

How to talk about Malaysian novels in English without reading any

Going Global 2004 – 2014: The Publishing Scene

Ninth of ten weekly articles by Chuah Guat Eng, published on 29 September 2015

Last week, I wrote about the remarkable increase in the number of Malaysian novels in English (MNEs) published in 2004-2014. The increase was partly due to the contributions of diaspora and expatriate writers, but it was local novelists who dominated the scene, forming nearly 60 percent of writers, and accounting for 60 percent of novels.

Some readers have suggested to me that the high production level of local MNE writers and publishers owes much to the inspiring examples of diaspora writers like Rani Manicka, Tash Aw, and Tan Twan Eng, who have won major literary prizes. This may be true for individual writers, but the pattern of growth of the three MNE categories tells a different story.

For all the excitement caused by the prize-winning novelists, the publication rate of diaspora novels over the years was not spectacular. It hovered around one or two a year, reached four in its peak year, 2009, dropped to three in 2010, and then to zero in 2011. When the publication rate returned to two per year in 2012-2014, three of the six novels were published by local and Singapore publishers. Is this a sign that the international publishing world's interest in MNEs has waned? Time will tell. What cannot be ignored right now is that, after their debut "Malaysian" novels, several diaspora novelists have set their subsequent novels in other, usually Asian, countries. It is also notable that expatriate MNEs, which appeared only from 2010 to 2013 and at a rate of two to three a year, were all published either in Malaysia or in Singapore, and not in the novelists' home countries.

In contrast, local MNEs showed a pattern of steady and uninterrupted growth: one per year from 2004 to 2006; three per year from 2007 to 2010; four per year in 2011 and 2012; five in 2013; and an astonishing 10 in 2014. One reason for this steady growth is undoubtedly that the writers were getting support from a growing number of local and regional publishers.

Who were these publishers and what were they publishing?

From 2004 to 2009, the main publishers were well established companies, but not known for publishing fiction. Their ventures into the MNE field were limited to single works (e.g. Editions Didier-Millet) or multiple works by a single author (e.g. Pelanduk) – all of

them heritage novels by older authors. It is difficult not to infer that these publications were undertaken more out of corporate goodwill than for commercial gain, especially since we don't find these companies publishing MNEs in later years. The one exception is Utusan Publications, which published *The Curse* by Lee Su Ann, then still a schoolgirl. It was a prize-winning novel which became a commercial success because it was subsequently used as a school literature text.

From 2010 onward, other publishers entered the MNE publishing scene. Among the first were Silverfish and MPH. Although their core business is in the retailing and/or distribution of books, they had been publishing short fiction in English by local and regional writers for some years. Silverfish entered with the first of Rozlan Mohd Noor's *Inspector Mislán* mysteries and went on to publish five more MNEs, the latest two in 2014. MPH entered with Geoffrey Walker's *The Bomoh's Apprentice*, and then published three more expatriate MNEs, the last in 2012.

From 2012, we have a group of new, independent publishers, who are particularly interesting because they are aiming specifically at the new, younger generation of readers, and therefore are more likely to set the trends for the future development of the MNE. FIXI Novo is undoubtedly the more active, followed by Lejen Press. Neither enterprise is new to the local publishing scene; in recent years, they have successfully established themselves as publishers of popular "pulp" Malay-language fiction (including novels).

In 2012, Lejen Press launched the first of A. B. Hashim's series of novels narrated by a westerner called Angus Baird. In 2013, FIXI Novo announced its entry with a hat-trick: one expatriate MNE (Kris Williamson's *Son Complex*) and two local ones (Khaliza Khalid's *Wedding Speech* and Brian Gomez' originally self-published *Devil's Place*). In 2013 and 2014, three more MNE publishers aiming at the youth market – Poket Press, Jemariseni, and Terfaktab Media – launched their first MNEs.

What this overview shows is that, however pleased and proud Malaysians may feel about the diaspora MNEs that have won international awards, local publishers are not anxious to produce novels with similar content and style. This is stated unequivocally in FIXI Novo's tongue-in-cheek Manifesto, "We publish stories about the urban reality of Malaysia. If you want to share your grandmother's World War 2 stories, send 'em elsewhere and you might even win the Booker Prize".

In other words, there is a debate going on in the MNE publishing scene as to what it means to be "Malaysian" today. The debate may never reach a resolution, but it will certainly have an effect on the future development of the MNE genre, influencing not only what and

how novelists must write to be published, but also the reading tastes of those to whom the novels are promoted.

Meanwhile, writers whose novels don't fit comfortably into any of the prevailing views will have to resort to self-publishing. As in earlier years, the proportion of self-published MNEs remained high during this period – about 23 percent. On the other hand, self-publishing has lost its stigma of yesteryears. It has become, like Wattpad and crowd-sourcing, just another way for writers to get their novels to their readers.

It seems to me that the diversity of MNE publishing modes in Malaysia reflects a vibrancy that can only bode well for the development of the MNE genre. The number of novelists prepared to invest in their own and their compatriots' works is suggestive of a kind of "cottage industry", unfailingly producing evidence of a creative pulse beating somewhere, and independent of the comings and goings of well-capitalised, mainstream publishers in foreign lands.