

Complete Citation: Wicks, Peter (2002). Eurasian images of Singapore in the fiction of Rex Shelley. In Mohammed A. Quayum and Peter Wicks (Eds.), *Singaporean literature in English: a critical reader* (pp. 377-383). Serdang, Malaysia: Universiti Putra Malaysia Press . ISBN 983 2373 50 63.

Accessed from USQ ePrints <http://eprints.usq.edu.au>

EURASIAN IMAGES OF SINGAPORE IN THE FICTION OF REX SHELLEY

Peter Wicks
Associate Professor of Asian Studies
University of Southern Queensland

In a series of four novels, amounting to a substantial personal literary output, the author Rex Shelley has fashioned a portrait of Singapore that differs significantly from the conventional ones, both official and literary. Shelley comes from the numerically small Eurasian community, and it is the distinctive historical experience of this minority, also known colloquially as *mesticos*, *serani*, or *geragok*, that richly frames his fiction. Yet Shelley's achievement is often curiously overlooked in Singaporean literary criticism.

The Singapore of Rex Shelley's fiction is not primarily the success story of the overseas Chinese who so quickly became a large and dominant majority of the Singaporean population, though their economic achievements do form a necessary context for Shelley's works. Nor is it a nostalgic vision of *Bangsa Melayu* as dreamed by generations of once rural Malays. Nor is it the ravaged evocation of Indian diaspora so eloquently chronicled by K S Maniam. Rather, Shelley's attention is upon the very human consequences of Western colonialism in Southeast Asia, namely the products of unions, legitimate or otherwise, between European males and local females. As Shelley told Ronald Klein in a recent interview "I wanted to put down some record of the social history of this Eurasian minority community." (1) The result is an impressive, if structurally flawed, portrait of vivid integrity amongst Singapore's Eurasian community over time. As personified by the characters in the four novels, Shelley's Eurasians are not marginal, post-colonial oddities, but an engaging, multi-dimensional community who laugh, cry, work, play, dream, struggle, gossip, and intrigue, just like any other. They may not be Malay, Chinese, Indian, European, or Arab, but they are involved, patriotic participants in the shaping of Singapore nonetheless.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rex Shelley was born in neighbouring Malaysia in 1930 of English, Portuguese, Malay and Buginese descent. His father was a shipyard worker and his mother a schoolteacher. He attended St Anthony's Catholic School in Singapore before the Pacific War, and then a Japanese language school for a year during the wartime Occupation. His first job was as a carpenter's apprentice in a shipyard. After the Pacific War, he attended Raffles College, where he studied Chemistry on a scholarship, and then went to Britain to study Engineering, where he briefly became involved in leftist student politics. After graduation from Cambridge University, he returned to Singapore and established a company that imported engineering equipment. He then worked for many years as a civil servant, and achieved senior positions in the Public Service and Education Service Commissions. Now in retirement, he still operates a trading business, and began serious creative writing in his sixties, publishing his first novel at the age of 61. His other enthusiasms are music, fabric-painting, swimming, and reading. Shelley identifies the dominant literary influences upon himself as Charles Dickens, John Steinbeck, Joseph Conrad and, to a lesser extent, Ernest Hemingway. (2) In his literary work, he certainly exhibits a fascination with intrigue and espionage.

THE FIRST NOVEL

Shelley's first novel, simply titled *The Shrimp People*, was published by Times Books International in 1991 to much local literary acclaim, including a prestigious award from the National Book Development Council of Singapore in 1992. Its Prologue evokes, in mythological terms, the birth of the first Eurasian in regional history after a Portuguese sailor meets up with a Malay woman on the beaches of Malacca so many centuries ago.

The vantage point of the novel then abruptly shifts to a group of Eurasian 'old hands' who, since independence, have migrated from Singapore to Perth in Western Australia. It is their meeting at the public bar of a hotel, and their alcohol-lubricated reminiscences, that provide the trigger for the narrative. Their dialogue and demeanour suggest more confidence in their past than in what is to come. They are more definite and assured about their historical experiences in Singapore and British Malaya than about a future in which they seemed destined to be swallowed up rather anonymously into Australia's middle-class, outer suburbia.

