

An Approach to Singapore Writing in English

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AMONG THE MORE ABSORBING and complex problems awaiting the critics of the new literatures in English is that which centres on the question of approach. The difficulty is not only complex but awkward as well since no real attempt at a methodology of approach has been attempted. Bruce King's recent book *The New English Literatures* in which he argues that nationalism has to be seen as pivotal in the discussion of such literatures is a valiant attempt in the right direction but it fails to offer, I feel, a convincing argument that these literatures may be understood and criticized as literature, not as political and social documents. And the several books which deal with such literatures under the rubric of Commonwealth Literature — books that did indeed pioneer the advent of their criticism — prove inadequate in their grasp of specific literatures. Even the very label "Commonwealth Literature," while underlining a strong and in many cases a valid commonality, has to be seriously questioned. With very persistent overtones of a "league" mentality, this particular label does not do sufficient justice to the marked presence of an intensive cultural identity that distinguishes many of these new literatures. Other coinages, such as "Literatures of Emerging Nations" lean heavily on assumptions which, while providing useful and sometimes necessary vantage points, do not, in the final analysis, contribute much to the criticism itself. The term, "New Literatures in English" is, one supposes, an effort at compromise. It is an interesting and quite provocative label, since it posits the twin-dilemma of the newness of the literatures in question as well as their intimate relationship with the language of a very old and distinguished tradition of world literature. As a compromise label

and as a point of departure "New Literatures In English" may be accepted as a convenient means of describing the literatures we have in mind.

The difficulty of approach is, perhaps, besotted by the fact that critics have been eager to find common areas within which the literatures will yield to criticism. Up to a point such a search has, of course, been fruitful. Naturally enough common factors are bound to appear if one searches diligently and if one pays sufficient heed to such things as history, geography, language, politics, and economics. Thus the history of such areas as Africa, India, Australia, Malaysia, the Philippines, the Caribbean, Papua New Guinea, and the Pacific Islands is a shared one. All of these countries experienced colonialism and much of the literature coming out of them will invariably reflect this. But it would be foolhardy for the literary critic to make more than superficial observations from this apparently shared experience. Colonialism, like much else in life, takes many forms and, depending on the colonizer as well as the indigenous situation, manifests itself in a bewildering array of attitudes, modes of behaviour, and socio-cultural patterns. The fact that Papua New Guinea was a colony of Australia which in itself was a colony of Britain may shed a fair amount of light on the peculiar nature of much of Papua New Guinea literature in English but it will still not explain the peculiar strengths that the literature affords both the writer and the reader. Again the Papua New Guinean reader will find things in the literature of his country which will inevitably miss the non-native reader. (Of course the opposite may be true as well.) What all this just shows is that perhaps we have to be practical and approach the literature of each of these "new" countries in its own right. Beyond a few superficial mouthings about common features (such mouthings often as much relevant to any group of literatures as to those in question) any attempt at generalization is bound to prove disappointingly inadequate. Grand, universalizing theories in the realm of literary criticism always become so when a particular text or group of texts is confronted.

The foregoing, then, serves as a clue to the complexities surrounding any attempt to approach Singapore writing in English. The necessary "background" to an approach has been dealt with

