# STAR BOOKS REVIEW

## Home truths from the great African moralist

### Charles R. Larson reflects on a writer in his autumn

HE occasion of a new book by Chinua Achebe, Africa's most celebrated writer and author of Things Fall Apart, the great African novel, cannot be ignored. It's been twenty years since his previously published book and more than that since his last novel. Much has happened to Achebe and Nigeria during those years, much of it not good. But even prior to those twenty years there was the civil war in Nigeria (1967-1970), after the country's Igbos succeeded and formed their own country called Biafra. It took years for the scars of those events to heal (if they ever did). Achebe and many other Igbos were left in a state of emotional collapse and, if you talk to Igbos today in southeastern Nigeria, they'll tell you that a similar situation could occur again.

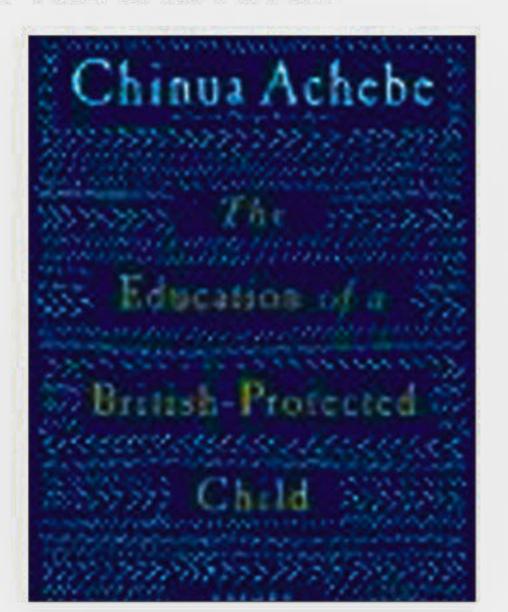
An automobile accident in Nigeria in 2001 left Achebe paralyzed and wheelchair bound. A person of less inner strength would not have survived. Finally, there has been a kind of downward spiral in the country's ability to emerge as the major moral force that it might have become on the African continent, leading the much-heralded but still unrealized African renaissance. Military coups, terrible leadership, the waste of the billions and billions of dollars from oil revenue, rampant corruptioneven the "Nigeria scam" -- have left a bad taste in many people's mouths. You can't call Nigeria a failed state, but it's certainly difficult to see the country as much beyond that because of the extraordinary toll of wasted potential in all areas. Achebe speaks about many of these issues in his new collection of essays, The Education of a British-Protected Child, an especially ironic title given the writer's ambivalent feelings about his country of birth vis-à-vis its current status in the world.

How odd, I thought, when I learned of the title of the new book. Achebe first used the term in a lecture delivered at Cambridge University in January 1993; apparently the text was not published until now. In 1957, he states, after a failed attempt to gain entrance to Cambridge for graduate work, he travelled to the United Kingdom "to study briefly at the BBC Staff School in London. For the first time I needed and obtained a passport, and saw myself

defined therein as a 'British Protected Person.' Somehow the matter had never come up before! I had to wait three more years for Nigeria's independence in 1960 to end that rather arbitrary

Thus, as a child growing up in a British colony, Achebe was a 'British-Protected Child'. Even if he had been an adult, the British would probably still have considered him a child. But that is not the irony that I mentioned above. Since Nigeria's independence, Achebe has hardly been able to consider himself a "Nigerian-Protected Person." He does not state this as directly as I just did, but one can't help believing that if Nigeria had fulfilled its promise at independence, Achebe would be living not in the United States but in the country of his birth. It's easy to extend the implication that the country's sizeable brain drain (artists, musicians, writers, professionals) would not have occurred with such magnitude were Nigeria able to nurture its intellectuals. Nigeria is only one of a number of African countries that are unable to "protect" its citizens and prevent them from fleeing their homelands--sometimes in search of jobs and a better standard of living but more often today because of wars.

