

Essay:

A case for literary contamination

Author:

Jane Camens

What I am now is an interesting deformity. I am not Asian and never will be. Even if I forget it sometimes, no one else does. But I am not what I was before I came here, either. Something in me has changed, or grown.

Karen Connelly, *Touch the Dragon*

Summer 1998, the year after the handover of Hong Kong, a Chinese translator, Martha Cheung, produced an anthology of translated short stories by Hong Kong writers. In her foreword she wrote that local people did not recognise their home in fictional representations of it. 'A plethora of images has been imposed and superimposed on Hong Kong – by Western writers as [well as] those from the Mainland.' One author described Hong Kong as the gossiped-about 'female protagonist in a pulp fiction ... represented, [but with] no voice to tell her own story.' It was time, Martha Cheung declared, for the people of Hong Kong to tell their own stories.

That summer, the British Council flew half a dozen writers to the newly Chinese-administered territory to read to those of us who lived there. They came not only to tell their stories but also to teach creative writing. Among them was former literary editor of *The Observer* and *Independent on Sunday*, Blake Morrison. I was writing for the *South China Morning Post* and asked Morrison what chance writers living in Asia had of finding a publisher in the West, to share their versions of reality with readers beyond their own home.

Morrison saw the direction in which publishing was heading in Britain. 'I can understand that living here as a writer you'd feel you're living on the margins. But in England now, the margins are the centre. This is where the action is. We feel now in England we can't be so insular and inward-looking.' Writers open doors to other worlds. Or as London literary agent Toby Eady said: 'Books are a quiet and thoughtful way of sharing an understanding of each other's cultures.' Twenty years ago Eady took a gamble that paid off. He backed an unknown Chinese writer, Jung Chang. Together with a translator, he worked on her manuscript for seven years until an editor at Harper-Collins published it under the title *Wild Swans*.

‘That editor’s courage probably made News Corporation’s HarperCollins more money and profit than David Beckham’s ghosted biography,’ Eady said. He now seeks manuscripts from Asian writers and has found publishers for a stable of Chinese authors whose books have sold well. ‘What they are writing today is exciting, real, and new,’ he said.

Until two years ago, Eady was telling writers in China that if they wanted a general readership outside China they would do well to seek publication in Australia and New Zealand. *Wild Swans* sold nine million copies around the world in thirty-two languages and won the British Book of the Year in 1993 but, according to Eady, ‘It was the Australian response to Jung Chang at the writers festival in Sydney that made HarperCollins wake up.’ Until the book sold 200,000 copies in Australia, the publishers did not know what they had.

Eady no longer bothers trying to push new Asian writers to Australian publishing houses. Risk-averse publishers balk at taking on unknown writers from beyond Australia’s borders. Allen & Unwin’s Patrick Gallagher said two years ago, ‘I don’t think an Australian market would support an Asian fiction list. I don’t want to sound negative. Most publishers would probably say they’d be very receptive, but whether it’s cost effective is another matter.’ He pointed to the difficulties of distribution in Asia. Indeed, as Eady discovered, there is no national distribution in China. Each major city has its own publishers who print and distribute locally. Printing is cheap, distribution is easy – and piracy is endemic.

Eady now takes his authors directly to Picador Asia, which he helped set up. The idea behind Picador Asia was that it would secure world rights and publish simultaneously throughout Asia, the UK, Australia and North America. Pan Macmillan had an Asian sales representative based in Hong Kong for a couple of years before starting the new imprint. Evidently, selling in Asia, and marketing Asian writers internationally, made it worth the financial risk to start a new list.

Australia set the pace, but our publishers are risk-averse and shortsighted, still in colonial shackles to UK publishing houses. At a recent meeting with Random House Australia I was told that the UK office would be more likely than the Australian office to take the initiative and introduce an Asian list. Nikki Christer, now publishing director at Random House Australia said while, as publisher of literary fiction at Pan Macmillan that Australian publishers ‘need to spread our wings and get out there, but I don’t know what we can do to make opportunities more available.’

It seems to me that the problem lies less with not knowing how to make opportunities available but more with the desire to finance efforts in Asia. Publishers who want to market their authors and brands in Asia need to establish a much deeper presence there. Sending authors to Asia is just one step. Our publishing houses also have to establish brand recognition by getting their books on

the shelves, or find other ways to establish relationships with emerging writers in the region, most of whom are ignorant about Australian publishers. Failure to do this amounts to overlooking the world's most populous and increasingly literate market. By 2050, Asia is forecast to account for more than five billion of the world's estimated nine billion people.

