

# Malaysian Literature in English



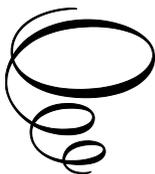
# Malaysian Literature in English:

*A Critical Companion*

Edited by

Mohammad A. Quayum

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Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Companion

Edited by Mohammad A. Quayum

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# INTRODUCTION

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This collection of essays brings together work by some of the most internationally acclaimed critics of Malaysian literature in English from different parts of the world: Australia, Canada, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and the US. It investigates the works of major English-language Malaysian writers in the genres of drama, fiction and poetry, from the beginning to the present, focusing mainly on thematic and stylistic trends. The issues highlighted in the book include gender, ethnicity, nationalism, multiculturalism, diaspora, hybridity and transnationalism, all which are, in varying ways and measures, central to the creativity and imagination of these writers. The chapters collectively address the challenges and achievements of English-language writers in a country where English, first introduced by the colonisers, has experienced a mixed fate of ups and downs in the post-independence period, owing to the changing and at times strikingly different policies adopted by each successive government.

Malaysian literature in English is relatively new compared to most of its Asian counterparts, such as the English-language literary traditions of India, or the Philippines. In India, for example, the tradition of writing in English dates back to a travel narrative by Sake (Sheik) Dean (Din) Mahomed (1759-1851), published in England in 1793 under the title *Travels of Dean Mahomed*. Following this, a multitude of writers began writing and publishing in English, several who would later be recognised among South Asia's most distinguished literary voices: Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-31), Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73), Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-94), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and many more. A major hub of English-language writing was Calcutta (Kolkata), where English found a foothold even before Macaulay's "Minutes on English Education in India" was approved by Lord Bentinck in 1835.

In contrast, English literary activity by local writers in Malaya (later Malaysia) did not emerge until 1949, with the establishment of the University

of Malaya in Singapore, through the merger of the King Edward VII College of Medicine with Raffles College; and the first book in English by a Malayan author—a collection of poetry, *Pulse*, by Wang Gungwu (1930-)—was published in 1950. Yet despite its relatively late beginning—no more than a few years before the country’s independence from colonial rule in 1957—the Malayan tradition of writing in English, like that of India, saw the advent of several gifted writers at the outset. This included such prominent writers as Lloyd Fernando (1926-2008), Lee Kok Liang (1927-92), Goh Sin Tub (1927-2004), Ee Tiang Hong (1933-90), Edwin Thumboo (1933-) and Wong Phui Nam (1935-).

In spite of this robust beginning, there were problems that threatened to quash the tradition’s development from the moment of its inception. As mentioned, English writing by Malayan locals first appeared in 1949 with the establishment of the University of Malaya in Singapore; however, by this time, paradoxically, Singapore was no longer part of Malaya. In 1945, soon after the British returned to Malaya after defeating the Japanese and the Axis forces in the Second World War, they started mulling over and strategising on the issue of independence for this Southeast Asian colony. Accordingly, in January 1946, they released a White Paper setting out the plans to create a Malayan Union: a unitary state comprising the Federated and Unfederated Malay States, as well as Penang and Malacca, in which “all citizens, whatever their origin, would have equal rights.”<sup>1</sup> However, Singapore was not part of this plan as the British intended to retain it as a Crown Colony to carry out their political, cultural and economic missions in this part of the world. This would mean that many of the writers who were pioneers of the Malayan English literary movement—such as Wang Gungwu, Goh Sin Tub and Edwin Thumboo—could no longer be associated with the Malayan (Malaysian) writing at all, especially after Singapore decided to break away from Malaysia for good in 1965 following a brief merger in 1963.<sup>2</sup>

Before making their departure from the colony, the British were eager to give equal citizenship to the ethnic Chinese in particular, mainly because they felt under obligation due to the wartime assistance they had received from the Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA)—an anti-

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Matheson Hooker, *A Short History of Malaysia: Linking East and West* (NSW, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2003), 285.

<sup>2</sup> After then Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew declared de facto independence for the Island state on 31 August 1963, it decided to join the Malayan Federation together with the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak, but chose to break away from it in 1965 over political disputes between Malaysia’s Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and Singapore’s Chief Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

Japanese resistance group in Malaya, composed mainly of ethnic Chinese guerrilla fighters—in defeating the Japanese forces. However, the Malayan Union proposal with the article of giving equal citizenship to all the ethnic groups in the country created an uproar in the Malay community and they held out against it so fiercely that the British were forced to revoke it and replace it with a new proposal in 1948, known as the Malayan Federation, which would “uphold the sovereignty of the sultans, the individuality of the states, and Malay special privileges.”<sup>3</sup> This failure of the British to ensure equal citizenship to all Malayan communities after independence must have dealt a blow to the morale of many of the young English-language writers, most of whom, as the earlier list makes clear, came from the non-Malay minority groups.

This sense of relegation and “othering” of the minority groups was exacerbated when, through an Act of Parliament in 1967, Malay was made the national language of Malaysia. This divisiveness was further reinforced in 1970, through certain amendments to the constitution that made it seditious to question the special rights of the ethnic Malays, the privileges of the Malay royalty, or the status of the Malay language, *Bahasa Melayu*, which was renamed *Bahasa Malaysia* by the government at this time to encourage the non-Malays to identify with the language.<sup>4</sup>

The move to institute Malay as the national language was no doubt beneficial from the point of nation building and unifying the country’s diverse ethnicities with a single language. But it also turned out to be a deliberately repressive move towards writers using English or other minority languages in Malaysia, e.g., Chinese or Tamil, as their creative medium. When Malay became the national language, concomitantly literature in Malay also became the national literature. As a result, writers in English, or any other language but Malay, no longer received any official support for their work, nor were they considered for any national award or even government endorsement for international awards. In this regard, comparing the state of English-language writers in Singapore to those in Malaysia, writer Kee Thuan Chye ruefully but sarcastically comments:

Singapore respects literature written in any language by its citizens. By and large, Singapore upholds a meritocratic system. It nominates writers from across the language spectrum for its Cultural Medallion and for the SEA

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave, 2001), 268.

<sup>4</sup> For details, see Mohammad A. Quayum, “Introduction,” in *Sharing Borders: Studies in Contemporary Singaporean-Malaysian Literature 1* (Singapore: National Library Board, 2009), 11-35.

