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## **AN INTRODUCTION TO COMMONWEALTH LITERATURE**

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### **Introduction**

As a term in literary regional studies, Commonwealth literature is generally believed to refer to the literary products of the independent countries of Africa, Asia, the Caribbeans and North America which were once colonised by the United Kingdom. The works of writers from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India, Malaysia and Singapore are therefore regarded as Commonwealth literature.

This essay proposes to examine the themes, styles and patterns of the development of literatures from these Commonwealth nations. Some of the issues that will be discussed include the general characteristics of Commonwealth literature, the ways in which these common features have been affected by the different cultures and historical development of the individual nations in focus, and the ways in which the development of national literatures has affected the notion of a Commonwealth literature. This essay will, in essence, analyse the major themes and trends that distinguish Commonwealth Literature as displayed in a selection of countries. It will also point out some of the major literary artists from the above-mentioned countries whose works most exemplify these themes and trends.

The term “Commonwealth literature” poses significant problems of definition. It has historical, geographic, political and linguistic connotations that simultaneously affirm and revise its status as a distinct body of literary work. The historical fact of colonization by the United Kingdom and the linguistic reality of English as mother tongue or official language do not automatically imply membership of either the Commonwealth as a political organisation or of the body of literary works known as Commonwealth literature. The United States is perhaps the most prominent example in this regard. The Republic of Ireland is another. There is also the ironic fact that the literature of the United Kingdom is not regarded as Commonwealth literature, even though its imperial past and language form the basis of the concept of Commonwealth literature.

In spite of all this, however, the designation “Commonwealth literature” has, over time, become a convenient appellation for the literary output of most of the countries that

were former colonies of the United Kingdom, and are thus to a large extent, linked by (i) a common experience of British colonialism, (ii) the use of English in contemporary life, and (iii) the influence of the British literary tradition. Unlike other literary categories, it is not completely defined by political ideology (such as Marxist literature), historical period (Elizabethan literature), geographical region (African literature) or prevailing literary trends (Symbolist literature). Commonwealth literature is, in many ways, a complex combination of all of these other categories, and this enables it to bridge the inevitable distinctions between writers from very different socio-cultural backgrounds. As William Walsh claims, “it is at least, a useful category of denotation grounded in history and making a point of substance about those it is applied to,”<sup>1</sup> yet, one which does not ignore the fact that “an African or an Indian or a Nigerian writer writes against a particular historical tradition and in a particular national context.”<sup>2</sup> In essence, Commonwealth literature demonstrates the inherent connections between geography and history, and between theme and subject matter in a particularly resonant way.

These similarities have in turn brought about the development of broad resemblances of theme and subject matter, as well as of technical approaches and patterns of growth. For example, many works of Commonwealth literature are distinguished by the examination of physical and psychological displacement brought about as a result of slavery, voluntary or forced migration and colonialism. In India, Malaysia and Singapore, the process and after-effects of colonialism have occupied literary artists, while settler colonies like Canada, Australia and New Zealand have tended to examine issues dealing with the problematic nature of their relationship to Britain as the “mother country.” This is especially true of Australia, which originally served as a penal colony. A great deal of Commonwealth writing is also characterised by sustained attempts by writers to make the English language serve their particular purposes, shaped as these are by the requirements of their different environments and cultures. In the words of Gerald Moore,

Since the seventeenth century, successive generations of writers have struggled to accommodate English to the expression of values, climates, landscapes and historical experiences quite different from those which originally shaped it; all ... have been engaged in using English to define cultures not English, or no longer English.<sup>3</sup>

Such attempts to mould English to suit the requirements of non-English cultures and societies are among the most significant markers of growth in Commonwealth literatures. The extent to

which a nation succeeds in producing literary works that have a distinct national identity, even though they may be written in English, is often a good indicator of whether its literature has come of age.

