Reconciling Malaysian Chinese Identity: Multiple Passages to Nationhood

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Introduction

Prior to the coming and expansion of Islam in the 15th century, the South East Asian region received significant influence from Indian and Chinese cultures (Hirschman, Reid, Winstedt). The region's relationship with China began with trade. While the Chinese did not begin significant ocean travel until the 7th century, they still traded with countries as far away as Persia, first by overland transport and later via the ports in the Malay Archipelago, using Malay and Indonesian vessels. Significant changes in the relationship between China and the peninsula of Malaya occurred when the King of Melaka visited China in 1411. Among the regular ports of call for Chinese vessels in the region were Pulau Tioman in Pahang, Lo Yueh in Johor, Melaka and Penang (Andaya and Andaya). In the 14th century, the Melaka-China relationship grew closer with the Melakan ruler marrying the Chinese princess Hang Li Poh and China in return offering protection for Melaka against Siamese attacks.

While the early Indians resided in the northern states of the peninsula, the Chinese were largely located around the ports (Penang, Melaka and Singapore), as well as in small tin and gold mining settlements (Purcell). During the British period more Chinese were encouraged or brought in to work in the mines to meet the growing world demand for tin. This transference of what was for centuries the economic domain of the Malay Sultans to the British, through the involvement of the Chinese, was to have a significant effect on Sino-Malay race relations later (Snodgrass). Chinese secret society activities and their battles for control of the mines also set the stage for British intervention in the affairs of the Malay states. The British period of occupation also left a long-lasting mark on the relationship between the three major races in the peninsula of Malaya. This stems from British policies and practices that differed according to race. In this article we will only consider the British relationship with the Chinese in Malaysia.

The British relationship with the Chinese in colonial Malaya was purely economic. The Chinese worked in the tin mines and as merchant traders. For the British, taxation on merchant trade and tin ore, as well as having the sole rights to buy the ore, was a profitable endeavour (Kratoska, Butcher). For this reason, the Chinese were left to their own devices. Such encouragement from the British created an environment where more and more Chinese traders and immigrants began to seek their fortunes in the peninsula (Mak Lau Fong). Chinese entrepreneurs in

Malaya recruited their work force from southern China, and by the mid-1890s the Chinese population had doubled in the Straits Settlement (Snodgrass). Many of the coolies from China were debt-bonded, and were required to work off this debt over a long period (Purcell). The British did not act against this, not wanting to lose favour with the Chinese entrepreneurs and jeopardise their own profits. This form of indentured labour was only abolished in 1914 (Kratoska, Purcell). While the British had to deal with the Chinese for economic reasons, their inability to control them required the British to look to other sources for their labour supply.

Malaya's independence in 1957 was negotiated based on an agreement between the Malay and the non-Malay communities. In the most simple form, the bargain meant that the Malays' special status and political privileges were acknowledged by the Chinese and Indians in return for Malay acknowledgement of the legitimacy of Chinese and Indian citizenship rights and business interests. Effectively what this meant was that the Malays were to hold political power and the Chinese were to hold economic power (Wan Hashim). The Constitution also decreed: Malay as the national language, Islam as the national religion, the institution of quotas for the Malays in education, business and government, and the setting up and expansion of Malay land reservations. In all other aspects the people of Malaysia were "equals".

Testing Tensions: The Racial Riots of 1969

For almost twelve years after Malaya gained independence in 1957, there were no serious racial problems. The Malaysian government created an image of a young multi-racial nation, living in complete peace and harmony with the emphasis on freedom and unity. In fact, Malaysian leaders believed that they had successfully created a Malaysian culture (Solehah). However, "Malaysia's success story and façade of multi-racial co-existence lasted until the elections of 1969 when sweeping Chinese victories threatened to upset Malay political hegemony" (Solehah 7). On May 13 1969, racial riots broke out, and a state of emergency was declared to cope with it. A National Operations Council under the leadership of then-Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak was set up to deal with the emergency. (For details of the incident, refer to National Operations Council 1969, Gagliano, Parker, Clutterbuck, Means). Constitutional parliament was suspended for two years. In 1970, Mahathir Mohammad, who would later become Prime Minister of Malaysia, wrote:

> Looking back through the years, one of the startling facts, which must be admitted, was that there was never true racial harmony. There was a lack of inter-racial strife. There was tolerance. There was accommodation. But there was no harmony. (Mahathir 4)

Blame for the riots shifted time and again, based on the perspective of the analysts and ranged from: excessive celebration by opposition parties, the communists, impartiality of the Malay dominated security forces in restoring order, and Malay communalism (Munro-Kua). In retrospect, many reasons have been assigned for the cause of the riots in particular, and racial disharmony in general. Among the reasons cited have been:

