

‘Merely’ academic? Critical responses to Australian – Asian fiction

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In a *New Yorker* cartoon an anxious writer fronts up to her publishers and asks about their strategy for her book. She is told they plan to publish it, then dump all the copies at the back of the warehouse and forget them.

No time has ever been great for writers of fiction, but this may be the worst of times. Readers are deserting hard-copy newspapers and printed books for modern, instant- satisfaction alternatives. The pages for books in the review pages of Australian newspapers and magazines have shrunk in competition with film, food, sport, and celebrity chat, and it’s more often staff journalists than literary scholars who write book reviews. Small literary magazines scrape by with a few stressed staff.¹ Often, even books that have made it into the bookshops are obscurely reviewed, if at all. How can Australian writers whose best work is known here only to the determined cognoscenti, be discovered abroad, or aspire to a Nobel Prize for literature? Such local protection as publishers have had is likely to be stripped away by new overseas publications rules and Google’s mass digitization of books. They are now wary of publishing any book that won’t sell at least 7500 copies, and that usually means finding an overseas market, which eliminates most Australian fiction.

Many Australians must have given up trying to write or publish their novels, including fiction of Asia. The difficulties authors face are

¹ Wenche Ommundsen and Michael Jacklin, *Mapping Literature Infrastructure in Australia: a report to the Australia Council for the Arts’ literature board*, Wollongong, July 2008.

multiplied if they are 'ordinary' Australians writing fiction about Asia, and Asian Australians writing fiction.² By my count, 55 Australian Asian fiction titles were published between 2000 and 2009, of which 30 were by Asian Australians. This represents a reversal of the proportion for the decade 1988-1999, when some 58 titles by Asian Australian writers were published, but only a mere handful by 'ordinary' Australians.³ The reasons can only be guessed at, but the outpouring of fiction about the diasporic experience in the 1990s, by new, 'authentic' writers of Asia must be one of them. Several of these writers have published nothing more.

The arts always do better in Australia when a prime minister takes an active interest in them. But we haven't had a leader so motivated for some years. For over a decade, reactionary governments both in the United States and Australia were led by men who showed no great love for literature, and demonstrated even less interest in the free play of ideas: it was as if, to them, liberty meant others' freedom to agree with them. Howard legislated for a national code of Judaeo-Christian values that newcomers had to know and subscribe to. Leaders in other countries, spooked by the 'war on terror', did the same, and threatened various fates for those who failed the tests.

It was surprising how quickly, at their whim, national exceptionalism and cultural assertiveness displaced universally shared humanistic norms and intercultural curiosity in Western societies. Boucher and Sharpe have shown how under Howard multiculturalism became officially unmentionable in Australia, and his approved national code permeated historical, literary and cultural studies.⁴ Scorn was poured

² Four Australian writers, one of them an author of Australian Asian fiction, have resorted to bypassing commerce altogether, setting up a direct subscription service for readers, Press On Publishing.

³ Statistics from Austlit Database, www.austlit.edu.au, and Alison Broinowski, *About Face: Asian Accounts of Australia*, Melbourne: Scribe, 2003, pp.273-276. Australian Asian fiction is narrative prose by Australians that involves Asian countries and people. Asian Australians are writers of Asian background with a significant Australian connection, by residence or education.

⁴ Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe, *The Times will Suit Them: Postmodern Conservatism in Australia*, Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2008.

by his appointees and supportive media commentators on applications for funding of 'merely' academic research in these fields. Asian studies were downgraded, and Australian fiction of Asia withered. Asian names virtually disappeared from the lists of literary prizewinners and festival speakers' lists. Now, our disempowered Minister for the Arts is unlikely to be able to head off those who will use the global recession as another excuse for shoving literature into the deep freeze. Writers of Asia whose work is internationally acclaimed, Aravind Adiga and Nam Le, spent some of their formative years in Australia, but now work in the US, the UK, or India. 'Ethnic fiction's hot', Nam Le's narrator is told by his creative writing teacher in the United States: but in Australia, it's not hot any more, at best it's room temperature.⁵

