Articulating East: Ideology, Censorship and Contemporary English Writing in Singapore[1]

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The days of the mandatory hair cut at the airport, the more recent decision to ban chewing gum, international incidents such as those involving the caning of Michael Fay for spray painting cars - all these and much more are routinely invoked by the west to demonstrate the puritanical and paternalistic attitude of those who govern Singapore. These examples legitimise a form of self-congratulatory response by the west to denigrate the repressive don't-spare-the-rod principle of governance in that country. While the implied opposition between freedom and authoritarianism in such a stance is not without a measure of validity, irony and caricature are also ways of coming to terms with or understanding the notion that cultural protectionism and benevolent dictatorship - if such a term makes sense at all - in the country have in fact worked to effect an economic miracle, although there isn't a consensus about the price paid for the success. On the one hand if economic prosperity, political stability, universal education, a very low crime rate etc. serve as a yardstick, Singapore's achievement during the last three decades is nothing short of astounding. On the other, as critics have often pointed out, if these have been gained at the cost of freedom, creativity and spontaneity, if these have led to the notion of a rugged and pragmatic society that is unsure of its own identity, then it is neither desirable nor stable in the long run. In short, according to the critics, however successful the country is in economic terms, it has achieved its success at a moral and spiritual cost, and we are right in our assumption that we are better off in the west. Alternatively, for those countries that have found themselves in economic decline and political chaos, Singapore serves as a model of harmony and a reminder of what they might have been. The objective of this essay is to

explore in some detail the implications of this ambivalence, particularly in relation to the pervasive presence of a state-sponsored ideology, censorship and contemporary writing in English.

At the very outset, one needs to reinforce that the economic success is in itself quite spectacular. For a city state of approximately 230 square miles with very little resources and a population of 3 million people, the rags-to-riches story in the last thirty years is particularly impressive. Even Joseph Tamney, an outspoken academic whose work is extremely critical of the ideology of the country, admits that "the average Singaporean now makes more money than an Irish or British citizen, and if buying power is considered by adjusting national income figures for the cost of living, then Singaporeans also live better than residents of France and Canada" (1).This achievement is even more striking because the country has achieved this prosperity while skirting the ethnic and religious problems that several postcolonial countries have faced, despite the multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-religious society that it accommodates. A nation so diverse with one group comprising more than 75% of the population attempting to create a collective consciousness is a sure recipe for civil unrest, rabid nationalism, narrow configurations of national identity, all of which have been encountered in other countries close to Singapore and in South Asia. It is hardly surprising that leaders of this tiny country often draw comparisons with other South Asian and Southeast Asian countries as examples of what might happen if the government did not prevent the possibility of unrest by maintaining a strict and vigilant control of what is permissible.

Lest we think of the multiracial situation in utopian terms, it must be admitted that ethnic and racial tension exists below the surface. It is alluded to in conversations, in incidental remarks, in fears about employment, real or imagined - but then it would have been unnatural if it hadn't been the case. Tamney points to several moments when the government itself clearly foregrounded Chinese values as the backbone to cultural stability. As he puts it: "racial policies simply follow from the leader's understanding of Singapore's history: The nation's success is a result of the influence of Chinese culture. That is to say, ethnic revitalization is meant primarily to preserve Chinese culture" (97). And he concludes on the note that "reinforcing racial identities is bound to undermine other efforts meant to create racial

harmony" (103). The tensions have been, however, kept strictly under control, and state intervention in cultural affairs is geared to diffuse the possibility of the escalation of these tensions. For those of us who are mindful of what is happening in countries like Sri Lanka, Singapore's "no-nonsense" policy towards ethnicity and its decision to preserve four official languages cannot be ignored. When the claim is made that the People's Action Party, with Lee Kuan Yew at the helm, ensured that Singapore would "remain a multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious society for long, with each ethnic segment - the Chinese, the Malays, the Indians, and the others - enjoying autonomy and equality of status in the cultures, languages and religions" (Vasil 38) one needs to recognize that this claim is not mere rhetoric. The foregrounding of Confucianism and Chinese culture is a part of a larger project involving the balance of the private and the public, and it could be argued that the emphasis on Chinese values is not simply a matter of racial bias. It grows out of a profound uneasiness about the nation's origins, about a syncretism that needs to be both acknowledged and denied by the country as a whole. As Ang and Stratton point out, "while the East/West divide is a discursive construction which has its origins in Western thought that enabled and legitimated European colonialism and imperialism, it now ciruculates among élites in the East as well, where it is inflected and articulated in ways suitable for their own purposes" (68). Thus the need to celebrate a Chinese ontology arises out of the urgency to counter the threat of Western liberalism which, with its emphasis on individualism, the leaders argue, could well destabilize the harmony that is so carefully maintained in the country. According to Kirpal Singh, "right now, a major concern is the worry ... that if the citizens of Singapore are not careful and vigilant enough their continuous progress is going to be threatened by the liberal and even decadent practices of the West" ("Cosmopolitanism" 1).

