

Kunapipi

Volume 22 | Issue 1

Article 5

2000

Sharing a Commonwealth in Malaysia

Kee Thuan Chye

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Chye, Kee Thuan, Sharing a Commonwealth in Malaysia, *Kunapipi*, 22(1), 2000.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol22/iss1/5>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Sharing a Commonwealth in Malaysia

Abstract

What is meant by 'sharing a commonwealth in Malaysia' as pertains to literature? I shall address it from the point of view of the writer. And because I am a writer writing in English rather than Malay, which is the national language, my views will be coloured by that bias. To me, writers share a commonwealth if they feel they belong to a community that ensures equal rights for all; provides them with nurture, support, even funding; accords them official recognition – in short, makes them feel wanted. In Malaysia, such a commonwealth does exist but for those who write in the national language. Only their works are considered 'national literature', as distinct from literatures in other languages, which are termed 'sectional' or 'communal' literatures. In practice, this means that 'sectional' or 'communal' literatures do not enjoy support, funding or recognition from official sources, despite the fact that they are no less Malaysian in substance and expression. They are not officially promoted; neither are they recognised for the intellectual and creative contributions that they make to the national culture and imagination.

KEE THUAN CHYE

Sharing a Commonwealth in Malaysia

What is meant by 'sharing a commonwealth in Malaysia' as pertains to literature? I shall address it from the point of view of the writer. And because I am a writer writing in English rather than Malay, which is the national language, my views will be coloured by that bias.

To me, writers share a commonwealth if they feel they belong to a community that ensures equal rights for all; provides them with nurture, support, even funding; accords them official recognition — in short, makes them feel wanted. In Malaysia, such a commonwealth does exist but for those who write in the national language. Only their works are considered 'national literature', as distinct from literatures in other languages, which are termed 'sectional' or 'communal' literatures. In practice, this means that 'sectional' or 'communal' literatures do not enjoy support, funding or recognition from official sources, despite the fact that they are no less Malaysian in substance and expression. They are not officially promoted; neither are they recognised for the intellectual and creative contributions that they make to the national culture and imagination.

Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, the national literary agency, overseer of Malaysian literature, gives little significance to these 'sectional' literatures. There is not even an ongoing programme to translate them into Malay. The Dewan goes to other parts of the world in search of literary texts to translate, and has done so with the works of Patrick White, Sally Morgan, Yukio Mishima, just to name a few, but it has not looked closer to home to the works of English-language writers like Lee Kok Liang, Ee Tiang Hong, Salleh Ben Joned, K.S. Maniam, Wong Phui Nam, or Omar Mohd Noor. There has been an anthology of poetry originally written in English with parallel translations in Malay published by the Dewan ten years ago, but that seems to have been the first and last of such endeavours. Its Malay title, 'Antologi Puisi Pelbagai Kaum', does not even allude to the poems as being Malaysian; transliterated, it means 'Anthology of Poetry by Various Races'.

In the giving out of literary awards, none of the national ones has been given out to the 'sectional' *littérateurs*. As for something more international like the S.E.A. Write Award, which is presented annually to writers of Southeast Asia, all the recipients from Malaysia since the inception of the Award in 1979 have been those writing in Malay. This is not surprising since nominations for the Malaysian candidate are made every year by the Dewan and the right-wing, chauvinistic literary organisation called Gapena. It has become something of a

joke that because of the nature of the selection, the established Malay writers simply have to wait their turn to get the Award. If they do not get it this year, they are sure to get it sometime. In neighbouring Singapore, the nomination is rotated among writers from the three major races regardless of the language they write in. Is that why Singapore has achieved developed nation status while Malaysia is struggling with its Vision 2020?

I do not mean to belittle the national language nor the writers who write in it. I believe in and support the use of Malay as the national language, and I respect writers as writers regardless of what language they write in. It is also to be expected that in a multi-racial society, the desire of the predominant race to safeguard its dominance can overwhelm other considerations.

Even so, it remains to be said that the continued practice of keeping the literary commonwealth restrictive rather than all-encompassing is one that writers surely cannot feel comfortable with — because it goes against norms that writers would uphold rather than reject. It divides rather than harmonises, stirs up feelings of envy, and fosters defensiveness on the part of the privileged and distrust on the part of the marginalised.

