

Global Modernism in Colonial Malayan and Singaporean Literature: The Poetry and Prose of Teo Poh Leng and Sinnathamby Rajaratnam

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At the 1932 opening of the Tanjong Pagar railway station in Singapore, the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Cecil Clementi, declared this southernmost terminal of the Federated Malay States Railway (FMSR) “one of the nodal points in the whole world’s scheme of communications” (National Heritage Board). The FMSR was both a transportation network and an instrument for the consolidation of imperial rule, symbolizing modernity while spreading colonial governmentality. The railway is the subject of Teo Poh Leng’s 1937 poem “F.M.S.R.,” “about a train journey between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur” regarded as “the first notable work of English poetry produced by a Singaporean writer” (Ogihara-Schuck 8) and an inaugural text of “Malayan modernism” (17). Twenty-eight years later, Malayan Minister of Culture Sinnathamby Rajaratnam sought “to create a Malayan culture deliberately” to avoid “the tragedy of racial conflict” in the new country (“Malayan Culture in the Making” 121). Rajaratnam’s imperative bears the hallmarks of Euro-American modernist attitudes regarding the formative relationship between avant-garde art and national culture. This is unsurprising; Rajaratnam spent twelve years in London in the company of Mulk Raj Anand, the celebrated Indian nationalist and modernist writer, and fellow anti-colonial South Asian intellectuals. Rajaratnam was a writer and a journalist before he became a politician and a founding member of Singapore’s People’s Action Party.

In highlighting the modernist connections between the work of Teo and Rajaratnam, I am situating their texts within the growing field of global modernist studies. A global modernist perspective “shuttle[s] dialectically between local complexity and large-scale visions” (Wollaeger 5). It focuses on “postcolonial intertextualities [that] are not derivative” of Euro-American traditions and can produce “denaturalizing mimics or indigenizing transplantations” of modernist art and culture (Friedman 488). Such transplantations of modernisms in the Malayan-Singaporean context create a representational space “where new possible worlds make ethical and political claims upon our understanding of this one” (Berman, *Modernist Commitments* 7). Teo Poh Leng penned his poem during the heyday of British colonialism; Rajaratnam wrote his stories and radio plays in the heady climate of anti-colonial nationalism and decolonization. Both Teo and Rajaratnam lived in Singapore, but

through their education and travels respectively they were aware of Malaya and Singapore's place in world affairs and expressed what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls a "rooted cosmopolitanism" (618). Through their modernist commitments and aesthetic reshaping of high modernist tropes, they resist and question both the ethics and politics of British colonialism and narrowly conceived national identities, offering glimpses of other possible worlds that might address the failings of their own.

Although modernity and modernism are often conflated, scholars of global modernism have elucidated the distinctions and the connections between them. Bill Ashcroft's discussion of "alternative modernities" is representative of the view rejecting a diffusionist, Eurocentric understanding of modernity. The material processes of globalization and the theoretical insights of postcolonial studies reveal how local, non-Western "cultural practices ... undermined the Eurocentric narrative of modernity" through the "appropriation, adaptation, and transformation" of aspects of modernity from both Western and non-Western societies ("Alternative Modernities" 90, 83). Modernism, as an artistic and cultural phenomenon, is not just a by-product of modernity. For Susan Stanford Friedman "modernism in its different geohistorical locations and periods" constitutes "a powerful domain within a particular modernity" and "a force effecting change as much as it intersects other domains of change" (475). Teo Poh Leng and Rajaratnam infuse geohistorical particularities from Malaya and Singapore into modernist aesthetics to express their commitment to political change and opposition to colonial domination. Teo's train journey offers a poetic survey of Malaya's social landscape; Rajaratnam's radio play serves as a sparring match between clashing ideological and socio-cultural viewpoints. As Jessica Berman reminds us, "modernism's local situations and commitment modulate the possible global meanings of modernism and modernity, even as they remind us of the political challenges to which they respond" (*Modernist Commitments* 8). This means that although writers from British colonies or newly decolonized territories are in dialogue with Euro-American modernism, they are not belated imitators.

Looking at twentieth-century Caribbean writing, Simon Gikandi argues that "Caribbean writers cannot adopt the history and culture of European modernism ... but neither can they escape from it because it has overdetermined Caribbean cultures in many ways" (3). Modernism and modernity have "value only when they are fertilized by figures of the 'other' imagination which colonialism has sought to repress" (Gikandi 4). Peter Kalliney's study of writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, whose early work was done under the auspices of cultural organizations such as the BBC, shows that "metropolitan cultural institutions designed to consolidate imperialism ... became modes of anti-imperialist cultural production through the incorporation of late colonial intellectuals partial to modernist aesthetics but also resentful of metropolitan political dominance" (*Commonwealth of Letters* 5). Teo's and Rajaratnam's close association with modernist figures and

institutions undoubtedly developed their anti-imperialist thinking, expressed by modernist tropes and styles in their writing.