Singapore is thus a difficult country to categorize, and increasingly difficult to link with its immediate neighbour, Malaysia, with which it shares significant historical connections and from which it separated in 1965. In literary studies, one tends to think of the two countries as being one entity, an assumption justified by history and by the older writers who spanned both worlds. Now, however, Malaysia appears to have taken the more predictable path to decolonization, as it moved from the enthusiasm of freedom from colonial rule and dreams of pluralism to a nativist assertion of national identity

based on ethnic patterns, historical origins and religious claims. As a consequence, although some of the finest writing did come from the country in the works of Lloyd Fernando, Wong Phui Num, K.S. Maniam and Lee Kok Liang, these writers now have little support from the state or from readers to continue their work. They work sporadically, in isolation, aware that the shift to Malay has had very negative consequences on their own writing.[2]

If Singapore has avoided this path, it is largely due to the government's policing of every aspect of the country's life. From watching television to family planning, from celebrating religious functions to being courteous to one's neighbours, the guidance of the state is evident in a non-coercive, rational and emphatic manner. As John Clammer comments, "this paternalism pervades not only government-people relationship, but is reflected and reproduced throughout the social system - in the bureaucracy, the educational system, the running of the public enterprises and even at the supposedly grass-roots Community Centres level" (111). Referring specifically to the issue of national security, a character in Gopal Baratham's *A Candle or the Sun* (1991) tells the gullible Hern: "Did they never tell you that on this island paradise of ours trade is a matter of security, health is a matter of security, how you wash your underwear is a matter of security? (104)

In Singpare, the ideology of the state clearly demarcates that the public sphere be conditioned by technology, by economic advancement, by western modes of production while the private domain be enclosed by Asian values. Singapore did not begin with this duality - in fact in the late 1950s and early 60s there was a desire to privilege local languages and jettison its colonial past. The leaders, however, soon felt that if the country were to hold its own against developed nations, it had to do so by encouraging the use of English, supporting technology and trade. But to do so while ignoring the cultural claims of a heterogeneous population would transform the population into mimic people (to borrow Naipaul's phrase). Hence the carefully orchestrated split between the public and the private. Such a split is hardly new in a colonial context, but in Singapore this duality becomes official policy in order to ensure that all citizens, for instance, are bilingual - their mother tongue ensuring the continuity of their Asian values while English, as the medium of instruction, advances their ability to compete with

western nations. While the wisdom or the practicality of such an enforced binary is open to debate, it has had the effect of promoting a community that uses English with a great degree of competence.

Singapore is probably one of the few nations in that region where the majority of the population do not claim English as their mother tongue but where the use of English has increased significantly, although it is, at least at the level of popular culture, tending to evolve into a "nation language" called Singlish, a form that uses the structure of English but combines it with the syntactical patterns and vocabulary of Chinese, Malay and Tamil. Because of the decision to retain English as an official language, the publication of poetry and fiction has been consistent, although not all the writing, like elsewhere, is particularly good. Singapore is also, unlike, say, India or the Caribbean, unable to claim diasporic writers as part of its repertoire of writers. Except for a few, such as Goh Poh Seng in Vancouver, not many writers have written from outside. This again is strange, particularly because of the careful monitoring of literature that has been a consistent issue in the life of the country.