on a number of occasions, but, perhaps most memorably, by Edwin Thumboo in his Introductions to two seminal anthologies of creative writing: *The Flowering Tree* (1970) and *The Second Tongue* (1976). In essence this background consists of some knowledge of Singapore's peculiar history and strategic geography. Even before Stamford Raffles turned the tiny island into a British colony in 1819, Singapore had experienced a kind of colonization in the form of rule by foreign princes and/or dignitaries. The overlordship was, on occasion, executed through proxy, though its presence does not seem to have had any serious effect until the coming of the British. Raffles, and his successors to the present day, transformed Singapore from a tiny fishing village into the vast industrial and commercial centre it is today. The geographical location of Singapore has always given it a global significance frequently denied to nations much bigger than itself. Being on the crossroads between East and West (and by extension between North and South) Singapore has been at the centre of both influence and confluence. Its size dictated that an aggressive wooing of labour across the seas be conducted if it was to realize the aims which Raffles had set. Thus migrant-workers by the thousands flowed into the 225 square miles of land from across India and China. From the neighbouring Malaya and Indonesia there had always been settlers. Together — and with small but significant labour input from Britain, Holland, Australia, America, France, Germany, Japan, and other countries — these various communities gave birth to the multi-racial/multi-lingual/multi-cultural complex that Singapore is today. The guiding spirit was British, although, as the leaders constantly point out, the spirit was well-tempered with a hard-core Asian morality. The elite of the country were educated in English and as a consequence were quick to adopt western modes of dress and behaviour. Their education also left them with a taste for traditional English literature and sometimes for the classics on which this literature was itself nourished. Unfortunately this elite was not kept healthily in touch with the sources of its own culture — namely the great literatures of India or China. Until recently most educated Singaporeans knew much more about *The Iliad*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Don Quixote*, and Shakespeare than they did

about the *Mahabarata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Analects*, or the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*.

Thus, through migration a special breed of Singaporeans was created: they were neither occidental nor oriental, and between these two worlds they tried to exercise an uneasy truce in terms of their own lifestyles and value-systems. The migrant mentality had little time or energy left for the pursuit of the arts, which were seen as luxuries rather than essentials. The forging of a common identity was left alone until the seeds of nationalism were sown, mainly after the Second World War. Mercantilism has seldom nurtured great writers and it is only in very recent times that the Singaporean began to express himself creatively through a language not inherently his own. The use of English as a creative medium began only with the conscious realization that the language could be used for such an end. Even if poetry did come as leaves to a tree its chosen tongue till very recently smacked of a certain inauthenticity. The language was being tried but without the necessary rigour or enrichment which makes for good literature. Part of the reason for this was that English was chiefly the language of administration, industry, and commerce: it had yet to acquire the requisite emotional and social/cultural status that ensures its worth in creative output. Much has been written and said about the use of English by non-native speakers and it is not my present purpose to engage in this discussion. But it must be said that in Singapore — as in many other countries — the language ultimately impressed itself upon the Singaporean's sensibility so as to allow for its use in creative expression. As the Singaporean became more exposed to the language and its literature and as he saw the emergence of a strong and viable literature in English coming out of such different areas as Africa, India, the West Indies, he himself became a little more confident and assured about his own facility with the language. Fluency itself did not guarantee creativity but it did go a long way to encourage creative expression. Though the first attempts were made by those associated with the University, creative expression in English was very soon to spread to schools (where it received a tremendous impetus at the hands of the young whose sensibility had not been affected by the corrosive effects of a high pressured,

rapidly changing, materialistic society), and to places of work and recreation. By the middle-fifties, the initial phase of creative expression in English — marked by a leisurely use of the language to produce imitative literature modelled along the masters gleaned from Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* — was ending and a bold new phase in which English was to be used for socio-political comment was being ushered in. As in many other countries the first fruits were harvested in the field of poetry.

Now, it is ironic that in most countries where English has been used for a creative purpose but where it lacked natural, native roots, the first products should have been poems. Poetry is perhaps the most difficult, the most stringent form of literary expression. And yet poetry came out (and continues to come out) ceaselessly from the budding writers of the new nations. Part of the reason for this peculiarity, in Singapore at least, was the somewhat urgent nature of the task at hand: a literature in English had to be created quickly so as to give the different races a sense of cultural identity. Furthermore, even today, Singapore favours short forms of literary expression because the whole manner of living and working is not calculated to leave enough room or energy for the production or consumption of works needing long and sustained effort. The release of emotions, of pent-up tensions, finds an easier avenue in poetry than it does in prose. So even if the poetry that is consequently written does not always merit close critical attention, the proof is nevertheless there that some kind of literature is being produced. One of the sad things about such a state of affairs has been the lamentable lack of a body of encouraging but honest criticism from which the potential poet could learn and benefit. Especially in the early years there was a dismal absence of informed criticism of the poetry in English in Singapore. Though some change has now come about — with the emergence of a number of people who take the task of criticism seriously enough to want to write long essays on a single poem — the potential student of Singapore poetry has to be warned that only a few pitfalls have been investigated and much more work is needed before any kind of methodology of approach can even be spoken of. Indeed, in very recent times the criticism has swung to the point where the works are used more as platforms from

which sallies are thrust at personalities than studied as literary creations in their own right.

