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Translation Milestones in Contemporary Literature

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Abstract

Southeast Asian fiction is simply the totality of all genre work produced by writers in or from the region. This plurality that defies easy classification offers each writer's worldview, rooted in their specific culture, for readers to explore and appreciate. A vast repository of ideas is brought out by recently published works in translation viz. *Chinatown*, a Vietnamese novel by Thuân, *Happy Stories, Mostly* by the Indonesian writer Norman Erikson Pasaribu, Indonesian author Budi Darma's P*eople from Bloomington* and Saadat Hasan Manto's collection of Urdu short stories *The Dog of Tithwal.* It clearly demonstrates that not everyone shares the dominant and hegemonic Western, majority white, cis-gender, and individualistic culture that strangles everything else.

Keywords: Southeast Asian aesthetic, interior monologue, absurdist fiction, Partition literature

Translation Milestones in Contemporary Literature

Southeast Asia—that part of the world that's south of China, northwest of Australia—is home to over 655 million people with hundreds of indigenous cultures and diverse ethnicities, but it is still relatively lesser-known to West-centric readers.Fortunately this is changing. During the last decade, literary artists within the ten countries that make up Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, The Philippines, Laos, Myanmar,

Singapore, Thailand, Timor Leste, and Vietnam) have begun to celebrate and propagate their own home-grown "literature of the Fantastic." A new centre of literature is thus developing.

Southeast Asian fiction is simply the totality of all genres of work produced by writers in or from the region. It's difficult to articulate a single, uniquely Southeast Asian identity or even a coherent Southeast Asian aesthetic. This plurality that defies easy classification is great from the literary point of view as it offers each writer's worldview, rooted in their specific culture, for readers to explore and appreciate. It clearly demonstrates that not everyone shares the hegemonic and dominant Western, whitemajorityand individualistic culture that strangles everything else.

One such book published in June 2022 is *Chinatown*,a Vietnamese novel by Thuân, translated by Nguyễn An Lý. It opens with "My watch reads ten o'clock," and goes on to display a writer completely at home with language and story-telling. Her narrator commences on a two-hour interior monologue that forms the bulk of the novel. She is on a halted train in the Métro in Paris with her twelve-year-old son who is asleep against her shoulder. An unattended duffel bag has raised the possibility of a bomb threat leading most passengers to disembark, having opted for other ways to reach their destinations. The narrator, a thirty-nine year old Vietnamesewriter whois currently teaching in France, sits along with three others, her mind wandering through a jumble of experiences, emotions, and places. At times, these are subsumed by the larger world, with digressions into the humungous emigration of Vietnamese to France, the disintegration of the USSR, and the effects of such events on ordinary lives.

Much of her thoughts revolve around two men. The first is Thuy, a man of Chinese descent, with whom she shares a son born during her twenty-three year old relationship with him. Despite overwhelming Vietnamese prejudices against the Chinese, she falls for Thuyat the age of sixteen, "bewitched by the goon boy of Beijing" (as her classmates taunt). He and her relationship with him suffer from powerful opposition and outright rejection by everyone around her, including her family(who refuseto acknowledge his existence). Although her son Vinh visits his father, she has avoided contact with him since their son was born twelve years ago. Even so, she misses Thuy terribly, so much so that he dominates her thoughts.

> I don't want to write about Thuy. I spend a lot of effort not to write about him. Writing to me is not an act of reminiscence. Nor is it an act of oblivion. Not until my last novel will I know why I write. Not until my last novel will I be able to understand him. My last novel will be dedicated to him. Thuy is a mystery. I have loved him as a mystery, the mystery to end all mysteries.

In contrast to Thuy, there is "the guy", a Frenchman who calls her, rides the Métro in the same car and supports her in everything she does. He has visited Vietnam twelve times, (once sitting beside her on the plane) and enjoys the affection of all her friends and family.His children play with her son whilehe talks about anything and everything from eating snakes to diarrhoea pills. Despite all the space that'the guy' occupies in her life and her thoughts, she holds him at a distance. Perhaps because he is an open book.