At such a time, you would expect academics who care about Asian Studies, and Asian Australian fiction, to fight back on behalf of novelists, poets, playwrights and film-script writers, if only because they set their works as primary sources. Yet apart from a few dedicated scholars who maintain their enthusiasm for the fiction, and some who, to their credit, go on defending Asian languages and Australian studies, the tendency has been the opposite. At recent academic conferences I have heard papers that were supposedly about various Asian Australian writers, but that mentioned their work dismissively or not at all. This, of course, is a general problem: in some circles, it seems, the less attention is paid to texts, the more respectable the research. In others, scholarly critics seem jealous of the public recognition writers receive, if not of their incomes.

Often, Asian Australian fiction is read academically as if French or Indian assumptions, say, about race and the colonial experience – informative as they may be – all apply appropriately to Australia. Certainly, the value of theory is its universality, and many of the most brilliant theorists are French and Indian. It is also true that representations and ways of seeing have universal characteristics. 'If theory means a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions', Terry Eagleton has pointed out, 'it remains as

⁵ Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger*, London: Grove Atlantic, 2008; Nam Le, *The Boat*, Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin Group, 2008.

indispensable as ever.’⁶ For most of us in the humanities a guiding assumption is that societies everywhere could benefit from more equity, inclusiveness, and plurality. In Australia particularly, we might wish that the faces on television and in advertising and theatre looked as diverse as those we see in the streets, and deplore the slow pace of that to change. But surely it is fallacious to propose that the demographic shortcomings of Australian fiction, drama, and film are an exact measure of the limitations of all ‘ordinary’ Australians, or that they prove that all ‘mainstream’ views about Asian Australians are racist. (We still lack proper descriptors: some have suggested that ‘unhyphenated’ and ‘hyphenated’ are better than ‘mainstream’ and ‘Asian’, or ‘Australian’ and ‘Un-Australian’).

It is as rare to find acknowledgement of this fallacy in the research, as it is to encounter any scholarly effort to reverse the discourse and examine how Australians and Asian Australians are represented in *Asian* societies, or how fiction of *Asian* societies deals with race, class, identity, gender, and sexual preference. Indeed, do cultural studies have to be forever confined to those categories? Why, Eagleton asked, are we transfixed by essences, universals, and foundations and not concerned with other ideas, like truth, objectivity, and disinterestedness? Nick Jose has recently recommended, for Australians, more concentration on work that represents ‘the Un-Australian, the cosmopolitan, the more complexly Australian, the generically hybrid, the challenge to literary decorum’.⁷ Hear hear to that. What he was gesturing towards was Asian Australian fiction, in which he and Linda Jaivin, writing of China, and Dianne Highbridge, (Japan), and Inez Baranay (India) are the only established ‘ordinary’ Australian writers still active.

There are some welcome signs that theory is shedding the old skin of nationality-race-class-gender-sexuality and trying on a new, snakier

⁶ Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, London: Allen Lane, 2003.

⁷ Nicholas Jose, ‘Australian Literature Inside and Out’, Barry Andrews Memorial Address, ASAL conference 2008. Un-Australian is so widely used by politicians, sportsmen, and journalists as to be meaningless: see ‘Too many un-Australians’, *Australian* 23 June 2009: 8.

look: a conference in Sydney in July 2009⁸ imaginatively asked participants to consider how literature treats the environment, terrorism, the holocaust, social organisation and ideology, propaganda and censorship, and imaginary new worlds.⁹ The writers of this new literature, many of whom have PhDs themselves, are showing the way, and if academics' theoretical preferences blind them to it, the academy will lose touch with the literature and the students as well. All the Asian Australian writers who spoke at the Sydney Writers' Festival in May 2009 said they resisted being identity-boxed and ethnically-labelled. Cambodian Australian writer Alice Pung recently observed that when she spoke to high school boys about her work, some of them – from diverse ethnic backgrounds – began to take an interest only 'when they realised [she] wasn't going to theorise about issues of belonging and cross-cultural chasms'.¹⁰

Let me compare a few current ways of teaching and researching Asian Australian fiction that may variously affect and reflect our academic values.