In discussing Teo and Rajaratnam as global modernist writers I am positioning them in what Pierre Bourdieu calls a specific field of cultural production. This dynamic literary-artistic field is both “a *field of forces*” and “a *field of struggles* tending to transform or conserve” its contours (Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* 30, original emphasis). The interplay of these forces and struggles generates what Bourdieu defines as the *habitus* of an individual writer: “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function ... as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends” (*Logic of Practice* 53). What initiates such objective adaptation is “the necessary yet unpredictable confrontation between the *habitus* and an event that can exercise a pertinent incitement” on our worldview and behavior (55). To wit, socio-historical and politico-economic forces have a formative influence upon our thoughts and actions, but these forces can be modified and adapted to some extent when we encounter and struggle with new materials or life-changing events. In *The Rules of Art* Bourdieu also suggests that literature can challenge apparently determinative socio-political and economic forces. In his discussion of Gustave Flaubert, Bourdieu sees Flaubert “situating himself ... at the geometric intersection of all perspectives, which is also the point of greatest tension” between social, political, and economic forces; correspondingly, Flaubert “forces himself in some fashion to raise to their highest intensity the set of questions posed in the field, to play out all the resources inscribed in the space of possibles that ... is offered to each writer” (100). This suggests that artistic autonomy can be relational instead of transcendent: creative freedom emerges paradoxically from imposed social constraints generating questions while providing resources for creative minds to reconfigure reality within the artwork’s space of possibles. Bourdieu’s use of the phrase “to play out” connotes both a strategy (to play a game) devised within a set of rules, and a performance (to play a piece of music) that can bend or even break those rules.

However, the act of playing and playing out may take place without conscious intent. The “series of ruptures” generated by Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education* “are not willed as such and operate at the deepest level of the ‘unknowing poetics’ ... in the work of writing and the work of the social unconscious fostered by the work on form” (Bourdieu, *Rules* 103). The form and style of an artwork are on a par with structuring and formative elements positioning writers and their works. Teo Poh Leng studied English literature with British professors at Singapore’s Raffles College; Rajaratnam cut his teeth as a writer among South Asian intellectuals in London. These circumstances are the grounding context but not the definitive framework for understanding their work. A close reading of their poetry and prose reveals the significance of their writing as a space of

possibles within which questions are imaginatively raised and social tensions figuratively played out.

Teo Poh Leng chose the long poem, favored by many Euro-American modernist poets, for his 1937 “F.M.S.R. A Poem,” published under the pen name Francis P. Ng. Eriko Ogihara-Schuck’s invaluable archival research reveals that Teo was born in Singapore in 1912 and died in 1942 during World War II when the Japanese military occupied Singapore.¹ Teo “belonged to the minority of English-educated non-Europeans” in colonial Singapore and received a “Liberal Arts degree in 1934” from Raffles College, “an elite British teachers’ training college” (Ogihara-Schuck, “Introduction” 10). However, the English-educated Teo was no imperial apologist; his literary education at Raffles College may have problematized colonial hegemony. A 1939 commission on higher education in Malaya reported that although English literature helped undergraduates “acquire in the fullest measure possible an appreciation of the spirit of English life” (McLean and Channon 31), it also recommended that Latin and Middle English courses be removed because they were “undesirable subject[s] for the students of Malaya”; more desirable was a “further emphasis on English literature of more recent times” (32). In McLean and Channon’s declaration that “an Eastern university must supply Eastern needs” (32), they seem to suggest that English literature does not merely serve as a method of colonial indoctrination but can also “inculcate” in students “a love of reading rather than effect a knowledge of set books” (40), a habit of mind that might become the seed for critical thinking and future reflection. Teo’s professor of English literature at Raffles College, Ronald Bottrall, was certainly ahead of his time: the syllabus for English literature for the 1935-1936 school year contained required lectures on Chaucer and Shakespeare but also “a course of lectures on contemporary English and American literature” and critical texts by F. R. Leavis and others (Raffles College 13-14).

Bottrall himself was a prominent poet in the early 1930s; he was praised and compared to both T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound by Leavis himself in *New Bearings in English Poetry*. Bottrall’s place alongside two leading modernist poets establishes the connection between Teo Poh Leng’s own poetic sensibilities and modernist verse. Even though Teo might only have met Bottrall during his final year (1933-1934) at Raffles College, a 1936 essay Teo published in the *Raffles College Magazine* shows how his thinking might have been shaped by conversations with Bottrall and his own reading of Eliot and Leavis. In “Prolegomena to the Modern Poets,” Teo defends Bottrall’s verse against detractors and lauds the professor as a “disciple” of Eliot (17). While it is tempting to trace a line of modernist influence from Eliot through Bottrall and then to Teo, the conclusion of “Prolegomena” suggests that Teo also found inspiration in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Arguing that Hopkins’s “vitally modern” verse had “sown the seeds of modern poetry,” Teo stresses Hopkins’s “use of discordance or atonality to convey discordant emotions” in a manner that was “inherent and well disciplined” (21). I propose that

“F.M.S.R.” draws on Hopkins’s poetic innovations in addition to the numerous allusions—pointed out by Ogihara-Schuck—to Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (“Introduction” 18). The large-scale vision of civilizational decay, spiritual languor, and despondent cynicism that marks Eliot’s poems is framed within the context and complexity of the local, colonial situation in Malaya by Teo’s application of Hopkins’s concepts of inscape and instress. Teo mobilizes modernist poetics in *F.M.S.R.* to offer discordant social commentary and political critique rather than proffer a paean to colonial power and technology.