Write Award, which is actually bestowed by an external body. In fact, year after year, the winning of the SEA Write Award by Malaysians has become a mockery. It's a case of the writers in Malay waiting their turn to be called.<sup>5</sup>

Not only were the English-language writers intentionally passed over and excluded from all official assistance and acknowledgements, they were also slighted for their choice of medium by mainstream Malay writers and critics such as Ismail Hussein, who in his fervour to extol Malay literature dismissed writings in English, Chinese and Tamil as “sectional literature,” “aimless literature” or “foreign literatures”—literature written in “non-indigenous languages” that could not be “understood by all Malaysians.”<sup>6</sup>

Such hostile views towards non-Malay writings had the effect of either silencing the writers or forcing them into what Shirley Geok-lin Lim described as “voluntary exile.”<sup>7</sup> Given the choice between their roots and their tongue, many of these writers held on to their tongue and sacrificed their roots, as they came to believe in Derek Walcott’s pronouncement, “To change your language you must change your life.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, talented writers such as Ee Tiang Hong and Shirley Geok-lin Lim left Malaysia permanently – Ee Tiang Hong for Perth, Australia in 1975 and Shirley Geok-lin Lim for the US in 1969. Several other writers made a conscious decision to settle in Singapore, where they found the language policy more conducive to their medium. This included Catherine Lim (1942-), Leong Liew Geok (1947-), Suchen Christine Lim (1948-) and Kirpal Singh (1949-), and even younger writers such as Farish Noor (1967-), Aaron Lee (1972-) and Huzir Suleiman (1973-). It should be pointed out that no English-language writer from the other side of the Causeway has so far offered to relocate to Malaysia, not even those who were once nurtured by this land. In this context, I once asked Catherine Lim – who was born in Malaysia, educated at the University of Malaya and constantly writes about her childhood experiences in Malaysia in her fiction – whether it would appropriate to consider her a Malaysian writer rather than a Singaporean writer, and her reply was an unequivocal “no”:

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<sup>5</sup> Mohammad A. Quayum, “Kee Thuan Chye,” in *Peninsular Muse: Interviews with Modern Malaysian Poets, Novelists and Dramatists* (Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 232.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Mohammad A. Quayum, “Malaysian Literature in English: Challenges and Prospects in the New Millennium,” in *One Sky, Many Horizons: Studies in Malaysian Literature in English* (Kuala Lumpur: Marshall Cavendish, 2007), 36.

<sup>7</sup> Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Tongue and Roots: Language in Exile,” in *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, ed. Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks (Malaysia: Pearson Education, 2001), 298.

<sup>8</sup> Derek Walcott, “Codicil,” <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/codicil/>.

I find it difficult to consider myself a ‘Malaysian writer’ rather than a ‘Singaporean writer,’ simply because I suppose my sense of being a Singaporean is so strong, Singapore being the country I have adopted, grown to love very much and will always be committed to.<sup>9</sup>

I wonder if her answer might have been more conciliatory towards Malaysia and less effusive towards Singapore had the political situation, especially the country’s language policy, been more “friendly.”

Obviously, the departure of many writers in the wake of such ethnic marginalisation had a debilitating effect on Malaysian literature in English. In fact, the impact of the Language Act and the constitutional amendments that followed had such devastating results on English-language writing that only three books of any consequence came out in the decade that followed: *Scorpion Orchid* (1976), a novel by Lloyd Fernando, and the two volumes of occasional writing by Adibah Amin – *As I Was Passing I* (1976) and *As I Was Passing II* (1978).

Ironically, the exclusion of English and English writing from national life also had ramifications for Malay literature. Without the competition of gifted writers in the English language, some who had earned global renown and recognition, writers in Malay grew somewhat relaxed and complacent, as it was invariably easier for them to win the national awards and hearts of local readers without necessarily having to strive to reach their maximum potential. In this regard, it is worth remembering what the English writer William Hazlitt had to say about the importance of competition in bringing out one’s best: “When a man can do better than everyone else in the same walk, he does not make any very painful exertions to outdo himself. The progress of improvement ceases nearly at the point where competition ends.”<sup>10</sup>

The other upshot of the language policy was the gradual absence of good local translators of Malay literature into English. Since English had been de-emphasised in the school curriculum, and literature in English was not included as a component of language teaching until 1998, obviously a whole generation of Malaysians, and perhaps more, grew up with little or no competence in the English language, certainly not sufficient to undertake

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<sup>9</sup> Mohammad A. Quayum, “Catherine Lim,” in *Peninsular Muse: Interviews with Modern Malaysian and Singaporean Poets, Novelists and Dramatists* (Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 113.

<sup>10</sup> William Hazlitt, “William Hazlitt Sayings and Quotes,” <http://www.wiseoldsayings.com/authors/william-hazlitt-quotes/#ixzz6GUMdQnd0>.

the translation of Malay literary works into English.<sup>11</sup> This has made a difference in the standing of Malay writers with non-Malay as well as international readers, and not one for the better. It is therefore not surprising that many of the Malaysian writers in English, such as the late K.S. Maniam and Shirley Geok-lin Lim, are in fact better known and more widely read and appreciated outside Malaysia than some of the stalwarts of Malaysian national literature, who have not been able to make a breakthrough outside Malaysia's borders owing to nationwide dearth of quality translation skills. Moreover, in a multicultural society like Malaysia, translation plays a pivotal role in bridging cultures and bringing texts to a wider audience. Translation can assist in the nation building process by enabling readers to experience the works of writers in other languages within the country and subsequently develop a mutual respect and admiration between reader and writer for each other's cultures. Accordingly, Singapore has produced several anthologies with texts in different languages, translated into all four official languages of the country. Unfortunately, no such attempt has been made in Malaysia. As a result, ignorance, prejudices and racial stereotyping abound among people of all ethnic groups towards cultures different from their own.

Of course, attitudes towards English have changed considerably since Mahathir Mohamad became the Prime Minister of Malaysia in 1981. A pragmatic leader, Mahathir saw the importance of English as "a universal language" and a "language of knowledge." "It does not make you less Malay or Malaysian if you speak English. To acquire knowledge, you must learn the English language.... You need to master the English language everywhere you go as the language is useful," Mahathir stated in a speech in 2018.<sup>12</sup> On two other occasions, for example, he emphasised the importance of English in a similar vein. In one he said that Malaysia couldn't keep up with the world without mastering the English language, and in another he declared that, in fact, Malaysia was regressing for lack of proficiency in English: "In this age, the English language is the international language, lingua franca,

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<sup>11</sup> Although it should be pointed out that the average level of English language proficiency among adults in Malaysia is better than many Asian countries, as Malaysia was ranked 26 in the world in the 2019 annual Education First (EF) English Proficiency Index which measures the development of English proficiency across the world. "Malaysia Drops in Global English Proficiency Ranking," *FMT News*, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2019/12/11/malaysia-drops-in-global-english-proficiency-ranking/>.

