

Mohammad A. Quayum (ed.)

Peninsular Muse

Interviews with Modern
Malaysian and Singaporean Poets,
Novelists and Dramatists

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For Natasha and Sasha

Interviews are an art form in themselves. As such, they are fictional and arranged. The illusion that what you're getting is the straight truth from the writer and accurate in every detail is false.

Margaret Atwood, *Margaret Atwood: Conversations* (1990)

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Introduction

This book brings together for the first time interviews with selected writers in the English language from Malaysia and Singapore. The book contains sixteen interviews, eight of which are with Malaysian writers and eight with Singaporean writers. The writers included are drawn from the first, second and third generations of writers in English from the two countries, so as to provide a good spread and sample of how literature in the medium has evolved in the former British Malaya, the country that emerged as two separate entities with the retreat of the Raj in the mid twentieth century. Unlike in the Indian Subcontinent, where English writing started in the early years of the nineteenth century, with Raja Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) and Henry Derozio (1809–31), literature in the medium (by local writers as opposed to English settlers or expatriates) took off in this part of the world only in the aftermath of the Second World War. During this period, Malaya experienced a new nationalist resurgence in the wake of the Japanese Occupation (1942–45), which destroyed the credibility of the British as infallible rulers. The Axis Powers were eventually defeated by the Allied Forces and British rule was restored in the territory in 1945, but the breach of trust from the failure to defend Malaya from Japanese aggression and occupation triggered a new nationalist awareness in the local populace. It also kindled and energised the imagination of a generation of young writers, mostly in school and college campuses, and later at the University of Malaya in Singapore. They took to expressing their anti-colonial sentiments as well as their identity and subjectivity as a people in the very medium of the coloniser, thereby employing the imperial language against the imperial power and their colonial education to resist and subvert the hegemonic colonial rule.

This body of young writers who started writing in the late 1940s and early 1950s, not long before Malaysia and Singapore attained full independence (in 1957 and 1965 respectively), constitute the first gen-

eration of writers in the two countries. Among them are Edwin Thumboo and Wong Phui Nam. Thumboo started writing in or about 1950, and his first collection of poetry, *A Rib of Earth*, came out in 1956. Wong also became active around that period, although his first collection of poetry, *How the Hills are Distant*, came out much later, in 1968. Both Thumboo and Wong contributed abundantly in the formation and nurturing of an emerging tradition through their robust participation as contributors and editors of various student publications. Thumboo was on the editorial board of a student magazine, *Youth*, in the early fifties. Even as a Secondary school student, he urged his fellow writers to strive for 'a genuinely original [...] literature.' Later, at the University of Malaya in Singapore, he became an editor of another student publication, *The New Cauldron*. Wong was also on the editorial board of *The New Cauldron*, and co-edited *Litmus One* and *30 Poems*, both anthologies of university verse. Thumboo is now widely regarded as the 'founder' and 'father figure' of Singaporean literature in English, while Wong is deemed by most accounts as one of the finest poets to emerge in the English language in Southeast Asia. Some of the other pioneers of the tradition include Wang Gungwu, Goh Sin Tub, Lim Thean Soo, Oliver Seet, Tan Han Hoe and Ee Tiang Hong – writers who are remembered and discussed fondly by both Thumboo and Wong in their respective interviews, among an array of topics ranging from their childhood, family, education, and formative influences, to those expressing their views on literature, life, and society, especially as they relate to their own writings, countries, and cultures.

Second generation writers are regarded as those who commenced writing in the 1960s and 70s, and they are represented in this book by Robert Yeo and Catherine Lim (Singapore), and Muhammad Haji Salleh and Shirley Geok-lin Lim (Malaysia). Yeo started writing poetry in the sixties, 'seriously enough,' he says, 'to want to publish and risk being put down.' But quite by 'accident' he became a playwright as well when his play, written 'unexpectedly in late 1968–early 1969,' was staged successfully in Singapore in 1974. Yeo has since published several volumes of poetry, five plays and one novel, and in his interview he talks about these accomplishments as well as his observations, anticipations, and perceptions as a writer. His compatriot, Cath-

