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CAVES

by

Wong Phui Nam

The opening winds down into the rock
bringing a short way light into massif of scarred
    stone
thrust up high out of the earth

to rest -- mis-shapened, black against the sky
a severed head left lying among the burnt out
    fields
with brow that abuts the sun.

Rising before the entrance, at the pond's end,
the sole mystical serpent grows large
with looking. It is faint shadow under the edge

diffused among the algae in water that glows
with the spreading chains of mucus, frog spawn
pushing for more life in the day's heat and
    moving air.

The seven heads branching, fanned out in full
distension of the hoods, the scales in rough lumps
and blunt, uneven fangs are set, made permanent,

so much of concrete the snake cannot turn back
upon its coils to weave out of the way of clouds
of midges, of dragonflies that swarm out of mere
    change

between the rains and these hot September days.

The temple keepers bring to the darkness
thin flourescent tubes as if to gain for the
    imagination
in one withe-washed chamber

ancestral images, guardians in such shapes
as mixture bonded of cement, crushed stone
and coarse river sand not wholly cleaned of mud
    would take.

Once they might have been presences.
Ranged round in their galleries, they now stand
disgorged from the deepest recesses of dream,

mere torsos, stiffened rib cages locked with wire
and heads hardened about bent pig iron rods.
What can they suggest?

All that we can hope to know about being more
than merely human is held fast, mixed in with
    coarse grain
in bodies calcify into substance

that daily becomes more solid, more resistant than
    stone.

A ledge at the furthest end falls off...
a little way down by slow difficult descent
we lose the light.

Most are repelled by first scent of dung
which comes up sharply with body's heat
and, mixed into it, disquiet and the commotion we
    bring.

Once into the pit, we come up in darkness hard
      against
unyielding stone. It thrusts itself into the face
and teeth
and curving beyond the outstretched arms

the fingertips on either side
it beats back upon us our dis-ease.
So much of ourselves being of the senses,
      we gag for air.

The life we have stirred up here in this
      closed heat
is of our own. We touch not so much ourselves
but wing and bone, obscure rage, hunger and
      fearfulness

that rise and crowd the mind, blind swirl of bats
that swarm its walls in boiling masses, in moving
      heaps
hanging stalactites of blood and fur,
      of fighting tooth and claw.

We have touched off a dream of fury that would
not subside.

After the first descent, we would be well down
into the stone. Where it opens, it leads us into
    uneven floors,
inward chambers, fissures, rock beds below which
    waters run.

In the moist air, where all sounds may be held,
resolved into the drawing and flowing out of
    the breath
the senses dwindle, weaken

into a thin uncertain flame, without smoke,
clear on wick that burns and does not burn, detached
and floating at the still liquid centre of soft wax.

If we have lost the way now, what names,
what guides can we call upon? What bright
    presences
who will see us through? Out of the memory

of a life lived out in this our makeshift city,
out of the ways of a borrowed tongue and myth
what can be retrieved, what word given which
    will manifest

one who would lead us across echoing wells,
    ravines, black expanse of void?

Yet it has been rumoured there are exits
in the most unexpected places, sudden openings
in the rock widening outward to a milky darkness

lit by faint points of light aligned
in constellations not seen since long before
the first kings gave us laws,

taught us to make the most of water from the
     streams and sky,
to read into the future from markings on burnt
     shells
and, if it be given that there are hints,

once out into the open, one may look across
a bare terrain of random boulders, escarpments
     under water
and see in the distance the whole line of the sky

a forest, black and writhing under an ancient
     wind.
If it be given, the sun, now caught, will struggle
to tear and free itself from massed entanglement
     of coiled roots.

Breaking out of the earth, it will ascend
taking to itself half of the heavens, reveal itself
a tremendous bird of lightning, of the source of
     light

bird that cleaves the world to itself in a
     consuming fire.

REALISTIC METHOD, THEMES OF ALIENATION AND NARRATIVE VOICE IN THE EARLY FICTION OF LEE KOK LIANG

by

Sharilyn Wood

Among the notable indigenous writings of Malaysia in English, Lee Kok Liang's stories, novella and novel rank among the best. Lee emerged as a writer of short stories during the last days of the British colonial period. Like other writers of fiction and poetry in English in Malaysia, Lee is a product of a time when English was the language of instruction, and a product too of an education abroad in an English-speaking country. Today, more than three decades after Malaysian Independence from England, Lee's writings retain their prominence among a number of Malaysian works in English.

In his 1964 anthology of contemporary Malaysian literature, T.S. Wignesan identified Lee Kok Liang as one of the best writers of English fiction in Malaysia (BE, 255).[1] Four years later, Professor Lloyd Fernando of the University of Malaya published the first anthology devoted entirely to Malaysian writings in English, Twenty-two Malaysian Stories. He included stories by Lee Kok Liang along with commentary in the Introduction which placed Lee as a major force in Malaysian literature. While Lee's work reveals a striking independence from obvious influences, his short fiction may be appreciated with reference to features found in major literary works everywhere. Central among

these are a careful use of regional detail (often termed "local colour"), a narrative voice and temporal ordering that preserves a sense of realism, and an underlying determinism in the portrayal of character and event which is usually described as naturalism.

Lee Kok Liang was born in Alor Star in 1927 and raised in Penang, Malaysia, where his family had lived for four generations. This background provided Lee with a detailed knowledge of Chinese-Malaysian settings which are prominent through all his fiction. He was educated in Penang in an English-language school until the Japanese invasion of 1941. At that time, all English schools were closed and so for four years Lee Kok Liang was educated in Chinese. As a child he was an avid reader, consuming many different kinds of literature. He attended Melbourne University from 1949 to 1954 to read Arts and Law and then attended the Inns of Court, London, to complete law studies. When he returned to Malaysia in 1954, he passed the Bar in Penang and went on to practice law there. Subsequently, he became active in politics, first by joining the Socialist Front, which has since been dissolved, and later by serving on the Penang City Council and the State Assembly from 1959 to 1964.

In 1949, while studying in Australia, Lee Kok Liang published his first short story, "Five Fingers", in Present Opinion, a journal published by the Melbourne University Arts Association. Then in 1950, he published "The Pei-Pa" and, in 1951, "Ami To Fu", both in M.U.M. (Melbourne University Magazine) which he coedited in 1951. "Five Fingers" describes young love cut short by soldiers and families

forced to flee their homes in wartime; "The Pei-Pa" concerns a poor musician who is forced to sell his young daughter into prostitution; and "Ami To Fu" depicts a family hiding from soldiers. These stories introduce a dichotomy between traditional and modern values and life styles, a common theme of much post-colonial literature Lee explores much more fully in his later stories and novels. All three works are remarkably sophisticated and captivating, considering they were apprenticeship efforts.

Soon after he returned home to Malaya in 1954, Lee published a story in the British magazine Encounter called "Return to Malaya", a delightful vignette which seems to have been based on his own experiences of "reentry shock", of returning to his homeland after living abroad. From 1949 to 1964, he published short stories aborad in many small magazines including Chance in the United Kingdom, M.U.M. and Present Opinion in Australia, and Tumasek in Singapore. In 1964 he gathered many of these, together with unpublished stories and a novella called "Mutes In The Sun", in a collection called The Mutes in the Sun and Other Stories (reduced to simply The Mutes in the Sun in the 1974 paperback edition). This collection includes many important works which have since been reprinted in various anthologies of Malaysian literature. Later, he also published two other short stories in Westerly, an Australian journal: "Not So Long Ago But Still Around" in 1971 and "Dumb, Dumb, By A Bee Stung" in 1976. In considering Lee Kok Liang's literary accomplishments, it is useful to treat the short stories together before considering his novella, "Mutes In The Sun", and his novel Flowers in the Sky which appeared seventeen years later, in 1981.

Lee's 1954 story "Return to Malaya", written in the first person, is the description of a young man's return to his hometown after studying abroad. The plot is limited: the narrator's bicycle has just been stolen and he is trying to learn news of the culprits. The story is never pursued or resolved; no closure occurs. Yet the flood of unorganized impressions represents what Lee may have seen as the state of his country at that time. As Lloyd Fernando has suggested, "This piece, rather like an essay, deliberately accepts as basic the confusing welter of everyday life in Malaysia minutely observed; and its refusal to shape an overt theme is part of its worth" (22MS, 4). In a 1985 study of Lee's work, John Barnes arrives at the same conclusion about this story: "'Return to Malaya' evokes the human environment in all its physicality and diversity, avoiding abstract generalizations and resisting the temptation to sum up or to formulate explicit judgements about the state of the society and its likely future".[2]

As the narrator of "Return to Malaya" walks along the streets, he observes in minute detail the life around him: a hawker and his small assistant selling their wares, a nervous Chinese servant learning to ride a bicycle, the smells and sights of a crowded food stall and naked children playing cards in the streets. The scenes around him are vivid as he records the sound of the children's games:

> 'I saw a rat to-day-lah.'
> 'A big fat rat with a long tail-lah.'
> 'Hic hic hic scampering and rushing about like a mad fox.'

> 'Oo-ee oo-ee oo-ee' (A sharp whistle sounded.)
>
> 'One two som, la-la-li-tum-bong.'
>
> And a fat man, very fat-lah, chased the rat with a tooth-brush.'
>
> 'Chek, chek, chek.' (Gurgles of laughter.)
>
> 'He lost his spectacles-lah, Ai-ya! do you know what he looked like?'
>
> 'Like what?"
>
> 'Like a tortoise with goat's dung eyes, chek, chek.'
>
> 'Ai-ya, Yes-lah, and he lost them, the spectacles-lah.'
>
> 'One two som, la-la li-tum-bong, I won!'
>
> They spoke in a sort of Hokkien Chinese (towns in Malaya are dominated by different Chinese dialects) with a few Malay and English expressions thrown in. Their conversation was not the lazy ding-dong dialogue. It was more of a ringing of voices than anything else; a sudden release of exultant feelings. Somehow they all wanted to talk at the same time and succeeded in doing so. Like starlings, twittering and wheeling in a mass, they filled the night with their high voices. Night-time was talking time for them. (MS, pp. 147-148).

The fact that Lee explains the linguistic settings of his scene -- "towns in Malaya are dominated by different Chinese dialects"--- reflects Lee's realization that the story would be read by many non-Malayans.