But there is nothing anonymous about the dynamic tapestry of historical characters that constitute the Eurasian community of Singapore in mid-twentieth century and whose lives are narrated in the pages of Rex Shelley's first novel. Names such as Machado, Gonzales, Cornelius, Perera, Pinto, Tessensohn, Kraal, Oliveiro, Consigliere, Eber, Delikan, and Westerhout dot the pages of the text. Such names figured in such dramatic events as the wartime Japanese Occupation, Maria Hertogh Riots, the Chinese High School Riots (1953), the Hock Lee Bus Riots (1955), Merdeka, and Confrontation. What Patricia Wong calls "a litany of names" furnishes a "registry of Eurasian society, primarily the Eurasian society in Singapore" and is integral to a sense of Eurasian identity, since it "serves both to situate one within one's community and to remind one of the past." (3) There is nothing random about authorial purpose here. As Rex Shelley recalls, "...I think, at the back of my mind, I wanted to put down some record of the social history of this minority Eurasian community. I think this community is going to disappear; it is too small to survive."(4)

Shelley selects one particular Eurasian group in Singapore as the prism for his narrative, the Rodrigues family, especially James the dutiful father and police inspector, and his vivacious, beautiful, younger daughter, Bertha, about whom the 'old hands' in Perth so love to gossip. Primarily, it is the character of Bertha, with her adolescent rebelliousness, her skills on the hockey field, her romantic escapades, her rivalry with the talented Sheila Cornelius, and her inherent sense of life's possibilities, who sustains the text. The author skilfully imparts to the character of Bertha Rodrigues a vitality and sense of purpose that strikingly contrasts with the perception of a Eurasian community widely held to be doomed.

Had Shelley stayed with the Rodrigues family and their experiences, his novel would have possessed a satisfying coherence as historical fiction, as what Patricia Wong terms "a family and community saga" (5) and as a document of cultural knowledge. But mid-way through *The Shrimp People*, the narrative turns to a melodramatic spy-thriller, with Bertha improbably cast as a kind of Mata-Hari figure who covertly works for Indonesia against Malaysia during the period of Confrontation. In fact, in a rather melodramatic episode, Bertha shoots and kills a fellow Eurasian agent, Andy McKay, because of his pro-communist sympathies. The reasons for this shift in plot are difficult to fathom. Perhaps Shelley's editors or publishers felt that this shift of genre would improve the book's commercial viability and persuaded the author accordingly. Better advice would have been to leave well alone, or

make two different texts altogether. As it is, Bertha's motivation for espionage and terrorism is only thinly documented, other than a vaguely articulated sense of Singaporean patriotism against Malaysia that she had once displayed on the hockey-field.

Although it attracted prestigious Singaporean literary award, local critical reaction to *The Shrimp People* was decidedly mixed. Dudley de Souza praised the novel's vitality, historical authenticity, idiomatic flair, and 'tremendous scope' (6) whilst acknowledging that the novel's "lack of a tightly-knit plot"(7). For her part, Patricia Wong can only find "the makings of a sweeping novel" (8) here, because she thinks the work loses its sense of purpose and direction mid-way through. According to Wong, *The Shrimp People* also suffers from structural disjointedness, excessive temporal shifts and an unnecessary and distracting array of minor characters. (9)

Yet, despite these acknowledged flaws, Shelley's intimacy with his community is pervasive, profound and to some extent, redemptive. He is able to demonstrate that massive prejudice haunted the Eurasians both from without and within their community. Thus Eurasian mothers preferred their sons and daughters to marry other Eurasians, and those of the same Christian denomination. However, one social avenue available to all youthful Eurasians was the sportsground, with tennis, cricket, and hockey among the favoured pursuits. Rex Shelley is at his narrative best when describing the hockey matches in which both Bertha Rodrigues and Sheelah Cornelius starred.

THE SECOND NOVEL

People of the Pear Tree, Shelley's second novel, appeared in 1993, and continued to confronted the issue of Eurasian identity full-on. In the first chapter, a prologue set in Malacca during the mid-17th century, a young Eurasian called Augustin Perera expressed disquiet when he hears an old Chinese acquaintance in Malacca, Ah Foo, openly expressed affection for China as "my place". (10) Augustine, it is said, "frowned as he thought of all that talk about China," and 'couldn't understand why she wanted to go back there.' (11). Yet Father Futado, the Catholic priest, tells Augustine Perera when they meet on the beach that he can equably call both Malaya and Portugal as 'home'.