- the unequal distribution of wealth in Chinese hands
- the unequal distribution of political power in Malay hands
- the special rights and privileges of the Malays
- institutionalisation of Malay nationalism
- changes in language and education policies
- the expulsion of Singapore to maintain Malay political hegemony
- Malay fear of marginalisation and dislocation
- institution of the First Malaysia Plan for the redistribution of wealth
- crowd psychology, racial antipathies, anger, fear and hatred

(Ross-Larson, Wan Hashim, Clutterbuck, Lee, Means, Munro-Kua, Ooi Kee Beng)

The post-May 13 period also witnessed drastic changes and sweeping reforms. Amongst these were:

- widening the Alliance coalition and changing its name to the National Front
- strengthening the Sedition Act of 1948 to prohibit discussion of sensitive issues and attacks on the Constitution, especially relating to the power of the Malay rulers, citizenship, national language, and the special rights of the Malays
- the Internal Security Act of 1960 which allowed the government to detain people without trial,
- the University Act of 1971 which limited public discussion by academics
- barring of government employees from joining the Malaysian Trade Union Congress,
- stricter control of the media
- institution of quotas for *bumiputera* participation in tertiary education

(Ross-Larson, Wan Hashim, Clutterbuck, Solehah, Lee, Means, Munro-Kua)

Aside from this, there were two other significant post-1969 developments: the sponsoring of a National Cultural Congress of 1971 and the instituting of the New Economic Policies.

The National Cultural Congress initiated moves to define national culture, national identity and national literature. The National Cultural Congress determined that the national culture should be based on the Malay culture, with the addition of suitable and appropriate elements from the Chinese and Indian cultures as measured against the Islamic value system (Malaysia, Solehah, Subramaniam). Rationalised

in this way, the national identity should also reflect Islamic values. The congress also defined National Literature as only works written in Malay in Malaysia. Other *Bumiputera* (e.g. Iban, Bidayuh, Kadazan, Murut, etc.) literatures are considered Regional Literature while works in Chinese, Tamil and English are regarded as Sectional Literature (Malaysia 1973, Solehah Ishak, Subramaniam)

Objectives of the first New Economic Policy (NEP) presented in the Second Malaysia Plan (1971) are firstly to eradicate poverty by raising income levels and employment opportunities and secondly to restructure Malaysian society by correcting economic imbalances. The second NEP was designed to restructure Malaysian society in order to redress imbalances in the economic and professional fields. A major policy was the restructuring of capital aimed at giving the Malays 30 % of the capital shares (Munro-Kua).

A 1996 survey on ethnic relations in Malaysia (Welsh 1996) indicates that ethnic consciousness remains at the core of differences in political attitudes.

> The clearest demarcation of differences among ethnic groups can be found on rights. The traditional ethnically contested rights of voting, religion, and education produced very strong correlation along predictable lines. Malay respondents very strongly opposed the freedom of religion and university suffrage; they strongly favoured equal opportunity to education, which is in line with the affirmative action policy that favoured the Malays from 1970-1990. Indian respondents, followed less significantly by the Chinese, held opposing views. Malay respondents in non-capital area also strongly opposed freedom of speech and supported the government's action to arrest people without trial.
>
> (Welsh 900)

The situation is that, "contrary to what the glossy brochures in tourist information bureaus claim, Malaysians are still looking for a common identity that will identify us apart from the rest of humanity. Although Malaysians are held together in a political system by the coercive force of the state and its apparatuses, and are possibly integrated through economic symbiosis or mutual interdependence, we are nevertheless caught up in our own ethnic cocoons…" (Zawiah 9).

Malaysian-Chinese Literary Visions of Malaysia

The birth and progress of a nation is charted by the accumulated and co-operative efforts of many. Progress is only possible when there is harmony – a common vision, a united stand and voices that echo these in symphony. In this venture the creative writer is both the musical instrument and the notes that are produced by the instrument. The ensuing discussion focuses on four players, their notes and the instrumental role they play in reflecting Malaysian Chinese identity through

traversing the multiple passages towards and away from Malaysian nationhood. All four are from the same ethnic background. Wong Phui Nam chronicles the psychology of primordial to recent sounds of the conundrum of a nation while Kee Thuan Chye provides the sophisticated reverberations of a people in search of a nation. These are the two tenors who chose to remain playing on the Malaysian stage. Wafting in amidst their ensemble is another melody, with a slightly estranged pitch, that of Ee Tiang Hong and Hsu Ming Teo, Malaysian notes rearranged in Australia.