As Others See Us

A recent collection of Australian academic essays, *As Others See Us*, was written at the height of the Australian values debate brought on by the Howard government. It includes a foreword by Ashis Nandy, and a discussion of his views.¹¹ Nandy, a psychologist who has spent 30 years studying colonialism, is credited in the book as the father of Asian cultural studies, a pioneer in postcolonial thinking, and one of the foremost critical intellectuals on the planet. For Nandy, the world is *perpetually* divided along colonial lines, and he seeks to have the Third World recognised as 'a collective representation of victims

⁸ 'Literature and Politics', Australasian Association for Literature, University of Sydney, 6-7 July 2009.

⁹ Selected from Call for Papers, 'Literature and Politics', Australasian Association for Literature, University of Sydney, 6-8 July 2009.

¹⁰ Alice Pung, 'School Days', *The Monthly*, May 2009, 17-19.

¹¹ J.V. D'Cruz, Bernie Neville, Devika Goonewardene and Phillip Darby, eds. *As Others See Us: the Values Debate in Australia*, North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008.

everywhere'.¹² Nandy places Australia firmly on the imperialist side of this enduring North-South, First-Third world divide. To support this, he can't explicitly say modern Australia victimises the Third World, nor point to an Australian colonial empire of the past. So instead he uses class analysis, declaring that Australia believes it belongs to the world's ruling class; Australia has not broken from its colonial past, and it persists in shunning its neighbours. According to Nandy, 'all other problems of Australia, important though they are, tend to get organised around this basic contradiction'.¹³

People in modern Northeast Asian countries might be surprised to learn from Nandy that Australia shuns them, given the frequent visits of Australian ministers, businesspeople, tourists, scholars and students to their capitals, even during the Howard years. It would also be news in two Northeast Asian countries if Australia were to claim membership, ahead of them, of the world's 'ruling class'. In Southeast Asia, some leaders have sometimes wished Australia *would* shun them, but others would complain if it did. As for values, in recent years, in Southeast Asian capitals, Asian values have repeatedly been described as incontestably superior to those of Australia, and those doing so have cited this as a good reason to shun Australia themselves when it suits them.

When Nandy writes about 'Asians', he seems really to be thinking not of Northeast or Southeast Asians, but of South Asians – Indians, that is. While he advances the incontestable argument that being hospitable to diversity is essential to social cohesion,¹⁴ he appears to be oblivious to recent moves in the opposite direction in Indian politics. Diversity and plurality are not an Asian monopoly, but also characterise multicultural societies like Australia. Even Howard – who often claimed to voice the opinions of 'most Australians' – was forced by public opinion late in his term to re-accommodate multiculturalism as a widely accepted description of Australia's way of life.

¹² Phillip Darby, 'An Ashis Nandy Travelling Kit for "Down Under"', in D'Cruz et al. 2008: 17.

¹³ Ashis Nandy, 'Australia's Polyglot Ghosts and Tireless Ghostbusters: a Demonic Foreword', in D'Cruz et al. 2008: xiii-xiv.

¹⁴ D'Cruz et al. 2008: 102.

As Others See Us was dedicated to Nandy, and to J.V. D'Cruz, one of its co-editors, who died in 2008. D'Cruz, whose 1973 history of Australian racism¹⁵ was a pioneer in its field. But D'Cruz, like Nandy, was given to generalised, invidious comparisons between what all Asians and all Australians think, which risk being racist statements in themselves. In a central chapter of *Australia's Ambivalence Towards Asia*,¹⁶ published in Malaysia in 2000, D'Cruz and William Steele discussed at length the ABC television drama series *Embassy* (1990-91) and Blanche d'Alpuget's novel *Turtle Beach* (1981) and film (1991). They took these 1980 and 1990s narratives to be 'fact/fiction', not revealing any satirical or dramatic intent on the part of their authors. Rather, the behaviour of the characters was taken as proof of how racially prejudiced all Australians were in real life against Asians, Malaysians in particular. (In a 1993 essay, Suvendrini Pereira anticipated them, arguing that d'Alpuget's fictional protagonist, Judith, 'embodies the stereotype' of the Australian drongo journo in Asia.¹⁷) Repeatedly in their book, D'Cruz and Steele urged upon Australian readers the improving example of Malaysia's race relations and its rejection of colonial attitudes. Plenty of their factual evidence of Australia's uneasiness towards Asia is wince-making, particularly now that Indian students have been attacked in Australian cities. But nowhere did they suggest that there might be similar shortcomings in the way any *Asian* government lived up to its claimed values, or whether any *Asians* harboured prejudices or ambivalence towards their neighbours, or took part in race-based attacks.