erine Lim, started relatively late, in the mid-seventies, also by accident, when some of the stories she wrote as an assignment for Instructional Materials at the Regional Language Centre in Singapore were published, together with a few new ones, in 1978 by Heinemann Asia, with the title *Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore*. This slim, unassuming volume enjoyed astonishing success immediately after publication, and she is now deemed a pioneer in developing English language fiction in the country. Lim has since emerged as one of the 'brightest and best' of Singaporean writers, having published eight additional volumes of short stories, four novels, a collection of poetry and a book of non-fiction prose. Moreover, she has won several local, regional and international prizes for her contributions to Singaporean literature. She talks about her life and art as well as her views on women, religion, science, technology and several socio-cultural issues pertaining to Malaysia and Singapore in her interview.

Muhammad Haji Salleh and Shirley Geok-lin Lim also started writing in the sixties, in Malaysia, but their careers have taken divergent paths since. Muhammad began as an English language poet but, touched by a nationalist sentiment, he chose to engage his creativity increasingly in Bahasa Malaysia after the publication of his first collection of poetry, *Time and Its People*, in 1978. He is now a bilingual poet and critic, straddling both English and Malay. However, it is his Malay works that have brought him more recognition, making him one of Malaysia's National Laureates and winning him several local and regional prizes. In his interview, Muhammad explains why and how this transition occurred in his writing and how he tries to negotiate between the two languages. He also talks about several other issues relating to Malaysian literature, culture and society. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, on the other hand, began her writing and academic careers at Universiti Malaya in the late sixties but emigrated to the US in 1970 and subsequently took up American nationality. She now occupies a transnational identity as both a Malaysian and an Asian American writer, and her books are often published simultaneously in Malaysia/Singapore and the United States. While Muhammad is deemed the most distinguished bilingual poet at home, Shirley Lim is perhaps the most accredited and acclaimed Malaysian writer abroad. She was the first female Asian writer to win the prestigious Com-

monwealth Writers Prize in 1980, and she has also won the American Book Award twice, in 1990 and 1997. In her interview, Lim ruminates on her complex imagination and identity, and her ambivalent, in-between relationship with Malaysia and the US and goes on to discuss her writing generally, and her novel *Joss and Gold* in particular.

The remaining writers included in this book come under the category of third generation writers because they started writing mostly in the 1980s and 90s. These are: Chuah Guat Eng, Kee Thuan Chye, Che Husna Azhari, Marrie Gerrina Louis and Dina Zaman from Malaysia, and Leong Liew Geok, Suchen Christine Lim, Kirpal Singh, Philip Jeyaretnam and Lau Siew Mei from Singapore. Some of these writers took up writing rather late in life and therefore the chronological order shown in the Contents of the book may not be properly reflective of where they belong in the generational grouping or in the evolutionary model of English writing in the two countries. For example, a contemporary of Muhammad Haji Salleh and Shirley Lim, Chuah Guat Eng started writing seriously only in the early 1990s, and her first novel, *Echoes of Silence*, was published in 1994. Perhaps the same could be said about Leong Liew Geok, whose first volume of poetry, *Love is Not Enough*, was published in 1991, and Che Husna Azhari, whose first collection of short stories, *The Kelantan Tales*, came out in 1992. This is, however, not a testimony of their quality as writers but is indicative of how the circumstances of individual writers may impinge on their careers.

Notwithstanding the above discrepancy, writers included under this category are some of the best from the two countries. Some of them are indeed gifted enough to win local and regional prizes for their work. Suchen Christine Lim, for example, won the inaugural Singapore Literature Prize in 1992 for her novel *Fistful of Colours*. Kee Thuan Chye received the Australian Cultural Award in 1994 and Philip Jeyaretnam earned the SEA Write Award in 2003. Lau Siew Mei was also nominated for several Australian literary awards for her novel *Playing Madam Mao* (2000). However, awards are not always the ultimate measure of literary worth. Many of the Malaysian writers, for example, have not been nominated for any national or regional accolades because of their literary medium. In Malaysia, to gain any kind of official recognition or even to win nomination for the SEA

Write Award, which is conferred by an external body, the writer's chosen medium has to be Bahasa Malaysia. In a situation like this, it would be foolish to equate merit with prize. Kirpal Singh, Leong Liew Geok, Che Husna Azhari and Dina Zaman are fine writers, with or without prizes, and it is worth reading their interviews and those of their generational group, as they shed light on their lives and writing and divulge their emotions and insights on many intricate issues formulating and guiding their respective societies.

