

How to talk about Malaysian novels in English without reading any

New Initiatives & Paradigms 1994 – 2003: Readership Building in a Globalised World

Seventh of ten weekly articles by Chuah Guat Eng, published on 15 September 2015

In 1994-2003, women writers entered the Malaysian novel in English (MNE) scene, dominated it, and helped raise the publishing rate to an unprecedented average of two novels per year. But sheer output alone does not ensure a genre's viability; for MNEs to grow and develop, writers and publishers need people to read and buy their books.

Had the average English-literate Malaysian become more receptive to MNEs during this period? What was it like for a woman writer launching her first, self-published novel in Malaysia in 1994? What kind of reception could she expect?

As the first on the scene, I was told in no uncertain terms what to expect by a reviewer of my novel. "Can a Malaysian writer rise above the artistic mediocrity of his peninsular outpost of progress, which flaunts regularly some of the most mindless TV and cinema in the supposedly civilised world?!" he asks. And answers: "I know my duty, I know the tradition.... He won't. As a critic rising above the prevailing mediocrity myself, I can see that he won't." (You can read the full review below under [My Fiction](#), [Reviews of Echoes of Silence](#), [Ted Dorall](#).)

Fortunately, I too knew the tradition. Sure, I had written a Malaysian novel addressing contemporary Malaysian issues. But I had no intention of casting it into the local slough of indifference. I was fully intent on sending my little book forth into the wider world.

With that in mind, I launched my novel at the Commonwealth Club instead of a bookshop. Apart from a few close friends and the local media, my invited guests were all foreigners, mainly cultural attaches of the diplomatic corps. Half a dozen good friends, well-known figures in local professional and amateur theatre, were there to entertain my guests by reading their favourite passages from the novel. And thanks to the old school tie, the launch was officiated by the then Minister of International Trade and Industry, whose presence ensured that I even got some fifteen seconds of fame on local TV.

The launch made a small splash in the local pond, but the ripples were far-reaching. In the months that followed, I got inquiries and orders from publishers, scholars, and general readers in the UK, US, Europe, Australia, the Philippines, and Singapore. Between 1998 and 2002, I was invited to speak and read at international writers' gathering in Mauritius, Finland, and Slovenia – the last two countries a sobering reminder to Anglo-centric Malaysians that English-speaking countries alone don't constitute the "literary world".

Did I, a self-published first-time novelist in the outer wilderness of the literary world, manage all that with my one little book? Of course not. I just happened to be present at a time when local socio-political, economic, and cultural events – not to mention scandals – were making Malaysia a country of interest for the rapidly globalising world. And some of these events helped to build an international readership for the MNE.

The most significant event was the announcement in early 1991 of "Vision 2020". Its implied promise of a more liberal attitude toward the use of English did not create a desire in Malaysians to read MNEs; it seems rather to have quickened their urge to write, an urge encouraged by *The New Straits Times*, which ran annual poetry and short story writing competitions for several years. But it did lead to other events that facilitated the building of an international readership for the MNE.

As in earlier years, the universities took the lead. In November 1994, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia held an international conference, "A View of Our Own: Ethnocentric Perspectives in Literature". Significantly, it was jointly organised by the university's Language Centre, known for championing the study of local literature in English, and the National Writers Association of Malaysia, the bastion of Malay-language literature. It was a collaboration signalling that the national (and nationalist) psyche was ready to accommodate the writing, reading, and teaching of Malaysian literature in English without guilt or rancour. In November 1996, University of Malaya Kuala Lumpur organised its own conference, the International Asian Women Writers Conference. Such conferences helped bring contemporary MNEs to the attention of local and international academic communities, where there was a growing interest in the literatures of emerging nations among those specialising in postcolonial, gender, and socio-cultural studies.

One consequence of Vision 2020 was an upsurge of foreign investments in the industrial and manufacturing sectors, as well as a stepping up of infrastructure and prestige building projects in preparation for the 1998 Commonwealth Games. These activities brought

a large influx of expatriate professionals and their wives, for many of whom reading MNEs was an easy and entertaining way to get to know about the country. Local novelists were often invited to read from and discuss their works at their cultural or book-group meetings and at-home parties. Many helped spread awareness of MNEs throughout the world by buying multiple copies of the latest novels to send or take home as gifts.

But perhaps Vision 2020's most important – although inadvertent – contribution to the readership building efforts of local MNE writers was the introduction of the “Internet Age” in 1995, and its relatively rapid development through the establishment of the Multimedia Super Corridor in 1996. By enabling writers and publishers to connect instantly with large numbers of potential readers and book buyers all over the world, the Internet restructured traditional writer-publisher-reader dynamics and became a powerful readership building and marketing tool for self-published writers.

It should be noted that these efforts by home-based MNE writers to establish their presence in the literary world outside Malaysia were undertaken before major international publishers began publishing novels of the diaspora. But, like a herald of the glory diaspora writers were to bring with their award winning books, this decade we're looking at ends with Rani Manicka, a diaspora writer, winning the 2003 Commonwealth Writers Prize for her novel, *The Rice Mother*. With that, she proved my reviewer wrong: a Malaysian can indeed rise above the nation's prevailing artistic mediocrity.