

Interview with Amanda Lee Koe

Introduction

We are glad to announce Amanda Lee Koe, one of Singapore's most exciting literary voices. She is an editor of the creative online magazine *Poskod.sg*, of *Esquire Singapore*, as well as of her own literary journal, *Ceriph*. She has co-edited *Eastern Heathens*, an anthology subverting Asian folklore, and is very involved in the Singaporean literary scene – for example in mentoring emerging local writers and in curating several cross-disciplinary exhibitions and projects.

Amanda Lee Koe's fiction has appeared in numerous literary publications. She also regularly participates in local as well as international literature festivals. She has been honorary fellow at the Iowa International Writing Program in 2013. Currently, she is an MFA candidate at Columbia University's Writing Program, where she is working on her first novel. Her collection of Short Stories, *Ministry of Moral Panic*, was longlisted for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award and won her the 2014 Singapore Literature Prize for English Fiction. *Ministry of Moral Panic* intensively deals with contemporary Singaporean identity, at the same time exploring a range of moral taboos. The diversity of its voices and topics, from the mythological to strong social realism, is representative of Singapore's own diversity.

Singapore being one of the Asian Tiger States in terms of industrial development, in how far can your writing be considered a voice of the "Global South"? Would you actually refer to yourself as such?

For me it's hard to define myself as a writer of be it the Global South or Singapore, because I think it's not clear to me what it means. I hope it doesn't seem evasive to the question, but I feel like I'm not even stable in terms of that national or regional identity. I really can't answer that, so I feel like I am more comfortable with envisioning myself like a writer from a city.

Considering the importance of the female voice and also the strong presence of queer topics in your stories, to what degree would you consider yourself a feminist writer? How have these aspects of your work been received by a more conservative audience, and is the articulation of (queer) feminist voices possible in Singapore?

I find it hard to think of myself as a feminist writer per se, because I feel like once you name it, you lose a lot of nuances in terms of your identity. For example, when you name a thing and you participate in a movement in a more traditional way (and there is a lot to be angry about in Singapore from a queer/feminist perspective), when you participate in these positions in a linear sense and with anger, then those whom you are trying to challenge have already succeeded in prodding you in a certain way because they have forced you to delineate yourself in relation to them. But if you can laugh or tease or tickle or something, then that means that they don't have that power over you to provoke a certain type of emotional or psychological response.

I feel that *queer* works for me not so much as an identity politics, but just a way of looking at the world because it suggests something very playful. It suggests something that's kind of soft yet strong and naturally invested in looking at angles that are

more sideways or more circular than – I mean I’m not trying to pun, but – the *straight* and narrow.

What are your thoughts on the concept of “World Literature” and its connection to academia?

Maybe I still see it with rose-tinted lenses because I’m not from the academy. I don’t have a liberal arts education because there was no liberal arts college in Singapore when I was growing up. I felt alienated from the Singapore pedagogical system, which I found very end-result driven. It’s always about how to get from A to B. On one hand, my sense of academia is that it is cold and it has to be cold, but yesterday’s symposium felt to me quite warm and the argument about World Literature seems to me to present itself as an argument for equality. We just have to probably find strategies or a less privileged language for it to circulate in public discourse and really go into small aspects of every day personal thinking, or as a key or an organising principle, for example towards projects you choose to do or things you choose to read or say. I feel like the debate about World Literature is really something that cannot be measured by progression. We can only understand a lot more about one another in a multipolar way. And the so-called problem of World Literature itself is something that will never be resolved and one which I’m not sure if it really wants or needs to be resolved – its productivity lies in conversations continuing to happen around it, as long as we can agree that we are not looking for a fixed answer and we are willing to see from one another’s position.

You have been awarded the Singaporean Literature Prize in 2014. In what way would you see yourself as part of the discourse of renegotiation of the term World Literature?

Well, when you are writing surely you aren’t thinking “Is this World Literature?” Speaking more generically, not just as a writer but a reader, I think maybe texts from the so-called periphery seem to have more pressure on them to be able to transcend their environs and be aware of how they can access a certain type of internationalism whereas texts from the so-called centres assume they can just – you know there is a type of man who goes into the subway car and spreads his legs when he takes a seat and expects other commuters to accommodate and adapt to their position? However, I feel that the beauty of the periphery is that it is a position that is unstable and that allows space for more conversations and unlikely connections to happen. But also as a writer I think it’s important to be aware but naive about your situation at the same time.

What role does language play in terms of the interrelation of Global South and Global North as well as for World Literature in general? Considering Singapore’s colonial history, what does it mean for you to write in English?

I think the question of language is also a question of capital and I feel like I do not have the right theoretical framework to talk through it. But my personal experience of it is also that when I came into being, colonial times were not only over and done with but that our own government had done even more work to make English the lingua-franca, for their own socio-economic and political reasons (since Chinese was seen to be linked to certain communist factions in Singapore).