Among the other forms of literary expression the short story easily ranks second to the poetry. In a curious way the short story is able to fuse the energy of poetry with the comfort of prose. As a hybrid the short story affords the Singapore writer a form with which he can cope. Even if the short story lacks the precision we associate with poetry it nevertheless allows the writer to put across his observations and feelings without too much compromise to art itself. Of late the short story has become very popular in Singapore: both readers and writers are encouraging its production through constant authorship and readership. Newer and bolder themes are being explored and newer and bolder styles experimented with. Whether or not the Singapore short story in English will be able to gain the kind of regard that the poetry has done remains to be seen. The signs are increasingly positive, though locality and culture have, perhaps, more influence on the content of a short story than on that of a poem. If the Singapore writer can look beyond the smallness of his country he may be able to produce short fiction that will be universally read and accepted. For the moment he is still a little too parochial.

Both drama and the novel have lagged behind conspicuously. Since the mainstay of drama is conflict it is easy enough to understand why in a small place like Singapore its appearance is slow and, on occasion, suspect. There was a distinct phase — for a few years in the sixties — when quite a few local plays were written and produced. For the most part these plays dealt with familiar problems of adaptation to a changing environment but they did not explore the problems with any degree of depth or complexity. In the last few years some attempt in this latter direction has been made and the tremendous success in 1981 of an adaptation of Peter Nicoll's *National Health* shows clearly that the stage is now set for a more vigorous and a more challenging drama to emerge. Two quite successful plays of Robert Yeo's may here be singled out as paving the way for authentic Singapore drama: *Are You There Singapore* and *One Year Back Home*. Both plays, it might be added, played to packed audiences. The success of *One Year Back Home* did raise the very interesting question of an authentic

idiom of speech: was English to be Singaporeanized to the extent that the deviations from standard English were endorsed by the playwright and accepted by both actors and audience? This knotty question still lingers in the minds of politicians, administrators, educationalists, and writers. Whether or not a distinct Singaporean English will flower depends considerably on how such powers that be see the question.

The novel, I suspect, will take a long time coming. Of course there have been numerous attempts at composition but their achievement is in doubt. There is a good explanation for this. Because of its length and scope the novel calls for more forthrightness and candour than either poetry or the short story. The novelist cannot mask for long his real attitudes, his real values. Sooner or later, consciously or unconsciously, his biases are to become apparent, his likes and dislikes open for public scrutiny. It requires an extraordinary talent to disguise one's convictions in a novel: the sustained writing works against it. As has often been pointed out, the exigencies of living in a very small, pluralistic society hinder the frank expression of views and ideas. One is never sure when one may be called to task for having uttered, stated, or explored an issue deemed to be sensitive. One is, therefore, constantly on one's guard. In these circumstances the writing of a good novel becomes virtually impossible: how are one's characters to behave, react, respond, interact, credibly if one is oneself not sure about these things? Who for example — even at an embarrassingly basic level — is to be the villain, who the hero: a Malay, a Chinese, a Sikh, an Indian, a Eurasian, a Japanese, an Indonesian, an Australian, an American? A few years ago this issue was highlighted in the form of a review in which the reviewer accused the author of *Naga* (a Singapore-based novel modelled along the lines of *Jaws*) of being pro-Indian. The fact that the author, Peter Manzu, was himself Indian, added to the objection. Now we know for a fact that novelists all over the world are constantly accused of being pro-this, anti-that. The crucial and significant difference, however, is that certain societies have learnt how to accommodate such accusations, even though sporadic outbursts of violence of one kind or another may sometimes result. America, in this respect, is an example that comes readily to