It is difficult to argue that Australian readers are not interested in books from or about Asia. Unwin Trust Fellowship holder Hannah Westland noted in her report into the relationship between British and Australian publishers that some of Britain's largest publishing houses use Australia to trial new writing from Asia. Shereen Baig, export sales director for HarperCollins UK, said that the books she chooses to sell to Australia are those appealing to the Australian market with its substantial European and Asian population. These include Irish, Italian 'and fiction with a particularly international slant, most specifically South-East Asian'. Novels like *Tokyo Cancelled* by Rana Dasgupta and *The Harmony Silk Factory* by Tash Aw were, according to Baig, initially more successful in Australia than in the UK.

Australia's choice of books says something about who we are, what intrigues us, and what we identify with. Australia is increasingly a hybridised, cosmopolitan nation.

My particular interest is cosmopolitan writing – writing that bridges cultures and takes readers into different ways of thinking and being in the world. The reality is that most contemporary Asian writers whose books have sold well internationally have spent considerable time in the West. Some return home with their perceptions altered, finding they can straddle realities. Other excellent Asian writers, successful in their own countries, have never made it into print in the West. The lack of good translators is not the only barrier to local work being picked up internationally. The writers may fail to engage a foreign readership because their references are too unfamiliar – too dense for foreign readers without an explanatory guide. While parochial experience is the basis of all good literature, writers who draw from a well of knowledge beyond the parochial can offer outsiders entry into other worlds from a privileged vantage point.

Princeton philosophy professor, Ghana-born part-English Kwame Anthony Appiah, uses the term 'contamination' to describe the kind of writing I am talking about. He puts the case strongly *for* cultural contamination. He appropriates the notion from Roman *littérateurs* who, in the second century BC, used that term to describe the mode of writing of Publius Terentius Afer, whom scholars today know as Terence. Terence was an African slave born in Carthage and taken to Rome. He wrote witty, elegant plays that incorporated earlier Greek plays. His work is among the few examples left of early Roman comedy.

Salman Rushdie has written about the shifting ground beneath the feet of displaced, culturally hybridised or 'contaminated' writers, a condition he suggests enables some to find 'new angles at which to enter reality'. More recently, Mohsin Hamid describes, in his brilliant Man Booker short-listed novel *The Reluctant*

Fundamentalist, the 'different way of observing' required when stepping back into his Pakistani homeland.

This sort of double vision also affects Westerners (and Southerners, in the case of Australians and New Zealanders) who become acculturated into Asia. The British writer James Hamilton-Paterson describes how reality becomes labile. In his novel, *Ghosts of Manila*, he writes of one of his female characters: 'Manila's effect on her was to blur the fond image she had of her own country ... A part of her began to unravel slightly ... England began to feel shapeless, like an aspirin dropped in water, hazy and commonplace.' Christopher Koch, too, talked of shadow worlds, and used the *wayang* as a metaphor throughout his Indonesian novel *The Year of Living Dangerously*.

Some critics say that writers who are not entirely immersed in a parochial world – whose values and world-view are influenced by other realities – produce writing that is somehow inauthentic. Globalisation, they suggest, produces the literary equivalent of Asia Lite – a form of narrative that is virtually guaranteed to be insight-free. The argument was summed up by Akash Kapur in the *New York Times*: 'A spectre haunts Indian writing – the spectre of authenticity. In the pages of magazines and journals, at soirées and (sparsely attended) book parties in New Delhi, literature is being judged by a specious metric of cultural and national loyalty. According to this standard, it is in the work of writers who live in India and write in an Indian language (and thus have trouble finding a Western publisher) and not, to quote one critic, in sell-out "export-quality prose" that the country's authentic voice is to be found.'

VS Naipaul, Vikram Seth and Amitav Ghosh – all 'sell-out' Oxbridgeeducated writers – have been targets of jealousy and scorn among Indian writers, partly because they do not live in India. With cutting derision, Indian writer and journalist Suresh Kohli told the BBC World Service's *Arts in Action* program that, while authors such as Sir Vidia had raised the profile of Indian literature, they only experimented with the language once they had a firm grasp of the Queen's English. Their writing denied readers the rich variety of Indian literature in vernacular languages which, he said, 'is much more vibrant, much more active, much more interesting and dynamic as compared to what is being written in English'.

Yet, it is clear to someone on the outside why the work of writers from the Indian diaspora is published internationally: they speak to outsiders in a familiar voice, making references to things we understand while taking us into unfamiliar territory. These authors, like Kiran Desai, winner of the 2006 Man Booker prize, who flip between cultures like mental trapeze artists, catch us in their space between realities, reach out to let us grasp their meaning, and take us for the ride. I question whether any emotionally honest, closely observed narrative can be *inauthentic*. Perhaps we are talking here about a *new* authenticity – the authentic globalised world.