The book has been designed to include writers from all three major literary genres: poetry, fiction and drama. In the two countries, as in all societies (ancient and modern), poetry flourished first, followed by short fiction, novels and drama (not necessarily in that order). In fact, poetry was the predominant mode of expression for writers in English from the two countries until the mid-sixties when fiction and drama slowly began to emerge. Thus, many of the writers included in the book are primarily poets, although some started with poetry and later branched out into other genres. Leading poets from the two countries included in the book are Wong Phui Nam, Muhammad Haji Salleh and Shirley Lim from Malaysia, and Edwin Thumboo, Robert Yeo, Leong Liew Geok and Kirpal Singh from Singapore. Fiction is represented by Chuah Guat Eng, Che Husna Azhari, Marrie Gerrina Louis and Dina Zaman from Malaysia, and Catherine Lim, Suchen Christine Lim, Philip Jeyaretnam and Lau Siew Mei from Singapore. Kee Thuan Chye is apparently the only playwright in the book, but Robert Yeo, who began as a poet, has also written five plays. Moreover, Wong Phui Nam has authored a play and Suchen Christine Lim has co-authored a play. Other writers in the book who practise in multiple genres are: Shirley Lim and Kirpal Singh, who are both recognised as poets and fiction writers, and Catherine Lim and Che Husna Azhari, who excel in fiction, but have each written and published a book of poetry as well.

Since both Malaysia and Singapore are multi-ethnic societies, consisting largely of Malays, Chinese and Indians, the book has been planned to accommodate writers from all the major ethnic groups, as well as those who are culturally hybrid. Edwin Thumboo, Kirpal Singh and Philip Jeyaretnam qualify for the latter category by being children of mixed marriages. Thumboo was born of a Tamil-Indian

father and Teochew-Chinese mother, while Singh and Jeyaretnam are both Eurasians, having Indian fathers (in the case of Singh, Indian Punjabi, and in the case of Jeyaretnam, Indian-Tamil-Sri Lankan) and Caucasian mothers. The rest of the writers have a more distinct identity, having their roots in one of the three main ethnic groups: Robert Yeo, Catherine Lim, Chuah Guat Eng, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Leong Liew Geok, Suchen Christine Lim, Kee Thuan Chye, Lau Siew Mei all share a Chinese diasporic background, while Muhammad Haji Salleh, Che Husna Azhari and Dina Zaman are Malays. That said, it should be noted that the identities of some of the Chinese writers are complicated by their *Peranakan* family ties, and in case of Shirley Lim and Lau Siew Mei, further compounded by their subsequent emigration to and adoption of a new land. Marrie Gerrina Louis is the only Indian writer in the book, but Kirpal Singh and Philip Jeyaretnam are also often aligned with Indian writers in the complex discourse of ethnicity in the two societies. Wong Phui Nam's case stands out as unique, since he is a Chinese, with certain Peranakan links from his father's side, who converted to Islam after marrying a Malay woman in 1968, and therefore he straddles both Malay-Islamic and diasporic Chinese cultures and identities.

Thus, by including writers from all three generations and all genres, as well as from different ethnic-cultural backgrounds, the book seeks to be as fully representative of the literature of the two countries as possible. However, writers from the Chinese community outnumber those from other main ethnic groups in the book because that is how the ratio stands among writers in English in the two countries. There are two obvious reasons why the Chinese community has the largest share of writers in English in Malaysia and Singapore. First, Chinese are the dominant group in Singapore and make up seventy-six per cent of its total population, while they form a significant minority in Malaysia with above thirty-one per cent of its population. By comparison, Indians make up roughly twelve per cent in Malaysia and eight per cent in Singapore, and Malays comprise about fourteen per cent in Singapore and more than fifty-three per cent in Malaysia. Although Malays add up to a significant number in the two countries, they have shown the least inclination to write in the colonial language because they were the 'original' inhabitants of the land before the arrival of