<sup>12</sup> "Speaking English Does Not Make You Less Malay, Says Dr M," *New Straits Times*, 22 December 2018, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2018/12/442822/speaking-english-does-not-make-you-less-malay-says-dr-m>.

and much of the knowledge comes to us in the English language.... If we only master Bahasa Melayu we cannot actively move forward in the world, especially in the economic world";<sup>13</sup> "It isn't that I don't love my language. I was a language champion before many today were born. In 1946... I was already championing the language but I prioritise knowledge. If we lag in terms of knowledge, we will regress.... We are already regressing."<sup>14</sup>

With this expedient attitude towards English, Mahathir adopted certain policies in his first term as Prime Minister (1981-2003) which helped to "reinstate" the language in the country. These policies included sending young Malaysians to English-speaking countries on government scholarships for tertiary education; introducing MUET (Malaysian University English Test) in 1999 as a prerequisite for entering local universities in 1999; introducing literature as a compulsory component of English into the secondary school curriculum in 1998; and instituting the teaching of Maths and Science in English in secondary schools in 2003. Mahathir's plans of creating a fully developed society by 2020 (Vision 2020), when, he hoped, Malaysia would become "equitable," "caring," "psychologically liberated," "mature," "tolerant" and "liberal" but also technologically advanced and economically vibrant, further reinforced the importance of English in Malaysia, as English remains the pivotal language in the current hyper-connected world, where from business, manufacturing and service industries to information technology and the Internet, people use the English language, whether verbally or in writing.<sup>15</sup>

Mahathir's policies and his continuous insistence on the value of English as an emerging global language gradually replaced the previous antipathy and exclusionary approach towards the language with a kind of benign acceptance. Undoubtedly it created new opportunities for potential writers in the language. Yet the overall milieu remained considerably unfriendly and unfavourable towards English literary activities. The medium of education at national schools as well as tertiary institutions was (and still is) entirely in Malay, whereas the vernacular schools used either Tamil or

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<sup>13</sup> "English Proficiency Crucial to Progress, Says Dr Mahathir," *The Star*, 22 November 2015,

<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2015/11/22/english-proficiency-dr-mahathir>.

<sup>14</sup> "Now Out of Power, Dr M Fears of Plan to Teach Maths and Science in English," *Malay Mail*, 12 March 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/03/12/now-out-of-power-dr-m-fears-for-plan-to-teach-maths-and-science-in-english/1845647>.

<sup>15</sup> "Vision 2020," *The Mahathir Years*,

<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/~teh20y/classweb/worldpolitics/Vision2020.html>.

Chinese.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the exposure to English, though introduced in the curriculum as a subject, was not by any means sufficient to create writers or even accomplished readers in the language. English remained as a kind of distant second language or even a foreign language with the vast majority of the population, especially with the “native” Malays, most who didn’t feel the urge to master English as their tongue was the national language, used at all levels of national life. Only some middle- and upper-class Malays, for reasons of either personal interest or family circumstances, developed a passion for English and, in some instances, for English writers and writing. This is evident in the small number of Malay writers writing in English, in the nascent years of the tradition as well as now, compared to those from the Chinese and Indian communities, although Malays make up more than half the population of the country.<sup>17</sup> In fact, their numbers are so few that it may not be difficult to count them on the fingers of one hand.

Sometimes Malay writers also feel the dilemma of being alienated and disenfranchised within their community if they choose to write in English. This may not necessarily be the case with Malaysian Chinese and Indian writers, who, having transplanted from their homeland and home culture are more attuned to accepting English as the global *lingua franca*. This is evident in Dina Zaman’s reply to a question I asked during an interview with her. I asked her, “If medium is the message as Marshall McLuhan suggested in the fifties, what kind of message are you sending out to Malaysians with your choice of medium?” She replied in an honest but somewhat indecisive tone:

I suppose my writing in English initially unsettled a few scholars and academics. When I began writing in the 90s, academics kept asking why I wrote in English and not Malay. I’m Malay. I should write in Malay. I always told them my Malay was not fluent.... I did go through a period of asking why, and I did try writing in Malay, but I figured living my life to other’s expectations would be a futile exercise. They’re not paying my rent.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> “A Glance at the Malaysian Education System,” <https://www.studymalaysia.com/education/higher-education-in-malaysia/a-glance-at-the-malaysian-education-system>.

<sup>17</sup> According to Benjamin Elisha Sawe, a *World Atlas* contributor, the population makeup of the country is as follows: “50.1%... are Malay, 22.6% are Chinese, 11.8% are indigenous Bumiputra groups other than the Malays, 6.7% are Indian, and other groups account for 0.7%.” “Ethnic Groups of Malaysia,” *World Atlas*, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/ethnic-groups-of-malaysia.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Mohammad A. Quayum, “Dina Zaman,” in *Peninsular Muse: Interviews with Modern Malaysian and Singaporean Poets, Novelists and Dramatists* (Oxford,

Another phenomenon with English writing in Malaysia is that nearly all of the country's writers seem to have gone into exile, as more and more voices are appearing from outside Malaysia than from inside. This applies not only to the older generation of writers who left after the enactment of the language policy, but also to the new generation who are writing from all over the world—from Singapore, Australia, the UK, the US and Europe. In fact, there appears to be fewer writers writing from home than from the diaspora. For example, Tash Aw, Farish Noor, Huzir Suleiman, Aaron Lee, Rani Manicka, Zen Cho, Preeta Samarasan, Beth Yaph, Tunku Halim, Jason Lee and Sreedhevi Iyer are all Malaysian writers, writing about Malaysia, from their various deracinated locations and diasporic conditions, dispersed as they are throughout different countries and continents of the world.

