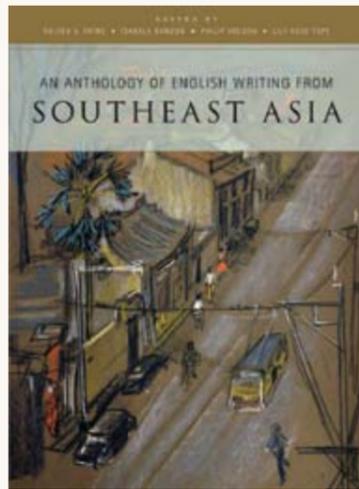


Book Review

“Rich and Strange”: The Manifold Remakings of English in Southeast Asian Literatures

Shirley Chew

An Anthology of English Writing From Southeast Asia is a substantive achievement and its editors are to be congratulated. All four are academics—Philip Holden and Rajeev S. Patke are from the National University of Singapore, while Isabela Banzon and Lily Rose Tope are from the University of the Philippines.



Patke, R. S., Banzon, I., Holden, P. & Tope, L. R. (Eds.). (2012). *An Anthology of English Writing From Southeast Asia*. Singapore: National Library Board.

All, as their biographical entries tell us, have specialist interest in literatures in English from Southeast Asia.

Keeping strictly to poetry, fiction and drama, the anthology draws attention to “the breadth and depth of what authors from the region have accomplished creatively in English” [General Introduction] over the last hundred years and more. This aim is underlined by a 10-section structural arrangement that is thematic and chronological, and that proffers “a regional rather than national canon” [General Introduction]. With English being the focus—but with translations from local languages into English omitted as well as the writing of “expatriates who lived and worked in Southeast Asia, for short to long periods of time” [General Introduction]—the “region” perforce narrows down almost entirely to the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore; in other words, countries that were once American or British colonies, and that in their post-independence eras have, to a greater or lesser extent, continued to foster the English language in education and for administrative purposes. Because outside these areas English is also used by “a handful of gifted writers” [General Introduction], there are included three items of fiction from Thailand, two from Myanmar, and a poem from Cambodia; and no doubt because of the recent revival of interest in...And the Rain MyDrink, HanSuyin by an editorial sleight of hand is considered a Southeast Asian writer and not an “expatriate”.

Like other publications of its kind, the anthology makes available significant writers and their works, and seeks to develop “a comparative and historical awareness of texts” [General Introduction]. A pleasure to be gained from the volume can be termed “genealogical”. To browse the wide-ranging items is to revisit the literary pioneers of the Philippines who had embraced English when it was imposed on the country at the end of Spanish rule in 1899 and the start of American colonisation,

for example, Ponciano Reyes, Angela Manalang Gloria, Nick Joaquin and N. V. M. Gonzalez. It is to reacquaint oneself with the Malaysian and Singapore writers who established themselves in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Lloyd Fernando, Edwin Thumboo, Wong Phui Nam, Ee Tiang Hong, Goh Poh Seng, as well as a younger generation who came into their own in the 1970s, such as Arthur Yap, Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Lee Tzu Pheng. Lastly, it is to be introduced to recent and notable voices, among them the dazzling inventiveness of Merlinda Bobis, the acute comic wit of Huzir Sulaiman, and the brooding intensities of Boey Kim Cheng.

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Despite the “differing historical trajectories” [General Introduction] of their countries, the writers of the region share a number of key concerns. One of these—given the rapid and in many respects violent changes brought about by foreign domination, war and modernisation—is to reclaim, as far as is possible, the past and the ‘local place’ through acts of memory. In the writing from the Philippines and Malaysia, the attempt to repossess an appropriated history and geography is often projected through a strong engagement with the natural environment. The examples are many. In the extract from F. Sionil José’s Po-on the father’s stump of an arm figures forth the harsh realities of getting a living from the land and the brutal practices of the Spanish colonial regime; Muhammad Haji Salleh’s “Tropics” is a lyrical evocation of “the brown people’s home,/their traditions engraved by every tide”; Tash Aw’s *The Harmony Silk Factory* delineates precisely the Kinta Valley with its traces of the early Chinese coolies who came to work in the area. If, in contrast, it is chiefly the notes of loss and alienation that are sounded

in representations of the urban environment among Singapore writers, they are nevertheless finely tuned. Characteristically double-edged, Arthur Yap’s “old house at ang siang hill” invokes and inscribes textually a personal landmark even as it apprehends the place’s erasure in the nation-state’s push towards an orderly future. Thirty years on, and different in tone and mood, Alfian Sa’at’s “The City Remembers” calls forth a grimly functional and estranging cityscape, one which has almost completely done away with the human presence.