This little story, full of regional detail and local colour, could only have been written by an indigenous author who knew the people well and had a careful ear for local features of English. In fact Lee Kok Liang, in a letter written 1965, once advised an aspiring writer to listen carefully to the sounds of home: "If you are a University student or graduate and do have the time -- could you do one thing I always wanted to do? Get a small tape recorder and if you are a girl, hide it in a big handbag, or if you are a boy, put it in a paper bag (chua lork) - and walk around the city -- the best places are the cinemas before the tickets are sold, or bookshops where schoolchildren gather, or any of the functions in school -- e.g. sports, concerts -- and tape like mad".[3] This sensitivity to the sound and local features of his language enables the writer to capture the flavour of the setting more exactly and to preserve these features before they change. Ee Tiang Hong, reviewing Mutes In the Sun for Westerly in 1976, suggests that only in the near-reportage of "Return to Malaya" and not in any of his other stories, "does Lee Kok Liang use local colour principally to present the exotic, record the peculiar before they suffer the change of Development and Modernisation".[4]

There is an obvious contrast between this description of a restaurant scene and the scenes created, for instance, by Somerset Maugham, the most prominent writer of fiction set in the region during colonial times. Maugham's Malaya consisted of the British Club and the official residences of District Officers; his contact with indigenous people was limited to Malayan servants and Chinese and Tamil labourers. Lee Kok Liang's Malaya includes children, hawkers,

businessmen and second wives. Details in his stories reflect his own roots in Malayan society, including changes in that society since earlier colonial times. The attitude towards the British is different. No longer is an Englishman seen as a superior being to be treated with extra respect merely because of his national origin. Lee describes a visit to a crowded coffee shop, a setting replete with details of Chinese Malayan society:

> Suddenly, striding down the alley, a belated theatrical figure made his appearance: tall, fearsome, high in the nose, with stormy sunset complexion, wearing a bow-tie and flowing nylon shirt; and, without turning his head, bore himself like a dreadnought through the crowds as though he had a mission to fulfil, or as if, a neighbour commented, he was hunting for the lavatory. In other words, an Englishman had walked by. (MS, 152)

Revealing vignettes, intimate glimpses into Malayan life, descriptive details of local colour, and a close portrayal of the new moods of the country are the strengths which Lee exhibits in his early literary work. In the short stories which were soon to follow, these strengths are woven into powerful plots which earn him a place as one of Malaysia's most accomplished writers.

Lee Kok Liang's stories reveal a local realism inextricably bound up with Malaya and capable of portrayal only by an indigenous writer of extraordinary sensitivity. The story

"Five Fingers" (MS, 1-6) is built around details of Chinese-Malayan life which are unlikely to be noted by an outsider -- two men playing Chinese checkers, a special lacquered box richly embossed with dragons, a Clan House where members of the family meet in an emergency. Similarly, the story "Just a Girl" (MS, 7-17) includes revealing details of life in a Moslem-Malaysian kampung: a banana leaf plate, a sarung which the girl wears, the fear of the crocodile in the river, and the constant reference to "Allah" in daily conversations. In "Birthday" (MS, 24-30) the Chinese grandmother munches a betel leaf and the red juices trickle down the corners of her mouth; the conversation includes the dangers of white ants which may attack the coconuts in the fruit plantation; and the man is described as having a head which resembles a jackfruit, a large tropical fruit common in Malaysia. The title of another story, "The Pei Pa" (MS, 31-41) refers to a Chinese stringed instrument. The men in the restaurant eat melon seeds, a custom akin to nibbling popcorn or peanuts in the West while drinking. and they have just come from winning at Majong, a Chinese game of great antiquity. The title of the story "Ami To Fu" (MS, 129-142) refers to a prayer which is offered to Buddha for atonement of sins and for good luck. The story describes incidents of ancestor worship and an old Chinese grandmother with bound feet. "Dumb, Dumb, By A Bee Stung" describes a Chinese funeral march which must follow a certain path in order to ensure a peaceful future for the departed. "The departed must cross three bridges and go through River Valley Road. According to the signs, which are too difficult to explain, he must proceed by way of the East and take a journey to he West, toward the mountains. The three

bridges are to wash away his faults as he crosses their waters".[5] The story "It 's All In a Dream" (22MS, 52-71) includes a description of the countryside through which a train passes: "clumps of banana trees, tall coconut palms, rows of rubber trees, patches of padi-fields, the misty turquoise hills in the distance, huts on stilts, little flocks of goats" (22MS, 68)--unmistakably a scene in Southeast Asia, and to those who know the area well, unmistakably Malaysia.

The vivid local colour of Lee's stories complements a consistent choice of subject material. His themes are not exotic, nor do they concern the lives of the wealthy or powerful. He does not write about Sultans or British Residents or business magnates. Lee writes about the world he knows well: people who are of the middle class, like the family caught in political difficulties in "It's all In A Dream", or the destitute, like the poor couple selling their produce at the market in "Just A Girl" or the couple with marriage problems in "Not So Long Ago But Still Around". He writes about people who are ill, like the musician's son who has a fever and needs medicine in "The Pei-Pa" and the men in the hospital in "Ibrahim Something". He writes about children and adolescents whose lives are controlled by their parents as in "Just A Girl" (MS, 7-17) or "Bandit Girl" (MS, 18-23). His settings include war situations which he experienced in the 1940's as a teenager during the Japanese occupation. "Five Fingers" (MS, 1-6) is a recollection of wartime atrocities and "The Glittering Game" (MS, 163-182) begins with soldiers who are patrolling a village. Situations relating to the period of communist

terrorism in Malaysia, the Emergency (1948-1960), are included in the stories "Ibrahim Something" (22MS, 215-228) and "Bandit Girl." Lee lived through periods when internal security was used as an excuse for political arrest and detention as portrayed in "It's All In a Dream." The immediacy and vitality of these stories derives from the realistic portrayal of historically and culturally accurate situations he knows well.

Another feature which helps to create a sense of vitality in his work is Lee Kok Liang's use of point of view. Although he varies this narrative technique from story to story and sometimes within one story, Lee typically presents the action through the eyes of only one person at a time, which is consistent with the way we experience things in real life. The narrator sometimes tells the story through the use of the first person "I", as in "Ibrahim Something" and "Five Fingers" -- "When I went into the room, he was sitting in his favourite chair" (MS, 1) -- and sometimes in the third person as in "Just A Girl" -- "The Monkey rattled its chain when she passed by" (MS, 7). In both cases, however, the action is apprehended through only one person at a time. Lee avoids the omniscient narrator who knows what is happening inside the minds of all the characters at once. He limits his comprehension of the action through the use of a third-person limited narrator. "The Pei-Pa", "Just A Girl", "Birthday", "It's All In A Dream" and "When the Saints Go Marching" are narrated from a third-person limited viewpoint. Thus the reader is privy to the thoughts of one character at a time and sees only those actions which occur at the place where that character is located. The

story 'It's All In a Dream", for example, is told in the third person from the limited point of view of a man who has just been released from jail and has not seen his wife for a long time. The reader learns what this released prisoner remembers, sees, thinks and feels, and what he can guess about the thoughts of the other characters. Thus, while the narrator can tell us directly what the hero's wife does -- "She bought the shirt recently and had it starched"-- he carefully limits his explanation of why she did this to the guesses of the husband -- "His wife must have felt that it was like attending a wedding or paying a visit to the relatives" (22MS, 53). Such careful control of viewpoint duplicates the mixture of certainty and guesswork the reader experiences in everyday life, thus preserving a sense of realism through the story.

"Ami To Fu" provides an example of a different kind of third-person narration in which the narrator moves the point of view from character to character. At times these shifts are confusing, but no more so than the shifting viewpoints experienced in real life when, for instance, several people discuss a complex topic. In this tale, the situation is described first through the eyes of Mama who speaks to her two children (MS, 129). Then Aunty speaks and the reader learns what she thinks about Mama (130-131). The narrator quickly shifts to the perceptions of Mama (131-132) and then to the older son, Silly Q, who walks away from the family group and to a different setting which he perceives according to his adolescent needs (132-133, 136-139). Later parts of the story are filtered through Aunty (133-136) and then through Grandmother (139-142). Finally the

description of the father's return and the resolution of their situation is told from the point of view of an external narrator (MS, 142-143). The precise points in the narrative where shifts in viewpoint occur are not signaled, thus forcing the reader to discover them for himself. Yet the world of the story is realistic because it is revealed through the perceptions and thoughts of only one individual's unique viewpoint, and with no authorial intrusion.

Along with this careful control of narrative viewpoint, Lee uses a narrative arrangement which duplicates either the unfolding of time as we experience it or the recollection of time as we relive it. Some stories are presented in straight chronological order, as in "Birthday" which begins in the afternoon when the girl is upstairs in her room, through their dinner, and on to evening when she returns to her sleeping area. Subtitles within "Ibrahim Something" overtly draw attention to the time -- "Afternoon", "Evening", "Night" and "Morning" -- and presage a similar use of time subtitles in <u>Flowers In The Sun</u>. Also in "Ami To Fu" the narrative development unfolds through a simple chronological presentation of one day. Variations of narrative development occur where Lee moves beyond a simple chronological presentation. In "Bandit Girl" the story begins and ends in present time (MS, 18, 22-23), but in between these segments there occurs a long retrospective section which fills in the bandit girl's past. "The Glittering Game" fills in the past by shifting from present time to past time, using memories and reflections of the young girl to show how her love of dancing began. "Ibrahim Something" is a first-person narrative which follows a strictly chronological presentation

until the last page, at which point some of the confusion is sorted out when the narrator remembers past events. The narrator says, "Parts of the jig-saw conglomerated into a recognizable image. I now remembered vaguely the furore that had occurred, young as I had been" (22MS, 228). His past memories, then, are narrated to clear up the present situation.

These variations occur strictly within the presentation of events in time, with past events occurring as recollected by the narrator. In all the stories, events are filtered through a single mind, or a sequence of minds. Never does Lee Kok Liang utilize an omniscient author who intrudes with additional information which the characters themselves do not either experience or remember. Lee's carefully controlled point of view preserves vitality and stresses the basic realism of his stories.

These narrative techniques -- a point of view which allows only one character at a time to tell the story, and a use of time which employs the experience of the memories of the characters rather than the thoughts of an intrusional author -- were both used extensively by the Realistic writers of the Nineteenth Century: Flaubert, Balzac, Stendhal, Tolstoy, George Eliot and Henry James. Lee Kok Liang may have read or studied some of these writers during his university study in Australia, but whether he did or not, his stories utilize the same carefully controlled techniques of realism.

The themes which Lee Kok Liang portrays in his writings show life as it is, with all its rawness and perversions. War is a common subject. The family in "Ami To Fu" has been evacuated and is hiding from soldiers. "Five

Fingers" tells the story of an old man whose first love was killed by soldiers; soldiers surround the young girl's village in "The Glittering Game". Another common theme of Lee's short stories is the idea that his characters are victims of circumstances such as poverty in "The Pei-Pa" or blindness in "Birthday" or victims of people such as the girl or her father in "Bandit Girl." "When the Saints Go Marching" is based upon a man's uncontrollable passions, suicide, madness and despair. "It's All In a Dream" focuses on political arrests and jailing. These subjects are far from the idealistic, sentimental subjects chosen by earlier Romantic writers. They are the result of Lee's careful observation of everything around him in Malaysia during his early years, and this feature of reporting all of life, the good along with the bad, is another element of realistic writing.