It would be difficult to explain why increasingly more and more Malaysian writers in English are emerging from outside the country than from inside, except to say that nationalist sentiment, especially among the ethnic Malays, is still very strong in the country, with the result that English-language writers are not welcomed to the same extent as writers in the national language.<sup>19</sup> For example, in 1991, Muhammad Haji Salleh, a Malaysian National Laureate, had the following to say about writing in English, “in Malaysia, there’s no future in English writing. You just can’t publish in this language anymore.”<sup>20</sup> As such, the government continues to decline moral and material support to writers in the English language; indeed, no official recognition for writers in English exists at all. Reading culture is nearly absent in Malaysia; consequently, few people read literary works and fewer still works in English. For a young writer to break into the publishing industry is almost unheard of, given that only two or three small establishments publish works in English (mostly fiction), and these are generally unwilling to risk publishing work by a new writer in case it lacks appeal with the limited readership in the country and causes financial loss

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Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 296-297.

<sup>19</sup> Even someone like Dina Zaman, a writer in the English language, acknowledges that writing in a language other than Malay is “almost sacrilegious” in Malaysia and that when it comes to Malaysia, she thinks of the Malay writers first and only then of writers in English: “In general, writing in Malaysia tends to be the domain of Malay writers. I have to admit when I think of writers, I think of Pak Samad etc first then K.S. Maniam. This has nothing to do with the quality of their writing, but because of what we were told/informed.” Mohammad A. Quayum, “Dina Zaman,” in *Peninsular Muse: Interviews with Modern Malaysian and Singaporean Poets, Novelists and Dramatists* (Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 301, 299.

<sup>20</sup> Muhammad Haji Salleh, “The Writer as Asian,” in *Conversations with F. Sionil Jose*, ed. F. Sionil Jose (Quezon City: Vera-Reyes, 1991), 51.

for the publisher. Moreover, because these publishing houses have little or no marketing network outside the country, they remain perennially dependent on the same small pool of readers for their viability and subsistence.

However, in the midst of all these challenges, Malaysia has produced a decent quota of excellent writers in English, perhaps not comparable with Singapore, Philippines or India in terms of quantity but certainly comparable in individual merit. This book brings into focus a number of these major writers, both from earlier and from current generations, and including writers from home as well as from the diaspora. The book will be of considerable value to anyone interested in Malaysian literature in English, Malaysian studies, Southeast Asian studies or literary criticism in general. It complements my earlier books, authored and edited in the field, and brings into sharp relief the many ideas and issues that occupy the mind and imagination of Malaysian writers in the English language.

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CHAPTER ONE

CANONS AND QUESTIONS OF VALUE  
IN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH  
FROM THE MALAYAN PENINSULA<sup>1</sup>

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**The Idea of Literary Canons and the Malayan Situation**

The dissemination of writing through publication activates the process of canon-formation in any society and culture. The idea of a canon extends and applies to cultural productions, a principle of implied value that is quasi-religious: “Canons are best seen as a necessary evil. In a world beset by the clamour of a populous mediocrity, the principle of selection cuts with an elitist edge. Only thus can room be cleared—ostensibly, to preserve against fashion and time the authors and texts that the age would have us read and cherish; but also, and often covertly, to establish specific kinds of writing by displacing others in the polemic process that we call literary history.”<sup>2</sup> Literary canons imply or promote a sense of value that is alleged to be “objective” and “universalist.” Regardless, or therefore, it is imperative for all of us engaged in literary studies to recognise that canons are never truly “objective”; that they are, at best, consensual, relative, polemical and political. The polemical and political aspects of all literary evaluations entail an investment in promoting specific values and assumptions, both of

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<sup>2</sup> Rajeev S. Patke, “Canons and Canon-making in Indian Poetry in English,” in *From Commonwealth to Post-Colonial: Critical Essays*, ed. Anna Rutherford (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1992), 244.

the broadly cultural as well as of the specifically literary kind, regardless of whether the investment and promotion is explicit or involuntary.<sup>3</sup> It is also imperative to recognise that while there was some point to the provocation offered famously by Northrop Frye in dismissing issues of literary judgment as matters of mere “taste” and the vagaries of pure subjectivity, as the subsequent writings of scholars like Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has demonstrated, the history of taste is not marginal, but central, to the dynamics of canon formation.

In colonial cultures, the function of canon-formation is complicated by several factors, which can be exemplified through the predicament and characteristic features of Anglophone literary productions from the Malayan peninsula before and after Independence. The narrative of how the English and their language came to the Malayan peninsula is long and complex.<sup>4</sup> With a few notable exceptions such as British India, colonial

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<sup>3</sup> We can regard *Tottel's Miscellany* (1557) as the early prototype for the canon-defining power of this book-genre in British writing; later examples include Percy's *Reliques* (1765), more recent examples include Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* (1861), and in the modern period, *Des Imagistes* (1914), Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), and numerous counterparts in North American poetry and the poetry of Britain's settler colonies and the postcolonial literary traditions of the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and the Philippines.

<sup>4</sup> Three large-scale maritime interactions between Southeast Asia and the outer world preceded the entry of Europeans into the region: trade with India, trade between Southeast Asia and China, and the spread of Islam. The first Portuguese ships that sailed into Malacca in 1509 entered a port already well-established on an ancient trade route. European missionaries brought a Western model of education to the region. Traditionally, education in Malaya was limited to boys at a certain age being taught to read and recite from the Qur'an. Parents did not generally send girls to school, and the aristocracy, whose sons were taught at home, was used to leaving the task of writing and reading of official documents to professional scribes, and the creation and transmission of literary or historical works to oral culture (Rex Stevenson, *Cultivators and Administrators: British Educational Policy towards the Malays 1875-1906* [Kuala Lumpur: Oxford UP, 1975], 16-18). The British secured their first base at Penang (1786), followed by a struggle with the Dutch for possession of Malacca. They discovered an alternative outpost along the same sea-route on the island of Singapore (1819). In 1824, the British gave up their interests in Java and Sumatra in exchange for resumed control over Malacca. In 1826, their three outposts—Penang, Malacca, and Singapore—were consolidated as the Straits Settlements. That marked the first stage of British control over the region. The Company lost its trade monopoly in China in 1833, and the Straits Settlements did not show a profit until after the middle of the nineteenth century. By this time, the peninsular population had grown to approximately 100,000 people. British expansion of indirect rule over the peninsula took place in the early 1870s through

writing was generally slow to develop—in British Malaya writing in English did not begin until the late 19th century, and remained marginal, confined to specific minorities and individuals, until after World War II. Colonial writing in multi-lingual societies is the cultural by-product of educational policies—in British Malaya the English introduced their language belatedly and selectively. Western schooling entered the Malayan peninsula through missionaries of several denominations. The first English medium schools sprang up soon after the establishment of the Straits Settlements in Penang (1816), Singapore (1823) and Malacca (1826). The earliest ideological contribution to British education in the region took the form of a plan that was as grand as it was impractical. Stamford Raffles, who had acquired the island of Singapore for the Company, described to Warren Hastings a plan for a “Malay College” and a “Singapore Institution.” However, Raffles died while the plan was little more than an idea, and his successor advised the Company that the region and its people were not ready for something likely to prove impractical. Therefore, the legacy of the paternalism shown by Raffles was to remain dormant for a long time.

