Philip Jeyaretnam (1964-)

Peter Wicks, University of Southern Queensland

Novelist, essayist, lawyer
Active 1986- in Singapore, South East Asia

Philip Jeyaretnam’s prose fiction has rightly attracted international as well as national attention. He has thus far published two well-reviewed novels, a linked collection of short stories, as well as individual stories and reflective essays. This substantial literary achievement is more remarkable, given his relative youth, the controversial political circumstances of his father, and his full-time career as a lawyer at the Singaporean Bar.

In contemporary Singapore, politics and livelihood impinge on creative artists and their output at least as much as in other developed countries. Factors such as the triumph of managerialism, the sheer economic plenty, and the monopolistic governmental process in Singapore have prompted Philip Jeyaretnam to articulate a profound awareness of the cost of development to individual human lives, including the potential loss of intellectual diversity, erosion of individual freedoms, and even the destruction of spiritual values. Whilst uneasy with the label of “political writer”, Jeyaretnam nonetheless recognises that it is impossible to avoid sensitive themes if the subject is the people of Singapore and how they think and feel. The role of government in Singaporean
society is just so formative and pervasive. In a plea for civil rather than official society, Jeyaretnam suggests that there can be legitimate commitments to, and passionate visions of, Singapore which vary from those espoused by the incumbent government, and which involve constructive participation by a broad range of the population. In fulfilment of these liberal beliefs, Philip has, over the years, himself served on Singapore’s Films Review Committee, the National Arts Council, the Remaking Singapore Committee, and the Censorship Review Committee. In personal interview, he conveys a quiet, modest reserve, and a sense that cultural and political responsibilities must be taken seriously.

In addition to his young family, the passions that have jostled for priority in Philip Jeyaretnam’s professional life to date are literature and the law. Born in Singapore in 1964, he is the son of former magistrate and prominent Singaporean Opposition politician, J B Jeyaretnam, and an Englishwoman, Margaret (nee Walker), who was also a lawyer and former legal partner to her husband. His paternal background is Jaffna Tamil and Christian. With ethnic Chinese ascendant in Singapore’s population, “I’m an unusual Singaporean to start with,” Jeyaretnam wryly observes. He was educated outside the local public system to avoid possible complications arising from his father’s intense political involvement, and also because of his mother’s English nationality. His primary schooling took place at Raeburn Park, and he attended secondary school at the United World College of Southeast Asia. For pre-university classes, he went to Charterhouse School in England, taking his A-Levels. His father sponsored him to study Law at Corpus Christi College in Cambridge University, from which he graduated with First Class Honours in 1986. He was admitted as a barrister-of-law of Gray’s Inn
in 1987. Compelled by Singaporean law, he returned home for a
term of national service, which he actually accomplished with
distinction. In 1988, and against international competition,
he received the prestigious annual Airey Neave Scholarship to
undertake a postgraduate thesis at Cambridge on “Singapore: A
Retreat from the Rule of Law.” The thesis was accepted by the
Airey Neave Trust, but has not yet been published. In October
of 1988, Philip Jeyaretnam married a Chinese Singaporean
school-teacher and actress, Cindy Sim. They have three
children, a Filipino maid, and at least four cats. Currently,
he is partner in the firm of Rodyk & Davidson, and President
of the prestigious Law Society of Singapore. On 4th January,
2003, Philip was appointed Senior Counsel by the Chief Justice
of Singapore.

Philip Jeyaretnam may well practise law successfully in
Singapore, but he has also been writing for publication for
more than two decades. This passion and talent for writing
have taken him on a Fulbright Fellowship to the University of
Iowa International Writers’ Program and Harvard Law School in
the United States, to a guest-spot at the Melbourne Writers’
Festival in Australia, to the Cambridge Seminar on a grant
from the British Council, to Germany courtesy of Interlit3,
and back to Australia in March, 1996, when he was writer-in-
residence at Adelaide’s Flinders University. He was also named
Young Artist of the Year in 1993 by the National Arts Council
of Singapore. Philip’s accomplishment in the field of
literature may be attributed both to what the Far Eastern
Economic Review termed his “undoubted talent” and to his
familial relationship to the indefatigable J B Jeyaretnam. Yet
Philip’s gentle, articulate and precise manner conveys a man
who is very much his own person. He has denied that his second
novel, Abraham’s Promise (1994), is about his father in
particular, although both the shadow and the tribute are perceptible in the text.

Philip Jeyaretnam has proved adept at both the short story and the novel, though he undoubtedly relishes the capacity to establish time and place that the longer literary form allows. His initial major work, First Loves was composed soon after the author was released from two years of compulsory National Service in Singapore, an experience which he, on balance, enjoyed. On release by the publishers in 1987, it stayed on the best-seller lists in Singapore for eighteen months, was short-listed for the Commonwealth Writers Prize, and was Highly Commended in the Book Awards of the National Book Development Council of Singapore in 1988. First Loves was especially welcomed for its relatively frank exploration of sexual matters, for the expression it gave to the values and experiences of a younger, English-educated generation of Singaporeans, and for its theme of innocence lost, or the getting of wisdom, Singapore-style. Through a series of linked narrative episodes, the two main characters, Ah Leong and Rajiv, engage in a quest for maturity and identity, both at individual and social levels. First Loves is a lively, sometimes hilarious romp, with plenty of telling phrases, not all of which are entirely plausible. For one so young, Ah Leong has some remarkably advanced opinions about life and society. His vision is hinted at rather than spelt out, but grounded in the efforts and contribution of ordinary folk.

