

How to talk about Malaysian novels in English without reading any

Going Global 2004 – 2014: The Writers and Their Novels

Eighth of ten weekly articles by Chuah Guat Eng, published on 22 September 2015

In 1994–2003, self-published women novelists set the development of the Malaysian novel in English (MNE) on a new trajectory by proving that novelists don't have to be academics; that their novels can address serious issues in an entertaining way; and that they can use the Internet to reach readers throughout the world.

In 2004–2014, no less than 66 new MNEs were published, 12 in 2014 alone. The new output average of 6 books a year is a remarkable improvement on the 1994–2003 average of two books, and the 1965–1993 average of half a book a year.

Even more remarkable, 39 (or 87 percent) of the 45 published writers were first-time novelists, and they accounted for 61 (or 92 percent) of the novels. On top of all this, an impressive number of diaspora writers won international literary awards.

What I personally find most remarkable is that local-based writers dominated in terms of number of writers and productivity. Here's the breakdown: 26 local-based writers (23 new) with 38 novels; 13 diaspora writers (10 new) with 19 novels; and 6 expatriate writers (all new on the MNE scene) with 9 novels.

In this article I celebrate this achievement by highlighting the novels that are lesser known, little read, and uncelebrated – pointing out some trends as I go along.

In the first few years of the decade, the majority of the novels published were what I shall call “heritage” novels. I hesitate to call them “historical” novels even though they are set in the past – recent or distant, mythical or fact-based – because, strictly speaking, they aren't. The narrative tone, voice, and perspective are invariably modern, and the novels often end in the present with present-day characters reaching an understanding of who they are and where they belong. This suggests that the novelists view history mainly as a tool to assert or affirm cultural heritage and identity. This view gives their novels an ethnocentric bias; and a comparison of the heritage novels published during this period shows that this bias influences the way the novelists write about the past.

A common feature of heritage MNEs by Malay writers is the preference for specific historical events that allow the dramatisation of their Malay characters' first encounter with,

and subsequent adjustments to, European culture: the Portuguese invasion in Kamsiah Bostock's *Malacca: A Romance* (2011); the 1824 Anglo-Dutch Treaty in Iskandar Al-Bakri's *The Beruas Prophecy* (2011); the assassination of Birch, first British Resident of Perak, in Shahriza Hussein's *Legacy* (2008); teacher-training in 1950s Britain in Isa Shaari's *Kirkby: The Life and the Loves* (2009); and the imminent end of colonial rule in Adibah Amin's *This End of the Rainbow* (2006).

In heritage MNEs by non-Malay, mostly Chinese, writers, the common element is the diaspora story: how their characters suffered in the ancestral homeland, the difficult journey to British Malaya, and how they and their descendants had to adjust to the local way of life in the new country. This basic story is explicit or implicit in heritage novels by both home-based and diaspora writers: Khoo Kheng-Hor's *Taikor* (2004), *Nanyang* (2007), and *Sifu* (2009); Kuan Guat Choo's *Mouse Clutching Winter Melon* (2008) and *Or Rau* (2009); Chiew-Siah Tei's *Little Hut of Leaping Fishes* (2008) and *The Mouse-Deer Kingdom* (2013); and Yap Chan Ling's *Sweet Offerings* (2009) and *Bitter-sweet Harvest* (2012).

Interestingly, variations of this basic story are found in the novels of some diaspora writers; e.g. Shirley Lim's *Sister Swing* (2006), Preeta Samarasan's *Evening is the Day* (2008), and Matthew Thomas' *Anakara House* (2014). In these novels, the main character is (or used to be) a Malaysian who, because of problematic circumstances in the family home in Malaysia, ultimately finds it necessary to leave and settle in another country.

The novels' publication dates indicate that heritage novels of this nature appeared less frequently after 2010. This may not mean that the heritage novel as a sub-genre has lost its cultural currency; it could simply mean that writers and readers today prefer it in a new form. Golda Mowe's *Iban Dream* (2013), Yangsze Choo's *The Ghost Bride* (2013), and Shih-li Kow's *Sum of Our Follies* (2014) may be considered heritage novels. But their tool for asserting or affirming cultural heritage and identity isn't documented history; it is folklore, legends, myths, and stories heard in childhood.

Another trend after 2010 is the sharp increase in genre or "pulp" fiction. The rise in crime-and-detection novels is more apparent because they're easily identifiable and, furthermore, appeared in a clump. Between 2009 and 2013, eight were published: three *Inspector Singh* novels by Shamini Flint, three *Inspector Mislán* novels by Rozlan Mohd Noor, and two *Kain Songket* mysteries by Barbara Ismail.

Thrillers, or stories of adventure and suspense, were in fact more numerous. MNE thrillers come in a variety of flavours, usually spiced with political criticism and seasoned with humour. Some are brewed with Malay magic: Lee Su Ann's *The Curse* (2007), Geoffrey S. Walker's *The Bomoh's Apprentice* (2010) and *Blood Reunion* (2011), Tunku Halim's *Last Breath* (2014), and Hadi M. Nor's *Family Values* (2014). Some are spiked with political

intrigue: Brian Gomez' *Devil's Place* (2008, republished 2013), Dipika Mukherjee's *Thunder Demons* (2011), and Mohd. Rozlan Noor's *the Gods* (2014). Some serve up the underbelly of Malaysian society: Khoo Kheng-Hor's *Mamasan* (2007), Marco Ferrarese's *Nazi Goreng* (2013), Ewe Paik Leong's *A China Doll in KL* (2014) and Mamu Vies's *Dog Pound* (2014). And some are set in imaginary worlds: the political satires of Joshua Parapuram's futuristic *Blue Moon* (2004) and E. S. Shankar's *Tiger Isle: A Government of Thieves* (2012), and Christine Chu's fantasy spy thriller, *Codename: Jumping Spider* (2014).

Finally, I must mention A. B. Hashim's novels, *Timid* (2012), *Five Thieving Bastards* (2013), *The Man in the Fire* (2013), and Farah K.'s *Evasion* (2014). These novels intrigue me because their first-person narrators are not Malaysian, but Westerners living in the west. I can't help wondering why, and whether it's the start of a new trend.