Lee Kok Liang's stories are told directly, with no overt authorial philosophizing. Nevertheless, his works rest upon and illustrate a philosophical view of a world independent and beyond the control of the human spirit. Lee's fiction suggests that the world contains and shapes people, a sense that whatever happens to humans is a result of social and natural forces. Dr. Bin, in "Not So Long Ago But Still Around", strains his marriage and makes his life miserable by his tireless search for acceptance by the influential members of society. Even after he has made his choice -- that the respect of society comes before the respect of his family -- he is still not confident that he has succeeded. There is still a nagging suspicion that the others have not accepted him, that he does not fit in. Equally important to the dictates of society are the irresistible forces

of the material world: greed, passion and instinct. The main character in "When the Saints Go Marching" has no options. He can not control his instinctual need to follow the pretty young women, even thought these urges lead him into trouble time and time again. He is trapped in a body filled with uncontrollable passions, and trapped in a house with a mad wife whom he has to care for, from whom there is no escape. George J. Becker, defines this philosophy of "man ... driven by forces over which he had little or no control and in which he could discern no goodness or purpose" as Naturalism. "Naturalism is no more than an emphatic and explicit philosophical position taken by some realists, showing man caught in a net from which there can be no escape and degenerating under those circumstances; that is, it is pessimistic materialistic determinism".[6]

One of Lee Kok Liang's finest short stories is "The Glittering Game". All the elements of literary Realism at its best coalesce in this tale. The heroine, Mei Fong, comes from a small town which has been relocated and is now surrounded by sentries -- one of some thousands of New Villages created during the Emergency as part of the Briggs Plan to defeat the communist terrorists.[7] At the same time a favourite uncle of hers has disappeared. Her innocent days in the kampung ended with this relocation. When she leaves the village, she has to pass by the sentries at the gates as if she is leaving a protective cage. Her family is very poor, and the elements of war and poverty shape her life. A prosperous-looking middle-aged woman comes to the village, sees Mei Fong dance, and offers to take her to the big city, promising to send a

monthly check home to the grandfather in exchange for Mei-Fong. This is the background of the story, scene of innocence endangered by exposure to the evils of the real world.

When the girl leaves the village, her naive love of dancing is met by the greed, passion, and ugliness of the big city. The dance hall is a sordid place where men without their wives or daughters pay $1.00 to see girls dance stripped bare to the waist, a few attempting to touch a girl when she dances out on the runway. The men, "feeling a bit ashamed", return to their rooms "more lonely than ever" (MS, 163). By careful choice of details, Lee portrays a sharp distinction between the wholesome life the girl shared with her family and the negative forces she meets in the city. her innocence is shown in stark contrast to the evils of the city.

The story is narrated from the point of view of Mei-Fong. The reader is told only what she thinks in each scene and what she understands. The past is conveyed through her memories. Because of Mei-Fong's innocence, she is not aware that the object of the evening's performance is not art. She is confused by the lead dancer, Ruby, who says that on the runway any steps will do, that the audience "won't notice the difference" (MS, 170). She doesn't understand what is meant when a man who thanks Ruby for arranging for Mei-Fong to dance on the runway says that "the first step is now taken" (MS, 173). Only the words that Mei-Fong hears and the sights that she sees are revealed to the reader who is, nevertheless, able to interpret them in ways that she, in her innocence, cannot.

Now, in the present time of the story, Mei-Fong's life is determined by forces beyond her control. She is as caged and controlled in her new life as is the bird who is being taught to speak (MS, 173-174); and she is drawn to the glitter and the stage as the silvery black moth is drawn to the flame which she holds on her walk down the runway (MS, 180). Lee's use of these images of the bird and the moth are richly suggestive of Mei-Fong's plight, though he carefully avoids pushing them to a level of symbolism which might detract from the naturalism they convey.

One story which starkly embodies the deterministic elements of Lee's fictional world is "Bandit Girl". The tale revolves around war, presumably the Communist insurgency in Malaya during the 1950's, and around the cruelty and violence therein. The young girl, who remains nameless throughout, admired her father because of his toughness, power and strength. When she asked her father what made him so tough, he answered her with a hard slap on the face (MS, 19). The plank floor of her childhood home bit into her flesh. By the age of eight she had calloused feet and hard thighs from her work on the water wheel. All of these elements -- her father's cruelty toward her, the hardships of her poor _kampung_ life, the excessive work required of her as a child, and the circumstances of the guerrilla war -- combine to create in her an extreme toughness which later compels her to torture and kill without remorse. Foreshadowings appear when she stabs repeatedly at a pig even after it is dead, saying, "I want to practice. I love to kill the bloody thing, even if it's dead" (MS, 22). Later she is able to hammer bamboo slabs under a man's nails:

"she loved to hear him squeal .... It was like music" (MS, 22). The Bandit Girl is a deterministic product of her environment, a victim of time and people and circumstances from which she does not and cannot escape. The final moments of her captivity reveal her as so controlled by the force of events that she is beyond fear or remorse. She sees only "the same tough, bare brown earth", the "leafless and silent" trees, and recalls "the stinging slap" of her father -- pieces of a materialistic controlling world, foreshadowings of an imprint on her mind before the final impact of her death -- "a sudden swish as the blade cut the air" (MS, 29)

The Bandit Girl's fate is emphasized by stark contrast with her mother's dreams for her daughter: "When I first saw you lying at my side, I had gentle hopes for you. I dreamt that you would ... have nice gowns to wear; you would learn to stitch, to embroider, to comb your hair beautifully" (MS, 19). These hopes for her daughter are dreams of freedom from material circumstance. She wants her girl to marry a rich man -- the ultimate peasant dream which will allow her to escape from her present environment to achieve happiness through liberty. These dreams are obliterated by the reality of her daughter's toughness. Instead of achieving liberty, the girl is imprisoned by her toughness and, later, she's caught and imprisoned because of her toughness. The story suggests that she is trapped, that life itself is a prison, and that freedom is an illusion, a dream beyond the power of human effort to make real.

The narrative method of "Bandit Girl" reinforces the distant and unemotional quality of the bandit girl. The story is told through limited third-person narration which centers only on her. She is called only "the girl". The reader apprehends the story primarily through exterior events and only rarely through inner thoughts of the characters. The first sentence in the story sets this tone: "No one could tell what emotion lay behind the girl's eyes. Love could lie there -- or cruelty" (MS, 18). This external view of the action duplicates the typical way we experience people: through their visible actions and not through their hidden feelings and motives.

This narrative is set mostly in the past of recollection with only the first two and the last six paragraphs of the story set in present time. The girl's detainment is revealed only near the end of the tale and her execution only in the final sentences. The middle reveals her past, the tough life of her youth, for a purpose -- to explain the present events. The story is short, just over five pages. A few instances of local colour appear, a brief reference to a water buffalo, the use of water wheels to pump water for the fields, and the joss-sticks that her mother burns before the kitchen god. Generally, however, the telling of the tale echoes the starkness of the tale itself; no unnecessary details embellish the lean facts of this well-told gem.

The short stories of Lee Kok Liang demonstrate surprising depth and control for a writer so young. His portrayals of the horrors of war, poverty, loss of innocence and frustrations alongside traditional values and

youthful hopes keenly convey the contrasts inherent in Malaya just after Independence. Lee's powers of observation and sensitivity to human weaknesses bear full fruit in his next works, the longer novelette, Mutes in the Sun and finally his full novel, Flowers in the Sky. As he tackles larger works, he does so without sacrificing the intimacy and concentration of detail found in his early short fiction.

NOTES

[1] Through the rest of this article the following abbreviations are used to identify sources for quotations from Lee Kok Liang: BE -- T. Wignesan (ed.), Bunga Emas: An Anthology of Contemporary Malaysian Literature (1930-1963) (Kuala Lumpur: Rayirath Publications, 1964); 22MS -- Lloyd Fernando (ed.), TWenty-Two Malaysian Stories (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd., 1968); MS -- Lee KOk Liang, The Mutes in the Sun and Other Stories (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books, 1964).

[2] John Barnes, "The Fiction of Lee Kok Liang", Quadrant, Vol. 29, Nos. 1 & 2 (Jan-Feb 1985), 120.

[3] From a letter to Ong Choo Suat (11 March 1965) quoted by Syd Harrex, "Mutes and Mutilators in the Fiction of Lee Kok Liang", Individual and Community in Commonwealth Literature, ed. Daniel Massa (Malta: The University Press, 1979), p. 143.

[4] Ee Tiang Hong, Review of Mutes in Westerly, No. 4 (December 1976), 101.

[5] Lee Kok Liang, "Dumb, Dumb, By a Bee Stung", Westerly, No. 4 (December 1976), 74.

[6] George F. Becker, ed., Documents of Modern Literary Realism (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 34, 35.

[7] See Richard Stubbs, Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare: The Malayan Emergency 1948-1960 (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989), for treatment of the Briggs Plan (pp. 98-100) and New Villages (169-182); see also Ray Nyce, Chinese New Villages in Malaya: A Community Study (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1973).

"Inside the Outsider A Portrait of the Third World Hero in N.V.M. Gonzalez's *The Bamboo Dancers*"

by

Sharmani Patricia Gabriel

The journey, both actual and symbolic, to discover an authentic, integrated identity is central to the theme that dominates N.V.M. Gonzalez's *The Bamboo Dancers* which, published in 1959, belongs to that "period of awareness" in the genesis of the Philippine novel in English. The quest for self and a purpose is, in fact, not only a pervasive theme in Philippine literature but in that vast body of non-European, Third World creative writing to which it can be returned.

The dominance of the image of the "lost" Filipino trying to come to grips with his personal dilemma in writing from the archipelago is an instance to exemplify the Third World writer's search for a fresh credo with which to reconstruct the mangled bulwark of ethics and beliefs which characterizes his disrupted, post-colonial consciousness. The dislocation of values and the attendant absence of a racial and national identity -- the products of the ugly sin of colonialism -- and their menacing void of anguish, estrangement, isolation, alienation, and bewilderment have propelled the committed writer from the Third World to transpose his elusive literary identity onto a generation of characters made dizzy by the complex and hypnotic cross-cultural web in which they find

themselves. The inner, psychic conflict between Oriental and Western cultures, between past and present resulting in the character's, to use that trenchant phrase by Guy Amirthanayagam and Syd Harrex, "somnambulistic loss of direction" (6), pressures him onto a flight to escape self and thereby the tensions underlying it, or (and the line between the two inevitably becomes indistinct at some stage along the journey) on an equally Odyssean journey to find self by rebelling against the imposition of foreign elements in the recent past. In the Philippines, for example, the "recent past" has been one of almost four centuries of foreign rule -- Spanish for three hundred years and American for another fifty. The silent revolt against this colonial past has, for the protagonist in Philippine literature of and after the 1940s, often involved a lonely pilgrimage into the earlier, more pristine pre-colonial Malay past wherein he may discover significant and worthwhile old values with which to interpret the giddy, inescapable, and prejudiced Americanized present. The coalescence of these traditional values into the wholeness of an authentic cultural identity has meant a shortening of that agonizing, geographical gulf between man and the object of his search -- himself.