Raffles was also the earliest British administrator in peninsular Malaya to subscribe to an ambivalent stereotype of the Malay as both attractively idyllic and incorrigibly idle: “The Malay, living in a country where nature

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a process in which the business of protecting mercantile interests led to invited interventions in the internal affairs of local rulers, which led to the appointment of British Residents in advisory roles on Malay affairs, which led to governing Malay territories on behalf of their rulers while protecting the symbolic roles and traditional privileges of the Malay aristocracy. This process was consolidated from 1874 to 1896, creating the *Federated Malay States*. The five Malay states which lay to the north were transferred from Siam to British control in 1909, forming the *Unfederated Malay States*, which were joined by the southern state of Johor in 1914, completing the consolidation of British control over the Malaya peninsula. The result of all this manoeuvring was that the British became the major producers of rubber and tin in the world. The island of Borneo (Kalimantan), situated southwest of the Malaya peninsula, was traditionally ruled by a Muslim sultanate based in Brunei. In 1841 an English adventurer was given territory on the northern side of the island—Sarawak—for having rendered military service to the sultanate; in 1877, an adjacent territory—North Borneo—was acquired by a British trade syndicate. Both territories became British protectorates in 1888, as did Brunei. Sarawak and North Borneo became Crown Colonies in 1946 and joined the Federation of Malaya in 1948. The Federation achieved independence in 1957, and in 1963, Singapore, Sarawak and North Borneo (now renamed Sabah) joined the Federation of Malaysia. In 1965, Singapore split from Malaysia to become a fully sovereign nation. Brunei became independent in 1984. The British presence in the region thus lasted for more than a century and half.

grants (almost without labour) all his wants, is so indolent, that when he has rice, nothing will induce him to work.”<sup>5</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century, a succession of British administrators continued to recommend that the Malay way of life be altered as little as possible. They were motivated by no mere concern to protect the innocence of the Malay; rather, they wanted gratitude for and compliance with the role assigned the Malay in their political economy. They were also wary of reproducing in Malaya the results produced by the Anglicist policy in India, where the widespread teaching of English had created not only the “babus” called for by Macaulay’s Minute of 1835 but discontented petty clerks, writers and nationalist revolutionaries. In 1884, E.C. Hill, the Inspector of Schools in Malaya, suggested that teaching English to Malays would render them “unwilling to earn their livelihood by manual labour,” thus creating “a discontented class who might become a source of anxiety to the community.”<sup>6</sup> In 1894, Hill agreed with H.B. Collinge, Inspector of Schools in Perak, who reminded administrators that they did not want a repetition of the Indian situation in Malaya, of the kind that would see the peninsula swarming “with half-starved, discontented men, who consider manual labour beneath them, because they know a little English.”<sup>7</sup>

When the British took a firmer step towards articulating an educational policy in Malaya, following a growth in the size of the economy and the population, there were three types of school in the region—missionary schools, “Free” schools and vernacular schools—but “Education was neither free of charge nor compulsory, and as a consequence, students in those early schools were mainly sons from wealthy non-British families.”<sup>8</sup> The first mission school for girls was established in 1842. Growth in the Straits Settlements was fuelled by two factors. The first was the development of the tin mining industry, which was controlled by the Chinese settled in Malaya, who imported labourers from southern China in increasing numbers. The second was the development of rubber plantations by the British, for which they imported labourers from India, chiefly from the Tamil south. The growth of Chinese townships fuelled the need for schooling in Chinese, which the community funded on its own. Indian labour, which worked on rubber plantations and on road and railway

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<sup>5</sup> H.S. Alatas, *Thomas Stamford Raffles, 1781-1826, Schemer or Reformer?* (Singapore: Angus and Robertson, 1971), 28.

<sup>6</sup> Alastair Pennycook, *English and the Discourses of Colonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 98.

<sup>7</sup> Pennycook, *English*, 111.

<sup>8</sup> Low Ee Ling, and Adam Brown, *An Introduction to Singapore English* (Singapore: McGraw-Hill Education [Asia], 2003), 5.

construction, created the need for Tamil “Estate Schools.” But the Chinese and Indians often preferred English-medium schools as the more practical choice. Colonial policy decided that schools teaching in Malay and English would receive government aid, while schools teaching in Chinese or Tamil would not.

The Chinese community was good at subsidising its own schools. Teachers and teaching materials were imported from the mother country, teaching was done in the unifying Chinese medium of *Putonghua* (simplified written Mandarin), and the curriculum was centred on the Chinese classics. These factors gave a cohesive communal identity to their school system. The Tamil schools did less well, and that reinforced the tendency for Tamils to prefer English schools. The social profile of those who went to English-language schools during the nineteenth century was specific and very narrow.<sup>9</sup> In general, the British attempt to sponsor education in Malay led to a slow increase in schools and Teacher Training colleges. By 1938, there were over 100 English schools, 788 Malay schools, 331 Chinese schools, and several hundred Tamil schools in British Malay.<sup>10</sup> The Japanese occupation of 1942-45 interrupted the British school system, but normalcy was quickly restored after their departure, and Raffles College and the King Edward VII College of Medicine were merged in 1949 to create the University of Malaya, with a second, autonomous division opened in Kuala Lumpur a decade later. In terms of school enrolment, Joseph Foley provides an overview for the hundred years before independence: in 1856, the number of students enrolled in English-medium schools was 922; in 1876 this had grown to 1,722; in 1891, it had grown to 2,883; by the end of the nineteenth century, the number stood at 7,264; by 1937 it was 17,161; and just before the Japanese Occupation, the number

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<sup>9</sup> As described by Anthea Gupta (online): “The people who spoke English and sent their children to English medium schools were mainly the Europeans, the Eurasians (people of mixed racial ancestry), some of the small minorities, such as the Jews, some of the Indians and Ceylonese, and also a group of Chinese people usually called the Straits Chinese, who had ancestors of long residence in the region, and who spoke a variety of Malay usually called Baba Malay which was influenced by Hokkien Chinese and by Bazaar Malay. The fact that all these children would have known Malay probably explains why most of the loan words in Singapore Colloquial English are from Malay.” Anthea Gupta, “Language Varieties: Singapore Colloquial English (Singlish),” 2007.