The country hasn't produced an Achebe or a Walcott, for reasons that are probably historical, but it has produced a large number of serious and exciting writers. Ideally, the heterogeneity of the country should have produced great literature. Its curious status as a nation that has no indigenous past but legitimately claims a primordial ancestry should have led to imaginative and experimental forms of writing. And the government's acknowledgement of multiple traditions should have helped. But it was a multiplicity about which the thinking was done by the state, and to flout that openly was hardly prudent. As Singh rightly maintains, "the exigencies of living in a very small, pluralistic society hinder the frank expression of views and ideas. One is never sure when one may be called to task for having uttered, stated, or explored an issue deemed to be sensitive"(11).

Writing has been, however, not in short supply. Koh Tai Ann speaks of more than 23 novels between 1972 and 1989, not to mention the plays, the volumes of poetry, and the short story collections (279). The country was receptive to poetry as New Zealand was receptive to the short story, and here again critics like Kirpal Singh have tried to explain the popularity of poetry in relation to the materialistic goals of the city state. According to him,

"Singapore favours short forms of literary expression because the whole manner of living and working is not calculated to leave enough room or energy for the production or consumption of works needing long and sustained effort" (9).

Among the poets, Edwin Thumboo is, as one critic has rightly maintained, probably as close as one would think of a poet laureate of the country. He started writing in the fifties and his most recent collection *The Third Map* brings together the best of his work. Other poets such as Robert Yeo, Arthur Yap, Lee Tzu Pheng and Kirpal Singh have in their own ways, made a substantial contribution, but Thumboo remains the most important figure, although critics like Jan Gordon have questioned the significance of his work.

Gordon writes about him, among others, and the point he makes about the derivative and unauthentic quality of Singapore writing becomes evident in an illustrative stanza from one of Thumboo's poems.

I have sailed many waters,
Skirted islands of fire,
Contended with Circe
Who loved the squeal of pigs;
Passed Scylla and Charybdis
To seven years with Calypso,
Heaved in battle with the gods.
Beneath it all
I kept faith in Ithaca, travelled,
Travelled and travelled,
Suffering much, enjoying little;
Met strange people singing
New myths; made myths myself.
(*Third Map* 81)

The poem as a whole is flawless in its control of form, is sure sense of rhythm, its capacity to blend the symbolic and the meditative. Thumboo's poetry that would find its place with the best of "mainstream" poetry, not because it is imitative, but because it draws its strength from a tradition that is almost entirely western. Gordon, who discusses "Ulysses at the Merlion" at some length, concludes by saying that "Thumboo's poems often appear

derivative even when they are not; a certain 'Anglo' quality seems grafted on in much the way the English language itself is in Singapore" (47). And for many of the writers this doffing of the cap is the inevitable result of a political and cultural situation that is "colonial" in its westernization and restrictive in its expression of national identity. Thumboo's poetry is not always celebratory and some of his finest poems are about expectations gone awry, but his criticism has been of a general kind, directed at human and moral issues rather than ones that are systemic.

The notion of promoting national identity seems innocuous enough, until one realizes its destructive potential in many postcolonial nations, including Singapore. Singh, for instance, sees it as a twin-dilemma: "how to achieve unity in diversity and how to become modern without shedding tradition?" ("Cosmopolitanism" 2) Translated into ethnic terms in a country that houses Chinese, Malays, Indians and Eurasians, the binary is both complex and potentially problematic. In practice, censorship involves constant intervention by the state through an interlocking system that begins with politics and extends to cultural and social life. And in the delicate balance it maintains, literature is recognized as a potential threat, particularly writing in English. Gordon, writing in 1984, says that the writer "is an elitist in the sense that he is highly educated and that he belongs to a very small sector of the population, that 5.2% who speak English well enough and with enough emotional comfort to use it at home" (44). Now the situation has changed considerably with a dramatic increase in both writing and the reading public, and the writer has the potential to be subversive, particularly because of his/her international audience, and the state feels it necessary to keep an eye on what is produced to ensure that it does not deride state policy.[3]

The notion of censorship brings to mind the conditions that existed in South Africa and all that has been written about the pernicious effects of censorship on a whole generation of writers in that country. In the critical writings of Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee and Andre Brink for instance, one sees the magnitude of the effects of censorship. But a comparison between the two countries is also likely to be misleading. Generalizing about censorship on the basis of the practice of the government, Brink for instance maintains that "censorship is invariably imposed by an authoritarian regime uncertain of its own chances of survival" (240). This certainly is hardly the

case in Singapore where despite the long period of PAP rule and the swiftness with which opposition is dealt with, there is a general awareness that the PAP has in fact worked with the country's welfare in mind and has secured for the people a standard of living that is the envy of neighbouring countries. But Brink is right in claiming that "censorship is an integral part of a much larger and more complicated phenomenon" (236). Singapore does not target anyone in particular for control, but it certainly makes it clear to everybody what is off-limits.

