

## LONELINESS OF THE MALAY(SI)AN ANGLOPHONE WRITERS IN THE 1960S

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**Abstract:** *There have been few studies done in relation to the literary magazines in the context of Malaysian Literature in English. The recent study by Rajeev S. Patke and Philip Holden explored the literary magazines more than any other studies done in the past, but even their work had scarcely explored the editorials of the magazines. Thus, this paper examines the “isolated” Malay(si)an Anglophone writers’ voices through an analysis of the major literary magazines published in the period focusing on the editorial columns of them. Reading through the editorials of the literary magazines, the present study found that the “feelings” of the Anglophone writers were not expressed in direct form. Thus, in order to appropriately understand the feelings of the Anglophone writers, the present study had to “read between the lines”. Through the analysis of the literary magazines, the present study revealed that there was a split among the Anglophone writers based on the preferences over the genres of writing: some valued political writing higher than literary writing, and vice versa. In addition, the present study also suggests that that split might have made the writers feel isolated and lonely. Furthermore, the present study argues that the isolatedness and loneliness were further developed by the independence of Singapore from Malaysia.*

**Keywords:** *Malaysian Literature in English, Literary magazines, Anglophone writing*

### INTRODUCTION

“Well, I felt very much isolated, in a sense.” So Wong Phui Nam, a noted Malaysian poet, bitterly answered when he was asked what it was like being an Anglophone writer in 1968. This Wong’s answer captured my attention in a lecture held in Georgetown Literary Festival 2014, simply because that was not something I expected to hear from him.

Previous studies on Malaysian Literature in English well introduced the origin of the Anglophone writing in Malaysia taking up the literary activities in the 1940s and the establishment of *The New Cauldron* (1950-60), a literary magazine published by Raffles Society, a student association in University of Malaya. Further developing the previous studies’ accounts on the literary activities in the 1940s and after that, the contents of the works written by the Anglophone writers at that

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period have been well introduced by Rajeev S. Patke and Philip Holden in *The Routledge Concise History of Southeast Asian Writing in English* (2010), but the actual “feelings” of the writers have scarcely been explored yet.

Mohammad A. Quayum in “Malaysian Literature in English: Challenges and Prospects in the New Millennium” (2001) described the “challenges” that the Anglophone writers faced with referring to the political situation and the changing status of English after the independence. However, again, actual voices from the Anglophone writers had hardly been investigated.

This paper will examine the “isolated” Malay(si)an Anglophone writers’ voices through an analysis of major literary magazines published in the period focusing on the editorial columns of them.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been few studies done in relation to the literary magazines in the context of Malaysian Literature in English. Among the few studies, one of the earliest contributions is Dudley de Souza’s “Roots of Malay[an] Literature in English” (1984). Souza traced the origin of serious Anglophone writing in Malaya back to the publication of a literary magazine by the students in Raffles College, which was later converted to University of Malaya. In the article, Souza well introduced some literary magazines published in Malaya such as *The Cauldron* (1949) and *The New Cauldron*, but he limited the scope of his study only to the works published in the magazines. Thus, the voices expressed in the editorial columns have been left unexplored.

This tendency has been maintained even in later studies. Mohammad A. Quayum in “Malaysian Literature in English: An Evolving Tradition” (2003) and “Malaysian Literature in English: Challenges and Prospects in the New Millennium” (2001) mentioned *The New Cauldron* considering it as the beginning of the appropriately localised Anglophone writing in Malaysia, but both of them focused rather on the general development of the tradition of Anglophone writing in Malaysia and the contents of the literary magazines were not much explored in these articles.

Recently, Rajeev S. Patke and Philip Holden in *The Routledge Concise History of Southeast Asian Writing in English* (2010) comprehensively described the tradition of Malaysian and Singaporean writing in English from the very beginning up to 1965 and covered what has been left intact. Patke and Holden vastly explored what had been published in the magazines, thus, in a sense, what Dudley de Souza attempted in his study was further developed and presented in even more sophisticated form.

However, the primary interest of *The Routledge* was predominantly in the literary contents that were published in the magazines and the authors of those works, so the editorial columns of these magazines were a blind spot also to Patke and Holden.

As briefly reviewed above, examining the Malay[si]an Anglophone writers' feelings through an analysis of the editorial columns of the literary magazines has scarcely been tried in previous studies done in relation to Malaysian Literature in English. Thus, the present study will try to fill the gap in the existing literature.

## **METHODOLOGY**

As the primary aim of this study is to reveal the feelings expressed in the literary magazines published in the early days of the tradition of Malay(si)an Anglophone writing, the text to be explored is solely limited to the editorials that were published in the aforementioned media.

The editorials carry the messages of the editorial board and the view of the magazines. Thus, by examining the editorials, the feelings of the writers can be extracted.

In order to better capture the feelings of the writers, cross-text analysis is applied in the analysis. Since there was apparently no independent literary club or association—which is not attached to any university or any other educational institutions—at least in the early days, if there was a literary magazine that featured Anglophone writing, it should have been well circulated among the Anglophone writers, who were seemingly the minority compared to the Malay writers, who had full back up from the country. Therefore the literary magazines would be the best material to achieve the primary aim of this study.

## **RESULTS**

Reading through the editorials of the literary magazines, the present study found that the feelings of the Anglophone writers were not expressed in direct form. Thus, in order to appropriately understand the feelings of the Anglophone writers, the present study had to “read between the lines”.