### **Australian Literature**

Of all the countries examined here, it is probably Australia which underwent a historical experience least conducive to literary development. Australia is unlike other Commonwealth nations in that the British specifically designated it a penal colony when it was first colonized in 1788. This means that it was the place where convicted criminals in Britain were sent as punishment for a variety of petty and serious crimes. As a result of this process of transportation, as it was known, many people came to Australia unwillingly and in conditions of great deprivation and misery. In addition to this, often-harsh climatic conditions, the relatively small population and the huge size of the country combined to make literary activity a difficult undertaking.

Early Australian poetry was often unoriginal and strongly derivative of eighteenth-century English poetry. The work of poets like Barron Field (1786-1846), William Charles Wentworth (1792-1872) and Charles Harpur (1813-1868) are in this tradition. As G.A. Wilkes puts it, “the poem was regarded ... as an artefact, as something fashioned according to certain principles, much as a craftsman might fashion a table or a chair.”<sup>4</sup> However, in the 1890s there were significant developments in Australian literature generally. Firstly, it was the period when the notion of Australia as “the modern Utopia”<sup>5</sup> gained wide currency, and the country began to acquire greater significance in its own right, rather than merely as an appendage of Britain. Secondly, there emerged a series of literary journals like the *Lone Hand*, the *Bookfellow* and the *Triad*, which devoted themselves to the promotion of a home-grown Australian literature and the development of an enlightened readership. Among the most significant of these journals was the Sydney *Bulletin* which flourished under the guidance of John F. Archibald and A.G. Stephens. Aggressively pro-Australian, the *Bulletin* “played an important role in the long and difficult pregnancy of a separate Australian identity in constructing a national spirit and defining its ethos and tone.”<sup>6</sup>

The so-called Australian bush ballads were the most significant development of the Australian Nineties. They were literary ballads written on the model of the anonymously authored songs that were rendered by cattlemen and farmers in Australia’s “outback,” the local term for the country’s immense hinterland. Adam Lindsay Gordon (1833-1870) and Andrew Barton Paterson (1864-1941) were the best-known exponents of the form, examples

of which include ‘Waltzing Matilda.’ The significance of these ballads to the development of Australian literature is that they helped to situate it within the popular imagination, thereby diminishing the influence of outdated English poetic diction and technique. Both poets, especially Gordon, helped to establish the unique landscape of the country as theme and setting in Australian poetry. The growing independence of Australian literature during this period was demonstrated in the rise of Christopher John Brennan (1870-1932), one of the greatest poets of this period. Brennan is one of the first English-language writers to show the influence of the French symbolists, especially Rimbaud and Mallarme. He sought to discover and express poetry and a philosophy that could unify diverse actual and imaginative experience, and the uniqueness of his writing stems from his attempts to achieve this. Another outstanding poet of the Nineties was John Shaw Neilson (1872-1942), described as one of the country’s “greatest writers of light lyrics.”<sup>7</sup> Unlike most of his contemporaries, Neilson came from a working-class background. His poor eyesight and near-illiterate transcribers negatively affected the interpretation of his poems, but even then, he is still noteworthy for his originality of vision and capacity for memorable lines. His delight in natural beauty helped to further establish the landscape as an object of the poetic imagination.

In the modern era, Australian poetry has continued to build upon the models provided by the above poets and the growing perceptions of Australian independence of thought and action, particularly after the First World War. These have been manifested mainly in increasingly experimental approaches to the examination of various issues and themes. The poetry of Hugh McCrae and R.D. FitzGerald, for example, demonstrate the influence of Neilson and Brennan respectively.

