
The publication of *Writing Singapore* has been in many ways a long time coming. Singapore turns 45 in 2010 and the nation’s literary scene has in the past half-decade witnessed some growth, hence the timeliness of this anthology’s publication. English Literature in Singapore has evolved to becoming a Singapore Literature in English. More proudly and perhaps with a slight nationalistic idiom, implicit is also a *Singaporean* Literature in English. This anthology, though distinctly titled *An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature*, does make a subtle endeavour in presenting a *Singaporean* Literature, a *Singaporean* voice – a sense of ownership and entitlement.

The editors Angelia Poon, Philip Holden and Shirley Lim must be credited for a very comprehensive ‘General Introduction’, in which efforts are made to secure tight definitions and justifications regarding the often messy and complex task of anthologizing. Firstly, due acknowledgement is made to other older anthologies of Singapore Literature, which in turn provide reason for the editors to explain the critical difference between this particular anthology and the rest. ‘While anthologies of Singapore Literature are not new, few have attempted the comprehensive overview undertaken by this anthology[,] aiming to fill the gap in the critical scholarship of Singapore Literature in English, aiming for historical breadth and coverage of multiple genres’ (xxi- xxii). This is the first anthology that has managed a comprehensive taxonomy of genres, time period and literary merit. That such a synthesis and organization is made is critical to the nation’s literary development.

Efforts to detail the proliferation of literary works must be given due recognition because aligned with such an order are the ‘decisions regarding canon and canonicity’ (xxii). The editors ensure that they underscore the difficulty in canonizing *qua* the act of anthologizing, with the awareness that they are after all dealing in postcolonial scholarship, a body of work that requires much defining and boundary marking. Political considerations and canonizing of new literatures in English cannot be examined in isolation; both exist together because the former agitates or necessitates the latter. Especial attempts are therefore made to create a canon comprising of mostly local writers, with the exception of an assortment of non-Singaporean writers belonging to different time periods.

This brings me to my main point of contention – that of inclusivity and its value. The anthology does not claim to be exclusive, nor does it claim to be frivolously all-encompassing. However, there is a pervading weakness in the arguments provided for the inclusion of non-Singaporean authors. I am not debunking the need for inclusion but one has to understand the implications of inclusion when coming up with an anthology of national writing, of *Singapore Literature*, as it is proclaimed in the title. The editors are generally clear in their defence of the direction of Singapore Literature: they view its concurrency with history, taken from the perspective of the ‘new millennium’ (xxi) and thus ‘anticipate that the anthology itself will encourage fresh historical analyses, stimulate new cultural productions, and contribute to important constructions and revisions of individual and national

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identities’ (xxi). Indeed what they mean by ‘fresh historical analyses’ needs further verification. What constitutes a fresh historical analysis? How would this impact the value of inclusivity? What kinds of works should be included and by whom should they be written?

To prevent questions that might arise with the inclusion of non-Singaporean authors, the editors provide a brief analysis of how each author’s work has relevance to Singapore. For example, Holden justifies the inclusion of Guillemard’s and Purcell’s poems in the 1930s and 1940s as being ‘transitional’ (10). Qualifying their works as being momentary is of course an attempt by Holden to legitimise their presence in a constantly changing Singapore, but he stops short at admitting: ‘both now seem increasingly out of place in contrast to more complex efforts to appropriate the English language and literary forms to comment on a Singapore context’ (10). If indeed it is ‘out of place’ as Holden critiques, why are they still included? He claims that they possess typicalities of colonial writing such as the opposition ‘of a tropical to a temperate landscape’ (10), but this reason alone does not suffice to warrant them a place in the anthology. There is absolutely no fresh historical perspective offered except for the fact that these works were written about Singapore in that particular period. The poets still remain outside their colonized culture, viewing and writing another culture they do not understand. Their fixation with the tropical landscape is simply a condition of the ‘contact zone’¹: the ‘social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination’² – where the local landscape is objectified and exoticised by the settler.

This is further exacerbated by the inclusion of Joseph Conrad’s ‘The End of the Tether’. Holden cleverly uses Hugh Clifford as a counterpoint to Conrad with the former disparaging that Conrad displayed ‘none but a superficial acquaintance with the Malayan customs, language or character’ (7). Such a move might seem to legitimise Clifford’s work here. However, Holden mitigates Clifford’s legitimacy by situating the latter’s work in ‘fantasy’ (7) – an impossible ‘amphib[ious]’ (7) state in which Clifford desires to be ‘to escape the constraints of the colonial order of things while at the same time not giving up loyalty to imperial power’ (7). Clifford’s desire for duality still disallows him to write outside the colonial discourse; his voice – despite its being remarkably less arrogant than Conrad – still remains irrevocably foreign, thus making his inclusion in the anthology highly questionable. Holden once again remains reticent about Clifford’s irreconcilable dilemma.

Finally, the inclusion of Isabella Bird’s travel narrative within the British pantheon is merely an attempt to provide a female voice in the predominantly patriarchal colonial narrative; it does not add value to a specific Singapore literary narrative. Bird the traveller invariably falls into the trap of exoticising the landscape as ‘spectacle’ (7). That such an inflated imagination of Singapore is proffered proves once again that ‘the colonial model teaches the exoticist that the Other is a

² Pratt 4.
conspicuously different order of being’. In all the above examples, the only effect achieved is an othering of the colonial object.

Based on these reasons, I do not think that the abovementioned works merit a place in the anthology nor the canon. They could at best function as pre-1965 transnational literature (about Singapore). Revisiting history can be a liberating endeavour, but one must be circumspect in being a little too all-inclusive, for such an approach necessarily devalues the very notion of inclusivity.

Anthologizing, like a nation’s literature, is a work-in-progress. Faced with the hard and sensitive task of anthologizing and canonizing, the editors have succeeded in coming up with a reasonably commendable solution, for now. Their selection of works, though having the potential to be slightly more exhaustive, is good enough as there is only so much an anthology can contain.

In itself, *Writing Singapore* is a step forward in Singaporean Literature. As a Singaporean, I must say that this is an anthology I am immensely proud of. I recommend this to anyone interested in reading about Singapore.

**Chew Yi Wei**

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