The Two Tenors on the Malaysian Stage

Wong Phui Nam

Wong Phui Nam is among the few Malaysians who write poetry in English. Most of Wong Phui Nam's poetry written in the sixties first appeared in an anthology of Malaysian writings entitled *Bunga Emas* published in the United Kingdom in 1963. They were subsequently collected and published as *How the Hills are Distant* in 1966 by the Department of English, University of Malaya. During much of the 1970s and 1980s Wong Phui Nam did not publish any new works. In 1989, he published his second volume of poetry called *Remembering Grandma and Other Rumours*. This volume was published by the Department of English, National University of Singapore. Wong's poetry has also been published in *Seven Poets*, *The Second Tongue*, *The Flowering Tree*, *Young Commonwealth Poets*, *Tenggara*, *Temasek*, *Collections of Poems from India, Sri Lanka, Singapore and Malaya*, *South East Asian Review of English*, *Westerley* and *Sare*.

Wong Phui Nam's works are distinctly marked by the depth of their involvement in the psyche of the Malaysian Chinese community. His poetry is both historical and psychological at one time. It is historical in that it charts the experiences of mainly the Malaysian Chinese community, their arrival, 'progress' and development in this country. His works traverse the ancient and the legendary through to actual histories of arrival and struggle to the dilemmas that inhabit the post-modern Malaysian mind. Psychologically, they invade the painful memories etched in personal and social history in deliberation of issues such as identity, culture, sense of belonging, alienation and challenges of nationhood.

Wong Phui Nam's poems are significant in that they signpost the birth and development of a multiracial, multicultural Malaysia. The signs in his poetry are ones that awaken Malaysian sensibilities to the problems of the Chinese 'Other', often seen as resilient, and affected by the tribulations of this emerging postcolonial multiracial nation. Most of his works concern cultural deprivation, 'psychic nakedness' and Malaysia as a 'wasteland' and as such the attendant themes often include cultural loss, loss of identity, exile, disorientation, disorder or internal conflict, alienation and death. Wong Phui Nam's consistent use of the personal

voice reflects an attempt to weld himself to the experiences dramatised in his poetry.

The foundation of Wong Phui Nam's poetry rests on the multi-ethnic Malaysian socio-cultural and political environment and its minefield of tension and sensitivities. Centuries of living together have taught the Malaysian people the skills of tolerance, tact and artful accommodation, while driving underground interracial ailments such as prejudice, fear and lack of understanding. Wong's poetry delves into the core of this uneasiness resulting in states of confusion and disillusionment that stem from individual and societal attempts to make sense of an uncertain place called "home".

Wong's epic poem *How the Hills are Distant* (1966) portrays a struggle to carve a place of one's own in a new environment. The poem reflects the problems faced by a minority group coming to terms with the adopted land. Though the poem can be viewed from a racio-cutural position, it also depicts a personal struggle in search of identity. For the minority and diasporic individual, the struggle to shape and reshape his identity is continuous because society and its social, cultural and political structures are changing constantly. The search for stability and acceptance leads one to hope as :

> I like you, old man,
> If I should ever die
> But learn my way about the hills.
> I should be glad
> Always of the rain
> Till the bunds of my body break and
> Are washed in sand.

As much as the poem alludes to death and the problematics of adaptation, it grounds itself in images of belonging, of learning the ways of the new land of hills, of the monsoon rains and of being one with the land, reminiscent almost of that infamous scene from Patrick White's *Voss*, of the body and blood seeping into the land as the ultimate metaphor for belonging. The tenor of the poem, like many of his other poems, reaches out towards the imprints of an unfurling sense of emergent nationhood, of giving up an existing identity and of attaining an elusive new one. As Wong himself has said of this very collection

> These poems need to be written. They are of a time, of a place, of a people who find themselves having to live by institutions and folk ways which are not their own, having to absorb the manners of language not their own. (qtd. in Thumboo 7)

Against the Wilderness also attempts to capture the immigrant sensibility and minority consciousness. The opening sequence of twelve sonnets sounds the voices of Chinese immigrants to Malaysia. They chart immigrant consciousness from China, across the seas, to old Melaka, the jungles, the tin mines, through the fear for survival to the wilderness of modernised Malaysia. "Antecedent" describes the nightmarish life in China which reduced them to despair:

> When people turned from eating bark to sand, we waited
> For our dead to putrefy before we buried them.
> ...
> Then we left. Every unseasonable road we took
> Brought us among other aimless ghosts in a treeless,
> Unforgiving plain, crying like us against exhaustion
> Of spirit as our bellies ate us from within ...