As in the poetry, developments in Australian prose were very uneven. Like the poetry, much of the fiction was highly derivative and grew along the patterns established in England, and the major influences were Daniel Defoe, Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens. Many of the novels were melodramatic tales of English immigrants who came to Australia, made good, and sought to leave the country as rapidly as possible. A prime example of such writing is *Geoffrey Hamlyn* by Henry Kingsley (1830-1876). The nineteenth century however produced two prominent novels: Marcus Clarke’s *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1874) and *Robbery Under Arms* (1888) by Rolf Boldrewood, the pseudonym of Thomas A. Browne (1826-1915). Both novels are important for their attempts to describe the landscape of Australia on its own terms as opposed to seeing it from the often-jaundiced viewpoint of a visitor. Boldrewood is one of the first novelists to make Australia’s penal past a subject for treatment in fiction. *Robbery Under Arms* is a melodramatic tale of bushranging (the Australian term for robbery)

and relies heavily on Scott for narrative technique and characterization. His other novels, *The Miner's Right* (1890) and *Nevermore* (1892), which also deals with penal life, show his immersion in the society of his time.

Joseph Furphy (1843-1912) is widely regarded as Australia's first great novelist, and his *Such is Life* (1903) crystallizes some of the most positive elements of an emerging literature that was at last beginning to emerge from the shadows of imperial influence. The novel recounts the diary entries of a minor bureaucrat which reveal a memorable personality. It draws upon the tall tale in a manner similar to that of Samuel Clemens (better known as Mark Twain), the American author of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Apart from its authentic descriptions of Australian life and manners, it is unique in its use of the device of the ignorant narrator who is the main channel of information but cannot see the connections between the events s/he narrates. Another important novelist of this era was Mrs. J.G. Robertson (1870-1946), who wrote under the pseudonym Henry Handel Richardson. Her most significant work is *Coonardoo* (1936), and it is regarded as one of the best examinations of the mixed-race theme in Australian literature. Another novel with a similar theme is Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (1938). The Australian novel rose to its greatest heights in the work of Patrick White, who has acquired a distinguished international reputation with novels like *The Tree of Man* (1955) and *Voss* (1957).

In recent times, greater prominence has been given to the literature of indigenous Aboriginal writing. As this process continues, it is expected that Australian literature will continue to demonstrate originality and relevance.

### **Canadian Literature**

Like its counterpart in Australia, Canadian literature has been deeply affected by perceptions of its ambivalent status. Despite its size, potential and actual wealth, Canada has long been regarded as "an inescapable question mark, a shape without form, a nagging puzzle."<sup>8</sup> Such a seeming lack of solidity is encapsulated in the paradoxes which structure it: "a people divided among themselves by race and language; a British colony which has thrown off colonialism; an American nation which stands stubbornly apart from the United States of America."<sup>9</sup>

Literary developments during the colonial era were complicated by the existence of both French and British cultures, as well as the presence of a flourishing U.S. culture to the south. As in so many other settler colonies, much of the early writing was often of purely provincial or historical interest and very dependent on established European literary tradition. However, the fundamental task of describing the local landscape and conditions rather than

those of Europe had to be undertaken, and this was achieved to a large extent in what R.E. Rashley calls the “survey poem.”<sup>10</sup> These are poems in which the writer portrays a specific locale and uses it to make larger comments on the uniqueness and validity of the New World as opposed to Europe. Poems written in this tradition include *The Rising Village* (1825) by Oliver Goldsmith, Joseph Howe’s *Acadia* (about 1850), William Kirby’s *The United Empire* (1859) and *The Emigrant* (1861) by Alexander McLachlan.

In describing the magnificent scenery that surrounded them, these poets also wrote about the experiences of the immigrants engaged in building a modern nation out of the wilderness. Thus, the poets soon changed from being acute observers of a nascent nation to literary nation-builders, laying concrete foundations for the realisation of Canada in literature as surely as was being done in the political economic spheres. Poetry of this kind helped in reducing the influence of the European tradition, especially its blandness.