mind. But in a small tightly-knit society like Singapore, expression and exploration of sensitive issues (in Singapore matters relating to such things as religion, race, language are officially deemed to be sensitive) is bound to encourage provocation. And Singapore, as the leaders constantly make it clear, cannot afford the nuisance that may result as a consequence. The economy is too precious, the efficient running of the state too vital, for any artistic disruption. The writer therefore, always conscious of his role and more so of his duty, hesitates, becomes necessarily cautious, or resorts to the writing of a kind of novel that will inevitably prove unconvincing (because it will not reflect reality) or, at best, narrow in its offering. The writer, caught in this uncomfortable position, seems to have let the novel alone. The work of Goh Poh Seng, however, may be seen as a tentative attempt to get past these considerations. Unfortunately Goh has yet to produce a novel which will meet with the expectations: to date his work has been either too impressionistic or esoteric. I might add that the good novel also requires the kind of time, energy, and assurance which are denied the Singapore writer inevitably caught up in his culture's materialistic goals.

But, it might be added with some degree of optimism, the novel has a very fertile soil in the environment of Singapore. The multicultural make-up of the society, the varied and diverse lifestyles, the ethnic complexities, the rapid change being ushered in at an ever-accelerated pace, the constant need to be on the alert, the unflinching drive towards greater affluence and prosperity, the daily stress on the need and benefits of a disciplined, hardworking society, the long leadership of a hard core of men dedicated to the growth and development of the city into one of the great city-states of our times, the density of the population, the political vulnerability, and the many other quite bewildering characteristics of the country all provide ample material for the potential novelist. There is no dearth of possible plots, counter-plots, themes, and visions: what is lacking, as mentioned above, is the subtle fusion of comment with craft so that the result does not cause unwonted fear in the culture. So far writers in Singapore — except for sharp social criticism found occasionally in a poem, short story, or play — have steered clear of actual political com-

ment. For how long such an attitude will prevail is anybody's guess; after all the creative impulse, when it is really there (and *not* when it is forced to be there), does not often pay too much heed to official expectations. It remains to be seen when and who will finally turn the vast potential of the novel form in Singapore into actuality.

All that has been said so far ought to feature in any approach to the study and discussion of Singapore writing in English — a writing that is markedly on the rise and not a little unaided by official support and encouragement. Recent thinking has it that a national literature ought to be openly encouraged. State awards to well-known writers such as Lim Thean Soo and Edwin Thumboo, state funds for subsidizing publication of creative works, numerous official creative writing competitions, and the inauguration of *Singa*, a Ministry of Culture journal devoted to literature and the arts, all promise exciting new possibilities in this direction. More and more of the younger writers have taken to serious writing and their efforts so far indicate that it is only a matter of time before a full nurturing of the literature takes place. The young, less bothered by worldly cares, take more liberties of expression and thereby pave the way for a more open and a more honest literature. All of these are positive and healthy signs, their optimism only tempered by such occasional outbursts as threats in Parliament centring on the introduction of local literature to schools. A fair number of significant people at the helm of power still believe that the best literature to study is that produced by the Shelleys, the Wordsworths, and the Brownings. Such a conviction is perhaps one of the more dangerous manifestations of a mentality that seems to be decidedly against the production and encouragement of the literature written by Singaporeans.

This dogmatic belief that only the English can write well in English is aided and abetted by a dedicated hard core of local critics from whose pens a word of praise is as hard to come by as water from stones. The standards, according to these people, are set, once and for all. Unless the Singapore writer can produce work comparable to an Eliot or a Hardy — or, if this is too much to ask, an Enright or an Auden — he had be better advised to leave writing alone. The fact that these critics are not themselves

writers may of course, have something to do with their so-called impatience with the bulk of literature being currently written in Singapore. One can only hope that they will, with time, adopt a more mellow and less arrogant attitude. This is *not* a case for special pleading. The best contemporary work that has been written in Singapore can match the best produced elsewhere.

