

How to talk about Malaysian novels in English without reading any

The Lean Years 1965 – 1993: The Writers.

Second of ten weekly articles by Chuah Guat Eng, published on 11 August 2015

Some years ago, I came across a report of an interview with a Diaspora writer who had recently won international acclaim with his first novel. When asked by the local journalist whether he had been influenced by other Malaysian novelists, he replied that he never knew there were Malaysians writing novels in English – or words to that effect. Even though many English-educated, well-read Malaysians might well have answered in the same way, his reply didn't endear him to some local writers and critics. It probably added fuel to the debate in subsequent years as to whether literary works by those who have emigrated should be considered Malaysian. Yet, to be fair, that novelist's response would have been perfectly understandable if he had left the country in the late '80s or early '90s.

Between 1965 and 1993, the Malaysian novel in English (MNE) genre could hardly be said to exist. As far as I know, only 17 new novels by local writers were published during those 28 years. Several reasons for the low productivity have been suggested, all of them plausible; namely, lack of interest on the part of publishers, lack of support from local readers, and an unfavourable political environment. Since I shall be discussing the publishing scene and the reading community in the next two articles, I shall for now briefly discuss the political environment – from my personal perspective because I can't speak for everyone who has lived through that era.

Sometimes, when I hear or read what Malaysians of my generation say about how peaceful and harmonious the nation was in their youth, I wonder which nation they might be referring to. In my experience, the '60s, '70s, and '80s was a time of political upheavals; each one rolling seamlessly into the next: the Malaysian Malaysia versus Malay-Malaysia debates soon after the formation of Malaysia, the May'69 riots, the students' demonstrations of the 1970s, and Operation *Lalang* in 1987. Each upheaval brought to the surface issues we're still grappling with today. And they brought in their wake laws that suppressed freedom of thought and expression: the Sedition Act, the Internal Security Act, the 1972 Universities and University Colleges Act, and the Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1984.

For me, as a young, aspiring novelist, these laws were inhibiting. The Sedition Act was particularly worrisome because it criminalised the raising of “sensitive issues”, a term so vaguely defined that it could mean anything and everything one wanted to write about. On top of that, there was the nagging feeling that to write in English was somehow to be a traitor to the national cause – and so I made a bonfire of my notes and my dreams of writing.

But there were those who wrote and, having written, published. Thirteen of them, by my count, and they published 17 novels between them. It is these hardy souls who wrote in unfavourable times that I wish to celebrate in this article.

Let me begin by giving you their names and the titles of their novels, in the order of when they first came on the MNE scene as novelists.

Johnny Ong, *Run Tiger Run* (1965); *The Long White Sands* (1977)

Anthony bin Thomas (T. J. Anthony), *The Nightmare of Youth* (1970); *The Search* (1978).

Tee, K. S., *Jessica* (1970)

Tan, Kheang Yeang, *Sauce of Life. A Novel* (1974)

Lloyd Fernando, *Scorpion Orchid* (1976); *Green is the Colour* (1993)

Chelvam, M. Paskra, *Salem* (1977)

Ewe Paik Leong, *Bandits!* (1980)

Lee Kok Liang, *Flowers in the Sky* (1981)

K. S. Maniam, *The Return* (1981); *In a Far Country* (1993)

Mohd. Tajuddin Samsuddin, *The Price Has Been High* (1984)

Chin Kee Onn, *Twilight of the Nyonyas* (1984)

Bhattacharjee, B.C., *The Immigrant*. (1989)

Alex Ling, *Golden Dreams of Borneo* (1993)

Many of you would have heard of Lloyd Fernando and K. S. Maniam, and possibly Lee Kok Liang. Their novels have been studied by literary scholars for many years and much has been written about them. Those who have read Zawiah Yahya’s *Malay Characters in*

Malaysian Novels in English may remember reading about the novels of Johnny Ong, Ewe Paik Leong, Chin Kee Onn, and Mohd. Tajuddin Samsuddin.

One would, however, have to search very hard to find out anything about the other novels because most of them are now out of print and unavailable. Which is a pity, because I would dearly love to be able read – or at least talk about – M. P. Chelvam’s *Salem*, set in Kedah during World War II; T. J. Anthony’s *The Search*, about the May ‘69 riots; B. C. Bhattacharjee’s *The Immigrant*, about Indian immigrants in Malaya from 1906 to 1945; and Alex Ling’s *Golden Dreams of Borneo*, a historical novel about the Chinese gold miners of Borneo during the time of the first Raja Brooke. But strangely enough, I can find no mention of them in any scholarly history of Malaysian literature that I’ve come across – not even as examples of “minor literature”. It would seem that as far as MNE scholars and most Malaysians are concerned, these novels have never existed. Why is this so?

The only reason I can think of is that these forgotten novels were not published by mainstream publishers; they were, as far as I can tell, self-published. Can it be that, wittingly or unwittingly, our scholars have made mainstream (and, especially, international) publishers the creators of our nation’s English-language literary “canon”?

Let’s see if we can find an answer to this question when we explore the publishing scene in the next article.