<sup>10</sup> J.S. Solomon, *The Development of Bilingual Education in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 1988), 10-16.

stood at 27,000.<sup>11</sup>

This highly selective account of how English came to the Malayan peninsula helps identify several key features of creativity in English from the region. First, the British were reluctant to spread English to native inhabitants. Second, the eventual dissemination of English across the region politicised the role of ethnicity in colonial educational policy. Third, ethnic exacerbations produced or aggravated by colonial policy continued to exercise a decisive influence on educational policy after Independence. Fourth, postcolonial divergences in state policy continue to shape cultural literacy and the scope of English as a creative medium in Malaysia and Singapore. Fifth, and especially for Malaysia, the impact of a divisive colonial policy on nationalist policy after independence led indirectly to the migration of several Anglophone writers born in Malaysia to overseas locations. And finally, the poetry anthology in English has played a crucial role in sustaining faith in English as a viable option for creative writing during a period of linguistic and cultural metamorphosis when English has remained marginal or secondary to most inhabitants of the Malayan peninsula: the census of 1957 reported only 6% of the population of approximately 400,000 using English on a daily basis in peninsular Malaya.

The system of education established in British Malaya since the beginning of the twentieth century resumed after World War II, with the difference that the absence of a local university was noticed with increasing frequency. The trend had had a beginning before the war: an essay from 1936 on “Raffles College and a Malayan University” by Tan Soo Chye notes that the lack of a university for the region was the result of a specific mind-set: “It is said that what a city like Singapore needs is an army of typists, stenographers, and book-keepers. B.A.’s and B.Sc.’s would be of very small value to the country.”<sup>12</sup> The lack was filled in 1949 through the merger of Raffles College and the King Edward VII College of Medicine into the University of Malaya. The creation of a campus for the university in Singapore was followed by the setting up of a second campus in Kuala Lumpur in 1959, and by the separation of the two campuses into autonomous universities in 1962. The sustainability of literary productions in English thus had to await the opportunities afforded by university education. This new productivity had its beginnings in student periodicals and in anthologies. No surprise then that Malayan writers in English took time to arrive, and did so, ironically, just as the region was ready to shed the

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph Foley, “Is English a First or Second Language in Singapore?” in *Evolving Identities: The English Language in Singapore and Malaysia*, ed Vincent B.Y. Ooi (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2001), 13.

<sup>12</sup> *Raffles College Magazine* 6, no. 2: 8.

colonial yoke. No surprise either that while such writers applied themselves to the task of individual and collective self-representation, they did so in literary forms, styles, modes and genres that were thoroughly derivative and imitative.

### **Early Malayan writing in English: Periodicals and Anthologies**

The first glimpses of English writing from the region's inhabitants date back to publications by young members of the Straits Chinese community during the 1880s and 1890s. A more sustained type of productivity in English became noticeable from the 1930s. School, college and university were the institutions through which a small minority of the Malayan population gained access to English and to the jobs and professions that were opened up by English as the language of trade, empire and modernity. School, college and university were also the institutions in which the acquisition of English was accompanied by the dissemination of the Western literary canon in the colonies. Admiration for and assimilation of the cultural values it promoted naturally bred in some a desire for emulation. College and university life provided a catalyst for brief forays into the occasional essay, story or verse modelled on Western styles and genres. Few among those who appeared in student publications during the 1930s and 1940s sustained their literary interest after university. The handful who did, laid the modest but lasting foundations for the development of new literary traditions.

The cultural aspirations of typical student publications of the 1930s, as evident from the *Raffles College Magazine*, were limited to effusions of the derivative kind. The issues for 1931-32 reveal two kinds of poem: one pretending hard that it could have been written in some timeless Europe of the mind, and the other willing to tackle local subjects, but unable to avoid banality and ineptness. "The Rainbow," by Philis, begins, "In quest of beauty I have been / To see fair dawn and sunset glow, / And fields that are for e'er green / Where silvery streams laughing flow."<sup>13</sup> The same issue includes a poem on a local theme, "Deserted Rubber Estate" by Araum which begins: "It will sink into jungle again, / The boar and the tiger come scurrying / Into the desolate marsh and rain."<sup>14</sup> This is scarcely any better, unless a Malayan rubber estate is to be preferred to a rainbow.

The critical prose of the period was capable of some discernment. "Aspects of Modern Poetry," by Len Peng Weng in 1934 holds up the poems of William Empson and T.S. Eliot for admiration. "Prolegomena to

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<sup>13</sup> *Raffles College Magazine* 2, no. 2: 9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

the Modern Poets,” by Teo Poh Leng, dating from 1936, adds to that pantheon the names of Hopkins, Pound, Yeats, Bottrall and the Auden group. This degree of being up-to-date was rare; and owed something to the presence of Bottrall in Singapore from 1933 to 1937 as the Johore Professor of English Language and Literature at Raffles College. More typically, local writing showed a passive appreciation of a dated past: an essay of 1937, for example, is happy to extol “Birds in English Romantic Poetry.”<sup>15</sup> World War II and the Japanese Occupation of the Malayan peninsula (1942-45) put most literary aspirations in English in hibernation.

