoto, Dinah Roma-Sianturi, Paolo Manalo, Conchitina Cruz and Marc Gaba. Most of them grew up with English like their first language and have native competence in it. They started writing for magazines, passed the editor’s gatekeeping and eventually brought out their chapbooks. They have also mentored the emerging poetic voices around them and promoted collegial cross-pollination. Although official support to creative writing and arts in the Philippines is meagre, the developmental dynamics of the ten poets measured by Lam’s model offer a robust poetic tradition conducive to engaging exploration of life and society.

Among the non-native Asian literatures in English, the Indian scene is perhaps the most consolidated and substantial because of the entrenched presence of English in major socio-economic domains and intellectual pursuits. Indian poetry in English had its tentative starts in the 1820s. During the post-independence years many poets have sought a clean break with the romantic legacy of the English poetic tradition and altered the inherited protocols of

producing poetry by their forebears of the colonial period. The poets featured in Lam's study include Anna Sujatha Mathai, Keki Daruwalla, Sukrita Paul Kumar, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Jeet Thayil, Rachna Joshi, Sudeep Sen, Jerry Pinto, Arundhati Subramaniam and Anand Thakore. Almost all these poets had a meta-awareness of English as the language of their thought and they felt quite proficient in its use from the very beginning. Though diffident about their first forays into verse, they were facilitated by fellow poets and journal editors. They feel part of a poetic community with a sense of their own identity and voice and are not guilty or self-conscious about writing in English which is now rooted in India for creative inflorescence.

Lam concludes her study with the observation that English as the language of thought is favourable, provided one has attained inwardness with it and a satisfactory level of operational competence in handling its structures. She discovers that the poets participating in creative writing programmes do not always consider their false starts to be secretive and private. Elation triggered by publication spurs creative growth. Further, stronger motivation unfolds their potential versatility. Equally, proactive peer support rather than cursory mentoring is more productive and helpful in promoting new voices. While her five-stage model is useful as a framework for tracing the longitudinal development of Asian poets in English, she has renamed three stages and refined the model in light of her study of the fifty poets in view of certain variations in their transition from one stage to another.

Lam's model can be applied to other literary genres as well as to English poetry of non-Asian provenance. It may well be used for testing literary productions in dominant second languages around the world. Evidently, English has survived decolonisation in Asia and so its choice for creative expression is not outlandish. As Rajeev Patke notes the rewarding seductions of English, "In the supple folds of the English language the Indian poets have always hoped to dress new intentions, or to discover a new self."<sup>1</sup> It may be added here that writing is not a matter of self-actualisation alone. It enables the writer to forge connections with his/her community – real as well as virtual. With efficient articulations of cosmopolitan stances, Asian poets in English have an opportunity to connect with readers from disparate backgrounds and "help put Asia in a new conversation with the world by bringing the spiritual and cultural ideals of the East into the global discourse."<sup>2</sup>

Lam's sample of poets from five Asian locations is fairly representative. The interview questions related to the background of the poets, their development and writing processes are germane to the hypotheses being tested

<sup>1</sup> Rajeev S Patke, "Poetry Since Independence," *A Concise History of Indian Literature in English*. Ed. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010, 2008. 275-310.

<sup>2</sup> Mohammad A. Quayum. Introduction. *A Rainbow Feast: New Asian Short Stories*. Ed. and Introduced by Mohammad A Quayum. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2010. 11-25.

in this project. With its breadth of reference and depth of investigation, Lam's book is a cogent assessment of the Asian English experience.

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