Achebe has not been known for talking about himself, but there are memorable passages in the new collection of essays in which he reveals fascinating autobiographical information. As a child, his concern with education and words earned him the nickname, "dictionary." In an essay titled "My Dad and Me," he writes warmly about his father's religious faith (he was an Anglican catechist) as well as Christianity itself. Inevitably, the new religion and education were fused, as anyone who has read Things Fall Apart already knows. "I am a prime beneficiary of the education which the missionaries had made a major component of their enterprise. My father had a lot of praise for the missionaries and their message, and so have I. But I have also learned a little more skepticism about them than my father had any need for. Does it matter, I ask myself, that centuries before these European Christians sailed down to us



The Education of a British-Protected Child Chinua Achebe Knopf

in ships to deliver the Gospel and save us from darkness, their ancestors, also sailing in ships, had delivered our forefathers to the horrendous transatlantic slave trade and unleashed darkness in

Related to the issue of slavery and Africa's "darkness," Achebe includes several essays in the collection that return to his on-going struggle to understand Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1902), which, he has said on other occasions, became a kind of springboard that provoked him to begin writing himself. Paraphrasing Conrad, who said that all of Europe had contributed to the making of Kurtz, "[S]o had all of Europe collaborated in creating the Africa that Kurtz would set out to deliver

and that he would merely subject to obscene terror."

In one of the most important essays in the collection, "Africa's Tarnished Name," Achebe once again challenges those who argue that Conrad could not be expected to present an enlightened picture of Africa because of the era in which he lived, i.e., no one else did. Achebe totally obliterates that ignorant position by identifying other writers and artists well before Conrad's racist story was published who had nothing to do with that argument. Unfortunately, it is Conrad's version that has mostly prevailed, but that can only be additional evidenceis it needed?--that racism has always contributed to the West's distorted view of Africa.

Make no mistake. Achebe is just as hard on Africans as he is on myopic Westerners, particularly with regard to his own country. "Nigeria is neither my mother nor my father. Nigeria is a child. Gifted, enormously talented, prodigiously endowed, and incredibly wayward." Bad leadership is at the core of Achebe's on-going litany about "the trouble with Nigeria." Those last four words are, in fact, the title of a book the writer published way back in 1984. His agony over his country and his people has not diminished; if anything, it has evolved to a state of "anxious love, not hate. Nigeria is a country where nobody can wake up in the morning and ask: what can I do now? There is work for all."

This simple observation could easily be made about many of the world's populationsespecially about Americans, America being Achebe's adoptive land. And, yet, the man has always been a person of good cheer, not a pessimist. We see his generosity of soul in virtually every essay in this collection, whether it be about his family, his defense of English as the language of his writing (and not Ibgo as some Africanists have questioned), or the importance of African literature. He asks why African writing in European languages came into being and answers that the African's "story had been told for him, and he found the telling quite unsatisfactory." More specifically, about himself he adds, "The day I figured this out was when I said no, when I realized that stories are not always innocent; that they can be

used to put you in the wrong crowd, in the party of the man who has come to dispossess you."

Chinua Achebe was born near Ogidi, in eastern Nigeria, in 1930. The first thirty years of his life, until 1960, were lived under colonialism, but you could say that Achebe had already broken the colonial yoke on his country by writing and publishing Things Fall Apart two years earlier. In the early years after the novel's publication, Things Fall Apart was read more widely in Africa than in the Westas it should have been. But in the last decade or two, Achebe's masterpiece has achieved iconic status in the West where it is often taught as the African novel. The novel merits such status, which is not to overlook Achebe's five subsequent novels, all uniquely addressing more contemporary issues. Last year, Achebe lived to see the publication of a special fiftieth anniversary edition of his

masterpiece. Few writers are so fortunate. But there is an additional side to Achebe's importance that few people know about. In the early 1960s for William Heinemann, the original British publisher of Achebe's work, the still young writer began editing the "African Writers Series," a daring series of literary works from writers across the continent. Achebe selected and edited the first two hundred titles. Thus, almost single-handedly he shaped the concept of African literature in a way no other writer has ever accomplished, defining the inspiration and development of an entire continent's literature.

Both in his own unique novels and in his role as editor of African Writers Series, Chinua Achebe has left an indelible mark on our concept of world literature. Without his own writings and the works of dozens and dozens of African writers whom he midwifed into publication, world literature would be much less rich and diverse, still locked into the geography of Europe and America.

Charles R. Larson, CounterPunch's Fiction Critic, is Professor of Literature at American University in Washington, DC.