The period after World War II saw an efflorescence of writing in English from Malaya. Student periodicals of the period included the *Raffles College Bulletin* (1948), *Magazine of the University of Malaya Students Union* (1949-52, 1960), *The New Cauldron* (1950-60), *Chichak* (1954), *Write* (1957-58), *Hujan Mas* (1959); followed in the 1960s by *Phoenix* (1960), *The Seed* (1960-62), *Lidra* (1961), *Monsoon* (1961), *Varsity* (1961-62), *Focus* (1961-62), *Tumasek* (1964), *Tenggara* (1967-90) and *Commentary* (1968- ). When the *Raffles College Union Magazine* resumed publication in 1946, the poems that appeared there were just as gauche as those of the previous decade. One of the early university poets was Richard Ong, whose “Rumba” acquired a degree of local fame for its articulation of a sense of tension and plurality to a multicultural society. However, his poetic style rarely strayed from the kind of effects evident in a typical quatrain from another poem, “Laura,” which goes like this: “Upon a wayside stone I take my seat / And from the midnight stars fair judgement seek / Of human bliss—if I might not defeat / With proud dreams Nature’s bounty for the meek.”<sup>16</sup> Harry Chan’s “Utopian Peace” begins: “Oh, where is that world where goodwill reigns supreme / And mankind in peace and harmony dwell, / Where forbearance against spite, and right o’er might / Prevails.”<sup>17</sup> E.H. Lim’s attempt to represent Singapore at the time of the Japanese invasion, in the poem “On the Road to Arab Street,” begins: “From deep its bleeding heart / This broken city disgorged / A trail of suffering humanity, / Trudging on, / To an unknown destiny.”<sup>18</sup>

The English prose that resulted from the war experience was far more straightforward and effective than the verse. The literary material that appeared in *The Cauldron*, the “Official Organ of the Medical College Union Literary and Debating Society,” which started publication in 1947, and in *The Malayan Undergrad*, which started publication in 1948, remained

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<sup>15</sup> *Raffles College Magazine* 7, no. 1: 46-48.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

insipid. The first issue of *The Cauldron* starts off with “Sea-side,” by S.R. Sayampanathan, which begins, “The night was soft as a dream, / Bathing in the light moonbeam.”<sup>19</sup> The following year, “Sweet Hypocrisy,” by the same poet, begins, “A time there was long years ago / When men a-hunting used to go / While women stayed and scrubbed the floor.”<sup>20</sup>

The cultural situation after Independence changed dramatically between Malaysia and Singapore after 1957. The cultural changes that solidified from the 1960s were direct consequences of State policies concerning the place given to English in the postcolonial nation: marginalised in Malaysia, centralised in Singapore. The period also saw the publication of numerous anthologies, whose function as one of the principal instruments of canon-formation shares many features with the role of anthologies in all literary cultures, while it also retains features that are specific to the linguistic and cultural situation in Malaysia and Singapore.

Anthologies made their entrance upon the scene of writing just after Independence. They began with the anonymously edited *Litmus One* (1958), followed swiftly by Tan Han Hoe’s *30 Poems* (1958), the anonymously compiled *The Compact* (1958), T. Wignesan’s *Bunga Emas* (1964), Lloyd Fernando’s *Malaysian Poetry in English* (1966), Edwin Thumboo’s *Tumasek Poems* (1966), David Ormerod’s *A Private Landscape* (1967), Thumboo’s *The Flowering Tree* (1970), Fernando’s *New Drama One* (1972), Thumboo’s *Seven Poets* (1973) and *The Second Tongue* (1979). These were followed in their turn by many similar compilations during subsequent decades, notable among them the multilingual and multi-volume *Anthology of ASEAN Literatures* (1985-2000). The sudden proliferation of anthologies from Malaysia and Singapore is testimony to the degree of interest in literary creativity in English evinced by university students, not all of whom were either committed to a literary career or able to pursue one without first ensuring a steady means of economic subsistence through careers that often took them away from literary creativity, sometimes for short periods, sometimes more or less permanently. The anthology as a vehicle for collective self-representation acquires a special significance in these circumstances, and the historicity of this significance raises issues of literary tutelage, elective affinities and the derivativeness inevitable to all colonial and postcolonial literary canons which must be addressed before we address the issue of how such writing was judged then, or how it might be evaluated now.

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<sup>19</sup> *The Cauldron* 1, no.1: 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 2, no. 2: 34.

## The Anthology as an Instrument of Canon Formation

If we now stand back a little from the historical specificity of the Malayan context to reflect on the anthology as an instrument of canon formation, it is possible to claim that the anthology serves a set of common functions in all literary cultures, especially for the literary genres that take up less print-space than the novel: poetry, the short story and the short play. It is a book built on the principle of the selective miscellany. The advantages offered by the format of the anthology are many, and they help poetry the most. Poetry is the least popular form of reading, and most readers like to take the genre in small doses. Most poets work oftener in short spans, which makes it easy to excerpt their work. Most poets are at their best only rarely, making brief representations of the kind provided by an anthology the most practical way of preparing readers for the more daunting option of reading and buying individual volumes of poetry. The anthology as a specific kind of book aimed at the general reader and the student has a longer shelf life and greater accessibility than periodicals, whose capacity to keep writing in print has an element of the ephemeral to which the book format is less susceptible. The canon-forming functions of anthologies are succinctly summarised by Barbara Herrnstein Smith:

The recommendation of value represented by the repeated inclusion of a particular work in anthologies of 'great poetry' not only promotes but goes some distance toward *creating* the value of that work, as does its repeated appearance on reading lists or its frequent citation or quotation by professors, scholars, critics, poets, and other elders of the tribe; for all these acts have the effect of drawing the work into the orbit of attention of potential readers and, by making the work more likely to be experienced at all, they make it more likely to be experienced as 'valuable.' In this sense, value creates value.<sup>21</sup>

How these generalisations have a bearing on the Malayan context can be illustrated briefly through two examples. First, it is worth noting how a succession of younger poets in Singapore have reinforced the work of reviewers, critics and anthologists by insisting on writing Merlion poems that allude to—and often in terms that seek to individuate themselves by carping parasitically about—Edwin Thumboo's "Ulysses by the Merlion" (1979). Second, it is worth noting how Arthur Yap's "2 mothers in a h d b playground" has acquired semi-mythical status in Singapore through its frequent inclusion in anthologies, regardless of the fact that it is critical of

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<sup>21</sup> Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Criticism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 10.

the values enshrined in the speakers it dramatises, whose counterparts in “real-life” are more prone to feeling flattered at being represented in a poem than they are likely to be discomfited at having the typology they embody thus satirised.

