

The Art of Fiction: Indian Diaspora's Gift to Malaysian Fiction-writing Descendants of Other Diasporas

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Abstract

In 1921, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan wrote in *The Hindu View of Life*, 'China and Japan, Tibet and Siam, Burma and Ceylon look to India as their spiritual home.' Today, many Malaysian descendants of nineteenth-century Chinese and Ceylonese diasporas continue to look to India for spiritual, intellectual, and literary inspiration. This paper discusses three contemporary, English-language novels by Malaysians of non-Indian descent which are informed by Buddhist/Hindu philosophical ideas of fiction and reality, shaped by narratological strategies found in Indian mythological narratives and epics, and inspired by the Indian tradition of using literary fiction to expose the fictional nature of received ideas and ideologies mistaken for reality in and by society. Published in 1981, 1994, and 2010 respectively, the novels provide an historical insight into how three representatives of Malaysia's non-Indian, ethnic minorities respond to the ethnicised ideas and ethnocentric ideologies that have dominated Malaysian life since the 1970s.

Keywords: Malaysia, novels, Anglophone, diaspora, Indian narratology

Scholars and critics of Asian Anglophone novels often assume that the authors invariably draw on Anglo-American or European narrative traditions because of their English education. While the dependence on western traditions is true of many Asian writers, including those writing in their native languages, there are exceptions. As Dr. S. Radhakrishnan observed in 1921 in *The Hindu View of Life* (1961, 11):

The dictum that . . . nothing moves in this world which is not Greek in its origin, has become a commonplace with us. But it is not altogether true. Half the world moves on independent foundations which Hinduism supplied. China and Japan, Tibet and Siam, Burma and Ceylon look to India as their spiritual home.

Today, many English-educated Malaysian descendants of colonial-era diasporas from present-day China and Ceylon continue to regard India as their spiritual home. Among them are fiction writers, for whom India's trove of stories is an endless source of literary models and philosophical frameworks for their fictional works.

This paper explores the influence of the Indian art of fiction on three modern Malaysian Anglophone novels by writers of non-Indian (i.e. Chinese and Jaffna Tamil) origin. The novels are Lee Kok Liang's *Flowers in the Sky* (1981), my own *Echoes of Silence* (1994), and Rani Manicka's *The Japanese Lover* (2010).¹ In these novels, the Indian literary influence goes deeper than surface allusions to Hindu mythology and Indian epics; it affects their narrative structures and strategies. Consequently, they share several characteristics matching K. Ayyappa Paniker's descriptions of 'the main distinctive features of Indian narratology' (2003: 3) as well as his typology of narrative traditions in Asian cultures influenced by Indian thought (*ibid* 160-168). These characteristics include non-linear or 'elastic' time; events and plots that seem physically impossible or empirically improbable; and a structural device, which Paniker terms 'interiorisation' and defines as 'the process by which a distinction, a contrast or even a

¹ The years in brackets are first publication dates.

contradiction is effected between the surface features of a text and its internal essence’, resulting in texts with ‘a multiplicity of layer upon layer of signification’ and a ‘dialectical relationship between different strands of narration’(*ibid*: 4-5). To date, these aspects of the novels have not been appreciated by Malaysian literature scholars, who have tended to judge the novels by western literary standards.

In the western literary tradition, narrative devices such as non-linear time and physically or logically impossible events in otherwise ‘realistic’ fiction are labelled ‘magic realism’, ‘unnatural narratives’, and ‘impossible storyworlds’ (Alber 2009) – labels reflective of a dualistic worldview that dichotomises human experiences into pairs of opposing absolutes (e.g. real and unreal, science and magic). Such labels do not sit comfortably with the three novels examined here because it is precisely this dualistic mindset that the authors seek to repudiate. In this respect, the novels are informed by the comprehensive, non-dualistic worldview of mainstream Hindu and Buddhist philosophers, who had the insight – long before the discovery of quantum physics and the formulation of poststructuralist and postmodernist theories – that human experience of reality is phenomenological, that concepts of reality are socio-culturally determined mental constructs, and that the function of literary fiction is to expose the fictional nature of received ideas and ideologies mistaken for absolute reality by society. As Paniker puts it (*ibid*, 10), ‘All Indian art is imbued with this esemplastic imagination which helps one to see the world upside down, realising that the very notion of up and down in an absolute sense is absurd.’