A case in point here is the episode involving the writer Catherine Lim in 1994 when she published two essays in the *Straits Times* calling attention to the authoritarian style of the government. She claimed that the politicians were being paid too much and that the public did not really like them. The response to this by the prime minister and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who by inviting the writer to either to "practice politics" or leave it alone, made it very clear that such comments were not taken lightly by the government (See Tamney 73-74). And Lim at that point withdrew from the debate. Here is an example of the manner in which the government makes it clear that they have a job to do and must be allowed to do it without distractions from the wings.

It must also be stressed that censorship in Singapore is not exercised by cultural or religious bodies outside the government. There isn't, for instance, as in Sri Lanka or India, a strong religious base that is not directly involved with politics but is an active participant in the framing of national identity. Such enclaves that have power over the masses and are in a position to dictate to the writer what is permissible and what is not does not hold good for Singapore, although public pressure about what is acceptable cannot be ignored altogether. The main control, however, lies with the government and its multiple agencies of control.

In matters pertaining to writing and performance censorship exists in the form of a Board that looks at all the literature that is written. It does not forbid publication; in fact no book has been banned before publication, but the vetting process is such that certain kinds of writing are pointed out as being unacceptable. In Gopal Baratham's novel, *A Candle or the Sun*, the would-be writer Hern receives a visit from Sam, who works

for the Ministry of Culture. This is what Sam tells Hern:You're not even a member of the Singapore Guild of Writers, Hern," he said lapsing into everyday speech. "My ministry people don't get a chance to look at your work or advise you about it. The first time we see your stuff is when it's published in some foreign magazine.... We are here to guide you,Hern.To help you get your thoughts into the proper social context.... We would never interfere with the actual craft of writing, mind you. You say things your own way. The artist must remain free" (17-18).

It is here that the subtlety of the scene in Singapore becomes clear. Areas not to be dealt with include language, race, ethnicity and religion, for to allow diverse opinions along these lines would be to encourage sectarian disharmony. Catherine Lim mentions how she once wrote a story involving an Indian man who is wrongly accused of raping a Chinese girl. Subsequently a secondary school adapted the story for a play, with one difference in that they changed the Indian man to a Chinese man. When asked why the change was made, she was told that "race was a sensitive issue. Minority groups might feel offended" (Lim 40). She adds: "Any topic that could be construed as even remotely touching upon issues of race, language and religion in this multiethnic society is likely to be self-censored out at manuscript stage" (39).

This, then, is the peculiar situation of the writer who enjoys, like all the citizens, a relatively high standard of living, and bears witness to a system where efficiency is the norm, but one which allows little criticism of politics or culture. If culture cannot be avoided, then guidelines exist for determining what is off-limits for the writer. The effect has been, as Lim maintains, one of self-censorship, and this in turn has far-reaching effects. As J.M. Coetzee rightly says: "When certain kinds of writing and speech, even certain thoughts, become surreptitious activities, then the paranoia of the state is on its way to being reproduced in the psyche of the subject, and the state can look forward to a future in which the bureaucracies of supervision can be allowed to wither away, their function have been, in effect, privatized" (35). In a general sense, this process of internalization has in fact occurred in Singapore where such rigorous self-discipline is very much part of the psyche of the citizens. Catherine Lim's story entitled "The Malady and the Cure" (*O Singpore*, 1989) about civil servants who, on the weekends, make a trip to malaysia, to a designated area that has been leased by Singapore, and spit and swear and drink as much as they like before returning

to Singapore as model citizens, is in fact an illustration of this mentality, this constant need to come to terms with repression.

