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GENERATION AND IDENTITY IN CLAIRE THAM'S SINGAPOREAN STORIES

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A debate about Singapore's identity has bubbled away in the island-state ever since its removal from the Federation of Malaysia in August, 1965. The country's small size, scant natural resources, entrepot economy, and multiracial population are all factors which have helped give rise to the ebb and flow of public discourse about what Singapore is. The State, in the form of the governing elite of the People's Action Party, has led the debate, with Senior Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, famously affirming in an interview for the journal *Foreign Affairs* in 1994 that "Culture is Destiny". (1) Yet other voices are occasionally heard, especially from academe and from the small, resident literary community. These other voices point to the essential hybridity of Singaporean society, as well as the evolving dimension to Singaporean identity across different generations, from immigrants to native-born.(2) This paper focuses on the contribution of one youthful author to this continuing debate, and furnishes a glimpse of the flip-side of selectively-championed and politically correct "Asian Values".

Claire Tham is one of the brightest and best of the younger generation of Singapore's creative writers. A very private person, not much is known of the details of her young life. Born in 1967, she was educated at the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, at Hwa Chong Junior College, and then at Oxford University in Britain, where she read Law. Though now employed in a bank, she began writing fiction at a very early age, and once hoped to write "the ultimate rock and roll story"(3), an ambition that was not, of course,

unique, but still proved elusive. Literary recognition, too, came early. At the tender age of seventeen, she won two second prizes in the National Short Story Writing Competition of 1984, followed by the Commendation Award for Fiction from the National Book Development Council of Singapore in 1992, and the Highly Commended Award for Fiction from the same body in 1995. She prepares literary reviews for *The Straits Times* newspaper, and presently is working on a first novel. In the debate about Singaporean identity, Claire Tham's prose conveys a very dim view of official exhortations to revere authority, uphold the community above the individual, and practise family values.

THE FIRST COLLECTION

Bored, restless, cosmopolitan youngsters populate the pages of *Fascist Rock: Stories of Rebellion* (1990), Claire Tham's first published collection of short stories. Brilliant, opinionated, and unconventional, Claire Tham has a capacity to capture the mood and manners of twenty-year-old Singaporeans with given names like Patsy, Chris, Alphonsus, James, Jeanne, and Irwin, who typically inhabit cars, arcades, and condominiums, and who convey sentiments about as deep as an alcoholic drink, a half-smoked cigarette, a pop song, or an evening drive past grey ghostly HDB flats.

The title is about the only ambiguity in this book. It could refer to a place, to music, or to an attitude, or all three.

For the characters in the story, "Baby, You Can Drive My Car", life is brittle, hedonist, narcissistic, escapist, 'a fake magazine existence.'"(4) The past is dead, and a friend's death brings merely a futile shrug of the shoulder. Says the story's female narrator:

"I want to have a good time. I'm sick of being like everybody else. I hate school. I want to dies young. That's about all."(5)

Tham's terse, spare prose sears up out of each story as her characters express their frustration at life on an island "no longer than a peanut"(6), at official recollections of

thousands of years of Chinese history which do not translate to Singapore, and at conformist practices like university initiations. Even a classic Chinese immigrant success story can go sour when, in “Homecoming”, a Singaporean university student returns from London to confront the solitary loneliness of a recently-deceased father, who “did nothing but stay in his flat all day, re-reading the papers and waiting for the day his son would come home.”(7) Behind every educational achievement, Tham indicates, there is an enormous private cost. The contrast of generational opportunity in this story is profound.

Older Singaporeans are allowed some, albeit brief, say in Tham’s literary vision. In the story just called “Lee”, it is left to a Singaporean Chinese father to explain to his Americanised, street-wise daughter that any former colony full of comparatively recent immigrants has to try doubly hard to matter and to be respected in a competitive world. On a car ride through downtown Singapore, Lee almost concedes the point:

“I thought it was going to be like Indonesia”, she remarked. “This looks like parts of downtown LA. Glitzy.”(8)

However, at least by comparison, a measure of acquiescence is possible, even for restless youth caught in a “milieu of work and pragmatism.”(9) The story called “Pawns” is set in June, 1989. The events of that time in China sent shockwaves throughout the rest of Asia, and indeed the world. “Pawns” vividly shows that the Lion City is more than preferable to a Celestial Middle Kingdom that can silence its educated younger generation at Tiananmen Square.

THE SECOND COLLECTION

Saving the Rainforest and other stories (1993) continues a literary exploration of particular kinds of non-conformity amongst an outwardly successful, materially preoccupied, formerly immigrant community. As the undoubted pick of the collection, “The Forerunner”, shows, Tham has a remarkable capacity clearly to delineate a

deterioration in human relationships, as between wife and husband, parent and child, or one generation and another. There are no prim Confucian success stories here, no manuals on successful leadership, no slogans for social improvement. Thus, an older Chinese woman forms an intense, futile romantic relationship with a younger, illegitimate Eurasian male, thereby providing the actual, subtle, unexpected theme of the title-story “Saving the Rainforest”. “Sundrift” traces the short-lived marriage between a starry-eyed young Singaporean Indian woman and an American expatriate whom she never really gets to know. A fleeting physical liaison between two men of very different ages occurs in “Deep Sea Sloth”, resulting in the end of the older one’s career. The suicide of a naked, drug-ridden teenager in “Forerunner” effectively conveys the terminal state of his parents’ marriage.

In all, the seven stark stories in this volume offer sombre insights into the Singaporean story, out of the mainstream, into the shadows, along the margins, or just below the surface. Claire Tham’s characters are truly Lee Kuan Yew’s social nightmare. Yet an inclusive and mutually satisfying definition of Singapore surely has to embrace the multiplicity of its people’s experience, including that of its younger members.

NOTES

1. Fareed Zakaria. “Culture is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew.” *Foreign Affairs*, 73, 2 (March/April, 1994), pp. 109-126.
2. Ang, Ien, & Stratton, Jon. “The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism: Western Concepts/Asian Cultures.” *Sojourn*, 10, 1 (1995), pp. 65-89; Morse, Ruth. “Novels of National Identity and Inter-national Interpretation.” *College Literature*, 19-20, 3-1 (October, 1992/February, 1993), pp. 60-78; Means, Laurel. “The Role of the Writer in Today’s Singapore.” *Asian Survey*, 34, 11 (November, 1994), pp. 962-973; and Wicks, Peter. “Singapore, Literature and Identity.” *Asian Culture Quarterly*, 26, 1 (Spring, 1998), pp. 1-8.
3. Tham, Claire. *Fascist Rock: Stories of Rebellion*. Singapore: Times Books International, 1990, p. 170.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

5. Ibid., p. 12.

6. Ibid., p. 24.

7. Ibid., p. 28.

8. Ibid., p. 99.

9. Ibid., p. 42.

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