GAPORES IN GAPORES IN

Singapore Fiction and Poetry in English: A Note

KHADEMUL ISLAM

'Literary editor?' the lead person would say, glancing quizzically up after perusing my card.

'Yes,' I would reply. Then there would be a pause. 'So,' I would then resume, 'shall we begin?'

'Ah, yes, of course.' And away we would go, into facts and figures about courses, syllabuses, professors, seminars, academic excellence and records.

It would be later, during a break for tea, or lunch, that I would explain that though right now I was in my role of visiting journo on a tour of Singapore's university campuses at the invitation of its tourist board, my card was right, I was the literary editor of The Daily Star, my real interests were literary (but not that I wasn't having fun right now, no no no, please!) and so, where were the poets and writers here, the ones who wrote in English?

'Ah,' they would say again,
'yes, yes, we have English language writers here.' And would
try to help me out. Like my hosts
at the Singapore Tourist Board.
'We weren't prepared for this,'
they informed me, 'but you could
look up the English department

people at NUS (National University of Singapore) when you visit them.'

But I was out of luck. It being vacation time, the campus was deserted. Where, after my meeting with the business school folks, the manager for corporate development pointed to the green rise in front of us and said, 'The English department, over there on top, but right now it's deserted.' Then shook his head, 'You know, they almost closed the department several years back. Nobody could find any use for English literature.' It was my turn to say 'Ah!' English lit departments, same story everywhere.

But a campus devoid of poets and writers didn't mean I didn't get to talk on subjects Singaporeans think about, and which conceivably are the raw stuff of literary endeavours. What you see and feel around you is what you write about. So, while waiting with the aforesaid manager--I wished I hadn't forgotten his name-- for the university bus to take me and my guide Ken back to our car parked way over on the other side, we chatted about Singapore, about its obsession with being number one (number one airport, number one university.

oh, how the smaller among us dream of being the biggest in some ways!), about the fetish for efficiency and change ('our alumni come here to visit and complain about not being able to recognize the campus from year to year'), about Singapore's bureaucracy obsessively churning out ever more studies about how to be number one, about the globalization of English and its impact of native languages-that very day a professor of Chinese had written in the Straits Times lamenting the fact that the young Chinese no longer cared to learn their mother

tongue, that they considered it

The themes of change and flux,

old-fashioned and backward.

of tradition and modernity. It was the same story on the other campuses I visited. Nobody available. Or I'd missed them by ten minutes. Which is what happened with Kirpal Singh, lit man about town, editor of a book of short stories and teacher at Singapore Management University. But then Dr. Chen of SMU later provided me with his email address, we communicated, and what you see on this page (as well as occasionally will see more of in the future) are entirely due to his kind help.

In between the campus visits, locked in a very tight schedule, which made enquiries outside academia impossible, I poked around in bookshops. Not much there. Catherine Lim, Hwee Hwee Tan, a few others, and some 'expat' stuff--books by foreigners in Singapore about Singapore, mainly British. But without the foreigner's anxiety. About which I started to wonder. What you notice in Singapore is how comfortable the ex-colonial masters are, perhaps a mark of how seamlessly Singapore seems to have transitioned into its postcoloniality. Compared to India's struggle for independence from the British, Singapore's bid for freedom from colonial rule seems a most gentlemanly affair, a series of coordinated moves to eventual self-government. Overall, Singapore has had no Sepoy Revolt. no Jalianwala Bagh massacre, no Surja Sen, no mass uprising against colonial rule, no 'Quit Singapore' movement. In fact, the opposite seemed to be true:

a sort of pride in the colonial

'connection'. Sir Raffles, who

everywhere: Raffles Class on

founded modern Singapore, is

Singapore Airlines iets. Raffles

Hotel, Raffles this, Raffles that.