A major problem for the Singapore writer (who, ethnically might be a Chinese, an Indian, a Malay, or a Eurasian) has been the awkward one of trying to feel in the mother-language and express in the non-mother language. From this viewpoint it is justified to state that much of the literature in English verges on the cerebral: words are calculated to achieve economy and precision without always sufficient regard for spontaneity. Particularly in the poetry there is a conspicuous lack of "an overflow of powerful feelings." Where emotions are present they are present without the attendant discipline of language, making the effort embarrassingly juvenile. Because the writer in English is aware of the rich tradition of English literature he is always conscious of his own shortcomings (whether real or imagined) and thus not quite able to overcome what I may term "the fear of free expression." Sometimes a certain posturing is to be noticed. In his Preface to *The Liberation of Lily And Other Poems*, Lim Thean Soo, for example, speaks of "modern poetry" being either too "inclusive" or "exclusive." He observes, further, that "Much of the poetry to-day appears also to be written for the next generation" and goes on to state that "We should encourage our young and those inclined to write poetry to use as models the poems more frequently read by a wide circle and less those confined to a select coterie." It is interesting to note, however, that the reliance upon "models" usually produced — and most noticeably in Lim's generation — weak imitations too painfully banal to warrant any serious consideration. Thus an early attempt, conscious of the "poetic" elements, went as follows:

You there! will you not help me shape a dream
 Of happier days, when all the world will seem
 A Paradise where all shall be content
 A wond'rous state of things, a poet's theme . . .

and so on. It was only after writers like Wang Gung-Wu, Edwin Thumboo and, to some extent, Lim Thean Soo himself (especially in such an early poem as "The Chempaka Blooms Again") had broken through the "poetic" barrier that real Singapore poetry in English began to appear. It has to be stated here that Thumboo's first volume of verse, *Rib of Earth* (1956), was crucial to the dawning of Singapore poetry in English. In this book Thumboo forcefully demonstrated how a cultivated mind aware of the rich textures of the language can realize creative expression through controlled voice:

Emergence

I sat on the sea-wall,
 Listened to the wild horsemen
 Fighting in the plumed waves
 I sat on the sea-wall
 Where one wild horseman
 Plunged a lance of confused voices
 Into my heart,
 And the clutch of mockery in curved mirrors
 Rejection of whorl
 Died with the corners of my mind.
 Old vagueness became a sudden meaning
 Creation spun clear:

I too was part of the story.

The craftsmanship here displayed, even though the emotional content seems a little muted, paved the way for the Singapore poet to explore his own individual voice. Thumboo, in his roles as both poet and a critic, has acted as mentor for the Singapore writer in English and his contribution remains undisputed and wholesome.

The younger poets, those who started to publish in the late sixties and early seventies, show far greater flexibility of thought and expression. Among the best of these, Lee Tzu Pheng stands apart in her ability to convey a sense of intimacy unspoilt by self-consciousness. Lee writes, as I have stated elsewhere, with the sureness of personal involvement, with the confidence of personal experience and with the sense of a certain knowing. When her

famous poem "My Country and My People" with those memorable lines

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

was first published it echoed the inner experience of an entire generation of Singaporeans, a generation that was witness to a desperate search for national identity. It is needless to add how the uncertainty of the country and her people is poised against the conviction and surety of poetic sensibility in the lines just quoted. For Lee, poetry acts as a means of transmitting honest feelings, and her courage in this respect is more than admirable. Lines such as

Now you have gone
I am again broken
refuse on the water's edge

and

I opened the brown envelope cautiously,
wondering what you had sent.
Years ago, you held me
in the same suspense. Years
have a habit of returning

clearly prove the strength of Lee's poetic gift. It is a talent which once again underlines my conviction that Singapore poetry in English has definitely come of age and can offer a viable body of work to the universal reader.

In approaching Singapore writing in English the potential reader may be advised to proceed a little cautiously. In the hands of some of the younger and better writers, English has begun to be used in ways not usually recognized. Apart from the more pronounced variations from standard English there are unique Singaporean usages of a cultural kind to be considered. One example must suffice for the moment: it comes from the opening lines of a poem by a young Chinese lady, Chung Yee Chong:

why this whiteness? why this purity?
why this church? why this ceremony?
why this veil to uphold what must unfold?

O love, descend upon us today,
 upon this whiteness like snow,
 this whiteness like snow

to think it doesn't even snow here!