By the time I grew up, the medium of instruction of all schools was English, and Mandarin was a much more removed second-language. Chinese dialects in Singapore were also systematically erased from both cultural and pedagogical spheres. And also I feel like when I was learning Chinese we learned it in a decontextualised sense – I didn't feel I learned any aspect of Chinese culture, I was only learning a limited vocabulary which would let me communicate in a rudimentary sense. When I was studying Chinese it was more like "Do you know how to write this word?" and "What is the meaning of these two terms?" So I literally have had no choice between languages because my Chinese simply isn't good enough for me to be writing in it, which is a shame.

But I do think that positionalities aren't solely based on language. For example, at the same time, I don't wish to participate in a post-colonial framework of writing, so I don't feel "guilt" about using English because I don't use it the way for example a British colonial power would expect me to. That's also why I wanted to be based in New York and not London, which seems to me more typical for novelists from the South-East Asian region. I dislike the thought that if you are a writer from a colony or from a Third World country your concerns, even if they're aesthetic, are seen to be political.

The Straits Times have argued that your writing subverts Singaporean traditions. Singapore being a rather young, culturally diverse state, what would these traditions look like?

I think that the prevailing type of prose was perhaps more social-realist and/or more restrained. I think that my work was thought of as unabashed because it was seen as provocative, but it wasn't trying to convince you of anything, of a specific position. I think Singapore fiction can be slightly moralistic in that sense. But for me at least, fiction is amoral.

I wasn't trying to be particularly divergent, but this is just how I saw the world and it was not rooted in a singular type of reality. But it's hard for me to tell in such a young so-called canon what movements are and map them; revisionist thinking like that assumes a certain trajectory as well.

AFRASO is a research project focusing on African-Asian interrelations. Is this connection present in your experience of modern Singapore?

No. And I must say I think the snippets that Frank [Schulze-Engler] read out yesterday from the fiction he was looking at, the one about East Africa and how China is perceived there – it's very fascinating for me because it's not a discourse we get in Singapore.

I don't know if it's just my limited reading, but it's definitely not in any sense something that's known in Singapore – whether it's in a cultural or sociopolitical way. I think that Asia and Africa are seen as two very different entities.

Still, it's hard for me to tell because we have only one newspaper in Singapore and it's a newspaper that is basically affiliated with the party. You need a very specific license if you want to open a newspaper there, otherwise it is illegal. In an internet-era that really doesn't matter as much, but I feel that the kind of general public discourse we get in Singapore is still very curated – curated also in a neo-liberal sense so you don't really understand the propagandistic value of it because it isn't so nationalistic. We're a very small city but we have a lot of global interests, obviously.

So I don't know how the Afrasian affinity would affect the way a Singaporean neo-liberal mindset sees the world.

It's hard for me to tell how Singapore actually sees itself in relation to the world. I feel like there's a lot of aspirational anxiety as well as that myth of exceptionalism within a Southeast Asian framework, but when you're talking about huge behemoths like Africa and Asia – I'm not sure what Singapore thinks it really is.

We have been talking about neoliberalism and Singaporean aspirations. Comparing the development of wealth and democratic structures in South-East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, do you think African countries could derive some impulses from examples such as Singapore?

I feel like whatever I say has to be prefaced by the fact that although Singapore is seen as affluent and successful, it's so small that I imagine if all countries were equally small it would not be *that* hard to make it relatively successful – not that I have tons of experience in running a country – but I think the scary thing is that Singapore *is* being seen as a test-bed global-city for authoritarian capitalism. But I don't think that it can be replicated because of size.

In China and Indonesia they're building these test-cities that are modelled after Singapore which, for me, is very frightening. My so-called country is firstly a city that's pretending to be a country but then has now also become a project that can be literally exported wholesale.

In relation to this another thing about growing up in and being educated in Singapore is that I almost feel like we are not equipped with tools with which to talk about any type of ideology. So we don't really have conversations about ideology within our disagreements. Even when people maybe are not happy with a certain government scheme, it's never truly contextualized in an ideological context, but a more economic or populist one.

Because it's so steeped in that kind of technocrat interest it's hard for me to relate that back to politics and democracy because for me it's such a late-stage capitalist impulse that I really feel that any type of gestures towards democracy are just to make the pill taste better. It's like a performance for an electorate that is becoming a bit more sophisticated. But the physical realities of Singapore and Sub-Saharan Africa are too different to make any type of proclamations.

I would like to understand better this exportable city thing, though. Am I just being immediately judgmental in thinking it is absurd and neo-liberal? Is it actually, if you look at it with a utopian lens, a way to work towards making life better for certain regions that takes the so-called best or most efficient parts of Singapore outside of an ideological context and replicates them? If we take away all the philosophical or socio-political context, can it be a good thing? I wonder if what is actually being exported is authoritarian capitalism but being couched in this value-free city-cloning. What will that mean in future?

Interview conducted by Victoria Kampfmann und Roxane Dänner (Frankfurt, 22 January, 2016).