Most unlike us in South Asia,

where I can't imagine a Clive

Class on Indian Airlines, or some colonial wedding cake of a Clive Hotel in Dhaka. Inside the Singapore Tourist Board building there were rooms named after European explorers: Costeau, Hillary. And when I pointed it out, the good folks there looked nonplussed. Then walked around and finally found Admiral Han room for me, in a dark corner.

dark corner. And--though I could very well be wrong about it, since the observation is based on a cursory reading-- inevitably it shows up in Singapore's English language prose and poetry. As in real life, so too in Singapore's fiction, the white man-- or the representation of him/her-- is one of at ease. Where unlike in some of the best fiction written by South Asians, there seems absent that large, overarching theme and backdrop provided by the nationalist struggle, by the continuing divide between the Western and the non-Western worlds. Where speaking Singlish seems about the limit of revolt against prevailing order. Even our earliest extant narrative text in English, in 1835, by Kylas Chunder Dutt, begins, 'The people of India and particularly those of the metropolis had been subject for the last fifty years to every species of

subaltern oppression...' I don't think there is quite the equivalent to this in Singapore's English language fiction, the postcolonial's semiotic defining of the self, the empire writing back. Their writing is funny, smart, modern, engaging, cosmopolitan, but it doesn't seem to have that. There is Vyvyan Lo's--who lives in London and I don't know if she's originally from Singapore--just-published novel Breaking the Tongue, set in Singapore, which does explore questions of loyalty to one's family and country, the role of language in culture, and the place of race, racism and ethnicity. But I think it would still be the exception rather than the rule. Unless Singapore's writers engage with the larger concerns, with, say, history's squat, the pull of ideologies and the growth of the post-Raj state, it remains to be seen how much resonance they will have in the rest of Asia.

But then, like the students who do trouble to learn Chinese in Singapore, maybe I am just being old-fashioned and backward.

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What Is It To Write?

FELIX CHEONG

It is not a vacation from your life when you weary of meetings and rain, waiting for the bus and cursing your luck.

It is a vocation that curses your life and can't wait for luck but must meet head-on the bus weary and rain.

It is not to scribble
a granted sky
by a tree
in the evening park
with your dog running free.

It is to run the dog inside, scribble the evening into the sky and park your tree between the granted and the free.

Felix Cheong is one Singapore's leading poets

SHAPING SPACES: Literature and the Environment in Singapore

KIRPAL SINGH

These days it is almost taken for granted that we become the products of our environment. Though scholars still argue about whether it is nature or nurture which defines our personalities, it is universally acknowledged that no matter what a human being is born with, his or her character, outlook, personality, is basically shaped by the environment in which he/she finds herself. In wanting, therefore, to discuss the ways in which Singaporean writers, especially poets, have responded to the notion of environment, it has to be clearly stated that this word is taken to mean every aspect and facet of a human being's experience outside of himself; that is, environment is everything external to a human being. Defined this way, environment would best be understood as **space**, or more accurately **spaces**, for no individual inhabits only one or specific space since at any given instant our senses are impacted upon by a whole variety of spaces -- physical, emotional, cultural, political, psychological, etc.

Let me begin by citing one line from the poem *Changi* by Koh Tat Boon. One of the visible facts about the Singaporean environment is that everything changes so fast that what is here today is gone tomorrow, thus making memory problematical!

The Changi I knew is buried.

This poem was written some 30 years ago but continues to reverberate today precisely because it captures that very frightening fact of Singapore's development: that the Island's environment, even the basic landscape, cannot be taken for granted, that environment, for Singaporeans, is constantly on the move and therefore a subject both of fascination as well as anxiety. For my generation—and the writer above is of my generation—Changi was associated primarily with a good swim in sea waters. Then came the decree that Changi beach would be reclaimed (which has meant pouring sand into the sea to make more land…) in order to build an airport. A feat of architectural construction then became for Koh a fact of loss and sorrow, even if only because it tellingly confirms the non-recovery of the original Changi as experienced by generations of Singaporeans.

So if space(s) determines people, and small spaces inhibit while large spaces expand the individual's world-view, is it any wonder that writers have paid special attention to the way(s) in which the environment has played a very crucial role in defining the larger Singaporean identity? In 2000, two young poets, Alvin Pang and Aaron Lee, came out with a collection of poems which expressed a multifarious response to Singapore's environment. Because Singapore is perceived to be mostly urban this anthology was titled NO OTHER CITY: The Ethos Anthology of Urban Poetry. A few relevant lines for purposes of noting just how insightfully our poets have gleaned our larger environment should suffice here:

Singapore River

The operation was massive; Designed to give new life To the old lady. We have cleaned out her arteries, removed detritus, and silt created a by-pass for the old blood. Now you can hardly tell her history.