Teo’s emulation of Hopkins is no mere conjecture. When he published “The Song of the Night Express” (later Canto VII of “F.M.S.R.”) in the Spring 1937 issue of *Life and Letters Today*, the diacritical marks indicating stress and frequent repetition, assonance, and rhyme are reminiscent of Hopkins’s:

For he chānts of the whéels,
Of the whéels revolving, revolving;
Of the places where he was sojourning, sojourning,
As he listens to grumbling discs returning, returning,
In his mind run thoughts evolving, evolving. (1-6)

Although the diacritics do not appear in the published version of “F.M.S.R.” it appears from this early excerpt that Teo was developing his own poetic craft by employing some of Hopkins’ prosodic techniques. Teo’s remark in an authorial preface that he “applied varying metres so as to express the varying rhythms of the railways” (“F.M.S.R. A Poem” 39) also suggests that he was using the railway as a conceit to represent what Hopkins would call the inscape and instress of colonial Malaya. The Jesuit poet thought of inscape as “the pattern, structure, form, or shape of an object ... which governs the behavior of each object” (Bump 37); perceivers must undergo a particular “experience” and “vision” before apprehending inscape “through sudden, unexpected insight” (Feeney 152). Instress is closely related to inscape; it is both experiential—“the imaginative sensation experienced when an object’s inscape is properly perceived” (Feeney 153)—and structural—the “unifying force” or “the inner flushness of an object, which draws it together” (Bump 38). Instress delineates the contours of an object’s inscape. For Hopkins these concepts have a divine provenance; Teo, however, wanted to “initiate a campaign to Wake Up, Malaya!” (“The Learning of Advancement” 5), and was likely more concerned about colonial society and politics.

By his own admission, Teo “composed” his poem “very intermittently between the years 1932-1934” (“F.M.S.R.” 39); certain contemporary events would have weighed on his mind during this period. Although British Malaya in the 1930s was adversely affected by the Great Depression, economically and administratively the colony was actually becoming “more self sufficient” and “less dependent on imperial or regional connections” (Kratoska 271). As colonial administrators began to “use local resources more effectively” during the decade, Malaya gained a measure of autonomy “which facilitated the transition to independence” after World War II (Kratoska 272,

290). This accorded with Governor Cecil Clementi's ambitious but unrealized plans for "uniting the whole peninsula into a Malayan League" that would help create "a Malayan nation" (Turnbull 161). Of course, such autonomy and proto-nationalism were on terms set by and favorable to the British, and the building of the Federated Malay States Railway could be seen as a technological means to such an end. The railway "served as the 'Trojan horse' for the expansion of imperialism" as it "infiltrated and drew Malay society ... into the British sphere of governance" (Lim 175, 184). To help consolidate British rule in the early 1930s, Governor Clementi also introduced laws "to check political dissidence" by curbing immigration from China and deporting any subversives, which led to "active discrimination against the Chinese" and "created racial tensions" (Turnbull 145). Although Teo Poh Leng was no immigrant, as an ethnic Chinese man he could possibly have resented such discrimination.

Furthermore, as his call to rouse a slumbering Malaya suggests, even as the colony recovered economically in the latter half of the 1930s, there was a lingering sense that something was amiss. In Singapore especially, life was "pleasant for the prosperous and the well-to-do" local elites and Europeans, but it was "gracious living at its most superficial" and "lacked cultural depth" (Turnbull 148, 149). A "widening chasm between Asians and Europeans" also emerged as the latter tried "to preserve the last vestiges of the mystique of superiority" (Turnbull 149). These historical circumstances are conveyed through Teo's use of the Federated Malay States Railway as a poetic conceit, which fits squarely within a Euro-American modernist tradition. As Andrew Thacker argues, writers such as Virginia Woolf often regard the train "as a speeding symbol of the experience of modernity itself; external reality collapses into internal space, only to be re-presented once again in a different outer space" (153-4). Or, to use Hopkins's terms, the material realities of 1930s colonial Singapore and Malaya constitute part of the instress or grounding forces of Teo's poem; these realities combined with the formal turns of verse constitute the poem's inscape on the page.

