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Abstract

Singapore writing in English goes back a mere forty-five years, and the work of the women writers is of even more recent provenance.¹ From the forties to the mid-sixties, anglophone literary works were mostly by male authors as far fewer women than men in Singapore had formal education (let alone an education in English, the language of government and of professional advancement and when during the colonial and immediately post-colonial days primary education was not universal even for males). Furthermore, it was tertiary education which played a crucial, enabling role in literary production for it was not till after the post-war establishment of the University of Malaya in Singapore in 1948 and the appearance of undergraduate magazines that local literary work began to be published in earnest. It followed also that the first anthologies of these early poems and short stories were produced and sponsored, too, by male undergraduates, graduates and male-dominant graduate institutions?

KOH TAI ANN

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Singapore writing in English goes back a mere forty-five years, and the work of the women writers is of even more recent provenance.¹ From the forties to the mid-sixties, anglophone literary works were mostly by male authors as far fewer women than men in Singapore had formal education (let alone an education in English, the language of government and of professional advancement and when during the colonial and immediately post-colonial days primary education was not universal even for males).

Furthermore, it was tertiary education which played a crucial, enabling role in literary production for it was not till after the post-war establishment of the University of Malaya in Singapore in 1948 and the appearance of undergraduate magazines that local literary work began to be published in earnest. It followed also that the first anthologies of these early poems and short stories were produced and sponsored, too, by male undergraduates, graduates and male-dominant graduate institutions.²

Expectedly, like the male writers, the earliest published women writers were university graduates. However, up till the seventies few women went on to establish themselves as writers.³ The most inclusive local anthology of the poetry in English to date, *The Second Tongue: an Anthology of Poetry from Malaysia and Singapore*, published in 1976, almost twenty years after the appearance of the first anthology of local verse in English,⁴ features the poems of only eleven women as compared to that by twenty-seven men. The disproportion is actually greater if the ratio is measured according to number of poems rather than number of poets included. By then, too, twelve of the men had each published at least one volume of poems, some more; but only five of the women had published or were to go on to publish one volume or more. These were the Malaysians Shirley Lim and Hilary Tham and the Singaporeans Wong May, Lee Tzu Pheng and Geraldine Heng, who, all except for Heng, began publishing their poems in the sixties. Since the late sixties, however, Tham, Lim and Wong have lived abroad or emigrated and all three have had volumes of verse published outside Malaysia or Singapore. Heng has hardly published any poetry after her first volume. Of the Singaporean women who began publishing in the late sixties, only Lee Tzu Pheng has continued to bring out subsequent volumes – in her case, three. Chung Yee Chong, a promising woman poet of the early seventies, appeared in a joint collection with four male poets;⁵ another, Angeline Yap who began publishing in a school poetry magazine 'collected' her mostly juvenile poems in a first volume; but neither seems to have published any poetry since. Other women – Rosaly Puthuicheary, Nalla Tan, Kamala Nesamoni, Sakina Kagda, Bessie Lee, Lin Hsin-hsin and most recently, Catherine Lim (who is better known for her short stories) have also published a volume or more each. But unlike earlier women poets such as Wong May and Lee Tzu Pheng, these other poets have been either little noticed or like Tan and Puthuicheary, have received mostly negative reviews. Among other women poets who have published poetry or short fiction regularly in magazines, but not collected their work are Ho Poh Fun and Heng Siok Tian, the latter a promising young writer who has also had her plays staged.⁶

That the early 'serious' literary energies of women writers went into poetry indicated, too, the lead established by the men. The poem was both the preferred and up till the seventies, the prestigious literary form, an importance reinforced partly by its pioneering status in the writing in English, and partly by its having been represented by its practitioners and literary critics (often synonymous) as an important expression of the English-educated elite's participation in the nationalist anti-colonial struggle in the fifties for political and cultural independence from the British, its determination to establish an autonomous literary voice.

The critical stance, the engagement with social, political and cultural issues – indeed, these were almost its *raison d'être* – set the agenda, too, for the poetry in English by Singaporean women poets. Such 'commitment', the making of poetry 'out of one's inner life' which simultaneously registered 'the forces at work in society' (to quote the creed and practice of 'pioneering poet', dominant male literary figure and patriarch of the local literary scene, Edwin Thumboo),⁷ privileged and universalised the poetry in English as the expressive vehicle of national consciousness and identity.

Significantly, Lee Tzu Pheng's best-known, most-quoted poem is "My Country and My People"⁸ – despite the irony lent to the title by its being hedged by quote marks (marks often omitted by careless readers who have missed the poem's quietly interrogatory spirit, apparent right from the opening lines):

My country and my people
are neither here nor there, nor
in the comfort of my preferences,
if I could even choose.⁸

Lee's basic inclinations as her later work shows, lean however, towards the private, personal world. Like most of the women poets, she prefers to write of love, family, friendships, relationships, suffering, and female selfhood. Lee's woman tries particularly to hold on to the tangible and despairs at the immateriality of words and intellectual production:

being woman
what would I want
with mind-children

these hands
only can hold
formed flesh

words
against my mouth
dry silent⁹

'Prospect of a Drowning' the bleak title poem of her first volume characteristically focuses on a despairing 'insufficiency' while her second volume, *Against the Next Wave*, its stoic title derived from a line in the earlier poem, tries to salvage at least something from pain: 'strange how suffering propels us/ to new insight'.¹⁰ Betrayal and disillusionment are increasingly countervailed however, in both this and her third, latest volume *The Brink of an Amen* by a sustaining courage inspired by a new-found Christian faith.

