

## **How to talk about Malaysian novels in English without reading any**

### **The Lean Years 1965 – 1993: Who’s Reading?**

*Fourth of ten weekly articles by Chuah Guat Eng, published on 25 August 2015*

We have seen how, during the formative years of the Malaysian novel in English (MNE), writers wrote and published in spite of the unsettling political environment and the uncertain support of the nascent book publishing industry. What kept them going? Was it because they knew they could depend on English-literate Malaysians queuing up by the hundreds to buy their latest book? Need we ask?

During those three decades, several surveys of Malaysian reading and book-buying habits were carried out. Running through all of them is a common theme: Malaysians have little interest in reading for cultural and intellectual enrichment. Yes, they all claimed to place a high value on academic achievements. Yes, each generation of interviewees enjoyed a higher level of literacy, education, and disposable income than the previous generation. But in 1984, it was found that the average household’s mean monthly expenditure on books (excluding textbooks) was RM4.00. And in 1993, it was reported that the average Malaysian read only half-a-page of one book (for pleasure) a year.

The figures improve when only the English-literate are taken into account. The same 1984 survey shows that their mean monthly expenditure on books was RM11.00; nearly three times that of the national mean. But they were a tiny minority; of the 6196 households interviewed, only 116 households – less than 3 percent – belonged in this category. And they were not buying local books. A 1996 study of the book trade shows that the English-literate had a marked preference for imported novels of the “pulp fiction” variety: romances, thrillers, and stories of crime and detection. Even today, if you were to walk into any book rental shop (the best place to check what Malaysians are really reading), you will find multiple rows of such novels stacked wall to wall, from floor to ceiling.

Having said that, I must confess, I was one of those English-literates who bought and read imported books. Until 1993, when I finally decided that I had to throw away nationalistic sentiments and write my novel in English before I died or went mad from grief over the state of the nation, I had only the vaguest idea of the existence of MNEs. And until

around 1999, when I started working on my doctoral thesis, I hadn't the slightest inclination to read them. I mean, *seriously* read them.

So, speaking from personal experience, I would like to add one more reason for the low readership of MNEs among Malaysians. During that period, most English-literate book buyers were unaware of the existence of local novels, simply because there was relatively little evidence of readership-building activities, whether by the government, the publishers, or privately organised discussion groups.

If there were social groups promoting the reading and discussion of MNEs, I never heard of them. The only book launch and book signing I was invited to, was a modest, quiet affair somewhat exclusive in tone. The impression I got was that everyone there (with the possible exception of me) saw themselves as part of the western-educated elite and considered the writing and reading of English-language literature as the domain of the "literati". In the local English-language newspapers, one would find the occasional review of an MNE or come across an interview with a local novelist. Invariably, the novelist interviewed would be someone with high social standing; either an academic himself, or well regarded in academic circles.

Like many governments of young nations, the Malaysian government perceived local literature as a means of promoting the national identity and image. But because of the national language and literature policies, the government was officially committed to promoting only Malay-language literature.

Yet – and this may come as a surprise to many – it is largely because of the readership-building activities of government institutions that we can talk today about the early development, albeit slow and sporadic, of the MNE genre. Two institutions are mentioned – and celebrated – here.

One is the public libraries. The National Library routinely keeps copies of newly published MNEs for their archives. But it should be noted that state, district and municipal lending libraries frequently purchased copies of MNEs for the benefit of their readers.

The other, more dynamic, and therefore more significant institution would be the public universities; more specifically, their departments of English language and literature. Although low-key and infrequent at first, the universities' readership-building activities included reviews and scholarly articles in local, regional, and Commonwealth academic

journals; the presentation of research papers at regional and international literature conferences; the inclusion of MNEs as texts in language, linguistics, literature, and cultural studies courses; and, eventually, the introduction of courses for the exclusive study of MNEs. Zawiah Yahya's *Malay Characters in Malaysian Novels in English* (1988), which I have cited before, is particularly significant because it pioneered an approach to MNEs that took away the stigma of studying works written in the language of the former colonial master.

But, as I've pointed out, the novels taught were confined to those published by mainstream publishers, and mainstream publishers tended to publish MNEs by authors with some standing in academic circles. As a result, the MNE world had a coterie-like character; exclusive, elitist, intellectual, and dry – beyond the reach of ordinary readers.

It seems appropriate to end this first part of our journey by celebrating the as yet unpublished writings of the late Feroz Dawson<sup>1</sup>, whose unexpected death in August 2012 deprived us of one of our most gifted and brilliant writers. In 1994, then 27, he appended this note to one of his published short stories:

I don't like the fact that most Malaysian writers are journalists, lecturers and lawyers. For our literature to be vibrant, we need criminals, maladjusted youngsters and psychotic housewives to write fiction. Then we'll raise some eyebrows.

His voice – non-conforming, non-mainstream, and anti-highbrow – became the signature voice of the MNE writers who made their debut from 1994 onward.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing this article, I was unaware that a collection of Feroz Merican's short stories, *Ladder in the Water*, had been published in 2012. . See my review, written in 2021, under Book Reviews below.