The poem is composed of ten cantos describing the train journey from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur of an unnamed "lonely man" (Teo, "F.M.S.R." VI, 11) wealthy enough to afford a "sleeping berth" (IX, 5). The first half of the poem describes a veneer of wealth and easy living hiding a deeper sense of moral bankruptcy and decay; vignettes of material wealth contrast with the speaker's moments of reflection and condemnation, building up the poem's tension and inscape. In the first canto, Singapore's status as a key trading port of the British Empire can be seen from how "millionaires from the New World with nothing else to do" (I, 1) come to Singapore to "buy wooden shoes, / Piece of cheap porcelains, / Costly geegaws and malacca canes" (I, 3-5). The slant rhyme of "cheap porcelains" and "malacca canes" suggests that such conspicuous consumption is ultimately unfulfilling; indeed, when these millionaires "leave nothing / Follows them but the sound, / The emanation of their own unsatisfied craving, / Their desire

uncrowned” (I, 8-11). The repetition of the “un-” prefix together with the hard “cr” sound in “unsatisfied craving” and “desire uncrowned” emphasize the hollowness of insatiable material longing. This critique turns towards absurdity at the end of the canto, where one “rich visitor” (I, 25) visits “the Ponggol Zoo / ... To meet living tigers, snakes and armadilloes / Or dead tigers guarding garish advertisement panels” (I, 26-28). The alliteration of “guarding” and “garish” underscores how grotesque it is to see dead, stuffed tigers—a popular symbol of Malaya—used as accessories for commercial advertising.

The static poses of stuffed tigers contrasts with the giddy movement of the inhabitants of Singapore who are “dancing” and “Jazzing in their cabarets, / Whirling in a drunken pace, / With a drunken grace” (V, 2-4). The auditory repetition and rhyme here is compounded a few lines later by the visual symbolism of “shadows [that] fill the streets / By the multitude; / Shadow shadow meets, shunning solitude, / Shadow shadow greets” (V, 7-10). The earlier drunkenness and indulgence of Singapore’s inhabitants reduce them to a throng of lonely shadows, leached of depth and substance. The poem’s critique is raised from a societal to a civilizational level later on: “Shadows reeling reeking ride, / Routing dregs of civilization, / Which is rottenness of rottenness, / *All is rotten inside*” (V, 19-22, original emphasis). The “shadows” are now “reeking” of “rottenness”; instead of “meets” and “greets,” there is the alliteration and assonance of “reeling” and “reeking.” The disturbing and repugnant kinetic and olfactory details expressed through the poem’s sound and sense underscore the profound lack of decency and loss of humanity afflicting the port-city of Singapore and British Malaya as a whole, which also suffers from cultural incoherence: “Buzzing, drowning, hooting, clanging: / Babel never heard so many voices” (II, 8-9).

These observations and reflections occur in the mind of the anonymous traveller who “cannot sleep a wink and so / His mind is caught in a chain of thoughts: / The world is bad, / The world is mad, / The world is sad” (IX, 6-10). “Chain of thoughts” is the key metaphor in this penultimate canto, for it recalls the overall conceit of the poem (the railway as a literal and metaphorical vehicle for Teo’s verse) and the poem’s inscape and instress. The poem’s dynamic pattern can be likened to a chain with each canto linked to the other; the poem is also chained or bound by the stresses or forces it is trying to represent and interrogate. The anaphora of “The world is bad, / The world is mad, / The world is sad” echoes the train’s regular, rhythmic movement on the railway tracks. These short, staccato lines are a counterpoint to the longer lines and sinuous imagery at the end of the Canto VIII, where the train is described as “Dragging its rigid length like a snake / Hissing, wounded in the spine, moving – / Leaving writhing marks” across the Malayan landscape (VII, 26-28). Marian Aguiar, examining British-built railway systems in colonial India, remarks how “the rhetoric of modernity connoted by a moving train pointed always towards a possible future, a destination toward which one ideally moved quickly” (10). British colonial administrators intended “the trains ... to represent the creation of a new collective identity that

would amalgamate the many sectors of Indian society” (Aguiar 8), much as Governor Clementi hoped the Federated Malay States Railway would shape a Malayan identity. However, Teo’s description here of the train as an injured snake disfiguring the land undermines Governor Clementi’s celebration of the railway as a boon for communication and trade and also reveals its role in spreading and consolidating British power, which may disintegrate rather than amalgamate Malaya.

The poem’s climax in Canto IX dramatizes the detrimental effects of British rule: after the unnamed traveler disembarks in Kuala Lumpur, the train he was just riding collides with another in “a terrific smash” and a “nurtured conflagration” (Teo, “F.M.S.R.” IX, 37, 41). This leads the speaker to conclude the canto by explicitly stating the poem’s conceit, with the repetition of aspirated consonants driving the point home: “The world’s the train, a crepitating blaze, / a polluted place” (42-43). Although some Euro-American modernist poets employed subways and trains “to stage a poetic encounter which could stress fixity amid the vertiginous bustle of modernity” (Thacker 86), Teo portrays the railway catastrophe as symptomatic of modernity’s darker side: it is not a bustle but rather a blaze “nurtured” by human intention and colonial domination. While such a poetic revelation of impending disaster may not offer a blueprint for radical change, we can situate “F.M.S.R.” within the larger context of Teo’s critical worldview. Elsewhere, Teo laments how Malaya suffers “the constant drainage of her wealth into foreign countries” and its populace lacks “knowledge or care about Fine Arts” (“The Learning of Advancement” 5, 6). To address these problems, artists and poets should see their role “not in furnishing civilisation with the final touches but in commencing the original outlines” (6) of a society that can reflect upon its own achievements and failings. “F.M.S.R.” commences such an outline, drawing on elements of Euro-American modernist poetics to assess local conditions. The poem’s inscape delineates a somber picture of Malaya and Singapore in the 1930s, foreshadowing the impending death and destruction of World War II.