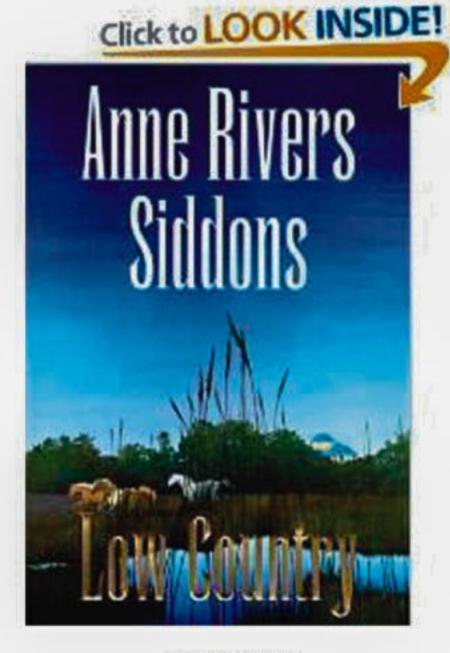
### Loneliness of a mother

#### Tulip Chowdhury explores death and sadness

ARO" is short for Caroline Venable. A woman in her thirties, Caro lived in Peacock's Island, South Carolina. She was born there, grew up on the island and knew of no second home. Dayclear, a settlement of the Gullahs, was just a part of Peacock's Island divided by a marshland. To Caro both the places were like heavens in this world. She was in awe of the old civilization of the Gullahs. She wanted them to retain their own lifestyle and live on there in their own way. To her, the word Gullah was a beautiful word, a part of the strange and lyrical amalgam of West African and Colonial English once spoken by the handful of Gullah community. They were the descendants of the slaves brought here by the first white settlers of these archipelago marshes. Some of the elders still spoke the old patois among themselves. To Caro the Gullahs were a part of her home, part of her being.

While Caro's thoughts were often full with thoughts of the welfare of these people, her other being was constantly mourning the death of her daughter Kylie. She had died at the age of ten, drowned in the sea that surrounded her. Had Kylie been alive she would have been a teenager. Caro often went to Dayclear and spent the night all by herself in the cottage up there. Her nights would be spent in the company of wine and whiskey. Here Caro drowned herself for the night and tried to forget the unhappiness over Kylie. Her son Clark was away from the island pursuing his studies. Her husband Clay was busy roaming the country looking for vacation spots. While Caro played the good wife, in her soul she was lonely and miserable. She was an artist but she could no longer paint to her heart's content. Somehow her brooding self always made her thoughts go astray. There were days when she would spend hours just holding on to the brush and staring at an empty canvas. Her soul seemed to be empty, her heart dead somewhere. The spirit of her dead daughter seemed to hover over everything she did and everywhere she went.

Then one day, while Caro was in the island cottage, a little girl ventured up to her doorstep. Caro thought she was having hallucinations, for the girl was the perfect image of little Kylie. Caro imagined that her little daughter's spirit was there to meet her. While she stood spellbound, Luis Cassells, the little girl's



**Low Country** Anne Rivers Siddons Harpertorch

grandfather, came over looking for her. When he heard of Caro's confusion he did not try to correct her but told her that it was just normal to envision her dead child in a likely situation. From this day Luis became Caro's friend, someone who seemed to understand her completely. Caro's tormented soul found refuge in this friendship. The little girl Lita grew fond of Caro and Caro sort of kept imagining that Kylie was there in the skin of Lita. Her soul refused to let go of Kylie, refused to believe that Kylie was gone.

While Caro was under all that emotional upheaval Clay was secretly planning to give out Dayclear and the Gullah community to be developed for a vacation Tulip Chowdhury is a writer and critic.

