

**Andrew Hock Soon Ng, *Intimating the Sacred: Religion in English Language Malaysian Fiction*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press 2011, 281 pp., ISBN 978-988-8083-21-3**

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The dedicatory lines of Andrew Hock Soon Ng's *Intimating the Sacred* are an indicator to the reader of not only how the study contextualises the literary pieces examined, but how one must engage the ethnopolitical minefield that the author's own exercise enters in tying together several timely essays on the place and role of religion and religiosity in English Language fiction written in an increasingly (culturally, politically) repressive Malaysia. The dedication reads as follows: 'For all authors in Malaysia who choose to write in English against the odds – your courage and commendable'.

Divided into five chapters with a separate introduction and conclusion, the author meticulously traces the trope of religiosity in a diverse corpus of texts, only after, however, situating the works within a broader field: first, in regards to other post-colonial literatures wherein Ng discusses the merits of Malaysian fiction and its recent critical interest (namely from the Australian academy); then in regards to broader multi-lingual trajectories within the Malaysian literary establishment, where he identifies how texts in English have been (at times unfairly) branded as being ethically conflictive within the post-colonial project; and lastly, in regards to the nation's race-driven political trajectory. This latter point informs the author's appropriation of Deleuze and Guattari's 'minor literature' to characterise the wider corpus of Anglophone Malaysian fiction. The study comprehensively traces the connections between recent Malaysian history and public policy – especially during the radically pro-racial era inaugurated, albeit informally, by the 1969 race riots – and the increasingly difficult publishing and critical climate for texts written in English. It is here that the reader is introduced to several key historical issues and political decrees that may otherwise go unnoticed to a casual observer. In doing so, Ng formalises the complexities of religion within the tableau vivant of Malaysian nationalisms, not falling into

the typical reductionisms of multiculturalism. In fact, Ng strikes several timely chords by stressing that Anglophone texts are not only a 'minor literature' placed into a binary opposition with government-approved 'national literature' written in Malay, but that they provide a litmus for identifying communal anxieties of identity and belonging among the ethnic (Indian, Chinese) and religious (Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian) minority groups vis-à-vis the majority Malay/Muslim. Four of the content chapters are devoted to the former (including well-argued critiques of the works of Lloyd Fernando, Lee Kok Liang, K.S. Maniam and Shirley Lim) whereas a final section is devoted to the vicissitudes of Islam and Modernity (with a capital 'M') in the works of Che Husna Azhari and Karim Raslan, wherein Ng provides nuanced readings of the interplay between competing drives amongst the Malay majority; that is, to either embrace the politics and aesthetics of global Islamisation or to align themselves with notions of Western Modernity. The latter, ironically, informs the government's *Vision 2020*, a collection of policies enacted to ensure the country's entrance into the 'first' world by the year 2020, even though in recent times the allure of alignment with 'International Islam' has overtaken this promise. Critical perspectives on the respective faith systems inform the literary readings, and Ng must be congratulated for not portraying these as monolithic entities within a fragile national cultural ecosystem, but as themselves poly-faceted and tensile within individual ethnoreligious communities. His rehearsing of Malaysian Hindu practices (2011: 106–7) in the analysis of K.S. Maniam's *The Return*, 'The Pelanduk' and *In a Far Country* is nuanced and conscientious, and provides a strong point of departure for a reader unfamiliar with the plurality and distinctive 'localness' of religious practice in Malaysia.

The five content chapters of *Intimating the Sacred* firmly maintain the primacy of Anglophone texts in being a key dialoguing agent in cultural and literary debates of communal and individual self. As Ng aptly notes, 'as with many paradoxes of colonial legacies, the inheritance of English, despite its impetus to further fragment the Malaysian society, has curiously also the potential to bring about unity, and defuse otherness [...] to forge a spirit of [...] mutual belonging' (2011: 11). Working with post-colonial, feminist, psychoanalytic (Lacanian) and post-structuralist theories, Ng deftly works through the literary text to support his claim that the sacred and religiosity in these fictions lay bare 'the gaps and schisms in the national imaginary' (2011: 29) that otherwise proliferates the false definition of 'identity' as linked to race-religion. Of special importance is the author's exploration of non-Western feminist thought as a dialoguing agent with well-known ideas. Examples of this can be found in Ng's discussion of Che Husna Azhari's negotiation of Islamic and Western positions, and the treaties forwarded by the Sisters in Islam. The author, furthermore, explores the feminist positions of non-Muslim women in multicultural Malaysia, exemplified by his commentary on the work of Cecilia Ng, Noraini Othman, Aihwa Ong and Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf, all of whom provide critical perspectives on the construction and phenomenology of gender in a poly-religious setting. As such, Ng argues that the various religions (and their constituents, practices, credos, and so on) that populate these fictions are not only thus exposed for their possibly 'essentialist and foundationalist paradigms' but that they also can then be productively engaged with the 'problematics and potentials of postmodern discursive contexts' (2011: 29). Ng's work, therefore, is a timely inclusion in the collective critical and cultural consciousness of a country that otherwise too easily

falls into the reductionism of race/religion = identity, and poses in its analyses a must-read for both the literary critic and the layperson interested in going beyond the facile and banal propaganda that the current government has put out to foster an idea of '1Malaysia'. Ng addresses this strategy in the conclusion, and identifies how the literary can and does put forward a tactics of subversion and dislodgement that then potentiates a deconstruction of said policies, which are in themselves intrinsically flawed in advocating for a multi-religious collective identity that is in stark opposition to micro-ethnic and religious notions of community and self. The author underlines the importance of these Anglo-phone texts in contributing to a dismantlement of this 'multicultural reality' as they evidence that this 'reality' 'continues to remain fraught with tension, suspicion and ignorance' wherein the presence of characters from different religious groups are repeatedly othered as outsiders. By identifying these tropes and drives in the texts examined, Ng then provides a well-structured retort to any propagandistic notions of multiculturalism that are ingrained into a ill-advised political drive of homogenization.

In fact, my only critique of *Intimating the Sacred* is that at times it fails to go further in a sustained critique of this incongruity that is otherwise fundamental to any discussion of religion and religiosity in the Malaysian context. Sections of the concluding remarks (2011: 209–10 in particular) are informative and timely in linking the literary texts to contemporary cultural and political debates, but lack the analytical bite that otherwise characterises the manuscript. My critique, however, must be read in context and softened by the fact that Ng, a Senior Lecturer at Monash University-Malaysia, is *also* writing from within, that is, within the geopolitical boundaries of a state that still maintains the Internal Security Act (a vestige of the colonial era) to curtail any acts of 'sedition', though others are prone to call these same actions intellectual ruminations on the status quo. Perhaps the dedicatory remarks then must also apply to Ng as one of those authors who 'choose to write in English against the odds' – his courage and equally commendable.