We have become So health-conscious The heart Can sometimes be troublesome. (Lee Tzu Pheng)

Then, as if almost in response to the above-quoted older poet's indictment (for indictment it seems to be!) of a policy which in the process of cleaning up leaves the natural environment squeaky clean in a clinical kind of way, the younger poet Koh Buck Song asks

How much more can we extend The borders of our troubled turf? How much longer stall The incessant, relentless Beat of the ocean's roar? (Reclamation)

Read together (and in the anthology the two poems are laid out side by side) these lines point clearly to an ever-increasing anxiety on the part of the writers (Koh Buck Song is younger than Lee Tzu Pheng by a good fifteen years!)that Singapore has begun to appear more and more like a hospital where the "ocean's roar" is kept at bay only through a very deliberate policy of "reclamation". Now what do we make of a people who don't hear the lapping/roaring waters of the rivers/oceans/seas? And in order to get closer to the deeper irony we recall Singapore is an island, surrounded by water. I do not believe the hiatus manifest in the poems above is just simply one of "nature" versus "artificial". I believe the poets are attempting to probe deeper into the layers of our being and asking and wondering what the net result of all these grand schemes of "reclamation" in the name of progress is going to be, especially as it affects and moulds and shapes the psyche of the average Singaporean. The emotional cost, they seem to be suggesting, is going to be more than is recognized, all the more so since the 'erasure" of the natural is done so subtly and in the name of delivering an even better future for the nation. Only thus can we make adequate sense of Lee's statement that in becoming so health-conscious the heart can sometimes be "troublesome". At the end of this engaging anthology of poems, the well-known Singaporean architect, Tay Kheng Soon, writes: The rain pours, this is the tropics after all. But somehow the rain does not wash away the heavy air that sits on the city's soul. Only the pavements get cleaned. And the planners who do not know about "air" are now frantically twiddling the knobs and pulling the levers to turn Singapore into a hub: a communication hub, a science hub, a knowledge hub, because they fear dissolution. For only the free can spontaneously re-invent themselves to face a new day; tweaking mechanical contraptions will not prevent them falling



apart when the design limits of the machine are exceeded. A leaf falls on my plate, has foreign talent arrived?

Tay's lamentation about the loss of freedom and spontaneity, while underlining his own position *vis-à-vis* the imposition of government policy on land-use without total concurrence with the larger polity, also hints at a more worrisome danger: the letting-go, out of sheer frustration, of pent-up emotions which, if one reads his entire essay between the lines, are lying in wait for their moment of intense release.

Little wonder, then, that Singapore's poet-guru, Edwin Thumbed, can say

Where the dark veil hangs careless Merging with star-whispers The sum-total is a phantom city. (Fingers Of the Cape)

Thumboo's poem has that haunting image (repeated) that "only the moon is real" -- why? Because the moon is too far away for us to interfere!. Our vision of the moon and the stars is shaped by the clarity of their impact: and in a city where **cityscape** determines practically every view it is hard to imagine how a people's vision could be rid of the interlocking surfaces of intrusive environmental

Where no owl cries its kill above city blocks And the moon does not dominate A night landscape Stars as bright as street lights allow.

This is the way Simon Tay's poem, *Singapore Night Song* begins and one assumes the following lines are going to elaborate the emptiness suggested here insofar as the natural environment has been taken over by the city's bright lights. But, no.. The poem's conclusion is a sober reminder of the fundamental reality confronting all Singaporeans:

If you cannot learn to love (yes love) this city you have no other.

And this is indeed true -- we cannot inhabit just any city because this city, this Singapore is where we belong, this is home. And this, I submit, is where the nub of the issue resides: most of the literary responses to Singapore's environment have complained about the manner in which change is thrust upon the environment without careful thinking-through of consequences; the short-term projections of a quick result triumphs over the long-term prospect of psychological damage. Singaporeans therefore turn <code>inwards</code> for nourishment and succor, the environment largely either failing, or limiting or disenfranchising the common man's ideals. Let us bring this brief excursion of ours into the ways in which Singapore writers have responded to the environment by looking at a few lines written by Keith Tan. For the 27-year-old, the environment is most surely a way of re-examining history and the socio-geopolitics, which emerge from historical recognitions:

To remember the living and the dead
To see, in the hulking towers of a hundred storeys
And in the pond of luminous lives,
And in old photographs of my grandmother's traveled face,
The testimony of irresistible time:
Our never-ending, ever-urgent chase....

