

**Mohammad A. Quayum (Ed).** *Reading Malaysian Literature in English: Ethnicity, Gender, Diaspora, and Nationalism*. Asia in Transition 16, Institute of Asian Studies. Singapore: Springer, 2021. 28 + 216 pp. ISBN: 978-9811650215.

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In *Reading Malaysian Literature in English: Ethnicity, Gender, Diaspora, and Nationalism*, Mohammad A. Quayum brings together thirteen contributors from five countries to examine several key figures and texts of Malaysian Anglophone literature published from the 1940s to the 2000s. The chapters in this volume, as Quayum puts it in his “Introduction,” are like the country’s national flower, *Bunga Raya*, the hibiscus—not only in bringing together different genres, epochs, and authors, but also in their use of English as “emblematic of the transethnic identity” (ix). Though it seems paradoxical through the lens of a postcolonial binary, English, the language of the former colonizers, is able to bring together diverse Malaysian perspectives. This is because literature written in Malay and the vernacular languages such as Chinese or Tamil would have a more limited readership due to the language not being accessible to other ethnic and linguistic groups, and due to the limited scope of the subject matter specific to only one ethnic group. Thus, as Quayum argues, “[Malaysian Anglophone literature] stands for unity, inclusivity, and hope for a better global future” (ix). With little written about the Anglophone literature of Southeast Asia, the volume as a whole addresses a lacuna in the literature, both in its important contribution to the study of Malaysian literature in general and for its close examination of the major Malaysian Anglophone writers and common themes found in their work. In so doing, this volume raises important questions about the place and contribution of Anglophone literature in Malaysia’s literary landscape.

The chapters are organized around three different generations of Anglophone Malaysian writers—who “have been instrumental in initiating an ‘independent’ Anglophone tradition in Malaysia”—representing four traditional genres. As Quayum explains in his “Introduction,” the chapters are organized chronologically based on the seniority of the writers being addressed in the article, from the pioneering generation of the 1940s through to the 1960s, to the second generation of the 1970s-1990s, and, lastly, to the emerging generation of the new millennium. These writers include Lloyd Fernando, Lee Kok Liang, K.S. Maniam, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, Adibah Amin, Kee Thuan Chye, Rani Manicka, Dina Zaman, and Preeta Samarasan. In chapter 1, Pauline Newton examines the pioneering writer, Lloyd Fernando, to show how “Fernando’s characters and readers must learn to

grapple with constructing a nationalist, inclusive identity” (3). Fernando’s work is again taken up in chapter 2, this time by Quayum, and in comparison to the work of Shirley Lim. Quayum argues that both Fernando’s novel *Green is the Colour* and Lim’s novel *Joss and Gold* “fervently reject ethnic as well as religious nationalism in favor of inclusive nationalism in Malaysia, which seeks to create a ‘rainbow’ nation state predicated on mutuality, reciprocity, and harmony” (xxiv). Chapter 3 examines Wong Phui Nam’s poetry in comparison with the poetry of his contemporary, Ee Tiang Hong. Chapter 4, also by Quayum, is dedicated to analyzing Adibah Amin’s novel *This End of the Rainbow*, and explores how Amin’s novel “dismantles the prevailing ‘tribalism’ in Malaysian society” and offers “an international or cosmopolitan approach that views every nation as being part of a commonwealth of nations” (xxiv-v). Chapters 5 to 7 focus on several plays or theatrical productions. In chapter 5, Susan Philip examines the works of Edward Dorall, Kee Thuan Chye, Huzir Sulaiman, and the Five Arts Center to see how they deal with the visions of successive Malaysian prime ministers to push the country to achieve developed nation status, concluding that “these plays show a variety of responses to ideas of ethnic integration and belonging within and ownership of the nation” (82). Chapter 6 presents Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof’s assessment of three of his own plays, and chapter 7 offers an analysis of Salleh Ben Joned’s only play, *The Amok of Mat Solo*. Chapter 8 peruses the work of the great K.S. Maniam, particularly his novel *The Return* and his short story “The Kling-Kling Woman,” which highlights pioneering female wage earners of the Malaysian-Indian community. While chapter 9 presents a close reading of three of Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s short stories from her collection *Two Dreams: Short Stories*, chapter 10 reads Lim’s autobiographical work *Among the White Moon Faces* in conjunction with Tash Aw’s autobiographical *The Face*. The latter argues that “[w]here *White Moon Faces* shows education facilitating transnational mobility and the fulfillment of east-west immigrant desire, *The Face* represents education enabling the ambitions of social mobility in modern Malaysia and in a highly interconnected world” (139). The last four chapters examine the works of Rehman Rashid, Rani Manicka, Bernice Chauly, and Preeta Samarasan, members of the third generation of Malaysian Anglophone literature. If chapter 11 peruses Rashid’s vision of what Malaysia could and should be, chapter 12 argues that by centering the experience of the diasporic mother, Manicka’s novel, *The Rice Mother*, “undoes the monolith of nationalist historiography that is dominated by heroic men” (183). Chapter 13 discusses Chauly’s poetry particularly through Lionel Trilling’s notions of sincerity and authenticity. Finally, it is fitting that the last chapter, on Samarasan’s debut novel *Evening is the Whole Day* (2008), highlights the notion of “homing” in a story about the descendants of Indian immigrants in Malaysia. The way that diasporic subjects find “home” in constantly moving (“for an ever-incomplete journey, in quest of a promising arrival” [219]) is also the fate of Malaysian Anglophone literature, this volume suggests.

The strengths of this collection are manifold, but I'd like to highlight two: Quayum as the editor provides an informative "Introduction" that not only situates the work of the writers whose texts are discussed, but also provides a succinct history of the place of English in Malaysia. He presents his argument in the context of the polemics regarding the use of English versus Malay or other ethnic languages in Malaysian literature. This is contextualized in terms of the language policy shifts from Malaysia's independence to the present day. A second strength is the organization of the chapters. Each follows a similar format: beginning with an abstract, a brief introduction to the author and the selected work, and a succinct summary of the text analyzed, which contextualizes the author and his or her work without overwhelming the reader with too much detail. Equally important for readers who are not conversant with Malaysian literature is that each chapter provides pertinent historical information. Though the volume is limited in scope to Malaysian Anglophone literature, the chapters provide a tidy introduction to Malaysian politics, society, and culture, and in so doing supplement the textual analysis offered. Additionally, some chapters invite ready comparison to well-known Western texts, helping non-Malaysian readers to imagine or connect familiar themes, genres, and forms to the Malaysian texts. Chapter 10, for example, compares Shirley Lim's autobiographical writing to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. This provides examples of the localizing of global trends, such as the Theater of the Absurd as dramatized in the play by Salleh Ben Joned, which Andrew Hock Soon Ng discusses in chapter 7.

The volume raises interesting questions in the study and historicizing of Anglophone literature in Malaysia. While some of the chapters might have benefited from looking at how Anglophone writers see themselves as regional Southeast Asian writers, and who they imagine their target audiences to be, the volume more than makes up for this in the depth of historical perspectives and careful textual analyses. It would also have been useful for readers to know what the occasion for this volume was, or how these chapters were solicited. As the authors of the chapters don't seem to speak to one another, revealing the occasion or book concept for the edited volume would have helped the reader to better gauge the significance of the essays. Also, surprisingly, there is little to no discussion of Islam as the official religion of Malaysia and the ways in which this does or does not give a particular Malaysian flavor to the nation's Anglophone literature.

On the whole, however, *Reading Malaysian Literature in English* is an important book for anyone interested in Malaysian Anglophone literature, and Malaysian literature more generally.