This paper focuses on analysing how the novelists, who represent three generations of non-Indian diaspora descendants (and are therefore members of Malaysia’s ethnic minorities) deploy the Indian art of interiorisation to expose the fabricated nature of the ethnocentric ideas and ideologies dominating the lives of many Malaysians, especially since the 1970s. The analysis is part of a larger research project to determine how the traditional, socio-political, and institutional structures peculiar to Malaysia’s multi-ethnic society are problematised in local Anglophone novels.² It must

² The research was funded by Universiti Putra Malaysia under the Postdoctoral Research Fellowship Scheme 2011-2013.

be emphasised that the aim here is to identify and describe the novels' narrative strategies and philosophical underpinnings; it is not to determine whether the novels fit into any of the (predominantly western) theories on gender, ethnicity, postcolonialism, or diaspora. A narratological close-reading procedure is used for the analysis. The theoretical framework is built mainly on Paniker's exposition of traditional Indian/Asian narratological features, primarily: interiorisation, the treatment of place and time, the use of fantasy, and the place of the individual in the social or cosmic order. As the novelists are modern, English-educated writers, western narratological concepts are discussed when relevant.

The novels are discussed individually in the order of their first publication. In discussing real or fictional descendants of colonial-era immigrants from present-day Sri Lanka, I use the words 'Ceylon' and 'Ceylonese' to distinguish them from the nation and its citizens. In discussing descendants of immigrants from China and India, the adjectives 'Chinese' and 'Indian' signify their ancestries, not their nationalities.

Lee Kok Liang's *Flowers in the Sky*

Lee Kok Liang (1927-1992) once described himself as 'a sceptical Zen Buddhist leaning towards Theravadaism and a sprinkling of Ganeshism' (Harrex 1993: ix). This combination of belief systems helps to explain the mixture of serious rationality and mischievous transgressiveness that gives *Flowers in the Sky* (henceforth *Flowers*) its complex and cryptic quality.

Woven into the fabric of the novel are the socio-political issues dominating Malaysian life in the decade following the May 1969 inter-ethnic riots and the institution of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the National Language Policy (NLP). The NEP, aimed at improving the economic wellbeing of the Malays and indigenous communities through preferential treatment, had a divisive effect. The non-indigenous non-Malays, mainly ethnic Chinese and South Asian minorities, tended to view both policies as evidence of Malay political, economic, and cultural hegemony; especially after the mid-1970s, when a Malay-Muslim resurgence coincided with rumours of Hindu temples and shrines being desecrated, and when the Malay-dominated government rejected the Chinese community's proposal to establish their own university. Many blamed the policies for the falling standard of English, ethno-religious discrimination and

polarisation, inefficiencies in government institutions, and corruption in high places.³ But because of the repressive laws prohibiting public expressions of dissent, they, like the characters in *Flowers*, confined their criticisms to the safety of their private thoughts.

The story, set in an unspecified Malaysian town in the late 1970s, consists of three separate events loosely linked by Mr. K., a Ceylonese surgeon. Two events take place in his surgery and involve his patients: Hung, a Chinese Buddhist monk on whom Mr. K. successfully performs a herniotomy, and Ah Looi, a stomach cancer patient who does not survive her operation. The third event, sandwiched between the other two, takes place in the garden of Mr. K.'s seaside home. A statue of the Hindu God, Ganesha, has washed up there overnight and attracted a crowd of devotees. A conflict situation develops involving Mrs. K., who wants the crowd to leave immediately; Swami Gomez, who refuses to leave before sunset; and Police Inspector Gopal, the closet devout Hindu sent to disperse the crowd. The conflict is resolved finally through the diplomacy and compromising spirit of Inspector Hashim, a Malay.