### **The Relativity of Literary Evaluation**

The Malayan situation provides a specific basis for some general reflection on questions of literary value. It is worth noting that the terms used to indicate literary approbation are often couched in buried metaphors transposed from other fields of human action, thought and belief. Thus, a novel, a story, a play or a poem might be described as “great” or “good” or “true to life” or “authentic” or “sincere,” illustrating how ideas of moral approval or representational verisimilitude govern value judgments in the reception of literary works. Negative judgments simply invert the logic of the same procedure. Literary history shows how the expression of value judgments often tends to slide from the simple expression of personal attitude, reaction, preference, antipathy or predilection to the implication that what is approved or disapproved ought to be so regarded by others. Literary value judgments, like all aesthetic judgments, invoke or appeal to criteria that claim, assume or imply a validity that is more than personal or subjective. Literary analysis, and the role assigned to that within classroom pedagogy often assumes or claims, without being embarrassed at its circular logic, that “correct” analysis and interpretation leads to (and in turn is corroborated in its “correctness” by) value judgments that are claimed to be—not the outcome of persuasion, authority, or consensus but—objective standards of merit and worth.

The corrective to such misperceptions about “objectivity” or “validity” must begin with the recognition that to apply notions of “objectivity” to literary judgments forces norms borrowed from the sciences onto the very different ways in which literary works function in respect to their actual and potential readers in society. One way of extending the correction, as developed by Reception Theory and academics such as Stanley Fish, is to invoke the idea that works imply their own interpretive communities. Another way subscribes to an entire tradition focused on the affective function of literature (a trans-national tradition, which includes Ramanuja, Spinoza, Jacques Maritain and others). Charles Altieri, for example, argues that we should treat art and literature as functioning *conatively*, such that “art objects intensify the capacity to keep us fascinated by what remains an ‘other’ to discursive intelligence, an ‘other’ keeping intelligence dialectically

aware of its own limitations.”<sup>22</sup> That such interpretive communities draw upon cultural presuppositions which are not congruent (or shared diachronically or synchronically across cultures) is self-evident if we consider the highly provocative inclusions and exclusions in the kind of canon implied by E.D. Hirsch Jr., in *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know* (1987), to which the simplest response is enshrined in the hoary Latin tag, *de gustibus non disputandum est* (There is no accounting for taste[s]).

The moral recommended by Barbara Herrnstein Smith is the recognition that all canons are contingent tokens of value, whose appeal depends less on argument and analysis than on explicit or tacit concurrences between the assumptions, beliefs and norms shareable between authors and readers. We find ourselves predisposed to “like” works whose values coincide, confirm or reinforce our own assumptions about value. Our “likes” and “dislikes” are likely to depend rather more on our cultural conditioning than on reason and method. This or that approach to literary interpretation and pedagogy is more likely to function as a kind of retrospective rationalisation than as a process of logical inference and analysis that is meant to provide the cause from which we would like to suppose we reach the effect of a value judgment. Frank Kermode enjoins an additional recognition: that the cultural politics which embodies and disseminates literary judgments through literary canons has a vested interest in dissembling its own historicity through the invocation of “transhistorical” canons.<sup>23</sup>

In colonial situations, authors exhibit the reverse of what Harold Bloom has called the anxiety of influence: we might describe it as *the solicitations of influence*. When English was “new” to authors in British Malaya, it was inevitable that they should look to models from traditions alien to their own cultural circumstances. The self-tutelage they had to undergo was a combination of selective acculturation and conscious as well as inadvertent cultural deracination. Let us consider an early example of literary self-tutelage, a few lines from a poem titled “Ode to an Amoeba,” published in *The Cauldron* (1949): “Wriggle, wriggle, little cell / How I wonder what the hell / Makes you wriggle all the time / In an undulating rhyme.”<sup>24</sup> How might we distinguish between the silly and the admirable here?

Next, consider the Introduction to the first Malayan anthology in English, *Litmus One* (1958), which gestures at the New Critic John Crowe

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<sup>22</sup> C. Altieri, “The Concept of Force as Modernist Response to the Authority of Science,” *Modernism/Modernity* 5, no. 2 (1998): 88-89.

<sup>23</sup> Frank Kermode, “Canon and Period,” in *History and Value: Clarendon and Northcliffe Lectures, 1987* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). 108-9.

<sup>24</sup> *The Cauldron* 3, no. 3 (1949): 28.

Ransom's description of a poem as a fusion of texture and an abstract structure, then calls for a mythopoeic frame of mind which, it hopes, will help poets tap symbols from a shared cultural reservoir. The Yeatsian flavour of this call points to a lack, and some of the most ambitious poems of later years from Malaysia and Singapore could be said to have been written as a redressal of that lack. The third feature of the introduction is its eagerness to periodise the achievement of a mere decade into three partially overlapping phases.

The implications of contingent value in colonial and postcolonial contexts can be spelt out plainly: the willingness to imitate (even to the point of silliness); the invocation of shared symbols (which begs the question of how symbols from Egyptian mythology, as used in Wong Phui Nam's early poems, are in any sense part of a cultural reservoir that can be drawn upon plausibly by a Malayan poet); the desire to periodise a mere decade into three phases (caustically challenged by Lloyd Fernando: "isn't it rather presumptuous, if not actually laughable to speak... of 'cross-currents' in the brief space of eight years? Shall we not hang our heads in embarrassment when we read of 'movements'...?"<sup>25</sup>—all these tendencies and features point to the strain entailed in the task of self-acculturation. Under such circumstances, what happens to the question of literary value? How can such literary aspirations rescue themselves from the stigma of derivativeness? How might we distinguish historical significance from datedness and literary apprenticeship from literary achievement? Historically speaking, the solutions that the poets of the time tried out included Engmalchin, and the self-appointed task of inventing a "Malayan consciousness" in English.

Engmalchin did not work for obvious reasons: its form of multilingual localism risked confining its accessibility to a small regional audience. The business of articulating a "Malayan consciousness" risked subscribing to what Yvor Winters has called the fallacy of national mimeticism: the belief "that the poet achieves salvation by being, in some way, intensely of and expressive of his country."<sup>26</sup> The more one understands the specific cultural problems that colonial writing faced, the more relativised one becomes in relation to the question of literary judgment as distinguished from literary value. Writing that appears dated or inept can be historically significant in ways that do not need to invoke a sense of consensus or objectivity about literary evaluation. However, to relativise literary evaluation does not mean we need to abandon all scope for contingent value judgments. Why, or how,

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<sup>25</sup> Lloyd Fernando, "Review," *Write* (April, 1958): 10.

<sup>26</sup> Yvor Winters, *In Defense of Reason* (New York: The Swallow Press and William Morrow and Company, 1947), 441.