Britain’s loss of its Southeast Asian colonies during World War II, culminating in the fall of Singapore in February 1942, spurred Sinnathamby Rajaratnam to pen an essay condemning colonialism as the reason for Britain’s defeat and the immiseration of Malaya’s population. Born in 1915 in Ceylon to Tamil parents, raised in Malaya and educated in Singapore, Rajaratnam argues that “the roots of the present conflict can, to a great extent, be traced to a complex and diseased colonial policy” implemented by Britain (“The Changing Malay People” 449). Because the British attempted to divide and rule, the Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities in Malaya were “distinct and isolated from another, and pursuing their selfish, communal interests,” unable to unite and help British troops fend off the Japanese invasion (453). As sociologist Daniel Goh observes, “in Malaya, the British saw the Chinese as economically useful but perfidious orientals to be kept out of the colonial body politic while the Malays were lazy but picturesque medievales to be advanced in civilization by political

and agricultural training and the Tamils from South India to be cared for as docile savages working European-owned plantations” (235). Teo Poh Leng alludes to this segregated situation in “F.M.S.R.,” where each ethnic community seems repulsive to its counterparts: “everywhere about the place float noises, / Being another hideous race” (II, 5-6). Yet in contrast to Teo, Rajaratnam is cautiously optimistic: “the end of this [world] war” might generate a wave of liberation and decolonization, ushering in “a federated world based on community of interests and aspirations, rather than on racial or national exclusiveness” (“Changing” 449), a world that would not offer “privilege for this or that race but” afford “justice and equal rights for all” (453). Whereas Teo exposes and self-reflexively critiques the stresses underlying colonial Malaya’s apparent prosperity and unity, Rajaratnam’s incisive thinking draws on the intellectual fervor of wartime London where he spent twelve years. He was inspired by the anti-colonial thinking of his friends in the Progressive Writers’ Association and his brief stint at the BBC’s Eastern Service with George Orwell.

Rajaratnam arrived in London in 1935 to study law, but the war forced him to abandon his studies as his family could not pay his fees. According to his biographer, Rajaratnam continued his education through friendships with writers and intellectuals from South Asia such as Mulk Raj Anand, who “inducted [Rajaratnam] the Malayan as an honorary Indian and a member of his new pan-Indian literary group, the Progressive Writers’ Association” formed in 1935 (Ng, *The Singapore Lion* 45). Rajaratnam published his first short story in 1941 in an issue of *Indian Writing*, a periodical edited by members of the Association, and would publish six more short stories before he left London for Malaya in 1947. Upon returning, he worked as a journalist and wrote a six-part radio play, “A Nation in the Making,” broadcast on Radio Malaya as part of the build up to independence in August 1957. As a politician, Rajaratnam held several key cabinet posts: Minister for Culture from 1959 to 1965, Foreign Minister for an independent Singapore from 1965 to 1980, Singapore’s Deputy Prime Minister from 1980 to 1985, before retiring in 1988.

While Rajaratnam is widely regarded as one of the founding fathers of Malaya and Singapore, I offer a different picture of him as an anti-colonial writer and intellectual by examining one of his short stories and his radio play in light of his ties with the Progressive Writers’ Association and the BBC. In terms of fiction, it is likely that Rajaratnam was inspired by Anand’s own reworking of British modernist prose techniques. Anand’s *Conversations in Bloomsbury* shows he had close ties to intellectuals such as Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, and Lytton Strachey. Although there is no evidence that Rajaratnam had personal contact with Bloomsbury, his friendship with Anand and his membership in the Progressive Writers’ Association place him within the ambit of British modernism, giving us an opportunity to trace a narrative of Rajaratnam’s life and thought through his London years and published works. It is a narrative framed less in terms of heroic nation-building and triumphant paternalism and

more as a transnational meeting of modernist minds, a meeting that inspired a struggle for anti-colonial liberation and social justice expressed in literature and in the longing for national independence.