When all attempts of finding sanctuary at home fail, they board the junks and sail the high seas to conceive a new body of belonging, with the lifeblood of the old body seeping away, as vividly illustrated in "Bukit China (1)":

> I became a stranger beast ...Chopper in hand,
> I worked through rib cage and skull, through settled, bleeding men
> As I would shake from me this pain, this abandonment by spirit.

Yet like the poems before, hope is always cleaved at the centre of the text, a hope that "My flesh would find continuance in the moist salt wombs/Of native women and leave secreted into this hill/A clutch of bones."

Wong's poems are not without their political undertones. In depicting the human condition there are allusions to the problems of human co-existence in multi-racial societies such as Malaysia. In a multi-racial society, trust, understanding and justice are essential for peaceful and satisfactory co-existence. If the foundation of nationhood is suspect, then suspicion, distrust and fear will paralyze the nation. It is within such a context that "rumours" thrive best. Indications that Wong's rumours are based on truth are found in the prologue of this book: "As is the way with rumour, much of what is told here is smoke, but once - here and everywhere - there had been a fire". In this sense, these "rumours" are antithetical in that they are truths. His rumours are those of death, disease and decay. The "rumours" attempt to create awareness not only of the diseases of society but those of individuals. The ailments that kill in the poems, "Remembering Grandma", "Fat Uncle Dying", "Last Days in Hospital", "Stepmother", "Cousin" and "For My Old Amah", are all cancerous diseases that work from within, unknown and unseen, until it is too late. It seems obvious that Wong is making a direct reference between the diseases of individuals and the amoral diseases that plague societies, nations and humanity.

The two most remarkable features of Wong Phui Nam's poetry are the seriousness of attitude in the intent they display and the care with which they are crafted. For the most part, the poetry manifests an admirable synthesis of diction, structure and imagery, a quality that allows interpretations within both literal and methaphorical dimensions. Wong Phui Nam's poems seem to be more than literary art. They appear as social and historical documents that capture the many emotions and experiences of a nation in growth. They boldly embody the perceptions and perspectives of a major voice of that nation, the voice of the minority-immigrant Chinese in Malaysia. His poems explore and question the issues of identity, hybridity, sense of belonging and national identity. They express a pain that comes with an unending search, inhibited by conditions, artificially imposed. In spite of their excellent craftsmanship, Wong's poems cannot hide the sadness and gloom they epitomize. The poems seem to capture in their nakedness some of the bitter realities of life from which we attempt to hide. Wong's message seems to be that the truth, however painful, has to be faced – understood and accepted – for only then can inroads be made towards creating a truly Malaysian people with a single and national identity.

Kee Thuan Chye

Kee Thuan Chye is a journalist with a talent for drama, acting, and directing. He is most known for his involvement in theater. His writings on and for theater are informed and founded in experience. Kee Thuan Chye writes about things that move him – racism, unequal opportunities, backwardness, about people closing themselves up, and about curbs to freedom of speech and expression. He tackles Malaysian themes such as racial discrimination and extremism, political manipulation, detention, Big Brotherism, through use of language and with characters that are recognizably Malaysian. Kee Thuan Chye used the Malaysian context as his source of ideas and issues to be talked about, criticized and written on. Malaysia provided both the 'subject-matter' for his plays and the object of his searching, courageous political criticism. Political agenda had become his primary concern. The plays *1984 Here & Now* (1984) and *The Big Purge* (1988) are all inspired by real events that happened in Malaysia. They are about extremism, ethnic tension and their results on Malaysian society.

His works often portray a deep concern with the importance of conducting national policy based on tolerance despite racial differences. His first play *1984 Here and Now* mocks the advent of censorship in Malaysia. Adapted from George Orwell's classic novel, *1984,* the play explores "Big Brotherdom" in Malaysia and reveals that the human spirit is stronger and far more resilient than the cynical and manipulative power of mere politicking, while creating the awareness of Malaysia as a fractured multiracial society. Wiran, the protagonist, confronts the injustices of what is seemingly a police state and when he hears of a solution to the country's

injustices by a new movement for a new Brotherhood, he joins in the hopes that they might have the answers to the problems of the nation. Yet the play does not offer any resolution, allowing its audience instead to decide on the resolution.