¹⁵ J.V. D'Cruz, *The Asian Image in Australia: Episodes in Australian History*, Melbourne: Hawthorn Press, 1973.

¹⁶ J.V. D'Cruz and William Steele, *Australia's Ambivalence Towards Asia: Politics, Neo/Post-colonialism and Fact/Fiction*, Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Book Publishers Association, 2000.

¹⁷ Suvendrini Periera, 'Representation Wars', in John Frow and Meaghan Morris, eds. *Australian Cultural Studies: a Reader*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993, p.18.

Banana Bending

Tseen-ling Khoo, one of Australia's outstanding younger academic specialists on fiction written by what she calls 'hyphenated' Australians, observes how their writing can debunk the myths of difference that still lurk in multicultural societies. In *Banana Bending: Asian-Australian and Asian-Canadian Literatures*,¹⁸ Khoo sets herself the task of analysing the cultural production of Asian-Australians and the diasporic experiences of Asian writers in Western societies. She approves texts that render complex and engaging the experiences they narrate, and that present characters in multi-layered, ambiguous, and unclarified ways, challenging the preconditions of literary production and consumption. Without ignoring Australia's xenophobic past, or its continuing failures to resolve indigenous issues, she moves beyond the unilateral critique of Australia deployed by Nandy and D'Cruz, and endorses Brian Castro's view that the exposure to others that occurs in multicultural societies is mutually enriching.

But Khoo finds Asian-Australian publication and literary criticism thin, compared to their North American counterparts. Seeking to introduce more dynamism into Asian-Australian writing, she urges novelists to catch up with Canada and the United States by examining, for example, the Australian xenophobia demonstrated by the 'comprehensive' internment of Japanese during World War II. Certainly, a work of fiction about the 'disregarded' history of internment in Australia would be a break-through. But Australia had then and has now no community to compare with the much more numerous Japanese-Canadians and Japanese-Americans, so it's not clear to whom her appeal is addressed. No Japanese-Australian writer has taken it up, nor is anyone likely to, unless Yuki Tanaka is tempted. We have seen no war fiction of Australia by a Japanese since 1984,¹⁹ and a novel by a non-Japanese Australian on the subject would

¹⁸ Tseen-ling Khoo, *Banana Bending: Asian-Australian and Asian-Canadian Literatures*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2003. Khoo's hyphen is used in this section.

¹⁹ Inoue Hisashi, *Kiiroi Nezumi (Yellow Rats)*, Tokyo: Bungei Shunju, 1977; Asada Teruhiko, *The night of a thousand suicides: the Japanese outbreak at Cowra*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1970, (*Hiroku: Kaura no Bodo*), Tokyo:

almost certainly be dismissed as inauthentic. As well, Australia's wartime circumstances were significantly different, as were internment practices.

Although she doesn't say so, Khoo's recommendation seems to be addressed to social historians, not writers of fiction. In her conclusion, Khoo points to governments' failure to 'recognise *and address*' (her emphasis) ²⁰ such inequities as Australia's past anti-Chinese regulations, and its present treatment of Indigenous Australians. She urges more Asian-Australian community activism, participation in the public spheres of government policy and the arts, and affiliation with other minority communities. Until that happens, she warns, Asian-Australian Studies risk remaining 'more reactive than original', instead of becoming forceful and incisive.²¹ In her conclusion, she urges literary scholars to find 'transformative possibilities' in national cultures. But whether she means that Asian Australian writers of fiction should also take up this form of community activism is left unclear.