Bound up with the writers’ acts of remembering is that of writing themselves as the subject of their stories, and the anthology’s texts encompass a broad range of emotions: Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s quietly heartrending “Pantoun for Chinese Women”, Edith L. Tiempo’s elegantly composed “Bonsai”, Lee Tzu Pheng’s tortuously defiant “Graffiti in The Ladies”, and Ng Yi-sheng’s irreverently sensuous “mock meat”. In addition, a significant number of the stories in the section “Travel and Diaspora” speak of, and for, the refugee and the migrant worker, that is, the politically and socially displaced who cannot be accommodated within the by now familiar paradigms of diasporic writing. To read Victor N. Sugbo’s “State of the Nation”, Ee Tiang Hong’s “On the Boat People”, and Jose Dalisay’s “The Woman in the Box” from *Soledad’s Sister* is to find rendered in them not a plangent nostalgia for ‘home’ nor the self-regarding delights of a hybrid identity, but extreme loneliness, the inhumanity of one’s own kind, and untimely death.

Given the good things in the anthology, it can only be churlish to mention even a few of the shortcomings, such as the editors’ insistently descriptive accounts of the texts in their introductions to the different sections; or the frequent overlaps in subject matter, most glaringly to be found between sections one and two; or the inept choice of plays, such as Edward Dorall’s *A Tiger is Loose in Our Community* and Kuo Pao Kun’s *Mama Looking for Her Cat*, which of necessity have to depend on stage produc-

tion, not print, to convey the mix and collision of languages in Singapore and Malaysia. Finally, since the anthology purports to showcase the imaginative literatures English has given rise to in Southeast Asia, it is odd, if not also otiose, to find included a section on “Using the English Language”. Odder still is the notion put across in the introduction that, with the “colonial anguish...no longer a major issue” [See Introduction to “Using the English Language”], writers are now free to enjoy contributing to “international writing in English”. Surely a writer’s relationship with English is more complex than this progressive trajectory would suggest? Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s “Lament” might have been written out of a specific political context but it also articulates a writer’s struggle in working creatively with not just English but any language. Indeed, language, as can be seen, is constantly made new in the best items in the anthology. To mention just two instances: Arthur Yap’s “inventory” may tilt at the nation-state’s obsessive “urbanisation and modernity” [Introduction to “Using the English Language”] but it also rejoices in the often inadvertent misuses of English that can lead to comic and even strangely alluring meanings; and Catherine Lim’s construction of Singapore Colloquial English in the dramatic monologue, “The Taximan’s Story”, is Singlish as commonly heard on the streets daily and at the same time a different Singlish, one which has been skilfully transformed by the writer’s art to yield an uncommon inner music.

When the late A.K. Ramanujan, himself a distinguished poet and translator, was asked in the 1960s for his views on whether Indians should in the post-independence era attempt to write poetry in a foreign language such as English, his disarmingly cool reply was: “I think the real question is whether they can. And if they can, they will.”¹ *An Anthology of English Writing From Southeast Asia* leaves us in no doubt that the writers assembled in it can write creatively in English and will continue to do so in significant ways.

About the author

Shirley Chew is Emeritus Professor of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Leeds, and currently Visiting Professor at the Division of English, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. She has published widely in the field of literatures from Commonwealth countries, and has co-edited *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire* (1993), *Translating Life: Studies in Transpositional Aesthetics* (1999), *Re-constructing the Book: Literary Texts in Transmission* (2001), and the *Blackwell Concise Companion to Postcolonial Literature* (2010). She is the founding editor of *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings*.

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¹ Lal, P. (ed.). (1969). *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, p. 444.