Vandana Saxena, *Memory and Nation-Building: World War II in Malaysian Literature*. London: Routledge, 2021. 180pp. ISBN: 978-0-367763-02-2.

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Published under the Routledge Studies in Contemporary Literature series, Vandana Saxena's study interprets a selection of novels whose range includes titles by both Western and local writers, and in the case of the latter, that are written in, or translated (from Bahasa Malaysia) into, English, although with a bias for texts published in the new millennium. The study's somewhat eclectic selection of fiction potentially allows for a reading approach that not only juxtaposes Western and local perspectives, but also compares the perspectives of different ethnic groups, regarding the subject matter. Divided into eight chapters, the first, which serves as the introduction, outlines the trajectory of the project and the focus of each chapter, while the second explains the theoretical framework enlisted as guide for interpreting texts in chapters three to eight – a framework interrelating memory, history, and culture/literature based on the works of Jan and Aleida Assman, Paul Ricouer, and Renate Lachmann, respectively, among others. Chapter three further refines the framework to clarify the significance of the aforementioned concepts' imbrication to nation-building by adding the scholarship of Mikhail Bakhtin to the theoretical mix and directly engaging Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005) for investigating the efficacy of the framework when applied to texts. Expanding the concepts of collective and cultural memory, the chapter further demonstrates how historiography – which is the formation of history and in the case of Aw's novel involves the multiplicated, ambiguous history of its protagonist, Johnny Lim, and his myriad exploits – comprises competing memories, and in turn underscores the importance of personal and cultural records as reinforcement of, or as counteractive or even correction to, the collective memory touted as authoritative in the process of nation-building. Taking a more gendered reading position is chapter four's examination of Rani Manicka's novel, *The Rice Mother* (2002), to illustrate how the diaspora experience can conceivably emancipate women from the traditional scripts by which they (and their female successors) will have to abide if they had remained in their original homeland. This is possible, the chapter postulates, because migration enables the creation of new and post-memories to then help resignify the role of (in this case) Indian women, a role that "emphasizes the hybridity of cultural identity, experiences and practices that results from displacement and cultural shifts" (85) and has the potential to contribute to nation-building.

Notable in chapter six is the enlistment of Leyla Shuri's *Morning Momiji* (2019), a translation of her Malay novel, *Pagi Semerah Daun Momiji* (2013),[1] for analysis with the aim to illustrate how the Japanese Occupation of Malaya during World War II has been reimagined by a Malay writer. A proposition of the chapter is that the novel aligns with the revisionist version (or memory) of the event promoted by the state – a version that allegedly downplays the atrocity perpetrated by the Japanese army (on particularly the Chinese) to indirectly abet the then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad's "Look East Policy". This policy was put into effect in the early 1980s to encourage stronger bilateral ties with Japan and the emulation of its values (instead of Western, and hence decadent, values) in the pursuit of becoming a developed nation. Moving from a local novel to a Western one, chapter seven focusses its discussion on Noel Barber's *Tanamera* (1981) but unlike the others, also considers the question of reception by contemporary, non-professional readers to gauge the reason for the novel's continuing popularity and what this signifies in the context of postcolonialism. When it comes to chapter eight, the study's attention shifts to an exploration of the possibility of literature as a medium capable of reconciling victims to the trauma perpetrated on them (and by extension, their tormentors) to catalyse forgiveness and healing. Premising its argument on Tan Twan Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2013), the chapter posits that literature can serve as an "alternative narrative" to that of justice-seeking and victim reparation informed by the "hegemonic conflictive ethos" (163) of international tribunals whose effectiveness, the chapter further contends, has hitherto only left more to be desired. Extending from the previous chapter and concurrently bringing the study to a close is chapter eight, which asserts that "Malaysian memories" of the War must deemphasize the official, collective memory to instead take into account the divergent perspectives notwithstanding the ethnicity of both direct and proxy witnesses (i.e. succeeding generations who learned of, but did not experience, the war), the latter in the form, among others, of prosthetic memories (of which literature is an example).