Asian Australian Author/Academics

It is now quite common for Asian Australian writers of fiction also to be academics, with PhDs, teaching creative writing or other disciplines.²² So they have opportunities to inject their values into academic scholarship, alongside their fiction which can itself become the subject of teaching and research. Four of them take positions quite different from the Asian Australian activism of Tseen Khoo, and the anti-Australian class analysis of Nandy and D'Cruz.²³ Their

Kongo Shuppan, 1967; Nakano Fujio, *Kaura no totsugeki rappa:zerosen pairotto wa naze shinda ka* (The Bugle for the charge at Cowra: Why did the Zero pilot die?), Tokyo: Bungei Shunju, 1984.

²⁰ Khoo 2008: 174.

²¹ Khoo 2008: 175, 183.

²² In August 2009 there were only two professors of Australian Literature, but 14 professors and six associate professors of creative writing. 'Now, just about every university in the country teaches writing', Stephen Muecke, 'Creativity on the campus', *Australian*, 30 September 2009: 28.

²³ 'Un-Australia', *Antipodes*, December 2008.

reasons for their stance do not necessarily satisfy these critics' expectations.

Michelle de Kretser is an Asian Australian writer who *has* recently won awards. Her Master's degree is in French, and her globalised fiction moves between Sri Lanka, France, and Australia. While Salman Rushdie has said he writes to please the kind of people who appreciate his work, and who feel part of the things he writes about, de Kretser says she writes 'to please herself,' which she feels free to do.²⁴ However she observes that while sex is no longer taboo in fiction, writers who cross other boundaries risk ostracism. White male novelists are particularly inhibited, she says, because taboos about gender, race, and ethnicity make certain subjects 'too hot to handle'. These inhibitions – that Rushdie calls 'bad social adaptations' – may corral Australian authors in their Westernness, creating one-dimensional Indigenous or Asian characters, for fear of offending publishers, judges, funding agencies, and academic critics. De Kretser feels she has the advantage of being able, if she wishes, to write critically about Asians, male and female, free of such taboos.

Rushdie warns against 'appeasements and surrenders on the one hand, [and] arrogant excesses and coercions on the other'.²⁵ If we, as scholars, behave timidly or arrogantly, so much for Australian academic freedom, and for freedom of expression generally. But taboos can have other dimensions. According to Carmen Wickramagamage, cultural translation is harder to do than heart transplants. Her example was Sri Lankan Australian novelist Chandani Lokuge, who has written fiction about the tortures of the diasporic experience in Perth and the reverse journey to Sri Lanka. While Rushdie makes up his own India as he goes along and gets away with it, Lokuge has been sternly criticised by Sri Lankan scholars for her misuse of mythology, errors in local dialect, and loss of authenticity. Her critics, Dr Wickramagamage suggested, were

²⁴ Broinowski interview with Michelle de Kretser, 26 November 2008. Salman Rushdie, 'Lost in translation', *Weekend Australian*, Review, 28-29 March 2009: 4-6.

²⁵ Salman Rushdie, 'Lost in translation', *Weekend Australian*, Review, 28-29 March 2009: 4-6.

envious of such an emigrant writer, because their own opportunities for publication were even more limited than hers.²⁶

Dr Teo Hsu-ming's middle-class parents migrated to Australia after the May 1969 race riots in Malaysia, and she found problems of racism in Australia to be not nearly as bad as elsewhere. She regards multicultural politics in Australia exclusive and coercive, but does not blame the usual suspects: rather, she targets Chinese Australian middle class males. Their expectations of her, based on traditional patriarchal culture, threaten to swallow her and disempower her again: 'When you grow up as a Chinese daughter, you grow up with a lot of guilt'. She avoids identifying with diasporic Asians in Australia, and lectures in modern European history. But Teo rejects much academic discourse about racism, saying that to her as a novelist, people are more complex, contradictory, and interesting in real life. She sees it as the novelist's task to present alternative stories located within a larger international story – about the struggle for human rights, for example – without directly engaging in politics, but with the hope of expanding minds. Readers, she considers, turn to fiction – not 'mere' fiction – for escapism, fun, therapy, the pleasure of narrative, and the 'resources to go on being human'.²⁷