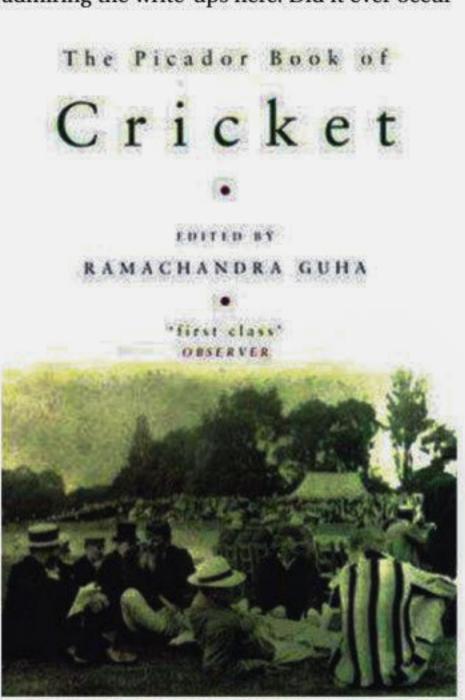
spot. Luis one day revealed the plans to Caro. She felt as if her sky was coming down. She felt betrayed by the very husband whom she had loved and trusted. On a whim she packed up and went off to her cottage in Dayclear. The morning found her looking for the wild ponies that roamed the island. Then she walked to the Gullah community and promised that she would not let anyone make their home a tourist spot. While she was going through this emotional crisis with her Clark she found Luis was ready to be more than just a friend. In Dayclear Caro once again found refuge in alcohol and tried to forget her unhappiness over her husband. The little girl Lita fell sick just when Caro herself needed some nursing. Lita's needs woke the mother in Caro and she stood beside the little girl and her grandfather. Caro's determination to keep the Gullah community intact at last wins over Clay and he is forced to give in. But the battle for the land and the love for the Gullahs have to go a long way before Caro and her husband can be reunited. Clay too had to break up with his contracts with his partners and return to his wife and her wants. While Caro is fighting to save her island and to keep its originality she finally realizes that Kylie was gone from her. The realization that her island might have slipped through her fingers makes her all the more realistic. She knew that it was the island where Kylie had lived, where she had spent her last days. She grew closer to Lita knowing that the little girl had lost her mother when she was five. At last Caro found solace in this world, learning that she could give herself to others and love them. She took Lita under her wings knowing that Kylie would have loved her for it. Of course Kylie would be always there with her, on her own island. Her island was also safe for the Gullah community, the people she loved.

Low Country is a book that stretches the vision of the mind through its detailed descriptions of beautiful places. Anne Rivers Siddon's tapestry of the marshes and the islands is simply picture perfect. The portraits of the beautiful, lush places make the reader live in the places and make them feel as if the happenings are palpably real.

## Between bat and ball...

#### Syed Badrul Ahsan enjoys a game

AMACHANDRA Guha gives you here, not the details of cricket matches in ▲ history but the personalities who left indelible impressions on the game. You have here a collage of essays straddling various periods of time, articles that throw up images of a bright past. The surprise is that those who may not understand the nuances of the game, indeed may not have demonstrated much attention to it (include this reviewer in that group of the ignorant) will nevertheless end up admiring the write-ups here. Did it ever occur



The Picador Book of Cricket Ed. Ramachandra Guha Picador

to you that Hanif Mohammad, the original Little Master, went to a madrasa in Pakistan after his family had migrated from India in the aftermath of Partition? Those of us who went to school in the 1960s recall the splendour he brought to cricket with his quiet handling of the bat. Ah, those were the days of Hanif, Mushtaq, Kardar and so many others. Remember the Ceylonese (today's Sri Lankan) named Michael Tissera, whose batting so impressed the girls in Karachi in 1967 that they all crowed in unison, 'Tissera, Tissera, we want a century'?

In this unputdownable work, you will recall the great player that Victor Trumper was until his death on 28 June 1915 at the age of thirty eight. His bier was borne by eleven Australian cricketers to his grave in Sydney. In distant London, caught up in the First World War, news of his demise made headlines. They reported thus: 'Death of a Great Cricketer.' W.J. O'Reilly speaks of the young Don Bradman, while J.H. Singleton celebrates him in his article, 'Brightly Fades the Don.' In this work, there are the forgotten names in cricket as also in cricket journalism that you will happily stumble into. Neville Cardus, C.L.R. James, Ray Robinson, Mathhew Engel share the stands with the likes of Tendulkar, Kapil Dev, Ranji, Botham, Sobers and a whole line-up of others. And note that V.S. Naipaul and J.B. Priestley too have something to say about cricket.

Guha happily registers the place of cricket in the soul. As sport and spectacle, he notes, cricket is now 'vastly more important in the erstwhile colonies than in the Mother Country' (which of course is England). He goes on, 'Indeed, an obscure town in the Arabian Gulf, Sharjah, hosts matches viewed by millions more people than would view an Ashes Test at

And that is all the more reason why you must commandeer this work, from wherever.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. He also edits Star Books Review.