To understand why despite its divisiveness this practice continues to prevail, it is necessary to look at the larger social and political context. Since the founding of this nation forty-one years ago, divisiveness has been a condition operating at the centre of Malaysian life. The political system is still organised and conducted along ethnic lines. It is a system that lends itself to, indeed actively engenders, the politicisation of issues such as race, language, culture, and religion.

It is a system that keeps up barriers when barriers need to be removed. It retards the evolution of a truly Malaysian consciousness through constantly reminding the people that they are Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Others. Or Bumiputra and Non-Bumiputra. Malaysian politicians attune their speeches according to the groups they are addressing. Hence, they will talk of Malaysian unity when they address a multi-racial audience, but switch to chauvinistspeak when they face an audience of their own race.

Race consciousness is still at a level where almost every issue is seen, consciously or otherwise, from the perspective of race. What this means for the writer is that his ethnic origin is often considered above the ideas he expresses; and he can be suspected of professing an agenda even if he does not have one. The writer thus finds himself confronted with a formidable barrier of prejudice — a barrier that has often prevented him from exposing — with uncompromising honesty — the glaring contradictions that exist in Malaysian society, from criticising the political excesses that have been perpetrated over the last twenty years, and from denouncing the financial, and political scandals that have arisen in that same period.

The other big barrier that the writer comes up against is curtailment of free expression. Despite avowals by the authorities that Malaysia upholds democratic principles, there *are* some things that cannot be expressed publicly. Some of these are specified in the Constitution, but a lot is arbitrarily decided by the government of the day. If what is said or written is construed to be a threat

to national security, the person responsible can be charged under the Internal Security Act. This Act, which allows for detention without trial, was a severe measure introduced by the British colonial regime to combat Communism. Today, however, there is no longer the threat of Communism since the Communist Party of Malaya gave up its struggle nine years ago. But the Internal Security Act continues to be enforced.

To the best of my knowledge, no writer has yet been detained under the Act specifically for his writing. That is perhaps because we have become adept at practising self-censorship. We learn quickly what to exclude from our texts if we want our writings published. Playwrights try not to include anything that may jeopardise their chances of getting a staging permit for their plays. To qualify for this all-important permit, the play-script has to be submitted for vetting by the Special Branch of the police — who, of course, are experts on culture. Some years ago, an innocuous play about a man recounting the difficulties he underwent to bury his grandfather was denied a permit. Why this was so remains a mystery. Perhaps, unknown to us, burial is regarded as a subversive activity.

When Sinclair Lewis wrote that ‘Every compulsion is put upon writers to become safe, polite, obedient, and sterile’, he had to have been referring to Malaysia. Given the divided character of the society, Malaysian writers often feel that what we say is not going to reach out to a wide audience, much less influence them. In Malaysia, change usually comes about at the initiative of the ruling authority, not the individual, not even the grassroots. The voice of the writer is one of the last to be heard. And it would be unrealistic for him to count on massive public support for his views. Some years ago, one of our National Laureates went on an artist’s strike to protest against what he called an insensitive publishing bureaucracy. For his action, he earned more condemnation than sympathy from his peers while the rest of the public did not care.

When writers are as divided as the society, their effectiveness as individuals and as a collective is necessarily diminished. When we should be creating awareness among the people of the unjustness of some laws, we are instead cowed by these very laws. It seems to me, then, that for us to reclaim our roles as writers, as the commentators of our times, the initiators of new ideas, we will have to go against the national line, against the ideology of politicians who divide and rule. The positive effects of this cannot be denied by those who are sensible enough to recognise what is just and right.

Sharing a commonwealth brings with it the feeling that one can stand together with one’s peers and work towards enhancing our shared needs and beliefs. If Malaysian writers can come together as equals, we can work together towards eradicating the culture of fear. We can eliminate the distinctions of ‘them’ and ‘us’ that brand writers of different ethnic and linguistic affiliations. Instead of being suspicious and envious of each other, we can work towards affirming life and all that’s noble about it.

We can build a commonwealth that *all* Malaysian writers can share in. A commonwealth of equality, of freedom, of humanity.