This emphasis upon locale and the attempt to consciously identify those elements that enhanced the Canadian identity led to the development of thriving regional centres of literacy production. The most prominent were those in Nova Scotia, and what is now Ontario and Quebec. The latter province was the heart of French-Canadian literature. Apart from Goldsmith, Nova Scotia produced writers like Joseph Howe (1804-1873) and Thomas Chandler Haliburton (1795-1865). This was achieved with the active encouragement of literary periodicals like Howe’s *Novascotian*. The literary development of Ontario and Quebec was enhanced by the emergence of periodicals like *The Scribbler*, *The Canadian Magazine*, and *The Canadian Review*, all of which were based in Montreal, which soon became the literary capital of Canada. The Literary and Historical Society of Quebec was also established there in 1824. Another Montreal-based journal, *The Literary Garland*, sought to promote European standards of civilisation, even though this often meant that it did not offer much encouragement to local writers. Two early French-Canadian poets from this era are Albert Lozeau (1878-1924) and Émile Nelligan (1879-1941). Nelligan is significant for being one of the first poets on the North American continent to be influenced by the French Symbolists.

English-Canadian poets really came to the fore in the 1920s. One of the foremost was Edwin J. Pratt (1883-1964). His poetry is distinguished by an acute observation of urban and rural Canadian life, and much of his best-known work has public themes, like *Towards the Last Spike* (1952), which is about the construction of a transcontinental railway. Pratt’s major effect on his contemporaries was to establish the appropriateness of all aspects of Canadian life as a subject for poetry. This is seen particularly in the work of F.R. Scott (1899-1985),

one of the poets of the “Montreal School.” Described as “a satirist, a love poet and a nature poet,”<sup>11</sup> Scott’s poetry is a reflection of an active public life, as well as an overt preoccupation with the condition of Canadian society. This is seen in poems like ‘The Witches’ Brew’ (1925) and ‘The Titanic’ (1935).

The most talented poet of the Montreal School was Abraham M. Klein. Nature, revolution and alienation are recurring themes in his poetry, the last a reflection of his distinctively Jewish heritage and the trauma of the Second World War. Apart from its original use of language, Klein’s poetry draws upon a widely diverse range of sources and influences, especially from Judaism, Canadian life and European literature. Contemporary Canadian poetry has notable names like Margaret Atwood and Robert Kroetsch.

Although Canadian fiction appeared later than the poetry, its development followed a similar route, namely the appearance of early works that were overly imitative of outdated European models followed by increasingly successful attempts to write about authentic Canadian experience. Part of the reason why fiction, especially the novel, emerged in Canada less rapidly than the poetry lies mainly in the country’s initial lack of the established social structures upon which fiction flourishes.

Given the huge size of the country, much of the earliest fiction was regional in nature, tending to concentrate upon the concerns and perceptions of the various provinces. Hence, between 1860 and 1920, most of the fictional writing can be divided into various regional types, in addition to the broad division between French-Canadian and British-Canadian fiction. In nineteenth-century Canada, the historical romance was the most type of fiction. Its prevalence is yet another testimony to the fact that many writers of the era saw nothing in contemporary times worthy of treatment and therefore preferred to go to the past, either of the Old World or Canada itself. One of the better examples of the historical romance is *Wacousta* (1832) by John Richardson which deals with an eighteenth-century Indian rebellion. Others are Gilbert Parker’s *Seas of the Mighty* (1896) and William Kirby’s *The Golden Dog* (1877).

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Canadian fiction had truly emerged. On the British-Canadian side, there was Morley Callaghan, whose style was significantly influenced by the American writer Ernest Hemmingway, who had first encouraged him to write. In novels like *Strange Fugitive* (1928), *It’s Never Over* (1930) and *Such Is My Beloved* (1934), he replicates the grim realities of modern urban life and their consequences for the individual. Although he was distinctive in his use of humour, Callaghan’s work demonstrated a hard-headed realism which was soon to become characteristic of modern Canadian fiction. The most prominent French-Canadian novelist of this era was Gabrielle Roy. Like Callaghan, her



approach to her subjects was unsentimental. Her first novel, *The Tin Flute* (1945, translated 1947) is a study of Montreal slum life. She was also one of the first novelists to write a “psychological” novel when she published *The Cashier* (1954, translated 1955).