Floating Appearance". This suggests that she has

designed it to climax her work. Certainly, the care

with which she builds her case for Conrad as "the

illusionist par excellence" of 19th century Malaya

who is incorporating in his narrative art the new

ways of seeing that were transforming human

visuality at this point of time makes for fascinating

reading. But here, too, she mostly extends ideas and

insights found in relatively recent critical works on

Conrad. In particular, the frequency with Stephen

Donovan's Joseph Conrad and Popular Culture

(2005) is invoked in this chapter indicates that she is

mostly adding to his observations about how new

forms of seeing such as the camera and the cinema

had had a profound impact on the novelist's envi-

sioning of the people and places of the Malay

Archipelago. But it is also true that here as elsewhere

she is able to build on the work of others to offer

more nuanced interpretations in this case particu-

larly of the story "The End of the Tether" to convince

us that the novelist's "fictional East is deliberately

set up as an unstable construct 'whose true outlines

eluded the eye' and where meaning is constantly

as a sophisticated and erudite interpretation of

Conrad's eastern world, if not an entirely original

One can sum up Conrad's Eastern Vision, then,

making and unmaking itself".

## Problematizing Conrad's eastern vision

### Fakrul Alam studies a collision of indistinct ideas

HERE is much to commend in Agnes S. K. Yeow's recent book, Conrad's Eastern Vision: A Vain and Floating Appearance. It is thoroughly researched, lucidly written and completely focused on its subject: the stories and novel Joseph Conrad wrote where the Malay Archipelago is the setting. Making good use of recent Conrad criticism, poststructuralist approaches to texts, and her knowledge of the history and geography of the region, Yeow has provided us with fully contextualized, readable, fascinating and nuanced readings of works such as An Outcast of the Islands, Almayer's Folly, and of course, Lord Jim. In the process, she manages to convince us not only of the "romance" that drew him to fictionalize the region he had experienced on his own but of the way he problematized it in his narratives. Additionally, she tries to persuade us that "in the trajectory of Conrad's aesthetic development, there is clearly a 'Malayan' phase" in which he negotiated between art and history.

Yeow roots her analysis in ideas emanating mainly from Bakhtin and poststructuralist thought. Bakhtin enables her to see a Conrad who "tacitly acknowledges that fiction and history are dialogic and contesting voices". Another Bakhtinian idea that influences her is his concept of "the surplus of seeing" that allows one to understand that "fiction sees thing which history does not and vice versa". Poststructuralism enables her to perceive "Conrad's problematization of art and history". However, she endeavors to stake a territory of her own in Conrad studies by concentrating on "the politics of visual subjectivity" in Conrad's Malay fiction. There are also Saidian echoeseven though the Palestinian intellectual's name is never acknowledged in the book itselfin her postcolonial attempt to read the tales "in counterpoint with history's version". Similarly, although Foucault is not evoked directly in Conrad's Eastern Vision, she stresses "the contestable idea of the Malay" that Conrad manages to conjure out of a matrix that is of "cultural, political, and discursive significance to the colonial powers as well as to the many other

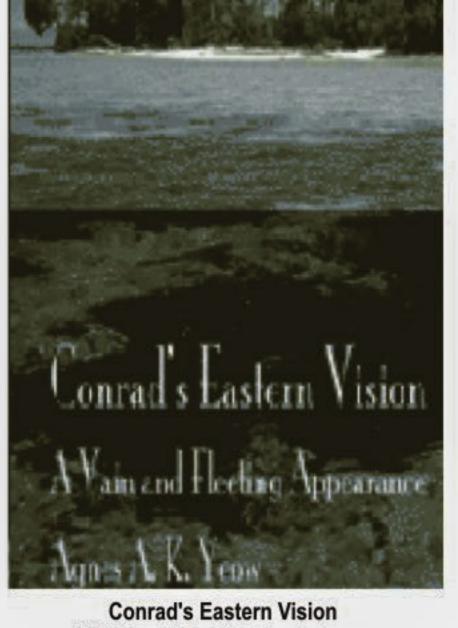
stakeholders in the native states and statecontrolled territories" (but why does she use that clichéd word so easily bandied in recent developmental jargon?).