Ernie Rama, the fleeing, self-deluded protagonist of Gonzalez's award-winning novel, is, in this respect, representative of the individual whose seminal condition of cultural dispossession as well as geographical dislocation and displacement has haunted not only the history of the colonised Philippines but of the rest of the former dominions which make up the Third World. Like his fellow

travellers in exile (Achebe's Okonkwo, Naipaul's Mr. Biswas, Patrick White's E. Twyborn, G.V. Desani's Hatterr, Wendt's Pepe and Tagata) Ernie is not only an outsider to the situations in which he has been placed -- one critic, Joseph Galdon, has even depicted him as "a kind of Asian Mersault" (xi) -- but one whose plight is made more harrowing because he has no real understanding of the motivations of his interior self. Ernie's self-ignorance resulting from his almost total immersion in the illusion which sets him apart as an outsider in reality renders much of his journeying an aimless wandering, itself part of the search.

When the novel opens, we find Ernie, the sculptor, in New York and -- to borrow the character Helen Reyes' words used in another context -- "a thousand miles away from the real thing", his ancestral home of the Philippines which, as the novel progressively makes it clear, is the only valid and genuine source of Ernie's cultural heritage. In America alone, in the span of a few weeks, Ernie travels from New York to Vermont in Montreal and then back to New York city again. Ernie's reasoning that the fellowship award bestowed on him has made it incumbent on him to acquaint himself with as many art centres as possible is not the real reason behind what increasingly appears to be his compulsive, restless journeying. It is his wilful, self-induced isolation from society that sustains him in this motion of perpetual flight.

An early manifestation in the novel of Ernie's psychic estrangement is his wanton shunting from one restaurant to another; "I tried everything from automats to soda fountains, from French to Greek restaurants"

(10). His subsequent explanation -- "I just wanted to get moving. Somehow I couldn't stand eating in the same place two days in a row, only to be again with strangers" -- is a demonstrable indication of the contradictory, self-annihilating state of tension in which he lives. A stranger to himself, Ernie Rama remains unaware for most but the last phase of his journeying that his having set out from his motherland to wander across the globe has been tantamount to "running away from what he really was".

Ernie's estrangement, his status as an outsider, is enhanced in the company of his Filipino friends, all fellow "exiles" in America. Against Reggie Samonte's genuine warmth and exuberance, discoverable from the time of their very first reunion in New York, Ernie appears withdrawn, impersonal, even nonchalant -- his characteristic response to life in general. When Reggie casually inquires if Ernie would be interested in meeting other Filipinos in New York, Ernie's intuitively asks if they are typical Filipinos, i.e. "the ones you'd expect to be dancing the tinikling (the Filipino traditional dance) with in some Fourth or July program" (12). When Reggie ruefully admits that he himself had once got himself "pressed into that sort of thing", Ernie's quick rejoinder ("Served you right, I'm sure") powerfully expresses his consciously-fostered dissociation from his cultural heritage. His alienation from his indigenous cultural roots is nowhere more evident in the novel than it is in this remark. His compelling distaste for and detachment from anything typically or traditionally Filipino is again evident when he surveys the furnishings in Reggie's apartment

with the eyes of an outsider. The somewhat clinical and condescending manner with which he looks upon the "cheap knick-knacks on the walls" demonstrates the innately superior character of Ernie's nature which is unwilling to identify itself with any of these symbolic manifestations of Filipinoness. His insensitivity to Cora's feelings in the matter of Reggie's vacation plans further intensifies his status as an outsider in the familial, domestic scene presented. This trait resurfaces in the course of the small party thrown by the Rices for a group of their Filipino friends. Ernie Rama consistently pulls away from the other guests, also "exiles" ignorant about the true reasons for the voyage of self-discovery that they have all unconsciously undertaken.

Indulging in pseudo-intellectual, flippant talk and striving after linguistic Americanisms in an obvious effort to emulate their colonial masters, these Filipinos, as pictured by Gonzalez's keenly penetrating, satirical eye, are transformed into repulsive caricatures of their home culture. Their Filipinoness is reduced to the level of incoherence of Johnny Kilala's mock Tagalog "*Toth-toh-oh 'yan*" which symbolically defines not only the spiritually fragmented universe which they inhabit but a world where moral purposes and cultural responses are conspicuously absent. The characters dabble in aimless, tangential chatter, all of them either indifferent or inattentive to what the other has to say. Gathered together, thus, in the New York apartment of the Rices, Ernie, Reggie, Cora, J.K., Delly Luna, and Mimi Valdez constitute the galaxy of characters representative in the novel of the "suffering Filipino race" which has

drifted hundreds of miles away from home and its cultural anchorage. There is thus much truth in Ernie's ironical remark that Mrs. Rice was moving among "relics of a lost Indian tribe" (28).

Ernie's lack of integration with J.K., in particular, and the rest of the crowd at the party underlines his deliberate disavowal of any claims of friendship or intimacy and reinforces the fact that he does not truly belong to the society whose company he keeps. His recurrent remark that he is "unable to make sense of what was going on" (23) is a trenchant statement of his own inadequacy, of his semi-willed failure to understand, to make significance out of the geographical and cultural absurdity with which he is confronted. Mrs. Rice's recitation of the soulful "Lament for Tammuz" which depicts the dark sterility, non-vitality, and aridity, both real and metaphoric, of the universe and in particular of Filipino life is a powerful device of the novelist to expose the moral indifference, insensitivity, and blindness of Mrs. Rice's audience. The self-absorbed J.K. can only interpret the elegy as an attack on his virility while Ernie is characteristically detached, lost in his canapes. He remains as he always has in other places and other times, dispassionate, emotionless, uninvolved, inert--dead.

Ernie's apparently aimless -- "It was now August and time, I thought, for moving on" (33) -- journeying soon takes him from New York to Vermont. His moral unconcern and emotional deficiency are further displayed in his conversation with the Josephs, owners of the rooming house, with whom he stays. Indifferent

to the Josephs' account of how they had lost their son to the war, Ernie is instead preoccupied with his fishing, a recurrent image in the novel. Ernie's almost maniacal obsession with his fishing equipment is perhaps paralleled in the rest of the New Literatures only by Mr. Biswas's desperate yearnings for a house of his own. For both Ernie and Mr. Biswas, their compulsions translate themselves into the overwhelming need to belong. For Mr. Biswas, his house of brick and stone will at last, and irrevocably, reconcile him to the earth of his new, adopted land of Trinidad. For Ernie, his fishing is the only activity to which he responds with zeal, enthusiasm, and some measure of personal involvement. For both, their frenzied longings and overpowering compulsions seek to halt the flux and provide some anchorage, thereby stabilizing the disrupted post-colonial consciousness.

In Vermont, Ernie meets up with an old girlfriend, Helen Reyes, but is quick to disavow any claims of a relationship with her. His inability to make contact with his fellowmen in general is crystallized in this relationship of uncommitedness which Ernie undertakes with Helen. In a scene in which Gonzalez deliberately evokes Hemingway's famous genitally wounded war hero, Jake Barnes, Ernie -- who carries a far more debilitating scar, a psychic one -- takes Helen home in a taxi and conscious of his latent homosexuality cringes from any physical contact with her. His frantic desire for non-attachment which he unconsciously attributes to his homosexuality is accompanied by the wilful indifference he displays when Helen later professes her feelings of love for him. Responding with a callous "oh, yeah" to

Helen's revelations, Ernie is only too aware that she "might as well have spoken to someone from another planet" (40).

The dream image which sustains the greater part of the novel's meaning and texture is introduced at this point at the appropriately idyllic setting of Greenleaf. Ernie's dream-like feeling as he views the scenery before him is a symbolic extension of his detachment which makes him view everything in life as unreal and fictional, an illusion. In fact, the motif of illusion and reality -- which formed an integral theme in Philippine novels published during the post-war period -- is a suitable device to delineate the disintegrative dilemma of the protagonist. Ernie's wilful withdrawal and isolation from his cultural roots manifests itself again at Greenleaf. When the hotel clerk asks him to perform the *tinikling*, Ernie feels "embarrassed", falling back on the readily available excuse that 'there [weren't] any bamboo poles around" (49). The dream image introduced at the outset of Ernie's arrival at Greenleaf functions repeatedly during this phase of his wandering. Ernie continues to be deluged by the uneasy feeling that everything seemed unreal, as if everything he saw was "a page torn from a book or a scene from a movie or even a picture on a postcard". The dream motif is thus a telling extension of Ernie Rama's inability, refusal, even, to comprehend reality. It is symptomatic of his isolation from the personal world of man. Running away from the truth, Ernie has yet to realise that his journeying, at this stage at least, is towards the ultimate disillusionment -- the tragic "sense of having stopped at the wrong place" (62).

Ernie's status as an outsider is further emphasized in the presence of Herb Lane who comes across as "the thoughtful and kind type" in opposition to Ernie who generally bemused by experience, the typical stance of the outsider, is described by Helen as being "never serious". Ernie's thoughts soon centre around his going to Montreal where blending with the faceless crowds he can once more assume the anonymity he desires by hiding behind the undemanding mask of the "stranger". It is quite apparent at this stage of the novel that Ernie's self-imposed exile and deliberately fostered alienation manifest themselves in his lasting, inerradicable loneliness, both among strangers and among friends.

Ernie and Helen at last consummate their peculiar relationship over *adobo* and *basi* in New York, in the Samontes' West End Avenue apartment. Surprising Helen, and himself, in the act, nowhere is Ernie's estrangement from his cultural and moral roots more palpable. Ernie's moral lapses, representative of those of his countrymen in America, finds its trenchant enactment in the Samonte residence. Ernie is characteristically evasive about facing up to the consequences of such an involvement. He withdraws after the lovemaking, afraid of hearing what Helen has to say. "Deep inside me", he admits, "was the reluctance to be confronted with the facts" (128). This again points to Ernie's wilful withdrawal from a personal world and his consequent movement into a self-recreated sphere where his involvement with reality is both limited and limiting. It is this too that forms the basis for Ernie's refusal to accept the reality of his brother Pepe's adulterous liaison in America. Ernie's

deliberate refusal to acknowledge the truth-- and therefore take responsibility for the consequences of such an acceptance -- is clearly reflected when, after seeing his brother in the company of his American girlfriend, he declares: "I didn't care -- at any rate, I shouldn't I told myself about whatever Pepe did with himself. I had seen no one. he had not been talking with anyone" (131).

Ernie's inability to respond and communicate with others exacerbates his loneliness. His self-sought divorce from humanity is symptomatic of the self-absorption that renders it difficult, impossible for him to understand others. It also contributes to the failure of his relationships with his brother and with Helen. Ernie himself is confronted with the moral significance of his callousness. One evening after dinner in Kyoto, Ernie receives repeated calls from a Japanese woman in distress. Ernie's thoughts, however, are only centred around his wanting to go back to sleep. Annoyed at the violation of the inner space which he has so painstakingly built around himself, Ernie later confesses: "I was surprised at my utter coldness. She was like somebody reaching out in the dark, and all I could say was that I didn't understand what it was she had been trying to do" (144). It is precisely this moral sightlessness which is responsible for Ernie being, as the critic Leonard Casper puts it, "often more stone than sculptor" (50).

