

### **ULASAN BUKU/BOOK REVIEW**

*One Sky, Many Horizons: Studies in Malaysian Literature in English* by Mohammad A. Quayum. Kuala Lumpur: Marshall Cavendish, 2007, 342 pp.

Few have done more in promoting Malaysian literature in English in recent years than Mohammad Quayum, whose contributions extend beyond scholarly articles, to actively initiating and editing a number of essay collections, including the influential *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader* (2001). He has also compiled anthologies of Malaysian writings in English, not only for academic purposes but also for posterity by making accessible many out-of-print works or those with limited publications. One cannot overstate Quayum's importance to the field, and hence this book by him is a much welcomed addition to existing scholarship.

*One Sky, Many Horizons* brings together a number of Quayum's scholarly writings in one volume, and include also interviews and biographical profiles of key Malaysian writers like Lloyd Fernando, Muhammad Haji Salleh and Shirley Geok-lin Lim. There is also an updated bibliography of Malaysian literary works in English at the end of the book. As such, it is a valuable research resource to both scholars and students, and provides at the same time an insight into Quayum's own critical approaches to Malaysian literature.

The first three chapters give an overview of the development of, and challenges facing, Malaysian Literature in English from its inception during the colonial era to the present time. Quayum carefully outlines how various factors led to the limited growth of fiction writing in English, such as the lack of readership, the focus on economic imperatives typical of a young, independent nation, and the passing of the National Language Act in 1967. The latter, as a national policy, downgraded the use of the English language, and consequently relegated literary works written in this medium to a marginal status termed "sectional literature." Muhammad Haji Salleh, who started his literary career writing in English, chose later – a move reminiscent of the Kenyan writer, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o – to return to his mother tongue (Malay). For other writers such as Lloyd Fernando, Wong Phui Nam and K. S. Maniam who do not feel the pull of ethnic allegiance to the Malay language and culture, English, despite its colonial legacy, was viewed as the only amenable alternative for their creative depictions of communal and national realities. Quayum himself affirms both decisions in the choice of language, noting the complexity of the multiracial composition of Malaysia and its postcolonial history.

The desire by Malaysian writers in English to engender a plural space for themselves, forms the central theme of Quayum's book. The fourth essay

proposes the idea of self-refashioning – a term drawn possibly from the Renaissance scholar, Stephen Greenblatt, but adapted to describe the way in which Malaysian literature involves a refashioning of the national landscape through a dialogic and syncretic imagination. Quayum's primary theoretical framework is a Bakhtinian one, but I feel that his conceptualization of dialogism could have been delved into more deeply. Tellingly, Quayum does not even quote Bakhtin once in his essay, although his elucidation of how the novel opposes a monologic, exclusive sense of racial identity to instead, encompass an inclusive, plural sense of community, is certainly in sync with Bakhtin's view. More careful elaboration of concepts, and choice quotes from Bakhtin's work on dialogism would have strengthened Quayum's position better.

Extending this key strand on the literary representations of a more open mutuality between Malaysians of different ethnicities, is the other thread in some of Quayum's essays that focus on questions of nationhood and nationality. The fifth essay discusses the issue of "contesting nationalisms," and the oppositional dialectic between "My country" and "Our country" (p. 110). Quayum shows how the various characters in Fernando's *Green is The Colour* represent differing views and conceptions of what constitutes Malaysia as a nation state. The analysis Quayum offers on the novel's antagonist, Panglima is an astute one, pointing to Panglima's cultural transformation into a Malay and his subsequent opportunistic use of racial sentiments to create "an exclusionary Malay nationalism" (p. 113). Quayum also analyzes Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Joss and Gold*, in which he focuses on the fraught nature of national belonging, embodied in the character Li Ann, who does not see herself as Chinese but Malaysian, but struggles nevertheless to transcend the racial hierarchies and borders erected by society and national politics.

These two novels are revisited again in later essays where they are analyzed further with the addition of the critical lens of gender. In the case of Fernando's novel, Quayum makes the subtle point about the intersection between ethnocentric and phallogocentric viewpoints, accurately describing how "Omar and Panglima, in their monocentricism and monolithic view of the nation, wish to keep the duo (the Chinese Yun Ming and the Malay Siti Sara, who are in love) 'in their place'" (p. 162). Indeed, the belief in either racial or masculine superiority is arguably a re-enactment of a form of "colonisation" and subjugation of "others." Quayum's critical foray into the question of gender marks is commendable especially because gender remains a relatively under-researched aspect of Malaysian literature.