And so we stand, at century's end, To pause and consider the work of man Before it fades into oblivion....

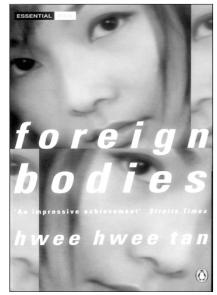
The future gestures as a felt and unseen hand, A half-hinting, seducing chameleon That puzzles us, tempts us Beyond the edge of any map, Till we wander maples, trackless, timeless Visionaries in an original world Sowers of new seeds on new soils, Builders of bridges Defying measure, Across this current-tormented ocean.

People believe the environment is as much shaped by us as we are by it: the Singapore story seems to suggest that the environment's domineering role goes well beyond simple **shaping**. Here the environment becomes us as we project our own images and visions upon it, choosing to locate it in our mind's eye as **that which impacts** rather than allowing it to take its organic path of growth and decay. And it is here, where, sometimes, the heart can be troublesome.

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iterature

From Hwee Hwee Tan's novel Foreign Bodies



The narrator is Mei, a Chinese woman, while Andy is English

Another time when there was a lot of cleaning up to do was during Andy's first MRT trip. There were these big signs plastered all over the train station, these drawings of a cup and a plate of steaming food, with a huge red cross stamped across them. For those lacking the ability to interpret visual symbols, a caption underneath that warned us that the possessors of food and drink in an MRT stations would be subjected to a five-hundreddollar fine. I told Andy to hide his bottle of Cocoa Bomb in his bag, but he said, 'I'm not going to let any foreign government dictate my eating habits.' So we

were standing on the platform, waiting for the train, and Andy starts recounting Fallensham United's latest victory, jiggling his hands as he tried to reconstruct Varney's last-minute winning piledriver. Of course he spelled his drink all over the floor. He took off his T-shirt, got down on his knees, and went 'Shit shit shit shit' as he tried to mop up the brown mess. Then this huge mother of a voice booms out from some hidden PA system. The cameras had been watching us all this time, that panoptic system that governs the public transport system. The voice said, 'Will the topless man please make his

way to the Central Control Station.' As usual, it was down to me to deal with the grim, grey-uniformed MRT wardens, gorvelling on Andy's behalf, soothing things over in the Singlish lingo that only the natives could do--'Ai-ya, sorry about my friend lah. He's ang mo, you know what they're like. He just got off the plane, he came from this small ulu ulu town in England, very sua-ku, he doesn't know anything. You give him chance, okay or not?'

'Okay, this time we give him chance,' the station manager said, 'but next time he do this again, we *ou kong* him a lot of money.'

It was Andy's first encounter with Singlish, so after we left the control station, he asked me, 'What were you talking about?' 'I told them you were this

'I told them you were this stupid white foreign country bumpkin,' I said, 'and they said they would let you off this time, but if you litter again, they'll fine you five hundred dollars.' I explained to Andy that though people like me and Eugene could speak perfect English, we reserved our 'proper' English for foreigners, job interviews and English oral exams. With friends and family, we always used Singlish, that is, Singapore slang. Singlish is a type of pidgin English, where English

words are arranged according to the rules of Chinese grammar, and sentences are sprinkled with the occasional Chinese, Malay and Indian words. Singlish sounds like 'broken' English--to foreign ears it can sound unintelligible. uneducated, even crude. However, we didn't speak 'broken' English because we lacked the ability to speak the Queen's English; we spoke Singlish, because with all its contortions of grammar and pronunciation, its new and localized vocabulary, Singlish expressed our thoughts in a way that the formal, perfectly enunciated, anal BBC World

Service English never could.
Besides, who wants to talk like some O level textbook, instead of using our own language, our home language, the language of our souls?

I don't speak either standard

English or Singlish consistently. When I'm with friends like Eugene, I enjoy switching between the Queen's English and the *Ah Ma's* English, randomly, arbitrarily and often in mid-sentence. It's just the Singaporean way, this totally jumbled, multi-lingual lingo--just part of our melting poet, *rojak* way of speech, thought and life.