This is Appiah's case for cultural contamination – call it cosmopolitanism if you prefer, or globalisation if you dare. He describes Wednesday, festival day, in Kumasi, the town in Ghana where he grew up. At the blowing of a ram's horn, the king of Asante arrives. All those seated on the palace veranda on carved wooden stools – traditional *kente* cloths wrapped around chests, shoulders bare – stand. People talk on cell phones, other Africans in suits mumble about their sons in Japan, their next holiday to Aspen, the educational needs of twenty-first century children, the teaching of science and technology at the local university, and other such contemporary concerns. 'I've seen visitors from England and the United States wince at what they regard as the intrusion of modernity on timeless, traditional rituals – more evidence, they think, of a pressure in the modern world toward uniformity.' They worry that the values and images of Western mass culture threaten the local culture. No, says Appiah. People absorb, adopt or adapt what suits them.

Globalisation can produce homogeneity, but it can also, in Appiah's experience, pose a threat to homogeneity. Villagers in Ghana have radios, but the language they tend to listen to is local, and while you might find a bottle of Guinness or Coca-Cola, you can also buy local-brand beverages. 'Whatever loss of difference, people are constantly inventing new forms of difference,' he writes in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (WW Norton, 2006)

On celebratory occasions in the West, to express pride in his African identity, the Princeton philosophy professor sometimes wears *kente* cloth, woven with colourful silk strips. Yet, he points out, the silk came to Africa from Java in the nineteenth century, with the Dutch. 'Trying to find some primordially authentic culture can be like peeling an onion.'

Globalisation can also produce writing that threatens homogeneity in literature. Globalisation gives us the common meta-language of shared references which, when evoked, are like a wink of recognition between the author and reader. I coined the term 'transnational semiotics' to refer to the commonalities shared by the cosmopolitan citizens of the world.

Cosmopolitanism enables more storytellers to take readers into different cultural realities. For instance, take the novels of Haruki Murakami who writes in Japanese, but spent four years at Princeton, where he wrote *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. The characters in his narratives are savvy internationalists, at home with global culture – essentially the products of capitalism and international arts. And it is this that makes his work so readily translatable and enables foreign readers to enter his Japan. In his latest novel, *Kafka on the Shore*, even the name 'Kafka' in the title demands cross-cultural reference. The narrator, who adopts this name, has read Franz Kafka's short stories. But by the time the reader learns this, the narrator has already cited Aristophanes in Plato's *Banquet*, and referred several times to *The Arabian Nights*. Later, he meets a cat who can sing an aria from *La Bohème*, has friends who hum

Schubert sonatas, quotes Shakespeare, Rousseau, Yeats, Sophocles, Tolstoy and Einstein, and talks of Oedipus and Cassandra. He uses throw-away lines like: 'You're a regular Snow White,' which means nothing unless you know the tale and its moral ending (although a search on Amazon.com reveals a book called *Snow White and the Seven Samurai* which possibly ends differently).

It is difficult to find a page of Murakami's writing that does not refer to popular culture, or the products of global capitalism. He talks about an old man dressed like Colonel Sanders. 'Yeah, that's the guy – glasses, white goatee ... He was a pimp working the back alleys of Takamatsu.' His characters drink Diet Pepsi, chew Cool Mint gum, grab a CD of 'The Archduke Trio', hum the theme from *Casablanca*, and wear Jack Nicklaus golf shirts and baseball caps. But his work is also interwoven with references to Japanese literature and history, taking many foreign readers to places they may not have been. For instance, his narrator likens what he considers the 'imperfection' of Schubert's *Sonata in D Major* to a novel by the early twentieth century Japanese writer Natsume Soseki. 'There's something in it that draws you in ...' the narrator says. 'You discover something about that work that tugs at your heart – or maybe we should say that *the work discovers you*.' We find that Murakami echoes Soseki in giving cats voices in the manner of Soseki's earlier novel *I Am a Cat*. He takes readers literally into the soul of Takamatsu City – into the Memorial Library – where Kafka considers similarities between the strange metaphysical occurrences in *Tale of Genji* and his contemporary experience, involving the soul leaving the body and returning.

'Nobody can be in two places at once. It's scientific fact,' Kafka says. 'Einstein and all that.' Murakami is in two places, on a stool straddling worlds.