The theme of the outsider continues to dominate the rest of Gonzalez's novel. On his train journey from Kyoto to Hiroshima, Ernie makes pathetic attempts to communicate with the

Cardinal Mann, but these meet with frustration because, as Ernie is to discover later, the Cardinal is hard of hearing. In a sense, this minor episode between Ernie and Cardinal Mann is symbolic of Ernie's inarticulateness which severs meaningful communication between himself and the larger society of Man.

Ernie's alienation from humanity is again demonstrated in his reaction and response to the war-ravaged Japanese whom he meets. Ernie's experiences in Japan largely function in the novel as Gonzalez's indictment of his protagonist's moral indifference. When a tearful Mrs. Kumagai recounts the suffering she and her family have undergone, Ernie's first response is "to turn my eyes away" (163). The holocaust of the war, observes one critic, is an "externalization of the interior wasteland of Ernie's own existence" (Benesa 59). Though Ernie resumes his status as an outsider in Hiroshima, the episode is significant as it marks another step in Ernie's journey towards eventual self-discovery. Ernie initially shirks any kind of involvement with the Japanese and their war experiences; the extent and depth of their communication, he confesses, makes him feel "uncomfortable". However, walking through the Atomic Bomb Explosion Centre Museum the next day, Ernie is deeply affected by the horrendous proof of human suffering and extinction as evidenced in the pictures on display. For the first time in a long while, Ernie is shaken out of his indifference and moved to see beyond himself.

In Tokyo, Ernie is introduced by Mrs. Hobbs to a Miss Page, the sari-clad British photographer who immediately attracts Ernie

probably because of the cultural ambivalence she projects. Although Ernie "envisions a deepening of his own friendship" with Miss Page, it is worth noting that the bond is both perceived and established only in his dreams, characteristic of Ernie's evasion of a real-life commitment.

Helen soon resurfaces in Tokyo to fill the void caused by Miss Page's disappearance. For the first time, Ernie and Helen are able to really communicate. "It was like feeling the warmth of another's hand on your own", Ernie describes. But even here, their attempts at communication are, to use that famous Fitzgerald phrase, "a broken series of gestures". Helen is intent on seeing "everything look nice and right" while Ernie, as nonchalant as ever, is only half-listening.

In Taipeh, the last lap of Ernie's movement to moral health, he comes face to face with a group of bamboo dancers in their national dress and acutely conscious of their cultural identity feels "smothered" by their presence. The old feeling of alienation trails Ernie even in this leg of his Odyssey. Ernie stands apart from the rest of the group as though a cordon had been thrown "around me, to set me off" (209). As always, Ernie appears more of a spectator than participant.

Herb Lane's sudden death in Taipeh makes a significant impact on Ernie. For the first time, he comes to view people not as bloodless abstractions, but as figures, physical entities. Death opens his eyes to an emotional involvement with others. His concern for Helen is uncharacteristic of him. "I didn't care about anything except that Helen came through

uninvolved.... I was not concerned about such abstractions as justice and retribution" (235).

Ernie's unconsciously undertaken pilgrimage towards moral recovery reaches its culmination in Sipolong, his ancestral village. His newly developing consciousness begins to affect the way he treats others. Of Rosa, the family maid, he candidly admits that "it was a long time I had treated, or spoken to anyone, with such kindness" (263). It is here, in his cultural heartland, that Ernie faces up to the truth behind his "phobia" for old men. This new understanding is tinged with epiphanic significance: "All through my days in America", he reveals, "in a hundred old men's faces I met in parks, restaurants, and other places, I had seen father's face. That was perhaps the reason why I had dreaded meeting those old men and old women. Now the meaning of that fear was clear" (266). it is evident from the evolving narrative that Ernie is nearer to self-knowledge than he was in the beginning of his journey. By running away from the image of his father, Ernie realises that he has been running away from a commitment to all that is Filipino in himself, thus consciously isolating himself from the source of his national identity. In this sense, Ernie's cyclical journey across the globe back to his native village of Sipolong is an educative process. Moving from disillusionment and the self-induced physical distancing-- symptomatic of his moral, social, and cultural estrangement -- to the final awakening to himself and the ensuing acceptance of the past as the source of his life and cultural identity, Ernie's newly maturing self learns to accept the ethic which it sought to repudiate at the beginning of its symbolic journey. In this

sense, the bamboo image functions in Ernie's cumulative consciousness as a powerful symbol of Philippine life and its traditional values. Ernie's refusal to dance the *tinikling*, the bamboo dance, is indicative of his rejection of any form of cultural identification with his historical past, inevitably culminating, as the novel testifies, in the shocking moral lapse enacted in the Samontes' New York apartment.

Ernie's near drowning in the purgative, cleansing waters of the river in his traditional place of pilgrimage symbolises the inexorable death of his old self and the ensuing birth of a newly acquired integrative vision. Emerging clairvoyant and transfigured from his near-death experience, Ernie, having come to terms with himself and his place, begins to realise that it is *himself* that he has travelled so far to reach. In this respect, Ernie, the once culturally dispossessed, is slowly on his way to becoming a "bamboo dancer", a man with a culture to call his own.

The story of Ernie Rama is rich in implication for it successfully epitomises the Third World wanderer's recognisable human dilemma. Cut off and alienated from his indigenous cultural roots and thereby from his inner self -- a plight attributable to the historical accident of colonialism -- Gonzalez's wanderer, like his counterparts from other post-colonial societies of the world, finds himself embarking on a symbolic pilgrimage of self-definition. Discovering himself an outsider in most of the stops along the way, cut off from any sense of geographical reality, Ernie suffers a disintegration of personality which relegates him to the ranks of the socially and culturally

dislocated. The accompanying sense of social and psychological fragmentation and fracture gives way eventually, and unconsciously in Ernie's case, to a reintegration of his whole personality through the realization of the historical self. The journey which had first been initiated with the protagonist himself denying his own origins ultimately ends with his acceptance of his home tradition as the source of his historical identity. This return to the geographically identifiable setting of the protagonist's own birth and childhood completes the journey motif in Philippine literature.

In this sense, *The Bamboo Dancers* is a seminal novel when viewed in the overall context of Philippine literature in English. It successfully establishes its kinship with the emergent literature of other post-imperial societies and the preoccupation of these novelists with using their writing as a weapon with which to exorcise the dark forces of colonialism as well as to delineate the human problems introduced in the wake of such a situation. The novel is an imaginative rendering of the post-colonial writer's search for a dynamic past, the old world, as a centre of reference for the interpretation of the "new" and valid human personality. Ernie Rama's sloughing off of his old self and his prejudices is symbolically reflective of the success of the English novel in the Philippines in beginning its separate and impressive Filipino existence.

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EPITHALAMIUM

For Marianne Rozario

by

Leonard Jeyam

Mother used to say the three of you
were some of the sweetest babies
she'd ever seen, and such a pity,
she'd always sigh, why children had to grow.

And growing up after all this time
it has finally dawned upon me
that in an act of unmeasured candidness
it wasn't *your* birthday being captured here --

through your own undoing, I suppose,
don't you seem to stand apart
(as your brothers look the other way)
capturing also their poise and presence

in an act of postured aggrandizement,
even if commemoratively Joe was meant
to be the photo's central subject?
As you smile away for the years to arrive,

do accept this simple wish, without rhyme,
without a real metre, but just a mixture
of thoughts and feelings that I hope
in the end will relieve the artlessness

of these, my three last lines:
May Love and Happiness be with you
and with Julian as well as sincerely
as old photographs can sometimes be.

'THEY PLAYED THE OLDIES THAT HAD BEEN DANCED FOR YEARS:'
THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE EURASIAN PAST IN THE SHRIMP PEOPLE

by

Margaret Yong

*The Shrimp People** takes the form of a nostalgic stroll through the Singapore Eurasian community, with the Emergency in Malaysia and Konfrontasi with Indonesia as part of its hectic background. Rex Shelley has woven an action packed thriller of international intrigue into this material; the results are not always seamless, but they make for vivid reading. Much of *The Shrimp People* is semi-reflexive, raising the question of self identity, but without pushing reflexivity to its logical conclusion and querying its own fictional form. The result of such a technique is curiously old fashioned--an enjoyable read, with little awarenes of the implications of fictions of identity. Nevertheless, it is an assured work and has many signs of narrative accomplishment.

Shelley is a retired civil servant who has written before, but this is his first attempt at fiction. He seems to have carved out an enclave for himself: what K. S. Maniam has done for Malaysian Indians in fiction, Shelley has done for Singaporean Eurasians. Though the plot of The Shrimp People is fast paced (at least in the second half of the book), there is plenty of room for evoking the ethos of the Eurasian community in Singapore. (Malaysian Eurasians

don't really come under his scrutiny very much.) Indeed, I would go so far as to claim that the real subject is Eurasian identity.

Shelley has invented an ingenious way of asking the question, 'what is an Eurasian?' which unearths his subtext. In order to explain that, it is necessary to say something about the plot, which is really quite simple: 'what happened to Bertha Rodriguez?' seems to sum it up nicely. The story concerns the disappearance of Bertha, who drives off across the Causeway after a quarrel with her husband. By introducing various characters who have a personal interest in finding out what happened to Bertha--Old Joe, a Singaporean Eurasian now living in Perth who seems to have known the Bertha Rodriguez story well, and Robert, Bertha's nephew, who is in Perth on business--*The Shrimp People* is able to advance the story, increase the mystery, and at the same time linger lovingly over the details of Eurasian identity.

Again cleverly, the Perth scenes are not contemporaneous with the story of Bertha, for they take place in the modern world of 'now' (mostly in a suburban pub) in contrast to the mood of the 'past' (when Singapore still had villages and rubber estates at the edges of a graceful city). The contrast between past and present is enhanced since the homesick Perth Eurasians invariably look back nostalgically on days of yore. This creates a neat framing device, so that the rest of the narrative is distanced and the story of Bertha is seen retrospectively as an inherent part of the Eurasian world now in danger of being eroded by the changing ways of cosmopolitan Singapore.

The excavation of the Bertha story is executed with an acute sense that the way of life she represents is passing even as we watch it unfold. Moreover, the Perth diaspora of Eurasians contributes to this nostalgia, as the immigrants mould themselves to new and Aussie ways. Robert's resistance to the abbreviation of Sylvia's name to Syl, for instnce, is symptomatic of this drift.

In its effort to define the features which contribute to the Eurasian identity and heritage, specifically to the Singaporean Eurasian sense of self, *The Shrimp People* reinvents through the act of memory. Part of its repertoire may be seen as aids to memory. Hence the strong, almost hypnotic, pull in the litany of names, of favourite songs which evoke the period, of the dishes typical of Eurasian meals ('must eat sambal belacan, chinchalok and can eat Hylam pork or Chinese black chicken, or kai keok ...'), of the Eurasian (or is it Asian?) formulaic questioning after the introductions are over, so that the newcomer is exactly located within the community. Hence also, the conventions surrounding the celebration of Eurasian birthdays, weddings, funerals, Christmases and baptisms.