Men also took the lead in the publication of prose fiction. The first local anthology of short stories in English, *The Compact*¹¹ in 1959 and the first Singapore novels in English

which appeared in 1972 were all male efforts.¹² But by 1976, Geraldine Heng was able to put together a collection of short stories, *The Sun in Her Eyes* 'by Singapore women', two of whom (Rebecca Chua and Nalla Tan) went on to publish a collection each of their short stories.

As the first anthology and subsequent anthologies of short stories by Singaporean and Malayan/Malaysian writers show,¹³ this form was also male-dominated – until the appearance of Catherine Lim, Singapore's first short-story writer proper. Before her, no male Singapore writer has ever and none of the women writers to date has had the popular success that she has enjoyed since her first short story collection *Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore* quietly appeared in 1979. *Or Else, the Lightning God* quickly followed in 1980. Both volumes sold steadily, even going into several more printings, although her work has attracted little local critical attention.¹⁴ Her novel, *The Serpent's Tooth*, an expansion of her short story 'Or Else the Lightning God', has been less successful with readers although it is typical of her short stories in general in its representations of the clash between generations, the conflict of the old ways and the new. Here too, are found her accurate renderings of Chinese custom and ritual, contemporary manners or mores, and recognizable Singaporean types – the strong-willed, ambitious English-educated daughter-in-law, the old matriarch and mother-in-law, members of the upwardly mobile English-educated class, its family relationships, preoccupations, 'life style', values and so on. She tells her stories well, relying much on surprise turns in the plot or exploitation of her Singaporean characters' self-delusions to produce what has become a standard feature of her stories, the ironic twist at the end.¹⁵

Universal education since Singapore's achievement of independence in 1965 with almost the entire school population since the late seventies being educated in English, growing affluence, rapid modernisation and urbanisation accompanied by inevitable socio-cultural changes have produced a growing reading public for local English writing which fictionally represents and/or examines these developments. Lim's short stories showed there was much local material ready for literary record and treatment while the rise in feminist consciousness among Singaporeans has both fueled her later works (such as *The Woman's Book of Superlatives*) and encouraged more women to express themselves, chiefly through fiction and drama which focus on feminist themes. Her success however, seems to have thrown into the shade other serious, perhaps more experimental women short story writers who have not her eye for telling detail and her sheer ability to tell a story. Among these others are Rebecca Chua, Wong Swee Hoon and Claire Tham, the last-named being the youngest and most recently published. A lawyer by profession, Tham's short stories focus on the lives of comfortably-off, usually middle-class types, the obviously conforming being set against or contrasted with the overtly or covertly rebellious members of this largely Western-educated group.

The only Singapore woman novelist proper (in the sense that she has published more than one novel and consistently published others over a period of time) is Su-chen Christine Lim whose most recent novel, *A Fistful of Colours*, was awarded the newly-instituted Singapore Literature Prize for best unpublished fiction manuscript. She is also the most consistently 'serious' novelist, choosing plots, characters, themes or issues which depict Singapore society at a particular stage of its development as experienced by representative women characters. She is serious too, in the thought she gives to her narratives, each novel adopting (albeit not necessarily successfully) a different narrative form in an attempt to give force to different perspectives. Her main women characters range from the liberated ex-novice, radical student activist, Marie Wang of *Rice Bowl*, to the traditionally-oppressed Yoke-lin, heroine of her daughter Yen-ti's journal which *Gift from the Gods* purports to be and to the three modern Singaporean women whose chequered marriages, relationships and life-stories make up *A Fistful of Colours*.

The other novelist who is akin to Christine Lim in seriousness is Minfong Ho. Her reputation as a young people's novelist has been largely established in the U.S. mainly through her sensitive, vivid portrayals of the lives of adolescent or teenaged girls caught in turbulent social and political conditions in Southeast Asian societies familiar to Americans such as those in Thailand (*Sing to the Dawn; Rice Without Rain*) and Cambodia (*The Clay Marble*). She is also a short story writer of considerable skill and penetrating observation, but has yet to bring out a collection of her short fiction.

