

Tunku Halim, *Last Breath*. Petaling Jaya: Fixi Novo, 2014. 413 pp. ISBN 978-967-0750-32-3.

Since the publication of his first novel, *Dark Demon Rising*, in 1997, Tunku Halim has established a reputation as Malaysia's foremost writer of horror fiction. One is not surprised, therefore, to find his fourth and latest novel, *Last Breath*, described on the back cover as serving "alternate history, magic realism and gothic spooks with a healthy dollop of satire." But I find the description misleading.

The story begins like a horror story. In a hubristic moment, Tan Sri Ismail Ismail, the country's fifth richest man, fires his Indonesian tea-lady for daring to "open her mouth" (10). Seeking retribution, the woman appeals to a female hermit shaman to take his life. Soon thereafter, Ismail suffers a massive stroke. While in a coma, he meets the shaman, with whom he makes a pact. In return for his life and the tea-lady's death, he will delay a dam construction project that would result in the flooding of the valley where the shaman has her cave-home. His wishes granted, he breaks his promise, only to learn that, as insurance, the shaman has lured his wife and their two young sons to her cave. From here on, the narrative shifts into adventure-story and thriller mode as Ismail races against time to rescue his family.

Despite the presence of shamans and a ghost in the story, *Last Breath* is not a horror story in the conventional sense. The shaman, a central character, is a grotesque, farcical and disgusting buffoon rather than a figure of fear. Ugly, smelly, obese and one-legged, she stuffs herself with food every chance she gets and causes bystanders to throw up theirs everywhere she goes. Her narrative function is not to scare but to personify society's collective psyche: "I am a... Malay bomoh. Shaman of our customs and traditions. Although some would say that all we have now are customs of greed and corruption. If that be so, then... I appropriately embody this institutionalised filth" (144).

There is no textual evidence to support the view that the fictional world and its "institutionalised filth" are "alternate history," the projected result of an imagined divergence from a real event in the past. They appear rather to be extrapolations of real-life, current events (e.g., ecology-destroying infrastructure development) and imaginaries of the nation expressed in popular gossip, rumours, conspiracy theories, urban legends and rationalisations of public policy. In the fictional Malaysia, the Prime Minister is a figurehead, and the real ruler is "Dead-Eyes Auntie," his reclusive aunt, who controls all power, all money and "all magic too," and who is "beyond corruption" because there is "nothing left to corrupt" (318). Socially, oppressive discrimination is enforced against the "Dolobs," an underclass despised because they are "darker than the Indians and lighter than the Chinese" (48).

Yes, *Last Breath* is satire – topical satire, political satire and satire of manners. But it also offers a message of healing. When we first meet them, the characters are caricatures, targets for ridicule. However, as the narrative progresses, insights into their psyche allow us to see even the most unpleasant of them as human and worthy of our understanding. In the case of Tan Sri Ismail and his wife, we see them becoming human through experiences that break down the social, economic and ethnic barriers separating them from others.

Significantly, the humanising process occurs in the primary jungle of the endangered valley. But the jungle is more than a simple metaphor for Nature's healing power; it is also the manifestation of the nature and source of that power. Here spheres of experience conventionally thought of as mutually exclusive dichotomies meet and meld: prehistoric and postmodern humans, science and magic, living beings and ghosts. Here is a vision of a holistic universe, where time and space are fluid and fold into one another; where magic is real and reality magical in ways that render the term "magic realism" meaningless. Nonetheless, *Last Breath* is no romantic fable. The reader is made aware that this holistic universe is powerless against the ruthless greed of those in power, and the real horror begins when the powerful see themselves as benevolent and wise philosophers and promise "to rule the nation exactly" until they draw their "very last breath" (413).

Last Breath is not a western-style novel with bits of Malay magic and spooks thrown in for self-exoticising effect. It is a Malaysian novel rooted in the time-honoured Malay literary tradition of using fantastical fiction to critique and to teach. It is remarkable for its skilful bringing of the traditional world of Malay magic and the contemporary world of western technology into a mutually critical dialectic. This is something no other contemporary Malaysian novelist writing in English has done, and Tunku Halim is to be congratulated for being the first.

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