But the main people of the pear tree in this novel are Augustine's descendants, the Perera family of 20th century Singapore. Their place is Singapore and Malaya under Japanese Occupation from 1942-1945. A romantic interest is furnished by the personal relationship between Major Takanashi and the beautiful Eurasian, Anna Perera, and the decision of the many members of the Eurasian community, uncomfortable with Japanese rule, to move up-country from Singapore to Bahau, a rural enclave on the Malay Peninsula. Harsh military occupation by Japan had laid bare the essential Eurasian dilemma of rootlessness. 'You know,' said Joe Perera wistfully, "We have no country. We are only a few and we have no place to call our own." (12)

For the Perera family, Bahau on the Malay Peninsula turned out to be barely that. Bahau may not have been wartime Singapore with its miserable rations of rice, but it still turned out to be a malaria-infested, poorly-soiled, Japanese-patrolled reserve, complete with road-blocks, iron gates, and armed sentries. There the urbane Perera family must learn to farm vegetables. They also link up with a Chinese guerilla company of the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army, and agree to provide them with some regular supplies of the food from their small plot. One family member, Gus Perera, goes into a jungle training operation with his new friends in the MPAJA, and the group successfully ambush a Japanese military convoy. Just like his descriptions of the games of hockey in *The Shrimp People*, Shelley captures the atmosphere of battle quite vividly. But in guerilla warfare, of course, the stakes are much higher. One of the communist terrorists, the woman, Ah Lan, is captured by the Japanese and deliberately and brutally shot by Anna Perera's admirer, Major Takanashi.. The Allied counterpart to Major Takanashi is Major John Pearson, a British officer from guerilla Force 136, which operates alongside the MPAJA. Pearson is also attracted to Anna.

In an especially poignant and lyrical passage, the Pereras attend Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve at the small, wooden Catholic Church in Bahau, filling the building with their singing of *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*. They then go on to the New Year's Eve party, where everyone drank *samsu*, and despite a continuing Japanese presence, greeted 1945 with a hearty rendition of *There'll Always be an England*. Well, perhaps for an older generation of Eurasians. Back in the jungle, Gus Perera had vigorously challenged the assumption by members of the MPAJA that Eurasians had a special insight into European culture just because they are, in part, of European descent, but as the shrewd, earthy guerilla fighter, Mrs Foo, tells Gus Perera back in the jungle, "You are too few to have your own country..."(13) Shelley reflected in a

recent interview, after 1945 "... I think the majority of Eurasians had a problem. They wanted to be independent but they were pro-British." (14)

However, in *People of the Pear Tree*, the simmering conflict between Major Takanashi and Major Pearson over Anna Perera's affections is resolved in an episode of hand-to-hand conflict towards the end of the novel. Pearson is killed, and the Epilogue almost incidentally reveals that Anna subsequently married Major Takanashi. It is clear that the future for at least one young Eurasian woman lies in Japan, rather than England.

THE THIRD NOVEL

In 1995, Times Books International brought out Rex Shelley's third novel, *Island in the Centre*. This novel also evokes a nascent affinity between the Eurasian orphans of the raj and Japan. Set in the 1930s, *Island in the Centre* opens with a couple of Eurasian sailors on voyage from Singapore to Nagasaki. Then the vantage point of the novel shifts to the beautiful, rebellious Japanese woman, Yuriko Sasakawa, who decides to seek her fortune overseas as a prostitute, and to a Japanese engineer, Tommy Nakajima, who works on a rubber plantation at Kluang on the Malay Peninsula. Tommy records his impressions of people and events in a personal diary. For a long while, the main action takes place in the red light district of Singapore during the 1920s. Then, at the onset of Depression, Tommy loses his job at the rubber estate, but is recruited by the Japanese Consul-General in Singapore for work as a commercial spy. He undertakes an affair with a beautiful Eurasian businesswoman, Vicky Viera, which prompts a mutual evaluation of the respective cultural traits of Japanese and Eurasians. Tommy and Vicki's plans for marriage are, however, thwarted by the Japanese bombardment and military occupation of Malaya in December, 1941. As Vicky observes from the road to Butterworth Air Base, "It was an experience she had never imagined she would ever have or a scene she could ever witness. Seeing a battle from so close .."(15) British imperial aspirations were far from the only casualty of Japanese Occupation.

THE FOURTH NOVEL

Times Books International issued the fourth of Rex Shelley's novels on the Eurasians of Singapore in 1998. Entitled *River of Roses*, the novel centres on four generations of the extended Rosario family. The narrative contains plenty of acute, apt, economical characterisation, vivid descriptions of culinary delights, and earthy, witty repartee. Portuguese culture and the icons and rituals of Roman Catholicism, as well as the Malayan landscape, furnish the context of this fourth work, far more than the previous three. The author discusses the historic (and historical) decision of the Rosary family patriarch, Alfonso, to adopt an ethnically Indian waif-boy and convert him to Christianity under the new name of Ramalho. Through the character of Padre Rocha, the author waxes lyrical over the 'utterly beautiful' island of Penang (16), incidentally an opinion by no means confined to Rex Shelley. The text also includes ample predictions of human nature based on astrology, numerology and divination. Descriptions of soccer games in Malacca again lead inexorably to the conclusion that if Shelley had not turned his hand to fiction, he would have made a superb sports reporter. In the character of Tony Rosario, Alfonso's son, Shelley has fashioned another rounded, plausible Eurasian person, a skilled engineer with a public service job, talented, ambitious and lusty, who falls in love with a woman not his wife, the Chinese Mimi Tan. Mimi in turn bears him a daughter whom he never meets due to the Japanese Military Occupation of Malaya and Singapore in December, 1941. The doomed romance between Tony and Mimi has a special poignancy.

