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## Poems

Charlene Rajendran

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## Poems

### **Abstract**

SO MUSH OF ME, SMOKED HAM AND SWEAT WEDDING

# Charlene Rajendran

Charlene Rajendran is a freelance teacher, writer and theatre practitioner. Exploring Malaysian voices through writing and theatre, she is particularly interested in issues of identity as an urban Malaysian woman. She is also involved in engaging young people in the process of self-expression using drama workshops and creative writing.

Charlene has performed, directed and produced for the theatre, mostly Young People's Theatre, Five Arts Centre. She is a member of Five Arts Centre, a performing and visual arts collective that is committed to exploring the arts with a Malaysian voice and perspective. Her involvement in the theatre began when she was a teenager. She performed for Janet Pillai in Teater Kanak-Kanak (Children's Theatre) productions organised by the National Cultural Centre in Kuala Lumpur from 1978–1981.

She has since written plays and poems for performance, often collaborating with a creative team to create texts that draw on the experiences and views of the performers. She often uses music in her presentations as she is interested in the way music provides a means of access to the emotions and inner thoughts that words alone do not. She has also experimented with her voice in some Five Arts Centre productions which have used music.

Charlene has conducted several creative workshops for young people and adults, and was one of the main facilitators of Teater Muda, an integrated arts workshop program for young people from 1992–1995. *Mangosteen Crumble*, a book of poems published in Malaysia by Team East in March 1999, was the result of her participation in a Writers' Workshop led by Mohan Ambikaipaker. Since then she has done readings in Kuala Lumpur, Lisbon and in the UK (London, Oxford, Cambridge and Durham).

Charlene has taught English Language and Literature at secondary and tertiary levels, having had the opportunity to design a course on Issues of Identity in South East Asian Literature. She has also written Teachers' Kits for secondary school teachers based on a Theatre-in-Education performance, a technology exhibition and short stories written by Malaysian teenagers. In 1999 she began Labyrinth, a series of workshops for young people looking at literature through drama, using theatre exercises and creative writing to explore a literary text. In 2000 Charlene was awarded an Arts Network Asia grant to conduct Asian Labyrinths, a project that includes using the Internet to work with a group of young people from Malaysia and the Philippines.

Charlene has a degree in English and Philosophy from the University of Durham (1987) and a Masters in Linguistics from the University of York (1988).

## SO *MUSH* OF ME

So *mush* of me is English.  
My dreaded colonial heritage.  
From Enid Blyton to Beatrix Potter  
my idylls lie distant in Yorkshire.

So *mush* of me lives Anglo.  
My dreaded white inheritance.  
From Laura Ashley to Marks & Spencer  
my istanas all built in Windsor.

So, *mush* of me  
misplaced.  
Really I am Malaysian,  
Ceylonese, Tamil,  
Anglophile, All.  
Mingled by history  
not choice.

So, *mush* of me  
misfit.  
My outfits all merge  
and combine.  
From kurungs of kashmere  
to kain batik ballgowns,  
my palate eats roast beef  
with rice.

So *mush* of me  
mixed up,  
sejarah  
that spans a globe.  
From Perth to Papua  
Toronto to Trent,  
my saudaras  
by boat and by flight.

So *mush* of me is  
muddled.  
Malaysian, Ceylonese  
Unsure.  
My anglicised fancies  
in tempatan dreams  
make *mush*  
in so *mush* of me

## SMOKED HAM AND SWEAT WEDDING

(i)

The blazing sun hangs a heavy humidity on the burring fans.

Selendangs flirt  
blazers slung.

Sweat drips  
awaiting,  
    awaiting,  
    the arrival.

‘It’s different if you have a daughter.  
My sons are all quite charming.  
But what will I do with my jewellery?’

A piquant siren cracks open the caution of unspoken sentiment.

‘Tonight they’ll swipe him.’

Guests glazing skywards.  
Glasses clunk in collusion.

Helicopters harangue a household of daughters.  
Doors are broken, father taken.

    Stripping the jewels  
    off ancient temples  
    for a crown.

(ii)

Chairs pewed to position,  
 arching golden chrysanthemums,  
 aisled in pastel carnations.

Flipping canopy bristles  
 the 'hello's, 'how are you's  
 into 'how now's, 'what to do's,  
 awaiting,  
 awaiting,  
                   the arrival.

'The bugger quit drinking.  
 Religion has ginned him.  
 Rolling his tongue in a sweet sparkling juice.  
 Nothing will drown him but soda.'

Blinking blood trucks.  
 Blocking passage, barging entry.

'These are orders. Quick disperse.'

Guests strained to listen in the explodes of a distance.

A crowd surging forward,  
 finding fumigation forces.  
 Tears, burns, itches, twitches,  
 crust the nerves.

                  Stinging whips  
                   cast servants and serfs  
                   under rule.

(iii)

Cream festoons, salmon ribbons,  
crimson carpet carves the bridle.

Awaiting,  
awaiting,  
the arrival.

Rolling sandpaper bellies spill through saffron silk sarees.  
Pedicure varnish toes twiddle peacock crepe kebayas.

‘Why not serve salads, some roast or cold cuts da?  
Rice and curry hardly fits in Carcosa Seri Negara.  
Though smoked ham would cause quite a sweat!’

Scuffles transcend into polished Black Marias.

‘The trouble is theirs now.’

Guests glazed in gossip.  
Baiting clues, juicing views.

Batons raised with voices  
pounding down on bended knee.  
Helmets smashed by stone and gravel.  
Hoarse and hoary in pith.

Liberated from Federated,  
Resident Governor to Prime Minister,  
Fooling with fates in a farce.

(iv)

Carcosa sits smug  
 on a history clad hill.  
 Built to cushion  
 in poppy-  
                     cock whims  
 a British Governor.  
 High Commissioner.  
 then the Queen of E  
                     no less.

Merdeka Square poses  
 a prickly heat protest.  
 Meant to curtail  
 the crony-  
                     crap schemes.  
 of Prime Minister.  
 Attorney General.  
 then the High Courts  
                     no less.

Union Jack once lowered.  
 Jalur Gemilang now cowered.

The bridal couple pose  
 at the top of the stairs  
 in a starkness  
                     of history  
                     and helplessness.



*Carcosa Seri Negara, located in 40 acres of landscaped gardens, was built at the turn of the last century in truly colonial splendour. It served initially as the official residence to the British Resident of the Federated Malay States, who would later become the British Governor of Malaya, Frank Swettenham. After independence, it became the residence of the British High Commissioner, until it was returned to the Malaysian Government towards the latter part of the century. It is now an extremely exclusive hotel, and its first guest was Queen Elizabeth II.*

*Merdeka Square is a historic spot in Kuala Lumpur, where the lowering of the Union Jack in 1957 marked the end of British colonial rule. It now boasts the tallest flagpole in the world, where the Jalur Gemilang, a name conferred on the Malaysian flag, flies supreme. More recently it has been the site of several human rights demonstrations, including the eventful rallies led by former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, soon after his dismissal from office, and just before his arrest.*

*The two are located close to each other, with the High Court and Parliament buildings, in close proximity.*

Charlene Rajendran

Oct 2000