In *The Big Purge* Kee Thuan Chye continued the intense interrogation of government policy in a no-holds-barred manner that courted censorship. The play was inspired by real events in 1987 when the Malaysian government used the Internal Security Act (ISA) and made many political arrests to curb extremism and ethnic tension. The play depicts Malaysians caught in the middle of these developments in Malaysian politics. Five people, a Malay couple, Junid and Mazlina, and a Malaysian Chinese couple, Wei Liang and Joan, and Ravindran, a Malaysian Indian and common friend of both couples, are the central characters in the play. Injustice and tragedy stalk the characters; Joan loses her child in a racial stampede, extremists accuse Wei Liang and Mazlina of *khalwat* or close proximity, causing Junid to accuse both of betraying him, while Ravindran loses heart and plans to migrate to Australia. These incidents portray the microcosm of the problems of nationhood. The lost child symbolizes the lost child of nationhood crushed by ethnic tension, the accusations of close proximity a symbol of the distrust and suspicion of inter ethnic camaraderie and Ravindran's plans point to the renouncement of nationhood and the trading of nation space. While the last has been a significant step for a lot of like-minded Malaysians disheartened with the nation, it must be remembered that Kee Thuan Chye did not lose heart with the nation and instead continues to write from within the national space.

These plays together with *We Could * * * * You, Mr Birch* (1994), paved the way for open dialogues about issues related to race relations, national consciousness and identity, as well as in examining the role of politics in Malaysian life. His contribution is more in the direction of cultivating awareness among Malaysian audiences particularly of the need to be less race conscious, and to be aware of the degree of political oppression and racial discrimination. This cultivation rises from the soil of the Malaysian nation, however arid it might be depicted at times, grounding itself insistently within its recesses.

The two writers and their works explored above may not extrinsically demonstrate startling resemblances. However, intrinsically they share melodies that are significant in understanding the Malaysian Chinese psyche and its aspirations for a Malaysian nation. The tenor is one of desire and determination to confront the issues that seem to hinder the birth of a Malaysian nation. Their works show several commonalities but primary among these is the desire and will to make Malaysia their home. However, there are also those for whom Malaysia did not become home, due to irreconcilable differences arising from confrontations with the tensions and conflicts of a budding mulitcultural nation. Among these writers are Ee Tiang Hong, Shirley Lim, Hilary Tham and more recently Hsu Ming Teo. What are their perceptions of the Malaysian nation and how do they reconcile their

Chinese identity with its inextricable Malaysian legacy? The ensuing discussion focuses specifically on two of these writers, Ee Tiang Hong and Hsu Ming Teo, who are bound by two factors, a) the blemish of the 1969 racial riots in Malaysia and (b) their subsequent relocation to Australia as a result of this dark episode.

Across an Estranged Pitch

Ee Tiang Hong

> I left Malaysia when I could no longer accept intellectually or emotionally, the official and Malay definition of the Malaysian nation and culture. And because the gap in our perceptions was so wide as to make negotiation impossible, I was convinced that I had no place in the new order of things, and not just as a writer but even as an ordinary citizen. (qtd. in Merican et al 27).

Ee's sentiments above accentuate the anxiety with the changing notions of nation and nationhood, contesting this new symphony which he saw as ultimately monocultural. Yet we have seen the skilful negotiation of this new path of nationhood attempted by the two tenors above. In Ee, we have an estranged Malaysian Chinese pitch, tunes that reverberate strongly with the Malaysian physical setting as home but drown out the strains of an emergent nationhood that he could not accept. As Bruce Bennet puts it in his foreword to *Nearing a Horizon* :

> Ee saw himself as a political émigré from Malaysia, where the anti-Chinese race riots of 13 May 1969 had led to humiliating reductions in freedom and authority for Chinese Malaysians including himself. As a seventh generation Straits-born Chinese whose family had assimilated many aspects of Malay and Western cultures while retaining their own, Ee had a powerful sense of the town of Malacca and its surrounding as 'home'. *(NH* xiii*)*

It is this sense of space that predominates Ee's poetry post-Malaysia and these create a binary between the country and the re-imagined nation that he could not fathom. Within these we have the melodious tones of Tranquerah and other streets in his "eternal city" "Melaka" (*NH*: 18) mixed with the almost grating discordant notes of the refrain of a justified self-exile. In the poem "The Burden" this comes through quite strongly :

> Weeding the back lawn, my heart a fallow,
> I hear a loud hum, of a lonely violin,
> A bleating phrase, a song, an overflow.

My father is alive, in a laterite grave
in Buki Piatu, in his family grove
of green and brown tembusu. […]

…the song strains
Like a leech, now thick, now thin,
Hangs like the musk of a love potion.

