

Mohammad Quayum (ed), *A Rainbow Feast: New Asian Short Stories* (Marshall Cavendish, 2010)

A Rainbow Feast raises the question of (third) world literature's revolutionary potential as a platform for internationalist-socialist solidarity across cultural, ethnic or religious disparities and in the face of shared oppression as well as its equally potential domestication as an exchange commodity-product for consumption and cultural capital enhancement by 'third' and 'first' world elites. As its title suggests, Quayum's anthology of Asian writing in English seems more prone to bourgeois-liberalist 'culinary hedonism' or so-called 'boutique multiculturalism' than to Marxian working class struggle, to say the most. Pursuing the food metaphor, a review found how 'through compacted sequences and flash-in-the-pan suspense, the bite-size stories swallowed me as quickly as I tumbled out of each tale. Each story left a unique aftertaste on my mental palette, while I reflected on what I had just consumed in the last ten to fifteen minutes.'¹

Insistence on the sensuous pleasures of the flesh drawn from an infinitely prolix and Morpheus-like Orient waiting to be tasted and savoured on a platter alludes to forms of commodity fetishism all too frequent in literary blurbs about Asian (diasporic) writing in English and somewhat obscuring its political/poetical relevance. It consists of an act of 'cultural cannibalism' whereby literature is consumed figuratively into, and its 'ex-centricity' reabsorbed within, the cultural production of transnational capital accumulation and 'ex(ap)propriation'. Western Marxist critique Theodor Adorno's belief that 'the trajectory leading to aesthetic autonomy passes through the stage of disinterestedness [...] for it was during this stage that art emancipated itself from cuisine and pornography'² is of particular relevance in light of global capitalism's ability to accommodate and draw a profit from even its most recalcitrant elements, like the (ex-)colonised.

For Adorno, neither does art rest on its ornamental decorativeness, which the aforementioned review suggests by having a photo of Quayum's anthology pose beside a plant pot, a philistine tendency in art which Adorno himself described as a 'feast for the eye,'³ nor does it lie in some extra-aesthetic 'message' but in the artwork's intra-logic, its 'opposition to the real world [is] in the realm of form; but this occurs, generally speaking, in a mediated way such that aesthetic form is a sedimentation of content.'⁴ Art's mediation between form and content, autonomy from, and subordination to, the real world reflects the dialectical 'double bind' between the revolutionary characteristics of world literature and its 'co-modification' by the market.

'The common string that threads these stories together is [not] the dust, feel, smell and spirit of Asia'⁵ neither is it that old blanket – 'made up of several different

¹ Tan Meng Chuan, 'A Rainbow Feast: Review,' *Overseas Singaporean Portal*, 23 Nov. 2010
<http://www.overseassingaporean.sg/cms/index.php/portal/sgfeatures/sgfeatures_features/sgfeatures_features_reads/book_review_a_rainbow_feast1/>

² Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) 18.

³ Adorno 18.

⁴ Adorno 7.

⁵ Chuan.

patches, each one of a different material texture and colour. Chiffon, laces, sequins, organza, embroidery' (211) – in Singaporean O Thiam Chin's short story 'Patchwork', for which the review of Quayum's anthology seeks a symbol of 'rich traditions in a time when heritage is not deemed important.'⁶ Against this revivalist interpretation, my own reading of a 'material' here seeks instead both the very fabric(ation) of the literary text and the dialectical-materialist and historical processes of life in-forming it – such material constraints which art may partially escape from and transform, like in a patchwork, due to its non-identitarian, monadic dimension at the formal level.

The anthology form reflects this double bind, in the same way the short story and English forms do. While stressing the neo-colonial motif of English as a *lingua franca* of business, in his introduction Quayum also stresses its transformation under the (ex-)colonised's pen, and while falling into the bogus of authenticity and exoticism by arguing how 'given the richness and diversity of Asian cultures, finding material for a short story is perhaps relatively effortless, because [...] in a colourful culture, the writer has only to look out of the window to pick up a character (and therefore a story)' (15), Quayum also finds how 'the short story historically flourishes among "submerged populations" in unsettled social climates because it is suited to express the subjective experience of marginalised individuals' (15). Finally, while noting the catalogue-like facticity of the anthology (indeed of the short story) form, making it a perfect repository for easy/quickly-to-be-forgotten consumption by the philistine reader, Quayum suggests how "'Slice of Life" stories, or *tranche de vie* [...] may violate the element of unity by mirroring life in its complex formlessness' (16).

Thus the blanket in 'Patchwork' may not only express a form of boutique multiculturalism but also this anthology's potentiality to resist co-optation by the totalising logic of capitalist reification. In this sense only are each of the 24 stories in *A Rainbow Feast* 'unique' not so much because they explicitly address the imminent issues of poverty (and, ironically, hunger), war, class and cultural inequalities, immigration and alienation, or women's oppression and sexuality, but because they do so within the immanent (intra)logic of the literary text, thereby resisting a transparent or mimetic (re)presentation of, and identification with, reality; i.e. not as it is, but as it *may* or *ought to be*. Hence, in Indian Marxist critique Aijaz Ahmad's words: 'Like socialism itself, "world literature" is a horizon: the measure of a time yet to come. Or, to put it another way, "world literature", like the working class, is a product of the capitalist market but stands in a relation antithetical to it.'⁷

Though qualitatively unequal overall, some stories in Quayum's anthology fit with Ahmad's utopian moment in world literature and Adorno's understanding of art's partial irreducibility to the objectifying real(m) of signification and identity. Opening with the words ('She looks into the mirror ...') (111), the aural laws of feminine appearance governing patriarchal Saudi Arabia in Suad Khatab Ali's 'The Subjugated Ones' are at the end transgressed, their illusory immediacy temporarily broken: 'For the next several hours, until she dresses for work in the morning, Fadwa will escape from being a woman' (118). What Fadwa is (not), the story's self-referentiality will not yield, subverting the apparent feast-like greed of the market's

⁶ Chuan

⁷ Aijaz Ahmad, 'The Communist Manifesto and "World Literature"', *Social Scientist* 28: 7-8 (2000) 29.

nominalistic drive only to dis/close a defiant fist instead. In Barnali Saha's 'The Gambler', the existentialist tale of an 'extraordinarily ordinary' (259) man whose entire life comes to a halt after divorcing his wife and committing suicide, the aural is again transcended, for in many ways, suicide is not death but always already resuscitation: 'Such is the complexity of a normal, seemingly unsophisticated, ordinary life that even though it looks perfect from outside, in most cases it is rotten and dead from inside' (259). Finally, in Farah Ghuznavi's 'Waiting', the reader will find him/herself waiting, along with these two Bangladeshi children from Dhaka belonging to 'the other 95 per cent of the city's population' (53) for whom Ramadan is no luxury indeed – waiting thus, 'with the effort of not succumbing to despair at the injustice of it all; that lice could flourish even as the humans on whose blood they *feasted* remained unfed' (52) (*italics mine*). In effect, such is the unresolved and ongoing dialectics at the core of *A Rainbow Feast*.

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