By the 1960s, new themes and styles had begun to emerge in Canadian fiction. Many of the books published dealt with the problems of urban life, particularly as these affected the lives of individuals, the perceived “Americanisation” of Canadian life and culture, women’s issues and the concept of the utopian society. Regarding form, contemporary novelists experimented with a wide variety of structures and approaches, including symbolic narrative, psychology, post-modern parody and pastiche. Historical fiction was also popular. The most prominent writers are Margaret Atwood, Yves Beauchemin, Anne Hebert and Mordecai Richler.

### **New Zealand Literature**

One of the most important defining characteristics of the literature of New Zealand is its remoteness. New Zealand is a small island country of about 1600 kilometres from its nearest neighbour, Australia, and far away from the regular shipping lanes and air routes of most nations. This isolation has given its literary development some of the characteristics of a typical frontier society, even more so than those of other countries of the New World. Another element that has shaped the development of New Zealand’s literature is the noticeable lack of general support for literary activity during the early part of its history. This has been traced largely to the Nonconformist religious background of a significant portion of citizens, as well as the relatively small population of the country.<sup>12</sup>

The European settlers who first came to New Zealand in substantial numbers during the early nineteenth century appeared to be more interested in making a living off the land than in literary activity. As a result of this inclination, much of the early writing was very functional in nature and consisted of diaries, journals, scientific texts and handbooks. These were designed to impart a practical knowledge that could enhance the development of the country and realize its economic potential. However, some of these early writings did have literary merit. An example is Frederick E. Maning’s *Old New Zealand* (1863).

One of the first significant works of poetry to appear in New Zealand during the nineteenth century was Alfred Dommet’s (1811-1887) *Ranolf and Amohia* (1872), a poetic epic of the lives of the indigenous Maori people. The poem is significant for its peculiarly New Zealand subject matter, even though its technique places it within the British Victorian poetic tradition.

During the 1890s, New Zealand began to experience a growing self-confidence similar to what was happening in Australia at the same time. This was due mainly to economic growth and expanding prosperity. The consequences for literature were that writers began to feel that it was possible to develop distinctively indigenous literature. Authors like William Pember Reeves (1857-1932), Jessie Mackay (1864-1938) and Blanche Baughan (1870-1958) produced work in this newly self-confident mood. All three actively espoused social causes which sometimes overwhelmed their literary output, but they helped to establish an abiding interest in the conditions of life in New Zealand as opposed to Britain. Although the hope of the era was short-lived, it helped to prepare the way for the adoption of local themes in New Zealand writing.

These attempts to place New Zealand at the forefront of creative writing were first seen in fiction in the novels of William Satchell (1859-1942). In *The Toll of the Bush* (1905), he offers a sustained description of the country's outback, and *The Greenstone Door* (1914) examines an aspect of New Zealand history touching upon relations with the Maoris.

The work of the expatriate New Zealander, Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923), is "particularly relevant to New Zealand because she wrote her best stories about life there."<sup>13</sup> The re-imagining of the country of her birth in her famous short stories has helped to strengthen the belief that the country can sustain the literary imagination. Most of her best stories are artistic recollections of her childhood, especially the collection in *Bliss* (1920).

An authentically indigenous literature began to appear in New Zealand itself in the 1920s with the emergence of Jane Mander (1878-1949), R.A.K. Mason and Robin Hyde (1906-1939). Mander's focus was on the problems of women in the rural areas, and *The Story of a New Zealand River* (1920), set in a Northland lumber-milling district, is considered her best work. In spite of his short literary career, Mason is considered to be the first to write genuinely indigenous poems, and has been an important influence on the poets who succeeded him. Mander was highly regarded both as a poet and as a novelist. She had a special ability to portray the country's recent and more distant past, and her *Check to Your King* (1926) is said to be one of New Zealand's best historical novels.