The world of *The Shrimp People* offers an impressionistic oral history in the making; its background theme is the documentation of the Eurasian past recalled and relived through the multiple flashbacks. The details of life (and life-histories, another important element in Shelley's method) in the Eurasian community help to create the sense of a complete (even self-enclosed) culture. It seems to me that this

wealth of informal yet substantial material is the underlying strength of Shelley's novel.

*<u>The Shrimp People</u> by Rex Shelley. Singapore & Petaling Jaya: Times Books International, 1991. 478 pp. ISBN 981 204 292 X

LANDSCAPE AS ART AND ART FORMS IN LAWRENCE'S *THE WHITE PEACOCK*

by

Alice Samuel Pillay

In *The White Peacock* the visual element in landscape description is a distinctive feature of Lawrence's art. His vivid creation of spring pictures in the 'poplars suddenly bursten into a dark crimson glow', 'the half-spread fans of the sycamore' and 'the white cloud of sloe-blossom go silver grey against the evening sky' has a Keatsian charm which pervades much of the poetic landscape of *The White Peacock* (p. 218).* His perception of nature in all its varying moods, his use of the intricate spectrum of colour and his ability to create poetic images give the novel an aesthetic richness that we associate with art form.

In fact, Lawrence's vivid evocation of landscape is in keeping with the arcadian world of Nethermere where its inhabitants live in rural simplicity although they discuss art and aesthetics. Nethermere is in fact a realization of the Midlands which Lawrence loved so much but a Midlands with only a hint of industry. While there is a description of the pits, the mining landscape remains very much in the foreground. Lawrence's forte, Alldritt maintains is 'his ability to actualise and to vivify our sense of the beauty of the seen world' (*The Visual Imagination*, p. 13). But while one can view the introductory paragraph simply as a piece of evocative description as Lawrence realizes the

lost atmosphere of a 'lusty' medieval England, there is something in the visual imagery that conveys in a microcosm the entire mood and tone of *The White Peacock*:

> I stood watching the shadowy fish slide through the gloom of the mill-pond. They were grey descendants of the silvery things that had darted away from the monks, in the young days when the valley was lusty. The whole place was gathered in the musing of old age. The thick-piled trees on the far shore were too dark and sober to dally with the sun, the reeds stood crowded and motionless. Not even a little wind flickered the willows of the islets (TWP, p. 3).

While there is a sense of immediacy in 'I stood watching,' the continuous action of the verbal 'watching' perhaps best describes the passive pose of Cyril, Lawrence's first person narrator who stands observing throughout the best part of the novel and who loses Emily merely because he does not exert his will. The use of the present continuous tense is significant for within the present moment is eclipsed the transcience of nature. Through the visual image of 'shadowy fish ... grey descendants of the silvery things' we are conscious of a fluid world that is continually in a state of change. Yet in the same paragraph, a sense of decay, degeneration and stagnation in the atmosphere is conveyed in

'the gloom of the mill-pond' and the image of the dense reeds choked and denied the essence of life. The reference to the past in 'grey descendants,' 'had darted away' and allusions to a 'lusty' valley carries with it connotations of a luxuriant and sensuous landscape which has undergone change. Scenes which are experienced pictorially, whether it has a description of a landscape, place or person stimulate what Torgovnick calls the 'interpretative processes of a reader's mind and cause him to arrive at an understanding of the novel's methods and meanings' *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism and the Novel*, p. 23). Mutability becomes then, a key theme, and through the cyclic process of change that has been suggested, we see the transcient lives and fortunes of those denizens of Nethermere.

Written very much under the influence of late Victorian romanticism and aestheticism, frequent mention is made of Pre-Raphaelite and 1890 poet and painters like Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Francis Thompson, Burne-Jones and Millais. A drawing by Aubrey Beardlsley and Maurice Greiffenhagen's 'Idyll' have a particular significance in the narrative. The 'Idyll' arouses in George Saxton, a strong physical desire for Lettie. Beardsley's 'Atlanta' has the same effect:

> 'And the more I look at
> these naked lines, the more
> I want her.' (TWP, p. 197)

But when Cyril makes possible the encounter between the two, Lettie does not conform to the Beardsley image and he weakly convinces himself

that she does look 'better than those naked lines'.

Lawrence's use of visual effects goes beyond mere description for he transforms these images in such a way as they become an expressive medium for communicating ideas and emotion. Barrie Bullen in *The Expressive Eye* observes that what may appear to be merely descriptive and visual on one level, is in fact 'charged with feelings and ideas which are not, strictly speaking visual at all' (Preface). In the chapter entitled 'A Poem of Friendship' George and Cyril share an intimate moment after swimming together:

> We stood and looked at each other as we rubbed ourselves dry. He was well proportioned, naturally of handsome physique, heavily limbed. He laughed at me telling me I was like one of Aubrey Beardsley's long lean fellows. I referred him to many classic examples of slenderness, declaring myself more exquisite than his grossness, which amused him (TWP, p. 273).

On one level it is merely two men admiring each other's physique in terms of visual art; Cyril is seen in terms of a Beardsley drawing while George, conceptualized in terms of classical sculpture, is admired for 'the noble fruitfulness of his form' (TWP, p. 273). As they gaze at each other after the moment of

physical contact, Cyril is conscious of total perfection:

> Our love was perfect than any love I have known since, either for man or woman (TWP, p. 273).

As George and Cyril are locked together in that still moment of perfection, we are conscious that the moment of perfection attained is possible only in art and not in the medium of everyday reality.

While there is the ephemeral quality of a dream about the first two parts of the novel, we are conscious of more sombre undertones pervading and affecting the lives of its central characters in the later chapters. While the novel has been criticized for the 'banality of the love-story' (Delavenay, *D.H.Lawrence: The Man and His Work*, p. 90) and the lack in homogeneity in the way scenes and incidents are put together, it is the visual element, the poetic images worked into the narrative and adroitly built around the symbolism of the white peacock that integrates the multiple threads of the novel. Lawrence presents his characters for the most part, through a prose medium which resembles visual art, either through pictorial representation or by conceptualising them as paintings or statues. In his description of character it is noticeable that behaviour, action and gesture are structured according to aesthetic patterns. Lawrence's description of Lettie 'moving in some alluring figure of a dance' and her 'eyes bright and rousing like two blue pennants' (TWP, p. 364) conforms to aesthetic principles. Annable, the gamekeeper

who adheres to the principle of animalism and naturalism is also viewed in an aesthetic light by Lady Chrystabel:

> ... and she would have me in her bedroom while she drew Greek statues of me - her Croton, her Hercules! (TWP, p. 185).

Her refusal to have children and her rejection of Annable for a poet causes Annable to reject aestheticism and denounce modern woman whom he contemptuously sees as a peacock, 'all vanity and screech and defilement' (TWP, p. 183). He turns his back on civilization as it were for a philosophy that upholds animalism.

While there is much that is visual in the novel's title, it is a connundrum for we associate the peacock with a multiplicity of colour. Lawrence's peacock is a white one and being white, assumes symbolic overtones. While the title is derived from Annable's tale, it is also an allusion to Lettie, the other modern woman in the novel. In terms of visual effects, Lettie is realized metaphorically in her bird-like gestures, frivolity and vanity. On another plane she is pictorially caught and stilled:

> As she turned laughing to the two men,s he let her cloak slide over her white shoulder and fall with silk splendour of a peacock's gorgeous blue over the arm of the large settee. There she stood, with her white hand upon the peacock of

> her cloak, where it tumbled against her orange dress. She knew her own splendour, and she drew up her throat laughing and brilliant with triumph (TWP, p. 311).

Her pavonine splendour is realized in images related to the vainglorious bird. Parts of her anatomy are always described in terms of its whiteness - 'whiteness of her shoulder', or 'face' or 'neck' (TWP, p. 311). Cyril says at one point that 'you cannot tire Lettie, her feet are wings that beat the air' (TWP, p. 68). Her transfiguration is complete and George and Leslie worship her almost as if she is an exquisite work of art. The thematic nuances suggested through the colour white are interesting. While white denotes an absence of colour, it in fact encapsulates all the colours of the spectrum. So Lettie, the 'white peacock' has the potential, the sensibility for complete fulfilment but in her choice of Leslie, she settles for the safer course and in so doing, denies herself the fulfilment that is possible. Graham Hough views this self-abnegation as 'the resource of a woman for escaping the responsibilities of her own development' (*The Dark Sun*, p. 28). She rejects George for his lack of rural simplicity, his complacency and his lack of aesthetic sensibility.

What preoccupies Lawrence in this novel is the suffering of individuals. Almost all the characters who feature in The White Peacock are like the metaphor of its gesturing title transfigured by their confrontation with reality. While there are ideological conflicts in the novel, realized within the context of

aestheticism and art, the resolutions are not absolutely clear. Lawrence's attempt at creating a mosaic of moods through a visual and impressionistic medium makes this novel at best a pastiche of art.

NOTES

*All references to Lawrence's *The White Peacock* (TWP) are taken from the Cambridge Edition, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

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IT WAS A WONDROUS SIGHT!

by

Malachi Edwin

It was a wondrous sight!
A sight for national unity watchers.

He eating fried mee with chopsticks
And she, nasi lemak with fingers.

The young man skilfully
manoeuvred the chopsticks
without letting slip a strand.

The young woman expertly
coordinated her hands and mouth
getting every grain in.

The meal almost over
They make plans to tell their parents.

ONE MAN'S ISLAND REPUBLIC IS ANOTHER MAN'S PRISON ISLAND: SIMON TAY STANDS ALONE

by

Agnes Yeow

Simon Tay. *Stand Alone*. Singapore: Landmark Books, 1991. ISBN: 981-3002-41-7. 268 pp.

Simon Tay, named Singapore's best young poet in 1986, is venturing into the field of prose fiction and "[experimenting] with different prose styles and techniques in shorter stories". *Stand Alone*, a compilation of twelve short stories and three poems, is the outcome of this pilot attempt and explores themes pertinent to life on the island republic as Tay conceives it to be: spiritual isolation, self-exile, identity crisis, betrayal, materialism, prejudice, loneliness. Tay displays an acute awareness of the circumstances shaping the lives of his countrymen. His works, drawn from intense personal experience and convictions, seek to transcend the dehumanizing effects of the rampant rat race. There is a definite attempt to formulate a statement denouncing the abject loss of individuality in the midst of moral and spiritual bankruptcy. His poems bear testimony to this. However, in manipulating a genre entirely new to him, Tay is less sure of himself, often sacrificing good storytelling for the sake of demonstrating a point.