As Philip Holden observes in his astute discussion of Rajaratnam's stories, they "attempt to imagine ... a Malayan national consciousness" (129) and "show the clear influence of Mulk Raj Anand's early novels in their exploration of the consciousnesses of subaltern figures in an oppressive society" (130). By the time the two writers met in London Anand had published his first novel, *Untouchable* (1935), and possibly *Coolie* (1936). Since my focus is on Rajaratnam rather than Anand, I draw on Jessica Berman's analysis of Anand's first two novels to highlight his intertextual dialogue with James Joyce, which gives us a sense of how Anand's prose might have inspired Rajaratnam's. Instead of seeing Mulk Raj Anand's early novels "as simply mirroring or mimicking" Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Berman considers how Anand's "modernist modes arise in response to social and historical developments in India" ("Neither Mirror Nor Mimic" 207). This was the first element of Joyce's work that intrigued Anand: his "emphasis on material existence within the context of a focalized narrative" (209). Anand extends Joyce's interrogation of the *Bildungsroman*—the novel of growth and development—by highlighting how the achievement of liberal and sovereign selfhood is impossible for protagonists in *Untouchable* and *Coolie* who are constrained by social class (212). Finally, Anand's synthesis of multiple languages and acoustic wordplay seem inspired by the musicality of Joyce's own prose, creating his "own system of signification" that "provides a moment of potential power" through an excess of meaning (214).

These three concerns—focusing on material life, problematizing the *bildungsroman*, and experimenting with literary sense and sound—are evident in the one short story Rajaratnam wrote set in Malaya. "The Tiger" begins with a pregnant Malay woman, Fatima, bathing in the river and encountering a tiger that, strangely, does not attack her. Fatima runs unharmed back to her village and a group of men led by a hunter, Mamood, sets out to destroy the animal. Fatima, however, feels "averse to having the tiger hunted and killed" (36) and goes into labor just as she hears the tiger shot and slain by Mamood. It turns out the tiger was a mother, like Fatima, and was only protecting her newborn cubs. Mamood, the young hunter, captures the cubs and plans to sell them for profit. Philip Holden reads the story as depicting "Malay bodies ... as representative of racial essence"; Fatima and the tiger are linked with "the natural world" while "male figures such as Mamood" symbolize "elements of culture", replicating gendered divisions in anti-colonial nationalism (135). Situated within a nationalist framework, this assessment makes sense; but reading Rajaratnam's story along a modernist grain offers a different picture.

The short story is mainly focalized through Fatima's consciousness, with only a brief moment where Mamood's eagerness to hunt the tiger is described from his point of view: he "fingered his new, double-barreled gun with all the impatience of one whose hunting

spirit had been aroused” (Rajaratnam, “The Tiger” 37). Mamood is key to understanding the conflicted, material world of this Malayan village undergoing a transition from a shared, collective ethos to one driven by heroic and enterprising individuals like him. Mamood is described as being like “a wild tiger himself” (37) and wants to “sell the tiger cubs for a good price” (40), hinting that his impatient nature and desire for money might become wild and predatory in future. Fatima’s own character development or *bildung* is abruptly arrested even though the story’s beginning reveals a glimpse of her interior consciousness: Fatima has “black oblique eyes” filled with “an ethereal melancholy” that “gave her the expression of one brooding over some pulsating vision within herself” (33). This almost Conradian depiction of Fatima’s consciousness, with special attention to her eyes, parallels that of the tiger, whose “eyes” also register “surprising changes of mood” (34). The unspoken but tangible bond between Fatima and the tiger reveals the depth of emotion and complex personality in them both, which stands in contrast to Mamood who, lusting after prey and money, is “running his fingers along the gun barrel” (37). Thus, when Mamood shoots the tiger, the deep connection between Fatima and the animal makes her want “to re-echo the cry” of the dying beast, “long drawn out in its agony” (39). But Fatima’s mother calls her feelings for the tiger “a crazy thing” (38) and any further development of Fatima’s character is foreclosed. Instead, upon hearing that Mamood has killed the tiger and is going to sell its cubs, Fatima utters her final word in the story: “Mother!” (40). This single word can be interpreted in different ways: Fatima’s cry to her mother for help; a lament that the tiger cubs have lost their mother; a realization that she herself is about to become a mother. Rajaratnam does not definitively determine the meaning of Fatima’s utterance. Her emphatic outcry, although circumscribed by the violence wrought by Mamood, contains an excess of signification indirectly critiquing and destabilizing a world dominated by Mamood’s single-minded and predatory logic.

While “The Tiger” certainly demarcates male and female social spheres, this division is undermined somewhat by Fatima’s mother’s recollection that Fatima’s dead father “used to say that the wind sang songs to him” and thus the villagers thought him “a crazy man” (38). These mysterious wind songs hint at an excess of meaning foreclosed by the social world of the village. Furthermore, the story invites readers to empathize with Fatima and the tiger rather than with Mahmood or other male characters, offering an implicit critique of a dynamic and modernizing but also masculine and implicitly violent milieu. That Fatima’s consciousness and personal growth is constrained and stunted by this milieu is regrettable, but the brief depiction of her interiority and the implied conflict between her and Mamood suggest that these characters are not necessarily representatives of a Malay racial essence as Philip Holden posits in his analysis of the story. Instead of being essentialized racial avatars, Fatima and Mamood represent the contradictions and problems afflicting rural Malay communities grappling with colonial modernity. Rajaratnam alludes to this in the essay quoted earlier, published in the

same year as “The Tiger”: “the impoverishment of the Malay peasantry” results from British colonial policies that have neglected them in favor of “educated, middle-class Malays” who, despite their social status, “failed in the task of knitting their compatriots into a national bloc” (“The Changing Malay” 452).