The poem whose opening lines these are is, naturally enough, entitled "The Wedding." The lines protest against the very presence of institutions which, (the poet seems to be saying) do not belong to Singapore. If the imagery of snow provides the physical sense of non-belonging the imagery of church, white veil, and ceremony represent the cultural dimension felt to be alien to the Singapore lifestyle. Once analyzed in this manner the poet's discomfort and cynicism become obvious; also the social comment takes on a greater significance than allowed for simply by a straightforward reading of the lines. A new dimension of interpretation is introduced by the subtle fusion of the snow-imagery with the religious imagery of a church wedding — the final aim of the fusion being to demolish both! This example illustrates just one way in which the skilful writer is beginning to use the English language to chart areas of experience usually taken for granted.

Another kind of subtlety in the use of language is that found in the poetry of Arthur Yap, one of the best poets in Singapore today. Yap's poetry is characterized by a tightness of language rare in Singapore writing. As a reviewer pointed out Yap is a linguistic specialist and his recent poetry (found in two collections, *Commonplace* and *Down The Line*) reveals how much Yap understands the science of language and how cleverly he manipulates words to achieve extraordinary effects. For Yap the poetry is essential, all else secondary. The kind of distillation of experience that he offers is not one which will find easy acceptance from most people. His is a difficult poetry and the reader had better be warned immediately to be careful not to be easily duped or fooled. The terseness and brevity of Yap's verse is easily appreciated by a reading of, say, only three lines from his poem "black and white":

impact of collision the long-legged road in convulsion,
 two schoolchildren, uniformclad,
 spread blue on the zebra-crossing.

Thus the poignant description of a road accident. If these lines could be written by a good poet anywhere, Yap's many other poems are distinctly Singaporean, both in tone and in philosophy:

sir: i refer to my interview and your salary offer
 you said i would be given a commensurate salary;
 commensurate with what? the depth of the filing
 cabinet or the old bag sitting 3 desks & one right-
 hand corner away? i am reasonably qualified:
 quite handsome: my lack of experience compensated
 by my prodigal intelligence: i shall not expect
 to marry the typewriter: it's decision-making
 i am after: that's what i am: a leader of tomorrow:
 so why don't you make it today? . . . so take me
 to your highest superior: & spare nothing:
 at me earliest convenience: yours faithfully

The ironic (though subtly gentle) attack on a certain quite definite crassness of mentality comes through unobtrusively, reminding the reader, once he has recovered from the wry humour of the lines, of the "get-on" ethos that prevails in Singapore. Familiarity with the place and setting which inform a certain literature is always helpful, most so when the literature pretends not to pay too much heed to them itself. Yap's poems on the surface appear to be written by almost anyone with a sophisticated urbane wit; at bottom, however, they could not but be written by a true Singaporean.

Two other quite sundry observations may here be made which might aid the reader attempting a comprehensive approach to Singapore writing in English. One concerns the quite easily noticeable absence of physical description. Landscape rarely features prominently in Singaporean literature. The reason for this is that over the years Singaporeans have become accustomed to having their sense of landscape changed almost overnight. Scenes and buildings change in front of one's eyes: thus my Primary School is no longer in existence, the beach where I used to swim is now the famous Changi International Airport, and part of what was formerly the sea now one of the busiest highways on the island! Thus a sense of place hardly impinges on the writer's imagination. Place is Singapore itself, not any tiny alley or bar which might be eagerly courted. If this results in a certain absence of "solidity"

in the literature, the compensation is that such solidity is provided for in the attempt to concretize the abstract. So, for example, reference is frequently made to roads, schools, flats, hotels, government offices, but without specification: the net result being a vague sense of the physical but with the knowledge that the physical in Singapore is, ironically, not very important.