The first story in the volume, "My Cousin Tim", is an account of the eponymous misguided offspring defying parental expectations despite having initially proven himself exceptionally gifted and brimming with potential. Tim is duly sent abroad to study, only to degenerate into a rebellious life of dissipation and ruin, a total economic and personal failure in the eyes of his family and society. In this highly predictable and stereotyped story, Tay repudiates restricting social norms and myopic views on that coveted phenomenon, worldly success. In a world where an individual's self-worth is measurable only in terms of a highly-paid job, a BMW in the garage, children groomed to excel academically, financial investments and transactions, there is little room for spiritual growth and people tend to be brutally pigeonholed. In this world too, homogeneity supersedes individuality. The ironic twist at the end of the story, which sees the wayward and controversial cousin Tim disclosing the fact that he has "made good" after all, lacks credibility and as such, backfires as a device to confound Tim's disapproving family and relatives. To have a liberated figure like Tim, who is painstakingly portrayed as an indomitable free spirit and an amoral punk-jazz aficionado, only to have him then amass a staggering million pounds sterling after a stint as a real estate agent seems a rather whimsical and incongruous transition. Tay might be suggesting that an individual is never really free of the social bane and that the stranglehold of parental and social expectations is, in the final analysis, desirable in that it enables the individual to find himself in his revolt against the forces that subjugate individual expression. Tay is not anti-prosperity but he objects to the rigid

conformity that society demands of a person and he believes that Singaporeans, the young especially, should be free to make their own life choices and endure the consequences of their own actions. Maybe Tay's primary objective in this story is to suggest that the supposed loser can still rise up to expectations but all in his own way and time. Tim is ambivalent over how to reveal the truth of his massive fortune to the family gathered at his father's funeral. With his father's death, the dubious Tim comes to represent a new-age generation which must now assume the responsibility of nurturing individual and national aspirations. If the money buys him acceptance (his dilemma is not whether or not to announce his incredible financial status but <u>how</u> to do so) he would be compromising his own principles and bastardising the very ideals and beliefs that make up his character. The money means nothing to him. This nebulous ending appears to be a mere red herring, which makes the culmination of the story less thought-provoking than problematic.

"Drive" seems to tackle the dangers of vengeful and mindless competition as exemplified by the reckless car races between the unnamed protagonist and a mysterious hell-driver on the highways. The narrative itself is trite in the repetition of details such as the Mozart on the car stereo. Man's propensity for violence is revealed sporadically and at the climax when the belligerent rival steps out of his car brandishing a crowbar. However, notwithstanding the rather uninspiring style, this final element of terror is promising in its sinister implications.

In the remaining stories, Tay goes on in more or less the same prosaic vein to deal with a host of pressing issues: marital bliss or the lack of it, cultural differences, a common heritage, intermarriage, male dominance and chauvinism, the jaded expatriate, sexual depravity, National Service, intellectual and moral passivity and complacency, emigration, bigotry, the forging of a national and cultural identity, superstitions, the narcissistic executive. However, this barrage of topical issues borders on prolixity and can be extremely tiresome after a point. Plots have a tendency to falter or wear themselves thin before the denouement or even the deliberate omission of a resolution. In stories where the authorial insistence assumes a didactic voice, characterisation is ineffectual. The latch-key husband, Noel, Zheng Rui Yin, Sam and Jackie, Professor Phenwick, Iris, and the rest are not fully developed and as such, are not memorable in themselves. Their personal struggles and dilemmas seem superficial sideshows but indeed have far-reaching effects.

"Catherine, Listening to the Rain" is the exception and sees Tay paying sensitive attention to characterisation via evocative language and images. The story within the story is effective, even poignant in its nostalgic, dream-like quality. However, the hasty generalisation seems to be that a defective marriage as that of Catherine, is the inevitable bane of a yuppie generation. Anyway, one is impressed with the notion that infidelity is an inherited social malaise, passed down through the generations, a neverending sequence of broken vows, likened to the incessant storm outside. Catherine sits through a monsoon-long

wait for an unfaithful husband, performing her wifely duties. The flashbacks and shifting time frames contribute to the idea of interlocking events and create a sense of past and present merging, precipitating the future willy-nilly into yet another case of betrayal, disillusion and moral chaos.

In *Stand Alone*, Tay's subtext paints a rather bleak picture of man and society's ills. Questionable value systems come under attack and hollow economic and social institutions are exposed. Ultimately, the realities which Tay, in his angst and genuine concern for individual wholeness, examines portend a collapse of personal integrity and lack of fulfillment in a world where people are alienated, trapped and very often, reduced to marketable commodities and automatons. The disintegration of personalities, the dissolution of marriages and the generation gap among other afflictions hurting the Singaporean psyche are well worth writing about. So are the eternal values of hope, courage, love, sacrifice, honesty and endurance which provide inexhaustible material for writers. However, Tay's rather lame narrative style detracts from the otherwise critical significance of his stories.

THE SIXTH OXFORD CONFERENCE ON LITERATURE TEACHING OVERSEAS

Part I

by

Devikamani Menon

Introduction

This conference is a yearly affair organized by British Council. The main purpose of this conference is to enable teachers, lecturers and education officers involved in the teaching of English literature or literature in English in ESL situations, to keep abreast of the latest developments and issues concerning the subject. The 1991 conference was held from Sunday 7 to Saturday 13 April at Worcester college, Oxford. 52 participants from 37 countries attended the conference, while 31 of them presented papers during the participants' sessions. There were also presentations from 11 invited speakers as well as 2 speakers who were also in the organizing committee.

The programme for each day began at 9.00a.m. in the morning and ended at 10.00p.m. at night, with breaks in between for meals. The day sessions were mainly presentations by the various speakers, while the night sessions were mainly presentations by poets and short story writers.

The following section will comprise the first part of a report whereby the writer will summarize the main points presented by speakers on the first two days of the conference.

1. A brief Background to Literature Teaching in English

by Alan Durant

Professor Alan Durant of Goldsmith's College, London University, explored the various social contexts for studying literature in English. Apparently it was first taught as a kind of secular, humanistic 'religion' to replace the actual teaching of the Christian religion. As education was initially controlled by the clergy, the early forms of literature taught were pseudo-religious texts such as John Bunyan's Pilgrim 's Progress, a text which was ideal for the teaching of Christian values.

During the time of the British Empire, the teaching of English literature and language served 3 kinds of purposes for the British administrators:

- Firstly, it created a new English-educated class with whom the British could interact in order to control the natives;
- Secondly, it perpetuated the notion that English literature and language were culturally superior to those of the colonial countries;

- Finally, it helped to promote the teaching of the Christian religion as English was then the main language of the Bible;
  so the teaching of English became a way of getting round the prohibition against teaching Christianity.

1.1 Literature Teaching in ESL Situations

Three stages were mentioned in the teaching of literature in English and English language to non-native speakers. During the first stage the structural syllabus influenced the teaching of the English language. The basic belief was that one should acquire basic structural competence before one can learn the literature of a language. In other words, that the teaching of language should come before the teaching of literature.

During the second stage the communicative syllabus influenced the teaching of the English language. This syllabus emphasized the teaching of communicative skills above everything else. Language teachers who implemented it felt that literature was best left out of language teaching, as the syllabus seemed to emphasize what language can do in terms of notions and functions rather than what it has achieved over the years. The communicative syllabus relied heavily on the mass media and simulations of real life.

However, in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s literature was seen to serve some functions in relation to language teaching. The 'language through literature' approach was

explored and it was found that literature and language can be made to cross-fertilize. In other words, literature can be taught in a more interesting way if language-teaching techniques are adapted, and language teaching can be enriched if literary materials are used as resources. In fact, literature has certain inherent advantages for language teaching.

Firstly, the stylistic contrasts of literary texts from different genres offers scope for the study of language styles. Secondly, the aesthetic nature of literary language motivates learners to learn the language at its best. Next, literature provides learners with tools to analyse their own culture, and it provides vicarious cross-cultural experiences that are useful for the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in the ESL situation. Lastly, literature provides an authentic context for teaching the various rules of language use and usage.

1.2 Current Issues in Teaching Literature

There seems to be a number of issues associated with the teaching of literature. Firstly, literature courses often focus on a few texts which are considered to be among the best. However, the conception of 'best' could be a relative concept, depending upon the socio-cultural factors that influence the selection. This has been referred to as the 'touchstones' argument. For many teachers it leads to the question of whether to focus only on English literature or literature in English in general.

Secondly, there is the question of whether literature courses should introduce 'earlier' literature before teaching 'later' literature, for example, whether a course on English should begin with Elizabethan works before introducing Victorian literature. There are strong arguments for doing so yet there are also arguments for beginning the study of literature with modern works. This has been referred to as the 'tradition' and 'chronology' arguments.

Next, there are the arguments for and against familiarizing the students with the major genres from the start. While this may help students to differentiate the various genres, it may also lead to rigid perceptions that may hinder the understanding of ambiguous texts.

Lately, the teaching of literature has borrowed heavily from the teaching methodology of language courses. The issue confronting literature today is not so much what we teach but how we teach it. The teaching of literature is made more lively when teachers adapt the activity-based approaches which are currently recommended for language teachers.

However, this had led to a dilemma for teachers of literature at the tertiary level. The dilemma is whether to continue with their teacher-centred lectures, tutorials and seminars or to use the student-centred task-based and activity-based approaches which focus on the use of groupwork, workshops and projects. While the former may lead to monotony and lack of student involvement, it does have its advantage in enabling the teacher to complete the syllabus and conduct summative assessment such as

examinations. The latter approach may have the advantage of variety and student involvement, but may pose problems of evaluation, and may leave the teacher with less time to complete the syllabus.

Furthermore, issues of context and culture were also discussed. Cultural references and allusions that are meaningful to students in one society may not make any sense to those in another. Cultural references become more problematic in a polyglot situation, where there are many ethnic groups with diverse cultural practices and beliefs. This was confirmed by another participant from Kenya, Jack Odenga Ogembo, during the participants' sessions. He emphasized that unless teachers clearly explain the cultural issues involved, cultural questions in literary texts may hinder full comprehension of the material. If the issues at hand clash with the cultural beliefs of the students, they may fail to perceive the significance of the theme or plot.

Another issue that often confronts literature teachers in many third world countries is the lack of availability of sufficient literature books for all their students. Books recommended for literature courses may have to be imported at exorbitant prices and very often, batches of such books may take several months to arrive at their destination. This situation may either compel students to photocopy entire books, thus breaching the copyright laws, or it may force teachers to select certain texts that they may not consider to be the best, but which are more easily available in sufficient numbers for their classes.

In brief, Professor Alan Durant outlined the background to the teaching of both the English language and literature, as well as some of the pertinent issues concerning the teaching of literature in the ESL situation. His presentation was both informative and thought-provoking, and he had given all the participants enough 'food for thought' to stimulate further discussion over the course of the conference. In fact, he had also touched on many pertinent issues that seem familiar to the ESL teacher in Malaysia.

2. Developments on the Teaching of Literature and Language in the British Context

by Brian Cox

Professor Brian Cox from Manchester University spoke on some of the recent developments concerning the teaching of literature and language in Britain. He has been at the heart of debates on English teaching in Britain, and is a founder and co-editor of the periodical Critical Quarterly.