To what extent has the literary circle internalized this cultural system is not always clear. Gordon, who, admittedly, takes an extreme position, maintains in his polemical piece that the arbitrariness with which barriers have been maintained has vitiated the literature, leading to the creation of what is, at best imitative material. Whether English as a hybrid medium serves to perpetuate the values of colonialism or reinforce the model of national development espoused by the PAP, the effect, according to him, has been the production of second-rate literature. Writing specifically about an anthology of poetry entitled *The Second Tongue*, he says: "The Poets of *The Second Tongue* enjoy a privileged relationship with the government in power, while at the same time the very marginality of the language in the Singapore "living" context restrains any adversary political venturesomeness. By deconstructing what is in effect their first tongue into an illusion of its secondariness, these poets create a special place for themselves as a small group with a small audience in a tiny country, which protects them from international class literary criticism ..." (64). The charge is hardly fair, and it certainly dismisses that powerful poetry of Lee Tzu Pheng and Arthur Yap, for instance, but the issues he raises continue to be relevant.

Gordon's main concern is with language, but the real concerns go much further, of writers being aware that they enjoy a measure of freedom in dealing with their own ethnic and cultural group and need to be more circumspect with others. Writers are increasingly concerned with the packaging of culture, which leaves little room for the imaginative exploration of complex issues. Philip Jeyaretnam maintains that "the temptation on the part of the government to interfere, to shape and direct, must be resisted. A lively culture cannot be created by decree. It must depend upon the participation of individuals ..." (94). The playwright Stella Kon says: "one day we may bury the image of the 'ugly Singaporean'. In this place we would have the 'artistic Singaporean', less materialistic, less self-centred, sensitive to other people's needs" (104).

It has been argued that the issue of censorship has been deflected in the last several years in order to preoccupy itself with matters pertaining

to sexuality. As Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan point out, "debate about film classifications, for example, has focused on the allowable limits of sexually explicit scenes, as if censorship affects society only when it prevents art from depicting the coupling men and women" (114). Even today issues of how much of nudity is acceptable and how much gay and lesbian material must be allowed are all matters of concern and active debate. The serious discussion of such matters has also had the effect of tempting writers to focus more often on such themes to the extent that the pressing need to address more urgent issues is often sidelined. Heng and Devan are impatient with this avoidance strategy and they are very clear that such strategies are hardly effective: According to them: "the challenge we have inadvertently posed our writers is: try and see how far you can get with rubber duckies, even when what really concerns you is free speech, detention without trial, or the price of beans" (114).

If what Heng and Devan say is true, it is also equally evident that not all writing in Singapore has adopted this avoidance strategy. While cultural control has led to a kind of streamlining it has also led to form of inventiveness that give a uniqueness to Singapore writing. Salman Rushdie, who constantly invokes the image of the censor in *Shame*, claims that "every story one chooses to tell is a kind of censorship, it prevents the telling of other tales ..." (71). But the story that is told is also about the story that is not told, and Singapore writers have been able to include these shadowy stories in ways that are of considerable interest. Lee Tzu Pheng, Kirpal Singh, and a host of other writers have continued writing, always using strategies that preserve their integrity as writers while avoiding a direct confrontation with the state.

It is hardly new to claim the literature has always been partial to satire and irony. Catherine Lim's writing has been, for the most part, ironic and what she points to are the hopeless incongruities caused by the materialism and the drive to succeed in the country. She is at her best in dealing with the Chinese community, in both her novels and her short stories, and the issues she foregrounds are such that they reveal the inconsistencies in the private sphere in a manner that shows the relation between the private and the public. Particularly in her short stories, one recognizes the stories that have not been told. In the incongruous and the facetious lie the possibility of telling alternative stories.

The plays of Stella Kon, Robert Yeo for instance, or some of the best known poems of Thumboo, work with dualities, with the irony of undying faith in money. Yeo's play *One Year Back Home* (1990) directly invokes politics whereas Kuo Pao Kun's *The Coffin Is Too Big for the Hole* (1990) mocks the rationalism of state ideology while ostensibly working within and satirising traditional Chinese values. This is subversion, but it is a kind of subversion that seems more acceptable to the authorities or at least one that gets past their watchful eyes. And one would imagine that it is because the country is mindful of how precarious the balance is between economic success and cultural preservation and is aware that the private sphere could well be comrpomised in the drive for success. In that sense, binarism and irony have in fact fed into state ideolog, nourished it and subverted it as well.

