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Different Voices

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Different Voices

The Singaporean/Malaysian Novel

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*For my brother Dominic Puthuicheary for his
unfailing devotion to his brothers and sisters.*

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FOREWORD

The language of Malaysian and Singaporean fiction has not been examined in a book-length publication before. There have been several shorter studies, or studies included in more general surveys. This pioneering book-length study by Rosaly Puthuchearry should therefore be welcomed by anyone who is interested in the study of the English-language literatures of the two countries. What is appealing, especially to the literary scholar, is Puthuchearry's non-technical approach to this area. While a technical study may accomplish certain academic goals, its achievement may be confined to the domain of linguistics, and in spite of the target texts, the book may not attract the attention of literary scholars. However, Puthuchearry's study is not limited in this way, and is more widely accessible. In fact, anyone with an interest in Malaysian and Singaporean fiction in English, even if he or she is not a literary scholar, may want to read this book.

Puthuchearry begins her study with a historical account of English language teaching in Malaysia and Singapore. She then goes on to discuss how the novelist generally

deals with a multilingual setting. There are several problems confronted by the novelist here, such as whether other languages or dialects of English should be represented, and how they are to be represented. For example, should their representation be merely indicated by “they spoke in Hokkien” or “they said in Singlish”, or should they be represented more directly, by using the non-English languages for short stretches?

After the useful introduction, she goes on to discuss twelve novels from the two countries. There is a thematic principle at work in the choice of the texts; they are not sequenced according to whether the authors are Singaporean or Malaysian, their age, or the texts’ dates of publication. The primary concern here is the use of language: localised standard English or its colloquial varieties, and the intrusion of lexical items or whole phrases from the other languages found in the two countries.

Among the local languages that are mentioned in the book is Malay. The use of Malay by the characters, including Baba Malay, can in fact be found in the majority of the works discussed. Other languages, such as Hokkien and Cantonese, are also featured. Hokkien and Cantonese are prominent in Lee Kok Liang’s *Flowers in the Sky* (1981) and Suchen Christine Lim’s *Rice Bowl* (1984). Tamil is naturally prominent in the novels about the Tamilian community in Malaysia: K.S. Maniam’s *The Return* (1991) and Marie Gerrina Louis’s *The Road to Chandibole* (1994). Kristang (which is spelt as Cristão in this study), the Portuguese dialect spoken by the Portuguese Eurasian community in Melaka and elsewhere, can be found in Rex Shelley’s *The Shrimp People* (1991).

Apart from the representation of non-English languages, the study also looks at the general political and

cultural concerns about language in some of the works. The prestige accorded to languages or their dialects is one of the issues pertaining to language in Philip Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise* (1995). Another important issue in the work is freedom of speech, which is also a concern in Lau Siew Mei's *Playing Madam Mao* (2000).

Although the analyses of the novels are not rigidly grouped according to the authors' nationalities or countries of origin, there is a clear desire to balance up the selection from the two countries by choosing an equal number of works from each country. Six of the novelists are Malaysian or of Malaysian origin, and the other six are Singaporean or of Singaporean origin. Three of them now live outside their country of origin. Lau Siew Mei and Fiona Cheong, both of whom were originally from Singapore, now live in the United States and Australia, whilst Beth Yahp, originally from Malaysia, now lives in Australia. Arguably, we should also mention Marie Gerrina Louis here, although it is more a case of living across the border: Louis is a Malaysian who has lived and worked in Singapore for several years.

The selection extends over three generations of novelists. The oldest is Lee Kok Liang, who was born in 1927, and the youngest is Lau Siew Mei, who was born in 1968. However, it can be argued that only two generations are strongly represented: the oldest and the youngest, whilst the middle generation is virtually absent. There is only one author born in the 1950s; the youngest of the first generation, Suchen Christine Lim, was born in 1948, and the oldest of the third generation, Ellina Abdul Majid, was born in 1959. The missing generation here has a historical basis, and is not arbitrary. The monograph does faithfully represent the strong attraction to fiction writing among the older writers, followed by a falling off

of interest, and a resurgence of interest among authors of the youngest generation. There is, in fact, a similar pattern in the writing of the other literary genres in English.

The selected novels are spread over a shorter period of time: they span twenty-one years of novel writing in English in the two countries. The earliest novels are Lee's *Flowers in the Sky*, and Maniam's *The Return*, both published in 1981, and the latest is Fiona Cheong's *Shadow Theatre*, published in 2002. Before the eighties, the interest in serious novel writing among writers of the two countries was not as strong, and there were also fewer publication outlets and weaker interest among publishers for such works. Most of the novels before this time were written as popular literature, such as those written by Lim Thean Soo or Chin Kee Onn, although there were some notable exceptions, such as Goh Poh Seng's *If We Dream Too Long* (1971) and Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* (1976). In spite of the fact that both Goh's and Fernando's works have some linguistic appeal, the twenty-one year period does give a sense of focus to Puthuchearry's study.

