EDITORIAL: Minorities Speak Up

This is not a special issue – and yet, entirely unplanned, we have a slate of articles which focus on minorities and how they resist authoritative impositions, whether in relation to ethnicity or gender or sexuality. Perhaps this reflects the *zeitgeist.* In a global landscape where minority rights and autonomy are increasingly under threat (think, for example, of the chilling slogan "Her body, my rights"), and where homeland and belonging are often precarious concepts at best (what does 'home' mean for Palestinians? Where is home for refugees and other displaced persons?), literature offers a space for acts of resistance. The fact that all five of the articles in this issue are concerned with acknowledging and centering this resistance in some form, speaks to the urgency and currency of these matters.

It is not necessarily a simple thing to talk about minorities, of course. The minority groups referred to in this issue are not always numerically smaller than other groups within the polities they inhabit. As Deleuze and Guattari have suggested, it is identities, rather than mere numbers, which define minority groups. Oppression and marginalization can happen to groups that are larger than the groups doing the oppressing and marginalizing – a fact clearly visible throughout millennia of politics and strife. Deleuze and Guattari's focus "on the political function of minor literature" was "a necessary one in the context of national and colonial oppression of minorities that marked the climate in which they published their work" (Solà and Vermeulen 4). It is no less necessary in the current climate. Particularly compelling is their contention that what they term "minor literature" is not just a matter of work being written in a minority language. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that it "doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language" (16). It is, in that sense, something that resists oppression using the tools

of the oppressor; it cannot, then, be so easily dismissed or compartmentalized.

Our first article looks at novels emerging from two ethnic groups, one of which is not actually a numerical minority. Kristiawan Indriyanto and Dian Syahfitri carry out a comparative analysis of indigeneity in Kimo Armitage's *The Healers*, and *Burung Kayu* by Niduparas Erlang. In their analysis, they bring together novels from two countries that are rarely considered together – Hawai'i and Indonesia – allowing them to highlight what they call "Transpacific Environmental Imagination". The authors tie these two nations together through the use of Critical Island Studies, since both nations are made up of diverse and complex archipelagos. What is highlighted in the article is the way in which the characters in the two novels interact with their indigenous knowledge and their environment, to resist repression and persecution.

Shilpa Nataraj and Sharmila Narayana, similarly, examine a work which centralizes the ecology and environment. They look at Sheela Tomy's novel *Valli*, set in a region of Kerala, South India, to focus on the (minority) indigenous community (scheduled tribes). The authors note that there is a strong sense of ecoprecarity in the novel, and that this means that the idea of sustainability must be rethought and expanded. Where the novels in the first article highlight the importance of retaining and recovering indigenous knowledge about nature, mainly as a means of recovering identity, Nataraj and Narayana push the narrative further by showing the negative effects of expropriation of forest rights in the service of gaining the rights to extract primary resources from the forests – a project which had its origins in colonial times, but has been continued since. Tomy's novel, written in Malayalam, exemplifies the notion of a minority constructing something within a majority language, insofar as Malayalam is the

majority language within the state of Kerala. However, the third article takes a slightly different view.

S. Sethuparvathy and Smita Jha also focus on novels originally written in Malayalam. The novelists N. S. Madhavan (*Litanies of Dutch Battery*) and S. K. Pottekatt (*Tales of Athiranippadam*) are positioned as being in the minority because Malayalam is only spoken by less than three percent of India's total population. Sethuparvathy and Jha hold it up against the majority literature, written either in Hindi or English. They contend that these Malayalam-language works undermine imposed identities because they are written from the subjective viewpoints of indigenous writers.

Fang Sirui and Grace V. S. Chin, in the fourth article, examine *Black Water Sister*, a novel that straddles the minority/majority divide in complex ways. The novel's author, Zen Cho, is a Malaysian woman of Chinese descent, with her gender and ethnicity marking her as part of a minority. Yet, she lives in London, and is published by a major international publishing house – which makes her part of the global (Western) majority, and sets her apart from other Malaysian authors who may struggle to find that kind of support. However, her works do tend to focus on minority groups and their struggle to express their own identities. In this article, Fang and Chin look at gender and sexual identity, examining how a supernatural relationship among three women, which stretches across different times, is able to give the women in the novel agency. All three women are 'minorities' – the first two because they are women caught in punitively patriarchal societies, and the third because she is a lesbian from a conservative family.

Our fifth and final article, by Nancy Sharma, also focuses on gender issues, through an analysis of Shashi Deshpande's "A Liberated Woman". Deshpande's female characters tend to be middle class – not a group we normally think of when we talk about minorities. However,

the author sees Deshpande's middle class Indian women as victims of imposed visions of marriage and motherhood, oppressed by capitalist patriarchy. Sharma examines how the female body is controlled and dominated – bringing us back to the idea I quoted in the first paragraph: her body, my choice.

We round out this issue with two book reviews and an author interview, all of which serve to highlight the vitality of Malaysian literature in English. Pauline Newton reviews *The Postcolonial Millennium: New Directions in Malaysian Literature in English*, edited by Mohammad A. Quayum and Grace V.S. Chin. This collection of essays focuses on newer work and approaches in relation to Malaysian literature. Enakshi Samarawickrama reviews the latest short story collection, *Have I Got Something to Tell You*, by prolific Malaysian author Malachi Edwin Vethamani. This review has a companion piece in the form of an interview with Vethamani, conducted by Anitha Devi Pillai.

As the year draws to a close, I would like to wish all our readers a wonderful holiday season, and a peaceful, productive new year. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank my colleagues Dr Farid Mohammadi and Mr Looi Siew Teip, without whom none of this would get done.

Susan Philip

Works Cited

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

Solà, Núria Codina and Pieter Vermeulen. "Introduction: The Aesthetic Agency of Minor Literature". *Interventions* (1-19). https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2024.2314275