A direct exploration of politics, then, is hardly possible in the country. One of the few books that have appeared in the recent past is a work called Kampung Chicken (1990) which is intertextually a rewriting of Animal Farm. Entirely in the form of a fable, the book is about freedom, about the need to break free of confines and it remains an important work, although it is a fable and the thrust of it is entirely allegorical.

Among the recent writers, perhaps the two that are significant are Philip Jeyaretnam, whose recent work Abraham's Promise (1995) is an important one and Baratham who is probably among hte most exciting writers in Singapore today. Intertextually connected with the well-known novel Plumb by Maurice Gee, Abraham's Promise creates a frame that enables looking at social and political issues. It is difficult not to see the connecton between, for instance, Abraham's Promise and the promise of a new land. The structure of the novel allows for interospection, for historical assessment and for moral judgment, from the perspective of an individual. In the framework of realism, the problems relate entirely to the individual, but it is clear, certainly when one takes into account the intertextuality, the Jeyaretnam is bringing to the surface issues that are particular to Singapore. Jeyaretnam's work, very much like other contemporary writing, points to ways in which one needs to think of Siggapore writing in relation to political constraints. Writers, for the msot part, have carefuly avoided engaging in discussions about politics for censorhsip. But they have also been actively

engaged in finding strategies that are empowering, ones that allows for the articulation of resistance but still do not flaunt subversion.

In the proliferation and popularity of gothic writing in Sigapore, there is again the opportunity to explore that notion of fear, in contexts that have no immediate bearing on the social and cultural conditions, but ehre again one sees the writers responding to restrictions by dealing not with causes but with effects. Here again, the issue is not merely comouflage; gothic excess is a way of recognizing and recording the ambivalence of the writer who is not entirely in oppositon but not one who is entirely in agreement either.

Literary criticism about Singaporean writing has been, for the most part, reluctant to discuss the issue of censorshp. its main focus has been identity, the manner in which the various writers explore their pasts and their status in Sigapoe. It is, probably, equally imprtant to look at the kinds of tales that authors have chosen to tell in a country where official control is decisive but official policy has led to sability and prosperity. In the best of literature produced in the country, the response to censorship has been non-confrontational but clearly meaningful and in its own way, oppositional.

In the whole corpus of contemporary writing, Gopal Baratham is decidedly different, and that he has published his works in Singapore as well is heartening Baratham has been writing consistently for several years and his most recent works have been published in England, a decision which in itselof was seen in some quarters as beig significant. Whatever the reasons, his works express a wiiiingness to expiore what has remainded prohibited.

As a novel that is concerned with a writer who is coopted by the State and punished for not conforming to certain guidelines, the structure of *A Candle or the Sun* allows for very straightforward caricature of state censorship. At one level the novel could be seen as didactic narrative whose main purpose is to condemn the repressive practices of the government. For a novel about which there is much to write about, it is surprising that very iittie has in fact been written. Heng and Devan do critique the text but they are very critical of the author's tendency to deemphasize politics and focus on sexuality. As they put it, "the attention of a cultural text that would present itself as social and political critique is split and undermined by its own obsession with sexual display. The most striking, powerful images that imprint

themselves on our attention come, not from political critique, but from the salacious conjunction of sexual and racial stereotypes ..." (112). The criticism is hardly valid, in this novel as in others, for Baratham is directly concerned with political resistance as a national concern and the text itself foregrounds the complex relation between ethnicity, religion, language and politics. Working with issues that are clearly sensitive, Baratham produces work that has neither the indirection of, say, Jeyaretnam nor the allegorical distancing of Velloo. That Baratham's text enjoys wide readership in Singapore and is taught in universities is reassuring, leading one to think that while censorship is still a significant presence in the country it is probably no longer a serious impediment to imaginative writing.

Notes and References

[1] The title is, in part, an expression of my immense admiration and respect for Professor W.H. New: a brilliant scholar, a dedicated teacher, and above all, a man of principle.

[2] The comment applies to all the writers except Lee Kok Liang who died in 1992.

[3] I owe this comment to Professor Kirpal Singh whose general observations on the paper were extremely insightful.

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