

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The School of Arts and Social Sciences at Monash University, Sunway Campus established in 2010 a research niche broadly known as "Social Transformation in Southeast Asia." This title encompasses the variegated expertise of the school's staff that ranges across the humanities and social sciences, and, more importantly, reflects the school's emphasis on encouraging a critical and ethical attitude in negotiating with the many ideological issues (social, political, cultural, and economic) we encounter daily. Various activities were, and still are engendered and carried out by staff members to promote the School's research, and because of the multi-disciplinary make-up of the staff, each activity was also specific to the staff member's research field. My contribution was to run a one day, closed-door workshop, where a select group of experts were invited to discuss the state of contemporary anglophone Malaysian literature and the local arts/literary scene.

Five participants – two of whom are international scholars – graciously accepted my invitation, and the outcomes of this workshop, which was held early in December 2010, are the essays you will find in this special issue of *Kajian Malaysia*. A concerted attempt was made, during our discussion, to avoid the frequently treaded terrains of nationalism and race that beset much scholarship on Malaysian literature written in English. Although these issues cannot be avoided altogether, because they are deeply embedded in the ideological imaginary of this country and invariably shape its literature, they are deliberately given minimum emphasis so that other equally important, but less, discussed features can be foregrounded.

I suspect none of us noticed it then, but when I was in the process of editing the essays after they were peer-reviewed, I made three unexpected discoveries: first, the essays are not only disparate in their focus, they offer genuinely innovative, and often astounding, insights. While Bernard Wilson revisits well-known, "canon" writers like Lloyd Fernando and Shirley Lim in order to reflect on their status as artists in a "floating" world (a concept that alludes to a novel by Kazuo Ishiguro's, but is fundamentally premised on a Japanese belief that existence, like a dream, is ephemeral); Philip Holden looks at the increasingly "global" nature of contemporary Malaysian literature, and elucidates the advantages and problems related to this. Susan Philip makes a critical foray into the world of community theatre as practiced in Malaysia to demonstrate the strides it has made to unify, and help reclaim the dignity of, a community in an impoverished part of Kuala Lumpur. Wong Soak Koon's essay and mine are devoted to single authors: Sybil Kathigasu and Salleh ben Joned respectively. Wong insightfully unearths the trauma that permeates Kathigasu's autobiography that recounts her wartime experiences. Through nuanced interpretation, Wong shows that beneath Kathigasu's exterior of resourcefulness, courage and indomitability of will in the

face of the Kempetei, lies a fearful individual whose only source of sustenance is her Christian faith. Finally, my paper considers the "profane" aspects of Salleh's poetry against the critical frameworks of Julia Kristeva's theory of semiology, and Giorgio Agamben's meditation on profanity.

What was also surprising is that these essays cover almost all the major genres: novels (Holden and Wilson), poetry (Ng), autobiography (Wong), short stories (Wilson) and plays (Philip), although the latter two are only obliquely referenced. Finally, apart from Wilson's essay, the others dispense with discussion of anglophone Malaysian writers that have hitherto dominated scholarship; even so, Wilson's essay performs that with which scholarship has remained tacit thus far: a critical, comparative appraisal of the four Anglophone Malaysian writers considered canon in the nation's literary history – Fernando, Lee Kok Liang, Shirley Lim and K. S. Maniam. In a sense, this issue of *Kajian Malaysia* could boast of many "firsts:" in it, you will find the first sustained and scholarly essay on Sybil Kathigasu's autobiography, *No Dram of Mercy* (1954); the first, and long overdue, critical reading of Salleh ben Joned's poetry; the first essay on Malaysian fiction as "global" literature; and an impassioned but sympathetic critique of the impact of local community theatre on disenfranchised, marginalised communities in the country's capital.

It has been a great pleasure working with this group of excellent scholars, and with *Kajian Malaysia*. Here, I want to take the opportunity to thank all the contributors and the two book reviewers for their generosity and willingness to participate in this project, and their painstaking efforts to ensure the remarkable quality of their pieces. I also want to express sincere thanks to the journal's chief-editor, Associate Professor Shakila Abdul Manan, whose patient responses to my incessant questions during moments of panic, and whose continuous encouragement, have been exemplary. My gratitude also extends to the various peer-readers who have taken precious time to carefully scrutinise the essays and offer useful comments. My only regret is that Associate Professor Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf, who participated in the workshop and who was to have contributed an essay on the place and pedagogy of anglophone Malaysian literature in local universities, had to pull out from the project due to personal reasons. Nevertheless, I am grateful for her presence at the workshop, and the insights and ideas she offered.

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