A 2005 *Guardian* review proclaimed that with the first collection of short stories by a Thai-American writer, Rattawut Lapcharoensap, 'post-postpost-colonialist literature has been born'. I believe the reviewer meant the same thing I do when I talk of 'contaminated' or globalised literature. All the terms have ugly baggage.

Lapcharoensap's references are largely American, although his setting is Asian. The references reveal where the writer is 'coming from', but he twists his tales to a Thai point of view. One of the stories in his collection *Sightseeing*, is told from the point of view of a youth whose Thai mother runs a tourist motel on a Thai beach, and whose Anglo-American father is a former US marine – a deserter, who also left his mother. While watching *Rambo: First Blood Part 2* on TV and being reminded of his father, the boy tells his mother that he has met a girl and might be in love. 'Like Romeo and Juliet love,' he says. The mother flies into a rage, saying if he is 'bonking one of the guests' she will kill his pig. His pig is called Clint Eastwood and it was Clint, the pig, who sniffed out the girl on the beach as she read *The Portrait of a Lady*. Our narrator knew immediately that she was American. 'Her Budweiser bikini told me so.' We share the humour and subtle pathos when Clint Eastwood, the pig, is

reviled by a hoard of nasty young American tourists. He swims away to freedom, hero-like, as Eastwood did in *Escape from Alcatraz*.

In the opinion of VS Naipaul, modern Indian writing in English has given India 'a truer idea of itself'. He said, in a keynote address at a literary festival in New Delhi, that the issue for post-colonial cultures was 'coping with modernity'. Australia, too, is a post-colonial culture. It, too, must come to a truer idea of its increasingly hybridised, cosmopolitan twenty-first century identity. Given that writing is related to identity, what is happening at the moment to Australian literature?

In May 2007, the new Chair of Australian Literature at the University of Sydney, Robert Dixon, made a speech honouring the outgoing chair Professor Elizabeth Webby. The mantle he took from her requires him to be a key advocate for Australian literature. He spoke about the past, present and future of Australian literary studies, in the light of concern about the lack of interest in universities. 'This is a time for change and risk, a time when there is potential to develop new and *international* trajectories in Australian literary studies.'

According to Professor Dixon, we have passed the stage of literary cultural nationalism, and gone beyond a phase of projecting Australian nationalism abroad. He believes that, in the interests of growing and developing Australian literature, we now need to enter a period of internationalising Australian literature. 'Australian literary studies must respond to the wider intellectual, political and social agendas of the present. What we are well placed to do now is explore and elaborate the many ways in which the national literature has always been connected to the world.'

He pointed to Patrick White, Christina Stead and Henry Handel Richardson – naming just a few of our major writers – noting that they were 'very cosmopolitan people and fluent in more than one language'. The absurd idea that writers who live abroad and immerse themselves in another culture lose the authenticity of their voice, or grasp on their identity, does not hold up. Is David Malouf's *Johnno* inauthentic? Does its parochial perspective on Brisbane suffer because he left Australia at the age of twenty-four and lived for almost a decade in Europe? Perhaps his Brisbane is more accessible to those unfamiliar with the city *because* he conjures it through fresh eyes, travelled eyes.

'There are things we need to know about beyond Australia,' said Dixon. His thinking follows in part suggestions by Ken Gelder, Professor of English and Cultural Studies at the University of Melbourne, who favours 'hyphenating' Australian literature. Gelder wrote in *Australian Humanities Review* in December 2005: 'These days the sense of Australia in regional and global contexts seems particularly pressing and this impacts on the ways in which Australian Studies understands itself.' They speak of linking Australian Studies and Australian Literature to other disciplines, such as South-East Asian Studies.

'Strengthening our understanding of Australia's place in the region and the world' is considered a national priority by the Australian Research Council, which stresses the need for more regional knowledge under the heading 'Safeguarding Australia'. One of the ways to know more about our neighbours, one of the best ways, is through literature, through listening to each other's stories, supporting literary engagement between Australia and the region. Reading, like conversation, can stimulate new ideas – even inspire paradigm shifts in ways of seeing the world.

Yet the Literature Board of the Australia Council this year ceased funding an Asia literature touring program managed by Asialink, which bills itself as 'Australia's leading centre for the promotion of public understanding of the countries of Asia and of Australia's role in the region'. Asialink consequently had to stand down its literature program manager, so no one at the centre now focuses on literary cultural exchange. The Council's rationale for stopping the program was twofold. Asia is not one of its current priorities (Europe and North America are), and Asialink failed to sell in rights of enough Australian writers to Asian publishers. The first of these reasons is short-sighted, and the second unrealistic, given the nature of much of Asia's publishing industry. Rights need to be bought *from* Asia.