Dr Inez Baranay is unintimidated by taboos, coercion, or academic hostility. Of Italian-Hungarian birth and Australian nationality, she now writes and is more published in India than Australia. She evokes with globalised facility the multiple voices, virtues and vices of Indians and foreigners, separately and together. Baranay is one of a very few non-Asian Australian novelists who can do this well. But she knows the taboos: in her novel *Neem Dreams* (2003), for example, Pandora, an Australian businesswoman, hesitates to describe an Indian boy as 'sweet', realising that 'you can't call just anyone sweet; sinister meanings are attributed to adjectives applied to identifiable Others'. Pandora is wary of 'certain pundits, critics keen to crow over forbidden perceptions, and whatever you might say about Others is forbidden'. Then she dismisses them - 'never mind' - and gets on with

²⁶ Carmen Wickramagamage, 'The Sense of Place in Chandani Lokuge's *If the Moon Smiled* and *Turtle's Nest*', Fourth International ASAA Conference, Kandy, Sri Lanka, 3 December 2008.

²⁷ Alison Broinowski interview with Teo Hsu-ming, 1 May 2008.

her own journey. To keep such Australian caution in proportion, it helps to compare the courage of Rushdie, of Taslima Nasrin in Bangladesh, and of Azar Nafisi in Iran, who have all been threatened with death because they express liberal or anti-Muslim views in their fiction, yet still go on publishing. And to compare the findings in April 2009 of the Scholar Rescue Fund, that in certain countries, oppression of academics for what they write is widespread and serious, and goes unnoticed and unpunished (www.ony.unu.edu). The same, according to the International News Safety Institute, is true of journalists who are imprisoned and killed in many countries.²⁸

Must the values we convey to our students of literature be so timid in the face of complaint and so cautiously accepting of one-directional victimhood? Are there not, anyway, more ways of seeing the human condition than through nation, colony, race, gender, and sexual preference? Do we risk killing the appreciation of literature and the reception of fiction by forcing writers of Asian Australian fiction into boxes they don't want to be in - as those I have cited tell us? Is it rather for us to encourage them to be more forceful, incisive, and less 'tame'?²⁹ Are we so arrogant and ignorant about the very writers we study that we even risk of killing the academic study of fiction?³⁰ Terry Eagleton has warned that 'literary criticism seems to be something of a dying art'.³¹ How should we revive it, and would that ensure the healthy growth of Asian Australian fiction? It may be worth reconsidering the warning of Susan Sontag in 'Against Interpretation', that we are stuck with defending art, but we quarrel among ourselves on how to justify it: 'This we do by asking of a work of art what it says - about identity, about culture, about context - rather than what it does. What is important now,' she said in 1996, 'is

²⁸ Tony Maniatty, *Shooting Balibo: Blood and Memory in East Timor*, Melbourne: Penguin, 2009.

²⁹ Khoo 2008: 175, 183. 'Asian Australian writing is tame': Adam Aitken, 'Writing Asia', Sydney Writers Festival, 23 May 2009.

³⁰ 'Academic arrogance and ignorance' about Asian Australian literature: Merlinda Bobis, 'WritingAsia', Sydney Writers Festival, 23 May 2009.

³¹ Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*, Oxford: Blackwell 2007.

to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more'.³²

In the Australian academy a revaluing of fiction, particularly the work of talented Asian Australians, for what it says, not necessarily in support of one kind of manifesto or another, but about our complex human synergy, and in many and varied voices, may be overdue. Facing widespread challenges to 'merely academic' cultural studies, as we are, this is the time for academic research to come to the rescue of the work of writers, and appreciating it, rather than making political ammunition out of it to fire at each other. It's not yet an indictable offence in Australia to create, teach, and use a less inhibited, value-laden vocabulary. Values can become codes and codes are constricting. That's why Asian Australian writers hate them.

³² Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', in *Against Interpretation: and other essays: Identities and Issues in Literature*, London: Macmillan 1996.