Politics and loss in Philip Jeyaretnam's Singaporean fiction


Abstract

[Introduction]: Singapore's Philip Jeyaretnam has now 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 paternal family, and his full-time career as a lawyer at the Singaporean Bar. Moreover, for Singaporeans, creative writing in the English language is, as pointed out in an editorial in the Straits Times newspaper, "a young flowering, struggling in new soil." (1) In contemporary Singapore, politics and livelihood impinge on creative artists and their output as much, if not more than, other developed countries. It is the purpose of this paper to consider each of Philip Jeyaretnam's major published works in turn for their insights into their author's world view, and the social milieu in which he functions, the place where he chooses to live and work. The analysis draws on the key basic assumptions set out by Altick and Fenstermaker in The Art of Literary Research (1993), firstly, that to understand the meaning of a text, it is necessary to know as much as possible about its creator, the author; and secondly, that authors and texts are products of particular social and historical contexts. (2) In the case of Philip Jeyaretnam's work, it is argued that the triumph of managerialism, the sheer economic progress, and the monopolistic political process in Singapore have prompted the author to convey a profound awareness of cost to individual human lives, in terms of loss of intellectual diversity and even destruction of spiritual values. He is especially disturbed with the "very shallow form of materialism" that holds full sway, with what even the officially-oriented Straits Times has acknowledged as "a kind of national ideology that is expressed in a relentless efficiency to ensure material well-being." (3) Whilst uneasy with the label of "political writer", Philip Jeyaretnam nonetheless recognises that it is impossible to avoid political themes if the subject is the people of Singapore and how they think and feel, because of the formative and pervasive role of government in Singaporean society. (4) In a plea for civil rather than official society, he suggests that there can be legitimate commitments to, and passionate visions of, Singapore which are other than those espoused by the incumbent government, and which involve participation by a broad range of the population. Indeed, for the literary critic, Dudley de Souza, Philip Jeyaretnam's creative work heralds the 'emergence of a kind of Singaporean consciousness..." (5)

Item Type: Article (Commonwealth Reporting Category C)
Refereed: Yes

Additional Information: No response to requests for copyright permission from publisher.

Faculty / Department / School: Historic - Faculty of Arts - Department of Humanities and International Studies

Date Deposited: 11 Oct 2007 01:03
Last Modified: 02 Jul 2013 22:43

Uncontrolled Keywords: Philip Jeyaretnam, Singapore, Singaporean fiction

Fields of Research: 20 Language, Communication and Culture > 2005 Literary Studies > 200519 South-East Asian Literature (excl. Indonesian)

URI: http://eprints.usq.edu.au/id/eprint/2356

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of the Law Society of Singapore. He is the son of Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam, who was a prominent opposition politician in Singapore. His brother, Kenneth Jeyaretnam, is the secretary-general of the opposition Reform Party. Biography. Philip received his early education at Raeburn Park School and the United World College of South East Asia in Singapore, and at the Charterhouse School in Surrey, England. He then went on to Corpus Christi College at Cambridge University, where