Through the analysis of the literary magazines, the present study revealed that there was a split among the Anglophone writers based on the preferences over the genres of writing: some valued political writing higher than literary writing, and vice versa. In addition, the present study also suggests that the spilt between the writers might have made the writers feel isolated and lonely.

Furthermore, the present study argues that the isolatedness and loneliness were further developed by the independence of Singapore from Malaysia.

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

There had been strong desire for the English educated university students to express their opinions on various issues, and also to publish their creative works and share them with other people. However, at the time the university level education in English language was installed in Malaya, there was no place to achieve it. Thus, they attempted to create their own. Starting with *The Cauldron* in 1949, various literary magazines had been published, but most of them had been terminated in few years from their establishment and almost none had survived until the present time.

One of the apparent reasons of it is that there had been regretful political constraints on the writers in general at that time as evident in the editorial of the first issue of *Write* published in 1957:

C: Now what sort of articles are we going to use?

B: Oh we'll never be short of material. There are so many subjects to write about. There's.....

A: (firmly) No, B, no politics.

B: No politics? But my dear fellow, with Malaya at a time like this, what else is there to talk about?

A: There's plenty else, and you know it. Besides, we'll never get four subscribers, let alone twenty if you want to do that.

B: (grumbling) What's the matter with this country, anyway? What's the matter with our students, for that matter? (With a sigh) However, I see your point. No politics it is. ("Editorial," 1957, p. 2)

Here, the Anglophone writers' feeling is well indicated in the words "grumble", "With a sigh" put in the parentheses. Their frustration can be detected in those words. Although this editorial remarks indicated that they would not publish articles concerning politics, it is evident that they were not actually satisfied with it. Ironically, this passage itself is, to certain extent, political. It shows that their intention had to be given up due to certain political constraints on the magazine by saying that it would not include any article of political nature.

This frustration is also evident in the issue No.3 of the same magazine published in April in 1958, which stated the termination of the magazine (though it was continued for another few volumes later). There, the editorial pointed out

there had been too many contributions from would-be avant-garde poets and the contents of the magazine was not balanced, thus it lost the pulse of their time. It said:

We consider our paper emasculated in that it doesn't run even a single column on political events in this country. In order to do this now we would have to apply to our guardians all over again for permission. It was our original intention to include a political commentary in our paper ("Editorial: Sputnik Crashes," 1958)

Apparently, we can see here a conflict between the writers. On the one hand, there were writers who were politically motivated and pushing the "avant-garde" poems into second-class status, and those who were eager to publish their experimental creative works on the other. This also is one of the feelings that the Anglophone writers had: irritation. Due to the scarcity of place for publication, those writers with different goal had to find a place in a same magazine.

The tendency shown in the editorial of *Write* is also visible in other literary magazine. In the editorial of *Tumasek* in the first issue published in 1964, Goh Poh Seng, the editor of *Tumasek*, also regarded literary articles as something that is not serious enough saying the contents of the first issue "are predominantly literary; it does not carry enough serious articles." (Goh, 1964, p. 3)

Being a minority group in the society, the Anglophone writers might have felt isolated. Considering the split between the Anglophone writers, it is quite possible. However, the present study maintains that it is after the independence that the isolatedness and the loneliness of the Anglophone writers had been critically developed.

Before the independence, as evident in Wong Phui Nam's editorial remarks to *The New Cauldron* in November 1958, still the Anglophone writers were united under a same identity as Malayan. Wong wrote that the writings of Malayan tend to be:

too imitative of British-American. Nowhere can one come across lines that one can unmistakably pin-point as Malayan (except in Mr. Thumboo's work perhaps) in the sense that the words are patterned in such a way that they are direct responses to the sum total of conditions under which we Malaysians live (Wong, 1958)

However, after the independence of Singapore from Malaysia, a qualitative change in the identity of the Anglophone writers occurred. The Malayan identity that had been evident in various literary magazines had been replaced by that of Singaporean as evident in the editorial of *Focus* in 1966/7 edition:

As our little nation happens to be more esteemed for her tradesmen than for her artist(...). Although we do not pretend to have extracted the cream of young creative writing on this island, the competence and enthusiasm shown in these youthful efforts is gratifying ("Editorial," 1966)

In the quotation above, new words such as "our little nation" and "on this island" had replaced the word "Malayan" that had been often used in the literary magazines. It is natural that the literary magazine that had been published in Singapore started to focus on the literary situation in its own territory, but it was apparently a great loss to the Malaysian Anglophone writers. It was in the 1960s that some noted writers such as Wong Phui Nam, Ee Tiang Hong and Shirley Lim left Malaysia. Considering the context mentioned above, it seems to have symbolic meaning that they left Malaysia in the particular period.

In conclusion, as shown above, the feelings of the Anglophone writers were not directly expressed in the editorial columns of the literary magazines. However, by cross-text analysis, the present study had found that the Anglophone writers had been frustrated by the political constraints and also had been irritated by the difference of their preference over the genre of writing. In addition, the present study argued that the Malay[si]an Anglophone writers had experienced a great loss and that might have made the writers further isolated in the country.

The present study tried to analyse as many texts as possible. However, due to some constraints such as availability of the materials, still there is a room for further exploration. It is expected that the topic taken up in the present study will be further elaborated in future studies.

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