In the background of both relationships is Chinatown, a space, an idea, a way of life, but completely unlike the other spaces where she has spent her life- Hà Nôi, Sài Gòn, Leningrad, Paris, airplanes,, buses, and trains- it is a place to be avoided. Its very existence defines what it is to be Vietnamese according tothe French- or people elsewhere-needing something mysterious and forbidden. Parisians cast an entire continent as a Chinatown, thereby further complicatingthe Vietnamese identity with their prejudice:

> [T]he Parisian assumes the whole of Asia are ethnically Chinese, the whole of Asia speak Chinese, the whole of Asia have Beijing-style soup and Beijing-style roast duck for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

The narrator strength lies in the fact that she never positions herself as a victim but is able to make decisions against many of the customs and prohibitions of those around her. Perhaps the biggest hurdle to her recognised identity is that she is a writer from Vietnam. This influences how she is or can be read on two fronts, neither of which is literary.

> [I]n Paris, I've come to know that other authors had great artistic traditions to back them up, whereas those from Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia were only seen as representative of the numerous wounds of war and poverty.

Thuan follows artistic traditions as she dwells on issues of uncertainty and choice.As her narrator sorts through her life and the temporal/cultural spaces these issues occupy, there'sthe inevitable presence of the two men of her life in perpetual contrast Her style is that of a writer's writer, acutely aware of the arrangement of the diversity of details which bestow life to her novel. She focusses meticulously on the novel's structure and its language, with repetitions of words, sentence structures, images and emotional states, all moving with a rolling momentum as her narrator sits captive within her own constraints of a two-hour time frame and an aesthetic that foregrounds the unknown.

Another gem in the category of South East Asian writers is Norman Erikson Pasaribu, an Indonesian poet whose debut collection *Sergius Mencari Bacchus* won the 2015 Jakarta Arts Council Poetry Competition. His recent collection of short stories, *Cerita-Cerita Bahagia Hampir Seluruhnya*, has been translated by Tiffany Tsao, under the title *Happy Stories, Mostly*. This collection was longlisted for the 2022 International Booker Prize.

The title*Happy Stories, Mostly*is a misnomer. It can be taken to mean that most of the stories in the collection are happy, or that each one of the featured stories is itself mostly happy. However, none of these stories is straightforwardly happy, and even the stories which are happy mostly, are interesting for the ways in which they are not happy. Rather than focussing on happiness, the collection explores the myriad ways in which people can deprive themselves of happiness, often by failing to connect with loved ones who do not conform to conventional norms.

In "So What's Your Name, Sandra?" Mama Sandra goes to a Mỹ Son, in Vietnam, to mourn the death of her only son, Bison who poisoned himself four months ago:

Poisoned himself? But why?

Because I told him he was no child of mine. And then I kicked him out.

But why did you kick him out?

I found out he had a boyfriend …

Mama Sandra's son was called Bison - a name suggestive of bi-sexuality, and also of brute strength. Such playfulness of language juxtaposed in a tragic context is a typical feature of the collection. Throughout, the writing is invariably vivid, and often exuberant, or funny, even when the characters are in the grip ofhorror and anguish.

"The True Story of the Story of the Giant" features a gay man Tunngul, who is met by rejection when he reveals himselfto his love-interest, Henri.Tunngul then kills himself, but his tragedy is nested within the story of Parulian, a giant from ancient times. After Tunngul's death, Henri decides to write a version of Parulian's story:

> Not a history. Not even a secret history. Something like a tale. So I wouldn't have to try so hard to stay true to what had or hadn't happened—just to what I had to say as the story's writer.

"A Bedtime Story for Your Long Sleep" is almost verbal slapstick. The story that sets it off features Alarm Man, who missed out on love because he slept through his alarm—and stayed asleep for fifty long years. Upon waking, Alarm Man recounts his tale to the narrator's mother, who then informs him that his beloved died of prostate cancer two years back.Subsequently, the narrator's mother also dies. However the pathos of the story is semi-disguised by a bizarre parody of creative writing classes, involving discussions about which is sadder: a sad story in itself, or a sad story told and disbelieved:

> And I also thought to myself: if the tale of me telling the story of Alarm Man and being thought a liar was sadder than the story of Alarm Man itself, wouldn't the tale of me being thought a liar after telling a story of me telling the story of Alarm Man and being thought a liar be even sadder still? I felt that such a story would prove useful someday—a bottomless pit of sorrow-bricks for me to mine, to build my Babel Tower of misery.