For these reasons, I read with cynical amusement Prime Minister John Howard's comment last year in Ho Chi Minh City that, 'Australia has ... done a very good job of reaching out to the region, of seeing herself involved in the affairs and the future of the region and sharing the hopes and aspirations of the hundreds of millions of people that comprise the Asia Pacific region, of which we will forever be a part.' His statement contradicts observations by long-standing Foreign Minister Alexander Downer who, at an earlier conference in Melbourne, said that Australia's distrust of Indonesia was born mainly out of 'complete ignorance'. We either share the region's hopes and desires, or have little clue what people elsewhere in our region care about. In my view, we have hardly begun to touch fingertips with region, at least in terms of literary engagement. Indeed, we seem to be going backwards.

Asialink still provides paid opportunities for Australian writers to reside for short periods in parts of Asia. I would like to see more Australians living and working in Asia, particularly writers and academics teaching literature, exchanging places for a time with Asian writers and scholars who can introduce Australians to their literature. I would like to see more Australians learning Asian languages, immersing themselves in the mythologies of Asia, meeting local writers and other thinkers, becoming familiar with different realities, and eventually writing stories. I would also like to read more stories about Australia written by people from Asia so I can see myself, my countrymen and women fresh through other eyes. Looking at ourselves in the mirror of our own literature is an insular way of perceiving who we are. Looking through other eyes, we may see differently.

Australia is changing, which is what a vibrant, living culture must do. We are continuing to develop, grow and create a new, unique identity out of multiple identities and influences we absorb, adapt and adopt. My sense is that people who have crossed bridges into other cultures can take others with them. Asian Australian writers do this. Chinese-Australian writer Ouyang Yu is described by literary critic Wenche Ommundsen as typifying 'the new generation of post-colonial writers and intellectuals who can write with detachment about the forces of globalisation and their impact on East-West relations and at the same time acknowledge their complex and often painful impact on their own life and work.'

Yet Yu told me he has virtually given up trying to publish in Australia. 'My first published novel, which won the prize for innovation at the Adelaide Writers' Festival, received twenty-nine rejections, including one from the publisher who eventually published it. I'm going to say, sorry, this is too hard. The only hope is to be published posthumously. Some publishers say, "Even though we find your work engaging and engrossing ..." that sort of thing, they quote the size of the market – the estimated readership of work here – as a reason why they won't take the publishing risk. The size of the market holds them back from publishing anything experimental. Do they want to publish toilet paper, something used by millions of people? Even if there's one reader, there's still a market. It's not just the money we mind about. We [Asian–Australian writers] want to reach this culture but that's being rejected. It makes them uncomfortable or challenges their notion of the way things are or should be. What do they mean there isn't a market? I want something to read that stimulates the mind. There are people around who like to think.'

Small publishers tend to be the ones who take the risks. Veronica Sumegi of Brandl & Schlesinger eventually published Yu's first novel. 'We're constantly looking for Asian authors,' she said, but stressed – as others did – that was difficult to find good manuscripts. Ivor Indyk's publishing house, Giramondo, took a long shot with Brian Castro's *Shanghai Dancing*, which had trouble finding a publisher because of its form, but went on to sell around five thousand copies and win both the Victorian and NSW Premier's Awards for Fiction. In Castro's view, earlier books set in Asia that found Australian publishers – including, presumably, Christopher Koch's work, Robert Drewe's *A Cry in the Jungle Bar*, and Blanch d'Alpuget's *Turtle Beach* – were narratives about Australians experiencing Asia, not the other way around, which Castro considers more interesting. 'Twenty years ago a good cook book or garden book enabled publishers to take a risk. Now publishers, particularly multinationals, are beholden to their masters in New York or London. The graph favours global writing ...'

In an essay in *Australian Humanities Review*, Castro wrote, 'The situation currently is that Australia needs Asia more than Asia needs it.' He could be writing specifically about Australian literature, but generalises. 'While the West seems to

have run out of ideas in the creative and cultural fields, relying on images of sex and violence, reviving old canons and dwindling to parody and satire in what can already be seen as one of the dead ends of postmodernism, the Asian region is alive with opportunities for a new hybridisation, a collective intermix and juxtaposition of styles and rituals which could change the focus and dynamics of Australian art, music and language.'

With a little more imagination, courage and some investment in the future, Australian publishers and arts bodies who support the 'contaminated' or 'hybridised' writing now coming out of Asia, or influenced by the region, could resuscitate interest in Australian literature – a new generation of literature from Australia. ■