And I am here, and there, and back again,
Wallowing in mud, cool slush, this waterhole
My home, in the freedom of another wilderness.

(*NH* 20)

The memory of family and the ancestral home plays heavily on the consciousness of the diasporic Malaysian Chinese poet, encapsulated in the archetypal image of the lost Eden as evoked in the image of the "family grove" in the homeland and the headiness of the pull of the ancestral melody on his consciousness, what Bruce Bennet rightly terms as the "resonant Malacca of his personal cultural history" (foreword to *NH,* xiv). Yet, while the personal history wafts in with the poignant melancholy of poetic lyric, the larger social history of the budding nation that he has left behind emerges harsh, strained and discordant. Take for example the following lines from the title poem of *Nearing the Horizon* :

I dreaded the uncertain, the darkness creeping
Down a hill slope, wild beasts emerging under its
Cover, insects swarming in the heat and stillness;
And the stressful crossroads, railway junction,
Or where a road forked on the edge of a ravine
[…] (*NH* 2)

These appear steeped in patterns of anxiety and anguished imagery seen in the repetitive images of ominous intersections perilous pathways, significant metaphors for the changing face of Malaysia, which the poet describes as one with "smiling road /blocks, NO ENTRY signs, fences"(*NH* 5). The pattern of imagery is also somewhat evocative of Yeats' fearsome beast slouching towards Bethlehem, insinuations of a promised land that is under imminent threat. This is further emphasised by the last line of the poem which sees him walking away from "Out of the eternal Wheel" (2), disinclined to negotiate and engage with the new testament of the nation.

As such the general impressions of the nation at large are fraught with a sense of disconnectedness, relinquishing his hold on what he saw as the failed covenant of nationhood, "of big time prophets and midwives/who didn't deliver" ("Done"

NH 38) . The antidote to his feelings of persecution and rejection takes shape in the deeply melancholic memories of family and the ancestral home. As Vijay Mishra asserts

> Whenever the nation-state is perceived as racist or imperialist [..] and the therapy of self-representation is denied to diasporic people, a state of melancholy sets in since the primal loss (of the homeland) cannot be replaced by the "new object of love". (Mishra 36)

The Peranakan identity becomes the "therapy of self-representation" for Ee as his poems constantly reinforce this sense of self and space, the conviction of a "A Baba born and bred in Malacca"("Comment" *NH* 13*)* with the ever present hailing of his "eternal city", Melaka which remains forever cocooned in mythic memory and shrouded by an almost heady sense of melancholy, especially when the nostalgic passageways of Tranquerah, Heeren Street and Bandar Hilir are evoked in the creative imaginary. Even though it appears as if towards the end Ee appears to reconcile with Australia as home, as evident in the majority of the poems in *New Horizon*, published posthumously, there remains still the faint tinge of injustice at having been compelled to leave his ancestral Melaka, pointing to what can be seen as the split subjectivity of his act of migration, of an agency that somehow always lacks true conviction. In "Done" for instance, he reminisces, though the "decision to leave was a correct one; we had no choice" ("Done" *NH* 38), evoking similar refrains heard in his earlier poems such as "Tranquerah Road": "I had no choice but to go/to leave all I loved" (*Tranquerah* 65) and Heeren Street: "Departures are those consequences you set out ... the consequence of a decision/ taken elsewhere/ to which we were no party" (*Tranquerah* 57). It is this split subjectivity that constantly strains at the edges of the poetic imagination, of always being "here and there and back again", of never truly having "sever(ed) the cord straight through/ in one brave stroke" ("Burden" *NH* 19) and that emerges from time in lines that make reference to the surreptitious seeds that were planted in the common garden of his past.

This rhetoric of blame appears to permeate the consciousness of many writers of the Malaysian Chinese diaspora whose cultural memory of the older country lies entombed with the ghost of the 1969 racial riots and the departure that ensued. What is even more significant is the fact that such memories and feelings inevitably spill over into the diasporic imaginary of the younger generation. There are a number of young writers of Malaysian Chinese descent who have recently emerged in the contemporary literary scene. Amongst these are Hsu Ming Teo, Tash Aw and Yang May Ooi. Evocations of Malaysia in their writings are perceptibly coloured by the legacy of the dark memories that pervaded the consciousness of writers of Ee's generation. Intimations of these can be gleaned in Hsu-Ming Teo's novel, *Love and Vertigo,* as the ensuing section will demonstrate.