Norman Erikson Pasaribu builds these stories from issues which concern in-betweenness: living between the straight and gay worlds; between love and regret; between misery and happiness; between the past, present and future; between the need to believe in God, and God's apparent absence from believers' lives.

Various phrases and even names—Anton, Yohannes—are often repeated in different stories. Numerous stories have similar backgrounds such as Batak, or Christian, or a hybrid of Batak- Christian. One story, "*Ad maiorem dei gloriam*", features a retired nun who begins to develop doubts about the life she's led. The next story, "Our Descendants Will Be as Numerous as the Clouds in the Sky",hasthe phrase *Ad maiorem dei gloriam* as the title of a novel: "Who would have guessed Thomas would use such a Catholic title. How cliché can you get, Amang!"This collection deserves to be read because of its playfulness, the breath of its vision, and the manner in which it crafts its sorrow-bricks into stories that confrontchallenging situations and emotions head-on.

Tiffany Tsao comes to the fore once again through her translation of the late Indonesian author Budi Darma's P*eople from Bloomington* (written around 1980; published in April 2022), a collection of stories about various people in the American Midwest—in the university town of Bloomington, Indiana—set in the late 1970s. Each story is well-constructedwith distinctive characterization and a gripping narrative style thatmesmerises the reader to the end.

Budi Darmawho is adept at absurdist fiction displays traces of it in this collection too. The protagonists, all of whom are first-person narrators, while entirely believable, are somewhat disturbed: each suffers from a sense of social alienation and is socially inept; each

is sensitive to a fault and shows an unhealthy obsession with one or more of the other characters and are prone to an overactive imagination and sometimes downright paranoia. They are voyeurs who snoop from windows and from across yards.

> As I began to take this route and see Mrs. Eberhart more frequently, I became increasingly troubled by how filthy her living conditions were. She would sit on the front porch nearly the whole day long, waving at anyone who passed by. Her hair was dirty, her clothes were wrinkled and grimy, and she had let her home fall into such disrepair. The house was actually much nicer and better built than those of her neighbours. But it looked old, dilapidated, and about to fall apart. The unkempt lawn only augmented the house's shoddy appearance… It was an irritant I could have easily removed from my life by simply avoiding Jefferson Street. What happened was the reverse.

The narrators reveal a preoccupation with disease and underlying the stories is current of violence which oftenbursts into the open.For example there's Bloomington, a real place where the author has spent six years of graduate school (which actually contains a "Tulip Tree" apartment building, "a massive affair, tall, imposing and aloof", although in reality considerably less than "fifty stories high"), is featured here as an eerie and disconnected place.The effect is as surreal as the stories themselves; it is hard to make sense of it, whether it is in Tiffany Tsao's translation or even in the original.Tsao recognizes this andelucidates on it in her Introduction:

> *People from Bloomington* certainly troubles Western expectations about what constitutes Indonesian—and Asian—writing. As such, it also unsettles something else: the traditional compartmentalization of literatures according to national, continental, and linguistic lines.

But what is most astonishing is nuance of irony which underlies each story. This is a typical characteristic of American fiction rather than Vietnamese story- telling.

> Her son, Matthew, was also utterly nondescript. A good fit for any job: hamburger-flipper, health-insurance agent, congressman.

The stories make for contemporary reading, slightly whimsical in tone, and absolutely authentic, with nothing to indicate that they were in fact written almost half a century ago. There is no "foreignness" about them but yet they are unsettling indeed.*People from Bloomington*serves as a reminder that translation isan act of creation in itself.

> It is also my hope that this English-language translation will prove useful in ongoing debates concerning the ethicality of writers making use of subject matter and experiences that are not theirs.

Tsao's erudite and comprehensive Introduction goes on to elucidate upon the "universality" of such works in fiction and targets the current literary debates on cultural appropriation.

However, even translation is attempted with trepidation, especially if the author concerned is of the stature of Saadat Hasan Manto, a stalwart of Partition literature in whose anthologies, the violence and brutality of being human is enough to shake even the strongest of hearts. It is only with the advent of a volume of freshly-translated short stories that one begins to place Manto outside Partition and view him in a fresh light: as a chronicler of Bombay, as a creator of stunningfemale characters, as a mirror to the horror of the idea of religion, and above all, as a literary artist more concerned with representing society than with indulging himself with aesthetic grandeur.