The other essays in the book include discussions of Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* (1976), K. S. Maniam's widely researched *The Return* (1981), and Lee Kok Liang's *London Does Not Belong to Me* (2003). These are followed by a

biographical listing that provides details on a number of Malaysian authors. Complementing his scholarship are interviews Quayum conducts, which lend interesting insights into the thoughts, inspiration and opinions of several writers. My qualm however, is over the uneven nature of the interviews. For example, the interview with Salleh ben Joned is rather limited, while those with Muhammad Haji Salleh and the playwright, Huzir Sulaiman, are quite long. This fault may not, of course, lie with the interview: Salleh is well known for his reticence and unpredictable temper, while Muhammad Haji Salleh is more forthcoming with his views on the Malaysian literary scene and the role literature plays in society. An especially interesting interview is the one with Shirley Geok-lin Lim, in which she seems to be taking a rather defensive stance with regard to the way her fiction should be interpreted. At one point, in fact, Lim even reprimands Quayum's over an interpretive point that, in her view, is a misreading. As a whole, the essays, biographical profiles and interviews, combine to form a valuable resource for the study of Malaysian Literature in English.

Quayum has indeed provided foundational criticisms from which future scholars can debate and argue over, or extend. For the most part, I am in agreement with Quayum's readings of the various literary texts; however I would question his claim that Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* is centred on Singapore. Although the novel is set there, I would argue that this is a strategic choice in order to elide any direct reference to the racial riots that occurred on 13 May 1969. Interestingly, Fernando's *Green is The Colour*, which was published nearly two decades later, projects a dystopian picture of post-1969 Malaysia. In this regard, Quayum is possibly mistaken in his conclusion that the novel "celebrates the ingenious, inclusive ideology as the basis for the formation of a holistic national identity of Bangsa Malaysia" (p. 165); instead I read the novel as expressing more of a disappointment over such a vision. On the whole, Quayum's book, like many other studies on Malaysian literature in English, is dominated by critical examinations of race, identity and nationhood. This, in itself, is problematic because the focal constancy in scholarship seems to suggest that they are written in order to bear the burden of promoting a shared, multicultural Malaysian identity and culture. One can only speculate if this is, indeed, a rather sad reflection of the lack of social progress and cohesion in Malaysian society, despite the government's recent move to create what is familiarly known as "1Malaysia."

One interesting area of note in Quayum's book is its dialogue with literature from other countries in order to make various critical observations. Examples include Quayum's framing of his view on the origin of Malaysian literature against Ralph Waldo Emerson's promotion of a distinctive American culture, and his thoughts on nationalism in comparison with Rabindranath Tagore's. However, Quayum's comparative approach tends to be brief. I believe that this method of appreciating

literature is advantageous, and merits a more extensive treatment. Indeed, Malaysian literature in English would benefit much from this critical methodology, as exemplified by David C. L. Lim's, *The Infinite Longing for Home: Desire and The Nation in Selected Writings of Ben Okri and K. S. Maniam*. Similarly, the literary scholar, Philip Holden, has argued for a transnational approach in reading Malaysian literature, and further suggests a critical engagement with the literary essay to complement and complicate one's reading of narratives.

Despite its indisputable importance in the discipline, *One Sky, Many Horizons* is not without limitations, some of which I have noted above. These shortcomings could perhaps be linked to, at least symptomatically, to the limitations of Malaysian literature as a field of study: its short history, the limited number of writers and their output, and the discouraging socio-political conditions for literary production, all contribute to the paucity of critical reception of, and debates over, Malaysian literature in English. In recent years however, Malaysian literature in English seems to have been given a new lease of life, with a new generation of younger writers emerging and publishing with internationally renowned presses, such as Tash Aw, Chiew-Sieh Tei, Preeta Samarasan and Tan Twan Eng. This marks a new era for Malaysian literature in English, and I am hopeful that it will grow and expand into new horizons.

## REFERENCE

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