Hsu-Ming Teo

Hsu-Ming Teo was born in 1970 in Malaysia and went to live in Australia in 1977. *Love and Vertigo* (2000), her first novel, oscillates between three countries, Singapore, Malaysia and Australia. Though Teo is seen to be affiliated with Malaysia, and certainly appraised as articulating her ethnic history with clarity of creative and artistic skill, the image of Malaysia that she shapes comes to the fore as a remembered reality, through the glimpses caught from the morsels of both memory and filial visits to this estranged home/ancestral land. The most significant issue that resides at the heart of her novel *Love and Vertigo* is, much like the subject matter of Ee's poetry above, the overwhelming sense of repudiation of the Chinese community by the Malays in Malaysia, as remembered by Grace, the protagonist. Grace's mother, Pandora, is Singaporean while her father, Jonah, is Malaysian. Grace herself is Malaysian born but having migrated with the family to Australia at the tender age of seven, is Australian in all but birth.

In the novel, Malaysia is a site of perennial violence and anxiety that induces migration in two generations in the history of Grace's family. The following is how the racial riots of 1969 are described in the novel:

> Malay Muslims, incited by the youth of the United Malay National Organisation, went on a jihad against Malaysian Chinese and Indians, murdering some, maiming others. The killing spree had been organised according to a precise café colour scheme: after *susu* (the milky white Chinese) then *kopi* (the coffee-coloured Indians). (11)

These lines are also the first glimpse of Malaysia in the novel. Jonah's mother (Grace's paternal grandmother) decides to move to Singapore with her son in the aftermath of a violent communist insurgence, insisting that "he would have a better chance of gaining a place at university if he didn't come from an obscure village in Malaya" (90). Jonah meets and marries Pandora, Grace's mother, in Singapore and she induces her husband to move twice, once from Singapore to Malaysia as she wanted to move "far away" from his domineering mother and again in the aftermath of the 1969 race riots, this time to Australia.

For Pandora, Malaysia equals the site of aggression and ethnic Othering and these heavily impinge on her daughter's consciousness as seen in the stories she recollects of the racial riots of 1969 that come to the fore weighing heavily on the side of a victimised and largely guilt-free Chinese community facing the violence of a *parang* wielding Malay community. The image of the *parang* becomes an almost permanent fixture to the figure of the Malay in Grace's mind, the last an image that is frequently evoked in the novel. She remembers that

> While Chinese and Indians were being sliced with sharp-bladed *parangs* in the streets of Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, my mother was screaming from the pain of childbirth, safe under the Sultan's protection, while my father hunted durians. (12)

The incident alludes to the birth of her brother, Sonny, embraced by bloodshed and violence all around. Malaysia thus becomes a malevolent shadow that lurks in Grace's subconscious, remaining largely fossilised on the shores of the memories of the 1969 racial riots, with an even harsher tone than that apparent in Ee's poetry.

In her reading of the Chinese Australian experience as depicted in three novels, amongst which Teo's *Love and Vertigo* is featured, Lyn Jacobs writes that "identity, sexual and familial love, and cross-cultural encounters are interrogated and complicated [in these novels] by an inability to forget the past which over-shadows the business of survival". This appears to be at the core of the representation of the Malaysian past, as the memories, are "no longer reality but history" (2); in fact they are not part of her reality as they stem from a legacy of memories that are inherited but never lived. Her parents' inability to forget the past informs Grace's present and eclipses her survival of it in the present. Yet interestingly enough at the point at which the Tays migrate to Australia, the country has only just begun to emerge from the prejudicial "White Australia Policy" and its shadow looms heavily on the lives of the younger Tays :

> We grew to hate the sound of our voices, and those of our parents. They loved all things British, but they could not speak English. Their accents, their syntax and their vocabulary mirrored in language our cultural difference and our social leprosy before the age of multiculturalism. (178)

Grace is taunted verbally but her brother Sonny becomes the victim of actual physical abuse and would come home "sporting ugly bruises everyday" (177). However, the incidents of ethnic othering that Grace and Sonny experience in Australia seem to fade into the creases in the pages of the story she tells. They are not related in accusatory tones, emphasising mostly the linguistic barriers that stand in the way of cultural encounters. The overall impression of this is the identification as Australian, which does not come across as too problematic. In fact Australia signifies freedom for Grace, in terms of her gendered identity as opposed to her mother's subjugation as a Chinese female in Singapore and her being othered as a Chinese in Malaysia.