As in any study which has to engage in the process of selection, there is always the question of why certain novels and novelists are left out. The omission of Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid*, or, for that matter, Louis' *The Eleventh Finger* (2000) is certainly justifiable, given the fact that only one work by each writer is chosen. However, questions may arise as to why the novels of Goh Poh Seng, Catherine Lim, Colin Cheong, Daren Shiau, Ming Cher, Simone Lazaroo, Chuah Guat Eng, Shirley Lim, Teo Hsu Ming or Lydia Kwa, amongst others, have been left out. In this connection, one may also want to mention the two novels by Malaysian authors on the Booker Prize long lists in successive years: Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005) and Tan Twan

Eng's *The Gift of Rain* (2007), which appear in the 2005 and 2007 Booker long lists.

One reason for their exclusion is that some of the novels by these authors are not as linguistically salient as the works selected. However, it could be argued that Goh's *If We Dream Too Long* or Ming Cher's *Spider Boys* (1995), for example, are of some relevance, even if one might want to quarrel with the accuracy of their linguistic representations, especially in the case of Cher's work. Also, even though some of them may have some linguistic appeal, including them would have set the book on a different trajectory from what Puthuchearry had set out to do. To pick another example, the contrast between the local dialect of English and that of the adopted country in Teo Hsu Ming's *Love and Vertigo* (2000) is not within the purview of the book, which is much more focused on the local situation. As for the novels on the Booker long lists, they fall out of the designated time span, and more importantly, one suspects that they represent a new beginning in Malaysian fiction in English whose generic characteristics are quite different from the texts selected, and have not been fully worked out by scholars, although one can probably place them in the same lineage as Chuah Guat Eng's *Echoes of Silence* (1994) and Vyvyanne Loh's *Breaking the Tongue* (2004).

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September 2009

PREFACE

When I embarked on this research in December 2002 after doing a coursebook in Advanced Research Methodology, it was not without a certain amount of trepidation since there are very few critical writings on Singaporean and Malaysian novels in English.

I have been interested in the novels of this region since the fifties when Han Suyin's *And the Rain My Drink* first appeared in 1956. The fact that the author lived in my hometown, Johor Bahru, was exciting for a teenager whose greatest enjoyment was reading. I used to see her, Dr Elizabeth Comber, who had become famous after her first novel, *Love is a Many-Splendoured Thing*, was made into a movie, at our convent school where her daughter studied.

In 1972, when I had to do an academic exercise as part of fulfilment of the requirement for my Bachelor of Arts degree with Honours in English, I opted to look into for the question on novels about the Japanese Occupation of this region. In order to explore the theme, "Two Dominant Themes in the English Literature of Japanese Occupation: A

Study of Modern Response to War”, I read all the memoirs and novels by both European and non-European writers that I could lay my hands on. In those days I could only find one novel by a non-European. *Sold for Silver* by Janet Lim, an autobiographical novel, was discovered in a second-hand bookshop by chance. It was an old battered paperback.

But by 2002, there were many novels by non-European writers on the shelves of air-conditioned bookshops. In 2001, while formulating the proposal, I decided to concentrate on novels written between 1950 and 1980. After reading them I prepared a questionnaire and set about gathering empirical data. In 2002 I abandoned this idea and decided to focus on the novels that were published between 1980 and 2002. There weren't that many to make this task impossible, but there were enough for me to have to make a selection.

My interest in this area of research was also spurred on by the fact that I had started writing a novel in 1996. My chief concern while I was writing was how to represent my mother's speech and the dialogues with my grandmother which were in Malayalam. What other possibilities were there besides vernacular transcription and mimetic translation? To understand other literary conventions I read *The Language of Postcolonial Literatures*, *The Empire Writes Back*, and *The Modes of Modern Writing*. But it was the chance reading of Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981) in 2000 that gave me the final theoretical framework for the discussion of the novels I selected for this analysis.

The chapters — sequenced chronologically, that is, in accordance with the year of the novel's first publication — are from the years 1980 to 2002. They include six by Singaporean writers and six by Malaysian writers. They

are from each of the main speech communities, Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Eurasian, and not only cover a considerable period in the natural histories of these two newly emergent societies with their cultural, religious, and linguistic differences, but also show the progression of literary representation in these two countries.

My research makes two contributions: one, a criterion for defining a characteristically Singaporean or Malaysian novel; the other, the correlation between speech and character in a multilingual environment such as Singapore and Malaysia.

My hope is that my research will not only help in the appraisal of novels by the diaspora, but also define the Singaporean and Malaysian novel in English.

Rosaly J. Puthucheary
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R.J. Puthucheary