Of the other women, most of whom so far have published only one novel, Ovidia Yu and S. Kon are the most serious and productive. Both, especially S. Kon are better known, however, for their plays, a few of which have been successfully staged, while Yu has also published some short stories including one prize-winning effort. Yu's *Miss Moorthy Investigates* is a skilfully told and entertaining 'who-dun-it' with a feminist slant, while Kon's *The Scholar and the Dragon*, like Christine Lim's *Gift of the Gods*, features characters of the generation of immigrant Chinese who lived in Singapore in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. Other first novels, published most recently by women writers in obvious response to the current hunger for local writing in English by the English-educated Singaporean reading public, are the 'semi-autobiographical' *The Lotus Blossoms* and its sequel, *China My Love* by San; *Women in Men's Houses* by Wee Kiat and *Treachery is the Game* by Shirley Lau. San's 'semi-autobiographical' novels set in Singapore, Hong Kong, Europe and China depict through the life and loves of its heroine, Lienhwa (*Lotus Blossom*), the cultural clash of East and West, Capitalism and Chinese communism in a way reminiscent of the fiction of Han Suyin. Less melodramatically, Wee Kiat attempts to exemplify in the lives of three women who are close, mutually supportive friends, the triple oppression of Chinese women summed up by the Confucian saying 'that a woman obeys three masters in her life - her Father, her Husband and her Son'. But the novel's content and prose-style do not move much beyond that of the standard fiction which used to be a mainstay of old-style women's magazines and which still mark feature articles found in their successors today such as Singapore's *Her World* and *Female* magazines. Lau's novel owes more of its style and preoccupations to pulp fiction, but unlike Wee Kiat's novel, without any pretensions to move beyond and above the formulaic intrigues and doings of the rich and powerful who operate in a world of boardroom or office politics, ambitious, egoistic husbands, bored wives, adultery and expensive life-styles.

Apart from the growing thirst for fiction in English among a reading public increasingly English-educated, there is also a current boom in the writing and staging of local plays in English. Professional theatre groups have emerged and so have women playwrights - Ovidia Yu and S. Kon as mentioned earlier, Eng Wee Ling, Eleanor Wong and others whose plays although staged, exist still in unpublished form. As theatre flourishes along with theatre studies newly introduced at the two local universities to cater to this growing interest, more plays including those by women are likely to be published in the future.

Notes

1. This account does not include women writers in the other main Singapore official languages of Malay and Chinese. For reference to these and their work, see the section on Malaysia and Singapore in the chapter on Southeast Asia, and individual author and title entries in *The Bloomsbury Guide to Women's Literature*, ed. Claire Buck, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1992), pp. 228-30.
2. For fuller detailed accounts, see Edwin Thumboo, Introduction, *The Second Tongue: an Anthology of Poetry from Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: Heinemann Educa-

- tional Books, 1976), and my 'Singapore Writing in English: the Literary Tradition and Cultural Identity', in *Essays on Literature and Society in Southeast Asia: Political and Sociological Perspectives*, ed. Tham Seong Chee (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981), pp. 160-185.
3. According to Thumboo, 'Before the mid-sixties, very few women wrote creatively; there were no women among the pioneer poets.' (Introduction, *The Second Tongue*, p. xxxii).
 4. *Litmus One: Selected University Verse, 1949-1957* (Singapore: Raffles Society, University of Malaya, 1958).
 5. *Five Takes* (Singapore: University of Singapore Society, 1974).
 6. Heng Siok Tian's first volume of poems, *Crossing Your Chopsticks* (Singapore: Unipress) is in press and is expected to appear in 1993.
 7. Evident, for instance, in his praise of Lee - that her 'most notable poem to date, 'My Country and My People' (sic) brings together personal and public history with candour' (Introduction, *The Second Tongue*, p. xxx1).
 8. *Prospect of a Drowning*, p. 51.
 9. 'Orphans', (*Prospect of a Drowning*, p. 5).
 10. 'In Sight' (*Against the Next Wave*, p.14).
 11. Sub-titled '(a Selection of University of Malaya Short Stories 1953-1959)', Herman Hochstadt, ed. (Singapore: Raffles Society, University of Malaya in Singapore, 1959).
 12. Goh Poh Seng, *If We Dream Too Long* (Singapore: Island Press); Kirpal Singh (the lawyer), *China Affair* (Singapore: University Education Press).
 13. See *Twenty-two Malaysian Short Stories: an anthology of writing in English* (Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books, 1968) and *Malaysian Short Stories* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1981) both compiled and edited by Lloyd Fernando; and *Singapore Short Stories*, Vols. 1 and 2, (Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books, 1978), ed. Robert Yeo.
 14. Lim's popularity was confirmed first by *Or Else the Lightning God* being made a local lower secondary school literature textbook and then in the late eighties by *Little Ironies* being selected as a Commonwealth-wide Cambridge 'O' Level examinations textbook (to which Anne Brewster and Kirpal Singh have provided a students' guide). Peter Wicks, an Australian, writes regularly about her and her work (eg. 'Of Family and Irony: Catherine Lim and *The Serpent's Tooth*', *Commentary: Journal of the National University of Singapore Society*, 7, 2 & 3 (1987), pp. 97-102).
 15. Her latest novel, *Meet Me on the Queen Elizabeth 2!* about 'a predatory Chinese female intent on advancing her interests among solitary, unsuspecting gentlemen on board a luxury cruise ship' (Author's Preface) appeared in July, 1993.

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*This is an inclusive not a select bibliography.

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* The occasional book review has been so far the more usual form of critical response.