Among the recent developments which he outlined is the new emphasis given to grammar in the language syllabus. It was strongly felt that knowledge about the language would improve the quality of communication. In the Malaysian context, this may explain the reason why grammar has been re-emphasized in the KBSM English syllabus.

Professor Cox also touched on the new allocation for speaking and listening skills in a wide variety of contexts, in the system of

evaluation in schools. Though speaking skills are now being emphasized, there was no longer a need to focus on Received Pronunciation (R.P). Teachers have been informed to respect and accept the various regional dialects of English even within England. They have been told that as long as the language spoken is grammatically correct, the various regional (and ethnic) accents should be accepted. To support this stand it has been argued that even R.P. is after all, a regional dialect of South Londoners.

The new emphasis on listening and speaking is basically aimed at meeting the communication needs of the student outside school. However, within the school itself there is a need to help the student to cope with the language requirements of other subjects. This has been referred to as the 'language across the curriculum' need. In meeting this need, the recent syllabus has laid greater emphasis on the craft of writing. Students have to be trained in writing skills so that they can easily produce a variety of discourse forms.

This need to improve writing skills in the English language has not been felt in the Malaysian context, because unlike the situation in England, English is not the medium of instruction in Malaysia.

With regards to literature, teachers are now encouraged to introduce a variety of genres, and not just limit the students' knowledge to prose, drama and poetry. Some examples of other 'genres' are diary entries, autobiographies, science fiction, media articles and book reviews. In other words, non-literary genres

too have to be considered besides the literary ones.

There was an important point made by Professor Cox towards the end of this presentation and that was the need to improve the language proficiency of teachers who teach English. Apparently this is not just a problem of teacher training institutions in third world countries. It appears to be a serious cause for concern even in England despite the fact that most of the teachers are native speakers of the language.

3. Practical Methodologies for Teaching Literature

by Ron Carter

Professor Ron Carter from Nottingham University can claim much of the responsibility for the current interest worldwide in the use of literature in language teaching. His books include The Web of Words (1987), co-authored with Michael Long, and Language and Literature: An Introductory Reader in Stylistics (1982).

In his words, "While there may be some limitations to language-based approaches to literature teaching, the sky is the limit when considering the use of literature in language teaching". This stand was clearly illustrated through a series of activities in which the participants were all totally and actively involved.

He began by dictating the lines of two poems entitled 'The Smuggler' and '40 Love'.

Each participant was required to arrange the lines of the poems according to his or her own perception of how they should be. After the poems had been dictated, the participants compared each others' efforts and asked questions pertaining to them. After this, the original poems were written on the blackboard and participants compared their arrangements with those of the poets. Participants were even encouraged to criticize the poets' arrangements and to defend their own arrangements.

For the second activity, he distributed a poem by Wilfred Owen entitled 'Futility' in which a number of words had been blanked out. The participants were then given a list of possible words to fill in the blanks. Working in pairs, participants then worked ont he choices that they could make. Finally, the original poem was read out and participants compared their versions with that of the poet.

Sample Poem : 'Futility'

Move him into the ....-
Gently its touch woke him once,
At home, whispering of fields unsown,
always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow,
If anything might r.......... him now
The .... sun will
know.
Think how it wakes the seeds,-
.........., once, the clays of a cold
star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,
Full-nerved - still warm - too hard
to ....?

- O what made f.......... sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

Wilfred Owen

The above activities have been referred to as 'process-based approaches in analysing a text'. The advantages of this technique are as follows:

3.1 Learners will begin thinking about the arrangement of words even before they see the final version. So it reverses the usual process in which they see the final version first. Such activities will enable the learners to perceive that there is a visual correspondence to the spoken words of poetry - that the way words are arranged in a poem may be a powerful and graphic illustration of the meaning or message of the poem.

3.2 Learners will also begin to look into their own socio-cultural expectations, as well as previous knowledge. This is important in a second language situation as cultural conventions vary from culture to culture. Learners are made to perceive that some poetry follow conventions of writing and sound and some do not.

3.3 Process-based approaches stimulate discussions in the target language. Learners may begin noticing things about how language is used, developing sensitivities with words and meanings, and sharing experiences and concepts. In other words, they stimulate thinking in the

target language and about the target language. The experiential connection between the learner and the text is encouraged.

3.4 When using a process-based approach in analysing a text, teachers convey the important idea that a text can always be reconstructed - that 'a poem is never finished' or 'a poem is never entirely the property of the poet'. In other words, it encourages creative writing. It was even suggested that if teachers can collect earlier versions of the poems used, from journals or reference books, learners will have the opportunity to see the actual choices poets have made in the writing process.

3.5 When using this approach, there is a great deal of repetition, which becomes a useful tool for language learning. In ordinary conversations there are repetitions. So the teacher can indirectly cause the learner to compare literary language with ordinary langauge. There was a reference to Deborah Tanner's Talking Voices in which she creates patterns of repetitions for the rhetoric patterning of words.

He concluded by saying that while there are many advantages in using the process-based approach, there are also some pitfalls for the teacher. Firstly it may be time-consuming, and secondly, the teacher's self-esteem may be at risk, when learners start arguing with the teacher's stand-point. Some teachers may feel threatened when learners start questioning accepted conventions. This may be the case with

students who are proficient in the language or are themselves well-read in literature.

4. Methods of Teaching Literature in Different Cultural Contexts

by Alan Durant and Richard Ellis

It is well-known that over the last thirty years major changes have taken place over the way literary texts are taught, especially in second language situations. Professor Alan Durant explored the various approaches being used for teaching language and literature. He also outlined a few of the 'interactive' or 'student-centred' methods for teaching literature in English. This was followed by a brief discussion as to how far such approaches to teaching are appropriate to the many different kinds of cultural contexts for teaching which exist in English studies around the world.

The most traditional approach for teaching literature is the lecture approach whereby the main purpose of instruction is the transmission of knowledge or content. This is a teacher-centred approach as it focusses more on formal teaching rather than on informal learning. The basic assumption behind this approach is that the student is like an empty vessel into which the knowledge or content is poured.

An improvement on this approach is the 'Socratic dialogue', whereby the teacher asks questions that stimulate discussion. However, the Socratic dialogue is still rather 'teacher-centred' as the teacher still expects 'correct'

answers, and usually modifies and develops 'wrong' answers given by the students, in order to eventually convince them that he or she is right. In other words, it promotes convergent thinking rather than divergent thinking.

On the other hand, the student-centred approach gives scope for divergent thinking. Teachers using this approach would conduct workshops in which students carry out problem-solving tasks, or conduct simulations and role-play. Students are encouraged to interact in the target language as they work in groups. In fact, this approach emphasizes the sharing of knowledge through peer teaching, and the keyword is co-operation rather than competition. The teacher becomes a facilitator of student activities rather than a fountain of knowledge.

For the teaching of literature using language-classroom techniques, a checklist of certain typical activities was outlined as follows:

- warm-up activity;
- listening tasks;
- comprehension tasks;
- study skills and dictionary work;
- silent reading;
- discussion in the target language;
- expression of personal response;
- stylistic analysis;
- written response and creative writing.

These typical language classroom activities for teaching literature are rather teacher-centred, and do not involve much co-operative effort on the part of the students. To illustrate that groupwork techniques from ELT

can be adapted for the teaching of literature, ten types of activities were listed. These have been tried out in 14 different countries around the world and have been found to be effective.

List of Groupwork Techniques from ELT adapted for literary work

4.1 'Comparison' activities: Students compare texts about the subject in different registers or styles, from different periods, etc. The texts chosen are as similar as possible in all aspects except the one the students are required to investigate.

4.2 'Replacement' activities: Students substitute words in the text and monitor the changing effect as they do so by listing responses and connotations.

4.3 'Ordering' activities: The teacher puts sentences of a paragraph in a jumbled order. Students are then invited to recreate order by looking for clues in the language. Another version would be the teacher presenting sentences in which the words are in a jumbled order. The students have to rearrange the words of each sentence into the right order.

4.4 'Completion' activities: Words are deleted from a text and students explore the predictive properties of context. Students then choose words or phrases which illuminate that aspect of the language of the text which the teacher

wants them to investigate e.g. rhyme patterns or metaphors.

4.5 '<u>Prediction' activities</u>: Students are presented with the opening of a short story or novel, sentence by sentence. After each sentence, students hypothesize about what follows and then hypotheses are tested and compared with what is actually written.

4.6 '<u>Classification' activities</u>: Students are presented with a dramatic dialogue, and are asked to label the utterances of the dialogue in terms of what they do and what they achieve; they then classify the functions of the different exchanges. Another classification activity is the drawing of grids or the breaking down of one large question into many smaller, individually more accessible questions.

4.7 '<u>General problem-solving' activities</u>: Students solve puzzles and come up with possible solutions which they present to the class. Another activity could be to identify the point of transition of novel unfinished by original author and later completed by someone else.

4.8 '<u>Continuation' activities</u>: Students write further lines of poem or continue any text-excerpt trying to keep the style consistent.

4.9 '<u>Composition' activities</u>: Students rewrite a text in a different genre, for example a story rewritten as newspaper

report, diary entry etc., or even transform the verbal message into a graphic medium for example drawing of a map, diagram or cartoon for possible publishers.

4.10 '<u>Performance' activities</u>: Students dramatize a passage through a mime or role-play; students simulate a scene by using improvisations; they create 'trailers' for prospective film producers.

Professor Durant concluded the presentation by comparing 'L_1' and 'L_2' (Krashen, 1982) contexts for teaching English. In the L_1 context, the native speaker can draw upon certain intuitions about language use. However, the non-native speaker cannot fall back on such intuitions. Hence in the L_2 context the teacher has to create a certain language-learning environment for the learner to acquire certain aspects of a language, as well as to develop language awareness.

One way of developing language awareness is to enable L_2 learners to compare the new cultural knowledge acquired in the course of learning a new language, with that they have already acquired with the mastery of their mother-tongue. One vital avenue of acquiring such cultural knowledge is through the study of the L_2 literature.

Professor Durant's talk actually outlined many of the language-teaching techniques currently being used in ESL classrooms around the world. His general stand was that these

techniques can also be used when teaching literature in the ESL classroom.

Conclusion

In general there appears to be a focus on issues, trends and methodology concerning the 'cross-fertilization' of language and literature. Except for Professor Brian Cox, all the speakers talked about issues concerning the teaching of literature and language in the ESL context. Durant and Ellis actually outlined a list of ten groupwork techniques from ELT adapted for the teaching of literature, while Carter's 'hands-on' approach convinced the participants that 'the sky is the limit when considering the use of literature in language teaching'.

The writer feels that there was a good balance maintained between theory and practice, during the first two days of the conference. The sessions were fruitful and thought-provoking for both academicians as well as teacher-educators and litrature teachers. In the second part of this report, the writer will summarize the main points presented by speakers during the last three days of the conference. The topics involve stylistics, the process-writing model and the use of art in the teaching of literature.

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