

How to talk about Malaysian novels in English without reading any

New Initiatives & Paradigms 1994 – 2003: The Publishing Scene

Sixth of ten weekly articles by Chuah Guat Eng, published on 8 September 2015

In my earlier survey of the local publishing scene in 1965-1993, I noted that it was only between 1976 and 1984 that Malaysian novels in English (MNEs) were published by locally based mainstream publishers. The rest of the time, novelists had to resort to foreign small presses or self-publishing. One of the consequences is that the self-published books are now mostly forgotten and unread.

The situation in 1994-2003 was very similar. However, the new generation of self-published authors (all women) have been more successful in ensuring their novels do not vanish into oblivion. Today, nearly 20 years after their first publication, some of their novels are still being bought and read. In my previous article, I discussed how these women opened up new possibilities for the development of MNE by crafting discourses of national and social importance into popular fiction forms. In this article, I celebrate the fact that, through their efforts to produce and sell their self-published works, they set new paradigms for the local promotion, marketing, and distribution of MNEs.

An examination of who published which MNEs launched in 1994-2003 reveals the fragmented nature of the local publishing scene. Of the 13 novels by home-based novelists, only three were published by locally based mainstream publishers: Alex Ling's *Twilight of the White Rajahs* (1997) by the Sarawak Literary Society based in Kuching; and K. S. Maniam's *Between Lives* and Lee Kok Liang's *London Does Not Belong to Me*, both launched in 2003 by the newly established Maya Press. The three novels by Marie Gerrina Louis, who lives in Johor Baru and works in Singapore – *Road to Chandibole* (1994), *Junos* (1995) and *The Eleventh Finger* (2000) – were published by mainstream presses in Singapore. Hamid Yusof's *The Thirdway Factor* (1996) was published by a vanity press in the UK, and Shoba Mano's *Love's Treacherous Terrain* (2003) was published in India. The remaining five novels – Ellina A. Majid's *Perhaps in Paradise* (1997) and *Khairunnisa: A Good Woman* (1998), Uma Mahendran's *The Twice Born* (1998), Aneeta Sundararaj's *The Banana Leaf Men* (2003) and my *Echoes of Silence* (1994) – were self-published. ■

The five diasporic novelists who published during the same period had an easier time; they were all published by established publishers. Yang-May Ooi's *The Flame Tree* (1998) and *Mindgame* (2000), and Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother* (2002) were published by Hodder & Stoughton. Shirley Lim's *Joss and Gold* (2001) was published simultaneously by the Feminist Press, New York and Times Book International, Singapore. Interestingly, two novelists were published by local presses which, until then, were not known to publish fiction. Beth Yahp's *The Crocodile Fury* was published in 1996 by Strategic Information Research Development, an imprint of Gerakbudaya. Tunku Halim's *Dark Demon Rising* (1997) and *Vermillion Eye* (2000) were published by Pelanduk Publications, established in 1984 and mainly associated with non-fiction.

The pattern that emerges from this brief survey is clear. A home-based novelist who didn't live in the right place or have the right connections to a publishing house had to self-publish – or perish as novelists.

The four women novelists who self-published may or may not have been the “psychotic housewives” that Feroz Dawson had hoped would invigorate the local fiction scene. But they were certainly women with successful careers in the commercial world. In informal chats with them, I learned that their approach to writing and publishing was marked by their working-life professionalism. For one thing, they had done their market research.

As writers, they were aware of the reading public's preference for imported popular fiction. As publishers, they knew of the lack of adequately trained personnel and quality control systems in the book publishing, distribution and retailing industries. As businesswomen, they set up their own publishing companies, and took advantage of their knowledge of Information Technology to produce, publish, market, and promote their books; creating websites, blogs and social networks as and when the applications became available. They made use of their experience in public relations, advertising, and marketing to plan book launches. They worked with event planners, bookshops, universities, schools, book discussion groups, and local as well as expatriate culture-related groups to organise readings and meet-the-author sessions where they discussed their work, and sold their books.

Many of their practices, new in the 1990s, are now commonplace in the local publishing industry. But perhaps their most significant contribution to the industry is that their activities, although essentially commercial, had a community-oriented flavour. Over

time, novel writing began to lose the elitism of the past and came to be seen as achievable by anyone with the will to develop his or her writing skill.

It can be said without overstating the case that because of their efforts, the basic infrastructure required to take the MNE in a new direction was already in place locally when large international publishers began publishing, promoting and marketing the “Malaysian” novels of the diaspora.

It is often assumed that the diaspora writers, especially those who have won literary awards, are responsible for putting the MNE on the world map. The way I look at it, it seems like an oversimplification of the matter. The real cause was a series of political and economic events in the second half of the 1990s, which suddenly made Malaysia interesting to an increasingly globalised world. In my next article, I shall explore how the phenomenon of globalization helped build an international readership for the MNE.