The second observation concerns ethnicity in relation to writing in English. For some peculiar reason very few Malays in Singapore have attempted to write in English. The bulk of poetry, prose, and drama seems to be written by Indians and Chinese. Whether this indicates that the Malay is reluctant to use a language not inherently his own, or whether this indicates a shyness or lack of confidence, is a matter for further investigation. Like the Indians and Chinese, the Malays have generally enjoyed the same kind of exposure to English as anyone else in Singapore and their competence in the language is ably demonstrated in their professional work. So it is a little difficult to fathom as to why they have not ventured to creative writing. I suspect that a possible explanation could lie in the culture itself — a culture nourished essentially by the soil and therefore not very comfortable in a highly technological, urban setting where the cerebrum predominates. Traditional Malay literature tends very much to be in the romantic mode and this, of course, does not find a ready audience in a tough-minded Singapore. A few of the attempts that I myself have seen reflect the unease of the Malay writer almost to the point of excruciation; it is hoped that this unease will diminish with the years.

One notable exception to what has been said above, however, may here be cited. The poetry of Mohammad Ibrahim, an old man of eighty-one, impresses one with its ballad-like qualities. Not only is Ibrahim a Malay, he is, almost exclusively, one of the few Singapore poets whose work contains a sense of humour. Humour is very much an absent quality in Singapore writing in English — perhaps the strain of living in an environment which forces one to be ever-watchful and ever-hardworking is not conducive to the production of humour. Whatever the reason, the writers have not been able to incorporate humour into their writing. There is scepticism and an ironic, wry wit which may sometimes be mis-

taken for humour, but the two are not the same. Ibrahim's poetry, however, contains an abundance of humour as will be obvious from the following example:

When my baby starts to bawl,
Cause of tummy ache or fright,
He wakes me up first of all,
Always in the dead of night,

When my baby starts to bawl,
My wife sleeps on like a log,
Out of bed I have to crawl,
For I'm the underdog.

Ibrahim is neither bashful nor acutely self-conscious, but writes a natural poetry full of warmth and good fun. The poetry here easily lends itself to dramatization: both music and action are neatly fused to create a melodious form which is more than just charming. In the lines cited above the surface humour does not blur or obliterate the trauma of the new, young father who is being compulsively educated in the ways of motherhood! It is depressing to note that Ibrahim's poetry has not been more widely welcomed in Singapore itself. In the minds of many of the elite, the poetry is merely jingoistic, at best competent doggerel. This is but one example of the kind of problems the Singapore writer faces at the hands of unsympathetic critics. Not only his poetry but the fact that his one and only collection of poems, *The Marriage Of The Rocks & Other Poems* (1980) was published when Ibrahim was seventy-nine years old shows the kind of caution from which such natural Malay poets suffer.

Between the Chinese and Indian it is the Indian who appears to be most at home with the English language. This could, of course, be connected with the fact that English has been in his "blood" longer; after all British rule over India (from where the bulk of the Indian community of Singapore comes) goes back a considerable time. There could, furthermore, be real merit in the argument that English has much in common with other Indo-Aryan languages and therefore the switch to English by an Indian is more easily accommodated. For the Chinese use of the language is still by and large an effort and frequently this tells on the literature that is produced. But I am aware that I am entering into a

delicate (if not dangerous) arena and ought to put a stop to my speculations. A more thorough study could, nevertheless, be conducted to find out more about this very interesting relationship between ethnicity and creative expression.

My conclusion must, of needs, be a qualification to all that I have said so far. Because the literature is still young, its "tradition" is still being forged and no hard and fast conclusions can therefore really be arrived at. What I have outlined above remains nothing more than a possible introduction to the writing in English in Singapore. The shaping spirit of imagination does not abide by the whims, fancies, or strictures of the scholar or critic; nor does it know itself when its high moments will come. The future is open and, dare I say it, bright for the Singapore writer. Already what little has been circulated internationally (mainly the poetry) has attracted a good deal of comment and interest. It is conceivable that this is going to grow as more work is produced and published internationally. When and how Singapore writing will take its rightful place beside the other new literatures in English depends a lot on the sympathy (that vital sympathy of which Coleridge spoke when he censured Lord Jeffrey's criticism of Wordsworth) which scholars both outside and inside Singapore bring to it. My own feeling is that the time has now come for Singapore literature to be examined and studied the way any other literature is examined and studied: no "special" allowances need be made beyond context.

A SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SINGAPORE WRITING IN ENGLISH

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