Vincent Tan and Connie Lim, the protagonists of Philip Jeyaretnam’s first short novel Raffles Place Ragtime (1988) are quintessential Singaporean ‘yuppies’, energetic, graduate, ambitious, and upwardly mobile. With their designer clothes, mobile phones, luxury cars, and offices right in the heart of
Singapore’s central business district at Raffles Place, they are amongst their country’s officially prescribed ‘best, brittle, and brightest’. In short, they are on the move and on the rise. At the start of the novel, Vincent and Connie are engaged to be married, but there is precious little than status-seeking to keep them together. Through a series of farcical episodes, the arrangement inexorably disintegrates. Although Connie tries to assuage her grief in an orgy of shopping, Vincent is afforded the chance for a more substantial relationship with a former secretary, Veronica. The author’s concern at Singapore’s lack of a distinctive, coherent, local cultural and spiritual tradition emerges clearly throughout. For the author, Singaporean society is grounded on contradictions, especially between silent past and obsessive present, and between individual fulfilment and material success. In the interests of sanity, he indicates it may well be necessary to give priority to the former over the latter. Raffles Place Ragtime was again short-listed for the Commonwealth Writers Prize.

Abraham’s Promise (1995) was Philip Jeyaretnam’s second novel and his most significant published book of fiction. The title of the work itself suggests a profound awareness of the Judeo-Christian tradition, By way of context to the work, Singapore moves from British colony to Japanese base to independent state with all the popular excitement of nation-building. The central character of the novel, Abraham Isaac, a Tamil Christian teacher and unionist, lives through all these dynamic years and endures a series of experiences, both personal and political, that can fairly be described as traumatic and transformational. Singapore gains prodigious prosperity and stability, and Abraham gains a measure of wisdom, but somehow that fundamental human quality of justice
escapes him. In fact, the character of Abraham Isaac recalls Ah Leong in his essential innocence and capacity to dream. The politics of newly independent Singapore is shown to have both winners and losers. Abraham Isaac is most definitely cast among the latter. *Abraham’s Promise* is an elegaic tale of missed opportunities, of melancholic loss, of what was, what might have been, of what is, and even what could still be. Abraham narrates in stately, refined language of a formal English kind, verging occasionally on the ponderous, but quite superb for the author’s partial purpose of evoking the Anglo-Indian colonial world of Singapore just before the outbreak of the Pacific War. Then, in the first flush of national independence for Singapore, Abraham becomes a school teacher and active trade unionist, and joins the governing party. However, when he chooses publicly to express a viewpoint in a letter with which the new government does not agree, Abraham loses both his teaching job and his party membership. On principle, he refuses to recant. In turn, he loses his income, his wife, and his best friend. To his ultimate horror, he finds that his beloved son is homosexual, a situation he finds he must accept if his battered life is to have any meaning at all. Abraham Isaac’s life, in sum, has been a progressive shattering of illusions, both personal and political. The novel includes quite chilling episodes of censorship, betrayal, arbitrariness, and sheer thuggery.

In the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament, the great prophet and patriarch, Abraham, makes a two-fold promise: to honour the great God, Jehovah, and to be loyal to the country in which he lives. The Jewish prophet, Abraham, is sufficiently brave to be willing to sacrifice his beloved only son, Isaac, in fulfilment of this promise. Philip Jeyaretnam evokes this epic theme in his second novel. In human relationships,
Abraham Isaac, the Singaporean teacher, was destined to care, even to care too much, but never to succeed in worldly terms.

Singapore, for Philip Jeyaretnam, is no site for gentle, innocent dreamers. In his three substantial works of fiction published to date, Jeyaretnam has emphasised the hazards for those who, like his character, Ah Leong, would seek to join the system, those who, like Vincent Tan, would work the system, and those who, like Abraham Isaac, would flaunt the system. Yet there is no doubt that Jeyaretnam, also like Ah Leong, remains “soaked in his country” in quite fundamental and impressive ways. There can be no doubt of his underlying affection for Singapore and recognition of its achievements. Above all, he has articulated significant viewpoints about national and personal identity, about cultural tensions and perils in a dynamic urban centre in transition, and about possible futures for his country.

WORKS BY PHILIP JEYARETNAM

Novels

Short Stories

Essays, Articles, and Chapters
“The Writer and his Audience: 1. Every piece of literature is a collaborative enterprise between the reader and the writer.” Solidarity, 125 (Jan-Mar, 1990), pp. 65-71.

“Sex, Art and Singapore.” Commentary, 11, 1 (1993), pp. 41-44.