The story then jumps to Alfred Rosario's grand-daughter, Philippa, her same-sex relationship with Vicky, and the return of the British forces to Singapore in September, 1945. Philippa falls passionately in love with a Malay musician, Daud bin Ibrahim, but is torn between Daud, the Muslim Malay and Duncan Gudgeon, the British agent, both of whom tap into her nationalist sentiments. However, the deep cultural differences between Muslim Malay and Catholic Eurasian rear up between Philippa and Daud. Believing that Philippa prefers Duncan, Daud commits suicide through electrocution. As Singapore moves through the Emergency to Merger with Malaysia to abrupt Independence as a city-state, Philippa Rosario is seconded to teach at a new Junior College, and meets up with the younger generation of the Rosario family as they deal with demands such as National service. Although he again furnishes Philippa Rosario with the blond hair, fair skin, and voluptuous body of a classic Eurasian beauty, Shelley gives to this female character rather more breadth and depth than he did with Bertha Rodrigues. On his predilection for female characterisation, Rex Shelley has observed:

“I think in my generation and my father’s generation, there were some very strong Eurasian women who stood out. In those days, with the hangover of the British Victorian times, a woman did not show herself; she behaved like a Jane Austen character. But in the Eurasian community compared to the British Colonial society, the Victorian repression of the female wasn’t so strong, so there were many more strong female personalities.” (17)

In the fictional persona of Bertha Rodrigues, Vicky Viera, and Philippa Rosario, Rex Shelley has been conspicuously faithful to earlier generations of Eurasian women.

Despite his historical framework, Shelley’s dominant structure is episodic rather than linear. His texts jump around in time and place. Stylistically, he makes extensive use of flashback, which can produce a disruptive effect on the reader.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

In stylistic terms, Shelley’s four novels contain some bizarre twists of plot and unevenness of characterisation. Yet they also possess dramatic effect and historical value, and in particular suggest the following about the Eurasian community of Singapore (and to a lesser extent, of neighbouring Malaysia):

- Eurasians experience profound ethnic ambiguity, but were generally loyal to Britain while the raj was east of Suez. Proud of their past, they are uncertain and uneasy about their future;
- Eurasians are not mere European derivatives;
- Although Eurasians may not conform to conventional ethnic categories, their humanity cannot be denied, and they can even be physically attractive;
- The maritime Malay and Portuguese heritage of the Eurasians gives them historical depth and a kind of epic grandeur;
- Eurasians can be dynamic and effective social participants;
- Just like other ethnic communities, Eurasians have been torn by contrary impulses, such as ideology, political affiliation, national loyalty, and site of long-term residence;
- Many Eurasians have made identifiable and constructive contributions to the modern political history of their countries of birth especially, in this case, to Singapore.

Herein lies Rex Shelley's fictional achievement.

NOTES

1. "Rex Shelley." *Interlogue: Studies in Singapore Literature Volume 4: Interviews*, ed. Ronald D. Klein. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2001, p. 44.
 2. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
 3. Wong, Patricia. "Rex Shelley's *The Shrimp People*: What Manner of Beast is it?" *Interlogue: Studies in Singapore Literature Volume 1: Fiction*, ed. Kirpal Singh. Singapore: Ethos Books, 1998, p. 49.
 4. "Rex Shelley." *Interlogue Volume 4*, p. 44.
 5. Wong, "Rex Shelley's *The Shrimp People*", p. 48.
 6. De Souza, Dudley. "Singapore." *Traveller's Literary Companion to South-East Asia*, ed. Alistair Dingwell. Brighton, U.K.: InPrint, 1994, p. 290.
 7. *Ibid.*, p. 258.
 8. Wong, "Rex Shelley's *The Shrimp People*", p. 50.
 9. *Ibid.*
 10. Shelley, Rex. *People of the Pear Tree*. Singapore: Times Books International, 1993, p. 9.
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
 12. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 208.
 14. "Rex Shelley." *Interlogue Volume 4*, p. 47.
 15. Shelley, Rex. *Island in the Centre*. Singapore: Times Books International, 1995, p. 169.
 16. Shelley, Rex. *River of Roses*. Singapore: Times Books international, 1998, p. 58.
 17. "Rex Shelley." *Interlogue Volume 4*, p. 51.
-