The Dog of Tithwal, a new volume of Manto's selected stories recently translated by Muhammad Umar Memon and Khalid Hasan is intense in tone, suffused with characters caught up in terrible or tragic circumstances, victims of religion and greed. The collection may be best analysed through two outstanding stories, the title story and "Mozail", both of which are portrayals of violence: one depicting in cruel killing of a dog and the other a

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heart-rending suicide/killing of a young woman. Insane men or women or even animals who become sacrificial beings turn into symbols of sanity in view of the bloodbath around them.

A dog makes an appearance very early in the title story; the soldiers on both the sides of the border (India and Pakistan) begin to have fun with him, their interactions with the dog often bordering on the tragi-comic:

> The dog went to Harnam Singh, who produced a cracker from his kitbag and threw it on the ground. The dog sniffed at it and was about to eat it, when Harnam Singh snatched it away … 'Wait, you could be a Pakistani dog.'
>
> They laughed. Banta Singh patted the animal and said to Harnam Singh, 'Jamadar sahib, Jhun Jhun is an Indian dog.'
>
> 'Prove your identity,' Harnam Singh ordered the dog, who began to wag his tail.
>
> 'This is no proof of identity. All dogs can wag their tails,' Harnam Singh said.
>
> 'He is only a poor refugee,' Banta Singh said, playing with his tail.
>
> Harnam Singh threw the dog a cracker, which he caught in mid-air. 'Even dogs will now have to decide if they are Indian or Pakistani,' one of the soldiers observed.

As the dog moves hither and tither, both Indian and Pakistani soldiers claim the dog to be theirs. Soon, the poor dog gets caught in the firing between the two enemies thereby highlighting a Hindustani idiom "dying a dog's death" which means "dying a horrible death". The "dogness" of the situation is not in the death of the dog itself but in the manner in which it is killed. It is the almost deranged soldiers with their senseless firing that seem to symbolise "dogworthiness".

Manto's body of work is full of such moments that expose the futility of proving one's nationality or religion. However several stories included in this collection by Memon and Hasan are also significant for the way they highlight Manto's unique vision of the times

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he lived in. “Mozail”, for example, is a portrayal of Bombay which ironically however, resembles the Mumbai riots in recent memory:

> ‘Yaar, you are unduly worried. I have seen many such riots here. This is not Amritsar or Lahore: it is Bombay. You have only been here four years; I have lived here for twelve, a full twelve years.’ God knows what Naranjan thought Bombay was. To him it was a city which would recover from the effects of riots by itself, in case they ever were to take place. He behaved as if he had some magic formula, or a fairy-tale castle that could come to no harm. As for Tarlochan, he could see quite clearly in the cool morning air that this mohalla was not safe.

Mumbai is hailed in popular media not just as a cosmopolitan city but also a resilient one- a role model that the whole of India could perhaps emulate. It is as if the recent incidents of communal violence were an aberration in an otherwise peaceful city.Manto’s descriptions of Bombay are a reality check to these rosy assumptions about the city and its history, despite these stories having been written in the mid-20th century.

Manto’s portrayal of strong women characters was also far ahead of his times. “Mozail”, a story of courage shown by a woman in saving another life and thereby holding up to ridicule what men consider sacred, is just one of several stories about unusual women who valiantly try to break the confines of patriarchy. They emerge as neither martyrs nor as goddesses, for Manto writes about them realistically and naturally making each one of them leave their mark. *The Dog of Tithwal*is neither comfortable nor appealing as it arouses too much anger at humanity’s irredeemable misguidedness. Taken one story at a time however, the collection is a guide to sanity, harmonious living and coming to terms with oneself and with others.

Southeast Asian fiction thus holds a plethora of ideas that deal with the imaginative and the mysterious in a uniquely regional way–specifically ideas rooted in the complex history of the region and each country’s unique literary tradition. Written without jargon, in

an accessible style, this fiction will be of great fascination to students of modern literature and also to general readers interested in Southeast Asia. Scholars of East and South Asia who wish to compare the literary developments of those areas would also find various areas of interest while perusing such writings. The repository of narrative techniques suggest that this literature has made a significant contribution to the social and political history of the region, as the authors address topics of significance to scholars of varied disciplines including cultural studies, anthropology,sociology,literature, history and political science.

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