It is however interesting to note that the memory of the country for Grace's father is strikingly different. In many ways Jonah is reminiscent of Ee Tiang Hong, reflecting the same split subjectivity in his relationship with the homeland. Grace remembers her father constantly comparing the state of affairs in Australia with

Malaysia and perennially insisting that he would have been better off had he not migrated:

> To have crossed the boundary of the familiar had been no easy feat for this reluctant Chinese Odysseus. He took a deep breath and did it – then he never stopped complaining about it for the rest of his life, reminding his family of the sacrifices made and the opportunities lost. (10)

When faced with intergenerational conflicts commonly associated with diasporic families, his sense of regret is almost immediately evoked :

> "Don't walk away while I'm talking to you,' he said, his voice trembling from outrage laced with hurt. 'That's the rudest thing you could ever do to a Chinese father. If I had known you all would turn out like this I would never have given up my practice in Malaysia and immigrated to Australia. My old partner is now a millionaire.' (234)

Yet his sense of bitterness constantly emerges as well in scenes like the following :

> 'Just remember May 13, 1969,' he told us, 'and be thankful that you're here instead of Kuala Lumpur. We could all have been killed. And if I hadn't sacrificed my career and all the money I could make there in order to bring you kids here for a good education, like all the other Chinese, you'd be suffering discrimination by the Malays in the schools and universities. So just be grateful you're Australian" (182)

Faced with conflicting memories of Malaysia, Grace's vision of it consequently oscillates between a sense of aloofness and inherited betrayal and ultimately it becomes apparent that the narrative space becomes a portal for negotiating the repressed history of her mother, Pandora, and thus by association her mother's motherland, the 'womb of space' that is Singapore: "I can begin to accept that part of me which is embedded here and refuses to wither away no matter how many times I chop and sear those roots" (271), thoughts that cross her mind towards the close of her narrative. While she manages to arrive at some form of reconciliation with her father, his homeland does not receive the same conciliatory gesture.

It can be surmised that Malaysia plays a ghostly role in the imagination of the two diasporic Malaysian Chinese writers, whose cultural memory of the older country lies entombed with the ghost of the 1969 racial riots. When these writings are taken to be authentic renditions of ethnic heritage as part of multicultural politics, the implications are far more serious as they present a version of Malaysia that is far removed from her reality. As Graham Huggan puts it

> Such writings may be considered on the one hand as capitalising – mendaciously in some cases – from the portrayal of a cultural otherness set in apparent opposition to the Anglo-Celtic mainstream but, on the other, as falling victim to the self-serving establishment desire to assign and manipulate categories of cultural difference by attributing value to literary works primarily rewarded for representing a fetishised 'ethnic voice' ... What is at stake here in other words, is not just the cultural authenticity – or lack of it – supposedly embodied in these writers and their writings, but the degree of agency they are able to exercise over the production and, no less important, the subsequent reception of their book. (138)

The question that must be asked is thus 'should Malaysia be perennially enshrouded by the spectre of the ghastly episode of the 1969 race riots that ultimately sits at the heart of most diasporic articulations of her past', or can a reconciliation be initiated with these estranged and embittered kinfolk? Both Ee and Teo migrated to Australia amidst the interstices and intersections of the shadows of two national anxieties, the host land's 'white Australia' policy and the 'ethnic affirmative action' policy of Malaysia, the first through direct experience, the other via a legacy of memories. Should the anxieties of the Malaysian racial riots of 1969 eclipse the spectre of prejudicial 'white Australia' in the minds of Malaysian diasporics in Australia? More importantly, do these anxieties still haunt the memory of Malaysia and consequently stand in the way of a reconciliation with the nation that could have been home?

There needs to be a sustained effort to initiate a reconciliation with the memory of Malaysia amongst the Malaysian diaspora across the globe through examining the perceptions that they have of Malaysia and to exorcise the demons of the past. Perhaps this can be done by re-examining the role that Malaysia has symbolically in the lives of its diaspora and to note the points at which it intersects with the reality of contemporary Malaysia as opposed to the imagined Malaysia of the past and thus working towards altering essentialist perceptions of the 'older' country. The first two writers discussed in the previous section found their own pathways as they stayed and negotiated with such imminent hegemonic transformations, and in so doing attempted also to merge the myths and metaphors of a Malaysian Chinese existence. Comparative discussions such as the ones put forth in this article can pave the way towards reconciling Malaysian Chinese identity both within the nation and its diaspora as it provides spaces for the inquiry into the various angles of the confrontation with and re-contextualising of perceived anxieties that obstruct the growth and perceptions of Malaysian nationhood. The privileging of the Malay community, airtight censorship laws, national language policies and all the other issues that drove so many out are the realities of Malaysian nationhood but they are no obstacles to the local literary vision, which has had the profound ability to flourish and grow and quite effectively proved many of its premature sceptics wrong.

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