For Rajaratnam in 1942, a Malayan national consciousness cannot crystallize until serious material and social inequalities within the Malay community (seen in the contrast between Mamood’s and the villagers’ attitudes) are addressed along with the tensions between Malaya’s various ethnic groups. Rajaratnam’s short story, like Fatima’s black oblique eyes, offers a glancing critique of this inequitable situation. It is clear from his essay “The Changing Malay” that Rajaratnam wishes a decolonized Malaya to be egalitarian; its constitutive Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Eurasian communities would treat each other on equal terms eschewing “privilege for this or that race” and form a “community of interests and aspirations” (453, 449). This egalitarian vision regrettably failed in postcolonial Malaysia after the racial riots of 1969 and the elevation of Malay language, religion, and ethnicity as the basis of Malaysia’s national culture. As anthropologist Aihwa Ong notes, the “special programs” for the majority Malays and others accorded “*bumiputera*” (indigenous) status “has created the world’s first affirmative action system tied exclusively to ethnicity” and “unevenly favored the middle and upper classes” among the Malays (80). The disparity between a money-minded and predatory Mamood and a caring and compassionate Fatima in Rajaratnam’s story suggests that he foresaw how socio-economic changes in a rural Malay community would be a persistent problem even if Malayness was valorized as a national identity.

If Rajaratnam took a leaf out of Anand’s book for his fiction, George Orwell and the BBC Eastern Service may have inspired his journalism and radio play. Rajaratnam did some “part-time broadcasting” (Ng, *Singapore Lion* 79) for Orwell’s Indian Section of the Eastern Service and wrote and read on the air one script for the “Open Letters” series addressed to a quisling (Ng, “Introduction” xxxvii). Although no direct correspondence between Orwell and Rajaratnam exists, it is probably no coincidence that Rajaratnam entitled his 1953-1954 political column in the *Singapore Standard* “I Write As I Please”, recalling Orwell’s own “As I Please” in the *Tribune*. Rajaratnam’s “satiric and reflective style” (Ng, *Singapore Lion* 159) in his journalism may have drawn on “the sense of dialogue, of points taken up, conceded or refuted” in Orwell’s prose (Taylor 327). Rajaratnam’s six-part radio play, comprising a cast of characters vigorously debating rather than didactically exhorting matters of anti-colonial nationalism, has resonances with another brainchild of Orwell’s: the six-part poetry program *Voice* broadcast in 1942. In each *Voice* episode Orwell and various authors such as Anand, William Empson, and Una Marson recite poetry and engage in lively literary discussions. The “great success” of *Voice* must have impressed on Orwell that “political propaganda was virtually powerless whereas literature could reach the heart of an audience” (West 39). The same

might be said of *A Nation in the Making*, a work blending Rajaratnam's political convictions with his journalistic and literary acumen. Rajaratnam was working in similar conditions to Orwell: during World War II the BBC's Eastern Service was "an organ of colonial discourse, propagating the word, and the worldview" of Britain "to its peripheral subject people" (Kerr 474); Radio Malaya during the years of the communist insurgency in Malaya (1948-1960) also "produce[d] specialized programs intended for the rural population to fight communist propaganda" and "to form a link between the rural population ... with the [colonial] government (Hassan and Intratat 172). Just as Orwell made his "newsletters sound like a conversation" and "engage[d] in dialogue" with enemy propaganda "by analysis and refutation" (Kerr 478, 481), so too Rajaratnam crafted his radio plays as a dialogue mainly between two characters, Optimist and Pessimist, debating different aspects of nation formation introduced by other speakers representing various perspectives or groups (such as the Malayan, the Communalist, and the Student of Malayan History).

Literature, however, has pride of place in Part I during the initial exchange between Optimist and Pessimist. The latter quotes Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Stranger" as justification for racial segregation and purity while the former recites Daniel Defoe's "The True Born Englishman" to advocate mixing and heterogeneity (Rajaratnam, "A Nation in the Making" 76-77). Rajaratnam, who was both personally and politically invested in Malayan independence and hopeful about the possibility of a multicultural nation, unsurprisingly gives Optimist the upper hand, but the dialogue-driven narrative helps him elaborate complex ideas without being overly pedantic. For example, after a quotation by Louis L. Snyder on the contingent nature of nationalism, Pessimist argues that Malayan nationalism is undesirable since it is indefinable. Optimist responds that "in Malaya, nationalism will have its own characteristics ... we shall be able to learn from other nationalisms, how to avoid mistakes and how to build a nation" (85). Precisely because there is no one set definition of nationalism, the emerging country of Malaya can adapt and discard earlier notions to find the most suitable form. Similarly, in Part II, after quoting a handful of passages by British and French historians about "the vital spark that brings a nation to life" (110), another character named the Malayan (an ally of Optimist) inductively defines "national consciousness": "a condition of mind, a spiritual possession, a way of thinking, feeling, and living" that can be further described as "love of country" in contrast to "jingoism ... which is arrogant and full of hatred" (111). Rajaratnam's own convictions undoubtedly weighed these debates towards *merdeka* (freedom or independence), but even "in an ideologically charged text of this kind" the number of speakers and perspectives "will always be in the plural" (Kerr 475).