The worldwide economic depression of the 1930s "forced upon local writers the naked realities of life"<sup>14</sup> in New Zealand. As a country dependent upon the export of mainly agricultural commodities, it was particularly hard-hit and the consequent widespread deprivation and suffering compelled many writers to re-examine their society and their own attitudes to it. This new thinking is revealed in the work of Mason, Dennis Glover and Allen Curnow. Glover's satirical *Six Easy Ways of Dodging Debt Collectors* (1936) is characteristic

of the era, as was Curnow's *Enemies* (1937). Both Glover and Curnow transcended the concerns of this period, however, especially the latter, who is widely regarded as the best poet New Zealand has produced. Curnow's poetry reveals an exceptional ability to utilise his country's landscape and history in creating a distinctive mythology. Curnow has also helped promote promising new poets in anthologies published in 1945 and 1960.

New Zealand fiction similarly took up social causes during the 1930s, and works like Frank Sargeson's *Conversation With My Uncle* (1936) were written in this mode. Like Curnow, he also transcended narrowly ideological approaches and went on to produce stories and novels that have made him one of the country's most influential writers. Sargeson's "unfailing ear for local dialogue and his unsentimental compassion"<sup>15</sup> distinguish his writing, and novels like *I Saw in My Dream* (1949), *The Hangover* (1967) and *Collected Stories* (1969) demonstrated the critical realism which was to become an important feature of New Zealand fiction.

### **Indian Literature**

India is the Commonwealth's largest nation by far, and several significant characteristics are implicated in its huge size and population. The first is the number of languages that are spoken. There are over 840 languages spoken by almost one billion people. These languages are, in turn, a reflection of the hugely diverse religions that comprise the country, ranging from the predominant Hindu through the Buddhist, the Jains, to the significant Muslim minority. These religions have a very long continuous history and have spawned literatures of great antiquity and extraordinary beauty, such as those found in Sanskrit, Tamil, Gujarati, Arabic and Kashmiri. India has also had longer contact with Christianity than most countries in Asia, with the founding of a Roman Catholic Mission in Goa in the fourteenth century. In relative terms, therefore, colonial rule over this "jewel of the British empire" was relatively brief.

The consequences of British colonialism are, however, profound. When the reality of India's size and age is situated within the context of Commonwealth literature, it becomes apparent that literature written in English is just one of the many literatures thriving in the country, and that this multiplicity of literary cultures affects the production of English-language (or Anglo-Indian, or Indo-Anglian) literature in India in significant ways.

Indian literature in English may be said to have begun with the adoption of the English language as the centrepiece of an English language education policy for the country 1835. This inaugurated the emergence of English as the official language of the colony and the

subsequent production of a Western-educated class of Indians who were proficient in it. However, long before this policy was enunciated, there were individuals who saw that traditional practices and modes of thought could be energised by inculcating aspects of British culture (including its literature) into the indigenous tradition. Foremost among these was Raja Rammohun Roy (1774-1833). Roy's life and work established distinct elements that were to become characteristic of Indian writing as a whole. These include a pronounced religious bent, a dedication to the mastery of the Western literary tradition and its relation to its Indian counterpart, an extraordinary versatility in the use of literary forms, multilingual ability and the deployment of literature for public causes.

One of the first Indian poets to write in English was Henry Derozio (1809-1831). Despite his brief life, he helped establish the influence of English literary forms on Indian literature in English. Poets like M.M. Dutt (1827-1873), and Toru and Aru Dutt drew heavily upon acquired genres in their work. The last two in particular underwent a near-complete immersion in Western literary culture, as they were educated in England and France, producing English translations of French lyrics. Significantly, however, Toru was not uninterested in her native literature, and utilised the myth and symbolism of her own tradition. In addition, her *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* was published posthumously in 1882.

The above was to be imitated in later writers, such as Romesh Chunder Dutt (1848-1909), who translated the indigenous national epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* into English in 1898 and 1899 respectively. In addition, he translated two of his Bengali novels into English as *The Lake of Palms* (1902) and *The Slave Girl of Agra* (1909). The Ghose brothers, Manmohan and Aurobindo, also displayed an intimate knowledge of English literary forms without losing touch of indigenous traditions. They knew Oscar Wilde and had collaborated with English writers on the production of a book of poetry in 1890, yet they did not neglect native literature in their work. Sri Aurobindo eventually became one of India's greatest literary figures and sages, producing works of great profundity between 1910 and 1950. Drawing upon the religious tradition he wrote the epic *Savitri* (1950), which deals with the attainment of true self-knowledge.

