

How to talk about Malaysian novels in English without reading any: introduction

First of ten weekly articles for Star Two by Chuah Guat Eng, published on 4 August 2015

No, no sarcasm is intended in the title. It simply reflects the popular perception that Malaysians seldom, if ever, read Malaysian novels in English (MNE) – apart, of course, from the half dozen or so that have won international literary prizes in recent years. If this perception is our reality, then we simply have to accept that the bulk of MNEs belongs in that universal pile of unappreciated and forgotten books, which Margaret Cohen, professor of French and Comparative Literature at Stanford University, calls the “great unread”. This doesn’t mean, however, that we can’t talk about the MNE. According to Franco Moretti, another scholar, one doesn’t have to – indeed, can’t – read every novel in a particular society or era in order to understand and comment on the genre’s development, its evolution as a literary art form, and its social and cultural dimensions.

But *how* do we talk about novels we haven’t read and probably will never read? It seems to me we can talk about them based on vague impressions, anecdotal hearsay, and subjective or ideologically coloured opinions. Or we can talk about them based on facts, statistics, and documented history. This series of articles is for those who prefer the second alternative.

In these articles, I explore the development of the MNE from 1965 to 2014. I have chosen 1965 as my starting point because that was the year Singapore left the Malaysian federation, leaving us the Malaysia we know now; and I stop at 2014 because it is difficult to talk about developmental trends while they are still unfolding. My focus is on the sociological dimensions of the genre, and not on the literary aspects of the novels. No attempt will be made to foreground or discuss the literary merits of any individual novel. Instead, I shall discuss developments and trends in three interrelated areas without which no literature (or any tradition of writing) can exist or be sustained. These are the community of writers, the publishing scene, and the activities undertaken by society to build up a community of readers.

The 50 years of development being explored are divided into three periods. The first, from 1965 – 1993, I call “Lean Years” because relatively few novels were published. My research

shows that only 16 new novels by local writers were published during those 28 years, all written by men born either well before or soon after the Second World War.

The theme of the second period, from 1994 to 2003, is “New Initiatives and New Paradigms”. In 1994, the MNE landscape changed in some fundamental ways, the full effects of which became manifest only in the 21st century. The most significant of these changes were the debut and dominance of women novelists; the rise of self-published authors, who often made use of the (then) newly available Internet and its social networking potential to market themselves and their works; and the supportive role of some public institutions and private individuals in expanding the community of readers.

The third period, from 2004 to 2014, is given the title “Going Global”. During this decade, we witness a sudden and fairly well sustained increase in the number of new “Malaysian” novels published each year. These new novels were not limited to those written by locally-based Malaysian citizens. Many of them were by members of the “Malaysian Diaspora”, former Malaysians who had chosen to be either citizens or permanent residents of other countries; and a few were by expatriates or foreign nationals residing in Malaysia. The other “global” aspect of developments in this decade was the dynamic expansion of IT-enabled social networking applications which made it possible for writers and publishers to reach potential readers and book buyers locally and internationally.

The entry of the Diaspora writers into what had up to then been the domain of locally-based writers, was unsettling in two ways. On the positive side, the fact that their works had been published by major international publishing houses and subsequently won internationally prestigious literary prizes had a catalytic effect on the MNE scene. It encouraged many locally-based writers to take on the challenge of writing novels instead of short stories, gave local and regional publishing houses the incentive to open their doors to aspiring novelists, and motivated a number of enterprising individuals to set up their own independent publishing concerns. On the less positive side, the propensity of Diaspora and expatriate novelists to identify themselves and their works as “Malaysian” led to much debate and quite a bit of soul searching among locals as to how the term “Malaysian novels in English” should be defined. I do not intend to engage in these debates in my articles.

For my purpose, “Malaysian novels in English” is defined as book-length (min. 75,000 words), single-story, fictional prose narratives published after 1965 and originally written in English by writers who present themselves (e.g. in interviews and biographical notes) as having some kind of “homeland” relationship with Malaysia.

I recognise three kinds of “homeland” relationships. The first is the “only homeland” relationship of the “home-based” Malaysian citizen locally born, bred, and domiciled. The second is the “former homeland” relationship of the Diaspora Malaysian, born and/or -bred in this country, but now mainly domiciled in another country as a citizen or permanent resident of that country. The third is the “second homeland” relationship of the “expatriate”, a foreign national born and/or bred in, and citizen of, another country, who, for personal or professional reasons, now or in the past, has made a second home in Malaysia and writes fiction with a Malaysian setting.

I conclude this brief overview of the explorations to come with a note of thanks to the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, which funded my research from 2011 to 2013 under the Post-Doctoral Research Fellowship Scheme. The aim of the research was to develop a non-ethnocentric, sociology-based paradigm for MNE studies.

Author’s Bio.

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