Yeow attempts to establish a specifically Malayan context to her reading of Conrad's Eastern stories and novels by arguing that some of them echo the narrative form called hikayat that constitutes an important part of the classic literary tradition of the region. Noting that this form is one that oscillates between history and chronicle and describing how it blends the fantastic and the supernatural with historical facts, Yeow sets out to show that a work like Lord Jim "is fashioned along the lines of a hikayat in both subject matter and form insofar as it reflects an eclectic blending not only of multiple points of view conveyed by framenarrators but also of multiple epistemological systems represented by fiction and history".

Chapter I of Conrad's Eastern Vision delineates "the collision of indistinct ideas" in the dialogic mode in Conrad's works on the Malay Archipelago. Yeow notes Conrad's ambivalence about Empire. She shows that the novelist was influenced by his own stay in this part of the world but that his views were also shaped by the contemporary western discourse of imperialism. Like other Conradians, Yeow allies the writer with his memorable creation Stein, albeit with a poststructuralist twist, for both remind her that "art and fiction (and other forms of knowledge, e.g. history and anthropology) intersect and destabilize each other". This is to say, fact and fiction are jumbled and trade, politics and Anglo-Dutch rivalry collude with the writer's tendency to fictionalize experience. The point, however, in not an exceptional one, for though Yeow's stance is buttressed by Bakhtin and poststructuralism, didn't we always know that history and fiction get together in the novel? Indeed, it is difficult not to conclude after coming to the end of the chapter that her conclusion that novels such as Lord Jim resonates with the "interacting voices of history and fiction" as a case of

putting old wine in a new bottle.

But even less convincing is Yeow's bid to give a uniquely Malaysian spin to her analysis by invoking the hikayat as a possible antecedent of Conrad's Eastern fiction in Chapter 2 of Conrad's Eastern Vision, where she also looks at Conrad's treatment of Malays in general and Patusan in Lord Jim in particular. She says that "seen in the light of the unique blend of fiction and history common to local historiography, Conrad's insistence that fiction is history constitutes an uncanny coincidence indeed" She sees "a subtext of the hikayat" in the Patusan sequence of the novel. Jim's progress



A Vain and Floating Appearance Agnes S. K. Yeow Palgrave Macmillan

and the twists and turns in his fortunes seems fantastic and mythicalthe stuff of "exotic romance". However, and as Yeow herself recognizes, such stories of white rajahs were common enough throughout the British Empire, as readers of Kipling's "The Man Who Would be King" will recall. Also, because she provides no clear evidence of Conrad's knowledge of Malayan storytelling tradition, how can we conclude so speculatively that he is affiliating himself with the hikayat tradition? The affinities she finds between the narratives of the tradition and Conrad's works are no doubt worth thinking about, but too general and too indefinite to be embraced with any degree of certainty by anyone seriously looking for sources of Conrad's narrative art of the period.

Far more telling are the details of Malay history Yeow amasses in the latter part of this chapter to inform us about the novelist's complex treatment of the social, economic and political contexts of Patusan. These details convince us that what he has conjured from them is "a remarkably accurate replica of a historical landscape which has witnessed the ebb and flow of political fortunes" of the white rajahs in this part of the world. In fact, Yeow is at her best in the second half of Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 of Conrad's Eastern Vision where she is able to show how rooted Conrad's portraits of rootless Europeans, Malay Muslims, diasporic Chinese and Arabs, and mixed races are in the demographic as well as the political history of the region. They all mingle in a world of "colonial unease", in territories that "are fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity," often occupying "interstitial, intermediary, in between positions" But while these chapters are illuminating and well worth reading for anyone interested in Conrad's Malay fiction they reveal Yeow's indebtedness to works such as Heliena Krenn's Conrad's Lingard Triology: Empire, Race and Women in the Malay Trilogy (91990) and Robert Hampson's Cross-Cultural Encounters in Joseph Conrad's Malay

Fiction (2000). Chapter IV of Yeow's book is titled "A Vain and

one. Nevertheless, it is a work that will be a valuable addition to Conrad scholarship, for Yeow does

manage to make us appreciate anew to what extent Conrad had taken up as a credo the declaration he had made in his famous "Author's Note" to The Nigger of the Narcissus: "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feelit is, before all, to make you see". It is Yeow's singular achievement to convince us that this act of seeing in his stories of the Malay Archipelagoes is the result of the complex negotiations he had undertaken between his experience of the region and his representations of its history for his readers so that they could envision the complexity of truth.

Dr. Fakrul Alam, a leading scholar, teaches English literature at Dhaka University