Moreover, radio was never a simple propaganda channel. Just as other British intellectuals such as E. M. Forster "attempted to shape the use of transnational broadcasting in the service of more equitable relationships of exchange rather than exploitation" (Morse 102), so too

Rajaratnam's evocation of multiple critical and historical sources for his argument attempts to "bring out the decent and human qualities" in his listeners and "fight with truth and decency against the racist" ("Nation" 106). While Rajaratnam wrote and initially broadcast his play in English, it was "translate[d] ... into Chinese to be broadcast to the Chinese schools" (Ng, *Singapore Lion* 252), whose students were seen as sympathetic towards communist insurgents.

The radio play's title, *A Nation in the Making*, may allude to the founding vision of BBC director John Reith, who wanted the BBC "to make the nation as one man" (qtd in Scannell and Cardiff, 7) and "to give the public what ... they need—and not what they want" (Reith 34). What Rajaratnam thought his listeners needed was a consciousness of the material conditions of Malayan nationalism and an optimism regarding the power of language to produce new meaning for a new nation. Part V of the radio play involves a lengthy debate between a Malay character and an unnamed narrator about developing a Malayan language serving as the basis for a national culture. To support his case for what he calls "Malayanising" the Malay language, the narrator—likely a projection of Rajaratnam—gives examples of how the English language evolved historically, quoting passages from Geoffrey Chaucer and James Joyce, thus revealing the modernist thread in his thinking. To allay fears that the Malay language might be "corrupt[ed]" (187), Rajaratnam argues that Malayanisation is a process of "enriching" the language through the "infusion of cultures" (188) by Chinese, Indian, and Malay writers "of taste and talent" who "will shape ... and produce a real Malayan culture" (187). Here are certain hallmarks of modernist aesthetic and cultural thought evident in both Anand's and Joyce's thinking: a practical concern with the material realities of an impending political rupture as a colony transforms into a nation-state, a fervent belief in the cultural possibilities of such a material transformation, and an unabashed optimism that the new cultural formation will better serve the people as a whole—or better yet, create a whole new people. One thinks of Stephen Daedalus's famous line from Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist*—"I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (214)—or Anand's comment in a 1974 essay that "we accept this civilization, but with the will to change it so that qualities may arise above quantities and men may evolve higher consciousness" (49). Hence we should read Rajaratnam's pronouncements as Minister of Culture mentioned earlier ("to create a Malayan culture deliberately and in the shortest possible time") not as an authoritarian edict forcing a concocted culture upon his people but as a logical development of modernist inclinations in his fiction and journalism that eventually infused his political beliefs.

Although Teo Poh Leng and Sinnathamby Rajaratnam were writing at two different moments in the history of colonial Malaya and Singapore, their poetry and prose show evidence of what Bill Ashcroft and John Salter (writing from an Australian perspective) call "modernism [as] a discourse of the contact zone" serving a "culturally

and politically disruptive dynamic” of anti-colonial resistance and nationalist advocacy (295). Hegemonic though it may be, colonialism was not monolithic, and modernism less so. Although Teo’s encounter with modernist letters was mediated through the colonial education system in Singapore, his essays and poem illustrate a critical engagement with and an appropriation of Eliot and Hopkins rather than slavish imitation. Peter Kalliney’s comment that “travel and translation are right at the core of modernism’s aesthetics of motion and dissonance” (*Modernism in a Global Context* 3) is especially relevant here: the figurative train journey in “F.M.S.R.” not only tracks the speaker’s movement from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur but also sounds a dissonant note to celebratory accounts of economic prosperity and Malayan unity under British colonial rule.

Similarly, Rajaratnam translated the British and South Asian contexts of his informal tutelage during World War II into prose and plays addressing specific problems related to Malaya’s national modernity, employing literary tactics and techniques drawn from a modernist repertoire. Even as a minister of state, Rajaratnam’s opinion that a Malayan culture needed to be swiftly created “by pressure cooking” to prevent the newly independent nation from ripping asunder due to “racial conflict” (“The Making of a Malayan Culture” 122) recalls attempts by Euro-American modernist intellectuals to forge a new, modern identity out of a cultural crisis or the aftermath of historical catastrophe. Undoubtedly, Teo, writing in the wake of Eliot, is more pessimistic than Rajaratnam, who expresses in his own writing Anand’s and Joyce’s sentiments that a future can be envisioned through the representation of material realities and experimentation with literary language and forms. This essay illuminates the global modernist connections in both authors’ works; it shows how their critique of colonialism drew on modernist aesthetics, how their nascent national consciousness was in dialogue with modernist literary concerns, and how they transformed a field of colonial and aesthetic forces into a field of literary and cultural struggle.

Notes

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