

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

### **New Initiatives & Paradigms 1994 – 2003: The Women Novelists**

*Fifth of ten weekly articles by Chuah Guat Eng, published on 3 September 2015*

By 1993, the popular perception of the Malaysian novel in English (MNE) was that it was “serious” literature written exclusively by elderly male academics, and read only by ever-shrinking numbers of English-literature students in local universities.

In 1994, two women launched their first novels, one a murder mystery, the other a romance. From then on, the popular perception of MNE began to change. In the years that followed, more new novelists appeared on the scene. The more prolific ones published two or three novels in as many years, so that for the first time, new MNEs were launched nearly every year. By the end of 2003, there were 12 new novelists, and they accounted for 17 of the 20 novels published that decade.

Seven of the new novelists were home-based and five were diaspora writers. Ten (or 83 percent) were women. Most were born in the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s. Only one or two were academics; the rest were professionals in law, finance, advertising and marketing, public relations, and journalism.

The majority of the novels were popular genre fiction – murder mysteries, romances, thrillers, historical fantasies, tales of horror and suspense – and they were all written by non-academics. Only four novels (Beth Yahp’s *The Crocodile Fury*, Shirley Lim’s *Joss and Gold*, Lee Kok Liang’s *London Does Not Belong to Me*, K.S. Maniam’s *Between Lives*) were written in the “literary” style characteristic of pre-1994 MNEs. Unsurprisingly, their authors were connected in one way or another to the academic world.

The most notable feature of the MNE scene in 1994-2003 was the dominance of women novelists, not only in terms of numbers but also in terms of productivity – the 10 of them published 14 novels. This and the next two articles celebrate these women, especially the home-based ones, who helped to build a wider readership for MNEs by writing in the popular fiction mode, but whose novels have not received the attention they deserve.

It is often assumed that because the home-based women novelists wrote “pop” fiction, their novels don’t address important social and national issues, at least not with the

same seriousness and insight that the “academic” novelists do. Lurking in that assumption is some prejudice or, perhaps, snobbery. It doesn’t take more than one reading of their murder mysteries, romances, and historical fantasies to discern that many do deal seriously with important social and national issues. They’re just more subtle about it.

Sometimes they weave the issues into the plot. Uma Mahendran’s *The Twice Born* has a fantasy-like plot, in which a man in a coma relives a past life in the Indus Valley at the time of the Aryan invasion. Through his experiences of the racial, political, religious and other conflicts arising from that encounter between two civilisations, the author addresses similar conflicts and issues in Malaysia.

Sometimes they hide the issues in the way the story is told. In Ellina Abdul Majid’s *Khairunnisa: A Good Woman*, a young Englishwoman married to a Malay tells of her experiences of life, love, and marriage in a well-to-do Malay family. As a foreigner, she reports what people say and do without understanding the full implications. But it is through her innocent and truthful accounts that the author critiques the way of life and mindset of post-NEP privileged Malays.

Sometimes they make use of the limitations and everyday trivialities of the average woman’s life – the family, the community, love, marriage, food, clothes – to address matters of national importance. In Aneeta Sundararaj’s *The Banana Leaf Men*, Rani Manicka’s *Rice Mother*, and Shoba Mano’s *Love’s Treacherous Terrain*, the narrative focus is on characters and life in South Asian communities. But the nature of life in these communities is depicted as culturally diverse. Many of the characters have other-ethnic friends, lovers, or spouses; and some prefer other-ethnic food and clothes. What is interesting is that these preferences for the other-ethnic are used to dramatise inter-personal, inter-group, and inter-generational conflicts related to ethnic identity and cultural traditions. The community is thus like a microcosm of the nation, with its never-ending problem of trying to forge social integration and national unity out of a culturally diverse and divided society.

Very often, the women novelists address social problems with a far better grasp of reality and with more profound insights than male novelists do. This is certainly true of novels dealing with the oppression and abuse of women and girls. In the MNEs written by men in 1965-1993, abused women are usually portrayed as victims of poverty, culturally endorsed male chauvinism, and their own unquestioning acceptance of their worthlessness. Physical and sexual forms of parental, spousal, or fraternal abuse are seldom mentioned or, if

mentioned, glossed over. On the rare occasion that a woman succeeds in escaping her situation, she disappears from the novel as soon as she walks away; we are not told whether and how she will survive.

In contrast, in the women's novels (e.g. Chuah Guat Eng's *Echoes of Silence*, Ellina Abdul Majid's *Perhaps in Paradise*, Yang-May Ooi's *The Flame Tree*, Marie Gerrina Louis' *The Eleventh Finger*, Rani Manicka's *Rice Mother*) the oppressed females are nearly all from higher social and economic strata. The violence done to them is not just psychological, it is physical; and acts of cruelty such as parental brutality, wife-battering, and fraternal rape are described without sentimentality. Significantly, the abused women are not portrayed as helpless victims, but as victors: strong-willed women who take steps to break free and start a new life. And the story of their self-empowerment and survival is central to the novel's plot.

In this overview of MNEs by women, I have highlighted the novelists' skill in using the conventions of popular fiction to deal with serious social and national issues. In the next article, I shall discuss how those who chose to self-publish set new paradigms for the production, promotion, and marketing of local MNEs.

### **Novels published 1993 - 2003**

#### **Home-based**

1. Chuah Guat Eng. *Echoes of Silence* (1994)
2. Marie Gerrina Louis. *The Road to Chandibole* (1994); *Junos* (1995); *The Eleventh Finger* (2000)
3. Hamid Yusof. *The Thirdway Factor* (1996)
4. Ellina Abdul Majid. *Perhaps in Paradise* (1997); *Khairunnisa: A Good Woman* (1998).
5. Alex Ling. *Twilight of the White Rajahs* (1997)
6. Uma Mahendran. *The Twice Born* (1998)
7. Shoba Mano. *Love's Treacherous Terrain* (2003)
8. Aneeta Sundararaj. *The Banana Leaf Men* (2003)
9. Lee Kok Liang. *London Does Not Belong to Me* (2003)
10. K. S. Maniam. *Between Lives* (2003)

#### **Diaspora**

11. Beth Yahp. *The Crocodile Fury* (1995)
12. Tunku Halim Abdullah. *Dark Demon Rising* (1997); *Vermillion Eye* (2000)
13. Yang-May Ooi. *The Flame Tree* (1998); *Mindgame* (2000)
14. Shirley Geok-lin Lim. *Joss and Gold* (2001)
15. Rani Manicka. *The Rice Mother* (2002)