Another prominent Indian practitioner of both English and indigenous-language literature is the 1913 Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). He displayed the versatility, erudition and commitment typical of India's outstanding literary figures. During a career spanning more than six decades, Tagore turned out poems, dramas and fiction among other writings, and is believed to have written more lyrics than any other poet. His literary

writing and is believed to have written more than any other poet. His literary writing was often influenced by political events, such as his poem 'The Child,' which was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's famous march on Dandi in defiance of the colonial salt law in 1931. His work was also profoundly shaped by his religious beliefs. As he points out, "In India the greater part of our literature is religious, because God with us is not a distant God; he belongs to our homes as well as to our temples."<sup>16</sup> The best of Tagore's early poetry is found in *Manasi* (1910) and his social concerns are expressed in much of his fiction, such as his short story collection *Galpa Guccha* (*Bunches of Tales*, 1912).

Contemporary Indian writers have drawn upon the examples set by distinguished predecessors such as those mentioned above. Authors such as R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Anita Desai have continued in the well-established tradition of erudition, cultural relevance and political commitment.

### **Malaysia and Singapore**

The modern literatures of Malaysia and the city-state of Singapore may be taken together because they share many cultural traditions due to their communities' geographical proximity to each other at the southernmost tip of Southeast Asia. Formerly known as Malaya, the area was once the centre of a lucrative trade because of its strategic position between India and China. With the rise of European trading powers, it came under the control of first the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, then the Dutch in the seventeenth, and finally the British in 1795.

Modern Malaysia and Singapore are made up of a plurality of distinct cultures, namely Malay, Chinese and Indian. This diversity of ethnic background is replicated in the variety of languages, among which are Malay, Cantonese, Tamil and Hindi. The literary background of the area was influenced by this diversity, with the earliest-known verse having come from southern India. Court verse from the fourteenth century utilised Sanskrit measure, and possibly developed into the classic Malaysian *sha'er*, a poetic form made up of four rhyming lines.<sup>17</sup> Islam influences the *sha'er* of later periods, and in the nineteenth century, its topics included such contemporary events as war, volcanic eruption and pearl fishing. Another traditional verse form is the *pantun*, which first emerged in the fifteenth century and was influenced by Indian and Chinese verse forms.

Modern Malaysian and Singaporean writing in English came into existence within this context of an indigenous-language literature. Ironically, however, despite the long tradition of external influence on the literature of the region, English-language writing was particularly

slow to emerge. This is probably due to the fact that English was not promoted as assiduously in the area as it was in India after 1835. In 1947, it was estimated that less than five per cent of the population was literate in English. Indeed, it was the immigrant Chinese community that produced the first indigenes to write English-language literature. Gregory W. De Silva was one of the few Malaysians to begin writing fiction. His novels include *Lupe, Only a Taxi-Dancer* and *Suleiman Goes to London*. There was, however, very little creative writing in English produced until the 1950s. The Second World War, which was often the spur for nationalist agitation in much of Asia, and which led to corresponding increases in literary output, did not result in any appreciable change in the region, although there were a number of books that dealt with the trauma of the Japanese occupation between 1942 and 1945. Sustained writing by indigenes really began to emerge with the end of the communist insurgency which started in 1948. Chin Kee Onn's *The Silent Army* (1952) dealt with this event. It was written in fictional form, even though it was factual. Its significance lies in the fact that it was "the first product of the new Malayan national literature in English to be published overseas and to get critical attention from the leading journals in both Britain and the United States."<sup>17</sup>

English-language fiction in Malaysia really emerged with the rise of Elizabeth Comber, whose books were published under the pseudonym Han Suyin. Her novels deal with the Japanese occupation and interracial relationships, and they are significant for their accurate replication of dialogue and evocation of place. Her *A Many-Splendoured Thing* (1952) was so popular in the United States that it was made into a film in 1954. Comber's other novels include *Destination Chungking* (1942) and *The Mountain is Young* (1958).