Undoubtedly an important contribution to scholarship on Malaysian literature, Saxena's study is, however, also marred by a host of shortcomings too conspicuous to ignore or dismiss as incidental, either because of their frequency or their egregiousness bordering on indeterminacy. An example of the former is the proliferation of language and construction problems whose fault is certainly the publisher's but partly the author's as well especially when it comes to the use of incorrect words (e.g., "embroidered" for "embellished", "strife" as a verb, "outsidedness" for "outsideness", and so on). Not only does this consistently disrupt reading, it also further complicates the reader's attempt to comprehend what is already a complex discourse. Constituting the latter, on the one hand, is the ambivalent position assumed by the study that leaves the reader wondering what the argument (which requires taking a distinct side) precisely is in the first place. Take, for instance, the concluding chapter whose adulation of Malaysian literature's potential role as prosthetic memory that encourages understanding and

empathy to achieve transcendence over experiences of War atrocities is abruptly inverted into a criticism of how its global success potentially overrides local realities in order to pander to an international readership, thus reifying the question of literature's value as cultural memory and annulling the argument that has already been established. There is also the issue, on the other hand, regarding certain professed claims that are either contradictory or biased (although likely unconscious). Evincing the first is chapter six whose criticism against the continuing popularity of *Tanamera* due to a (Western) readership informed by nostalgia (of the colonial past) indirectly contradicts (and hence undermines) the study's own assertion about the imperative to be inclusive of disparate memories (even those considered unpopular by the study) as part of historiography's process. Exemplifying the second is chapter five whose assertion of a Malay novel's determination by the state's revisionist history is already a red flag, which is then compounded by an interpretation framed against the context of Mahathir's "Look East Policy" that would only be persuasive if the original novel was written in the 1980s or early 1990s, not 2013, when considering how the policy has been developing autonomously from the government since the turn of the century, and is hence no longer a state priority (Pandian et al, 10). A likelier reason – at least to me – for the novel's affirmative depiction of Japanese characters despite its setting in Malaya during WWII is the fact that the author is married to a Japanese and now considers Japan her home. Alternatively, it could be related to its setting of a kampung within which its homogeneously Malay inhabitants are confined and isolated from the outside world as a result of the ongoing war. Understood alongside the fact that the Malays were viewed as non-threatening, and were therefore treated more favourably, by the Japanese army, it is unsurprising that the kampung's inhabitants would be oblivious to the atrocities perpetrated by the Japanese on their distant neighbours, particularly the Chinese. In this regard, the novel's reluctance to portray the brutalities committed by Japanese soldiers has less to do with conformity to state agenda and more with ensuring verisimilitude. The chapter's concentration on a single ethnic novel to censure its positive portrayal of the Japanese indubitably suggests that only works underscoring the cruelty of the Imperial Army – like Chin Kee Onn's *Ma-Rai-Ee* (1952) – would be deemed authentic memory. Not only does this interpretation betray the chapter's (unconscious) bias, it also reifies the earlier problem of the study's self-contradiction that would invariably confuse the reader about what its argument precisely is in the first place. There are also issues with the study's ethical suasion like the proposition that "the working out of traumatic memories [in fiction] undercuts the poststructuralist psychological theories of trauma which describe the experience as a 'breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world'" [161],[2] which is tantamount to saying that literature is more capable of effecting healing from trauma than the scholarship of practising psychologists with years of experience.

But perhaps the most glaring shortcoming of Saxena's study is its misleading title. I may be wrong here, but I suspect that what would interest the reader is not the generic main title, *Memory and Nation-Building*, but its more specific subtitle, *World War II in Malaysian Literature*, whose discussion is nonetheless merely tangential, like an afterthought at best, despite the introductory chapter's sustained proclamation of how the history of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya is integral to the study. Rephrasing my point slightly, while the study deliberately includes texts that are clearly set against the backdrop of Malaya during WWII, its argument tends to place more emphasis on history, memory, the ethical role of literature, colonial nostalgia, postcolonial readership, nation-building, and so on – basically everything but the War, to which the study refers only occasionally as part of the aforementioned list of topics' discussion – rather than the War itself whether in terms of its representation, its significance to Malaysian literature as a trope (not a questionable ethical referent), its connection to trauma according to individual novels (which the study consistently mentions but never illustrates), and for lack of a better term, its "gendering", to offer just a few suggestions. In the end, all these drawbacks invariably lead me to wonder if the study was possibly written in haste, in which case the fault is certainly the publisher's, knowing how unreasonable publishers can be with deadlines and how breaching them is a risk an up-and-coming scholar would understandably want to avoid.

Notes

[1] A direct translation of this title is "Morning as Red as a Momiji Leaf".

[2] Inset quote: Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996, p. 4.

Works Cited

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