Singaporean literature underwent sustained development in the early 1950s at the then University of Malaya, now the National University of Singapore. Undergraduates like Wang Gungwu and Edwin Thumboo wrote poetry that was infused with a nationalist consciousness. A conducive atmosphere for literary creation, which seemed to be lacking in the society as a whole, was available in this academic setting. The university offered publication outlets for these budding poets through journals like *The Cauldron*, *The Malayan Undergrad* and *Write*.

Using English offered attractive possibilities to these poets because the indigenous-language literatures often concentrated on ethnic issues. However, there was a contradiction between their nationalist sentiments and the use of English in expressing those sentiments. As

a result, a home-grown poetic idiom called “Engmalchin” was developed in an effort to accommodate English, Malayan and Chinese cultures, Ee Tiang Hong’s ‘Song of a Young Malayan’ and Arthur Yap’s ‘2 mothers in a hdb playground’ are among the best examples of this kind of writing. Thumboo, who became one of Singapore’s most prominent poets, published *Rib of the Earth*, a collection of his poetry, in 1956. From linguistic experimentation, poets of the region began to develop a symbolist and mythopoeic poetry, as can be seen in the poetry of Wong Phui Nam.

Thumboo’s anthologies of poetry like *The Flowering Tree* (1970), *Seven Poets* (1973) and *Journeys* (1995) have helped boost the quality of poetry in the region, and the emergence of promising writers like Robert Yeo, Kirpal Singh and Elangovan, coupled with the emergence of both Malaysia and Singapore as economic powers, is likely to enhance the development of the region’s fiction in the near future.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup>William Walsh, (1973) Preface, *Commonwealth Literature* (London: Oxford University Press) v.
- <sup>2</sup>William Walsh, (1973) Introduction, *Readings in Commonwealth Literature*, ed., William Walsh (London: Oxford University Press,) xvi.
- <sup>3</sup>Gerald Moore, (1969) Introduction, *The Chosen Tongue: English Writing in the Tropical World* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd.) ix .
- <sup>4</sup>G.A. Wilkes, (1974) Introduction, *The Colonial Poets*, ed., G. A. Wilkes (North Ridge, NSW: Angus and Robertson, 1984) n. p.
- <sup>5</sup>H.J. Oliver, (1961) “The Literature of Australia,” *The Commonwealth Pen: An Introduction to the Literature of the British Commonwealth*, ed., A. L. McLeod (New York: Cornell University Press) 39.
- <sup>6</sup>Walsh, *Commonwealth* 117.
- <sup>7</sup>Oliver 41.
- <sup>8</sup>F. Watt, “The Literature of Canada,” *Pen* 12.
- <sup>9</sup>Watt 13.
- <sup>10</sup>Quoted in Watt 15.
- <sup>11</sup>Martin Seymour-Smith, (1973) “Canadian Literature,” *Guide in Modern World Literature* (London: Wolfe Publishing Limited,) 332.
- <sup>12</sup>See J.C. Reid, “The Literature of New Zealand,” *Pen* 65-67, and Seymour-Smith, “New Zealand Literature,” *Guide* 891.
- <sup>13</sup>Seymour-Smith, “New Zealand,” 892.
- <sup>14</sup>Reid 69.
- <sup>15</sup>Seymour-Smith, “New Zealand,” 897.
- <sup>16</sup>Quoted in K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, “The Literature of India,” *Pen* 131.
- <sup>17</sup>“Malay Poetry,” Alex Preminger, et. al., eds., (1974) *Princeton Dictionary of Poetry and Poetics* (1965; London: The Macmillan Press) 472.
- <sup>18</sup>M. Hardman, “The Literature of Malaya and Singapore,” *Pen* 209-210.