By western literary standards, the novel lacks the dramatic force of the typical Aristotelian plot because the events do not work together towards a unified climax and resolution. Only the Ganesha incident has the characteristics of a plot – conflict, resolution, and life-changing outcomes – but it is unrelated to the other two events. The events thus seem contiguous rather than interlocked. Analysed from the perspective of Indian interiorisation, however, the events are found to interlock at several levels. Around each event is a cluster of characters, each with his or her story, and they relate dialectically in a multi-voiced and multidirectional exploration of a single socio-political issue: the correspondence between gender- and ethnicity-based discrimination and the tendency to blame the NEP and NLP for all social ills. Lending structure and coherence to the exploration is the method of inquiry, modelled on Gautama Buddha's four-step therapeutic procedure: identify the problem, the cause, the solution, and the way forward. A brief overview of how these four steps are interiorised must suffice for this paper.

³ For more comprehensive and contemporaneous overviews of the socio-economic and political situation during the immediate post-NEP period, see Rahman 1978, Tham 1978 and Ali 1981.

In deploying the art of interiorisation, Lee stands alongside those Indian authors who make it difficult for readers to get to the core message by creating texts that ‘may be a hard nut to crack like a coconut’ (Paniker, *ibid*: 5), although in Lee’s case, the fruit analogy that comes to mind is the thorny durian. The surface text of *Flowers* is, simply said, off-putting. The story is told by an omniscient narrator that is not a character but whose voice projects the persona of a gossipy, male, Chinese, all-round bigot, who shares with most of the male characters a disdain for women, people of other ethnicities, and anyone with a slightly dark complexion. Furthermore, the epigraph – lines from an unidentified text about a Buddhist nun who ‘fornicated’ and a ‘low-caste’ seductress who uses ‘kapila magic’ – seems to give religious endorsement to the men’s misogyny. This thorny surface is the first step of the discourse; it identifies the problem to be addressed. But this is not all there is to it. Some of the thorns are puzzles and mysteries, which have to be identified as such and then solved before the other steps of the discourse can be discerned. These puzzles and mysteries may be considered what Lee calls ‘a sprinkling of Ganeshism’ – obstacles deliberately set on the path to enlightenment, but hiding the keys to their own removal.

A western literary critic might consider Lee a game-playing author, one who uses a variety of narrative strategies to challenge and entice the reader to discover ‘a secondary level of meaning’ in the text (Hutchinson 1983: 7). However, Lee’s game-playing purpose and stratagems are identifiably Indian in origin, and one of them is the Buddhist theory of fiction attributable to the Mahayana philosopher Nagarjuna (ca 2nd century). In *Vigrahavyavartani* (‘Averting of Disputes’), Nagarjuna defends his use of pedagogical discourse – which in Mahayana philosophy is simply another form of fiction – by comparing himself to a magician, and his discourse to artificial beings he creates for the sole purpose of destroying one another to reveal their artificiality (Bhattacharya 1986: 108). In the same way, every aspect of *Flowers* (including the epigraph) is a fabrication created with the ultimate aim of destroying the characters’ (and by extension the readers’) ego- and ethnocentrically fabricated ideas and ideologies. For example, the portrayal of the female characters as strong and intelligent managers of the chauvinistic male characters’ successful careers nullifies the latter group’s tradition-bound assumption that

women are morally and intellectually inferior, while the narrator's and characters' bigotry confronts the reader with the absurdity and offensiveness of his/her own bigotry.

That this Buddhism-based deconstruction is Lee's objective is indicated in the novel's title. The phrase 'flowers in the sky' signifies the insubstantial specks or 'floaters' that may appear in a person's field of vision, and is always used in Mahayana *sutras* as a metaphor for the illusions and delusion that must be rooted out to bring an end to personal and social conflicts.⁴ This objective influences the way Lee uses the categories of place and time, the physical and the imaginary, and the individual and society in his novel.

As a Buddhist, Lee would have held the view that society is 'composed of psychological units' (Dharmasiri 1981: 140), and that enduring social change starts with the individual's emancipation from the delusions created by self-centred desires. This view is at odds with the assumption held by many Malaysians, including government policy makers; namely, that an ethnicity- and language-based approach would correct socio-political inequalities and their attendant ills. Nevertheless, *Flowers* is neither a criticism nor a defence of the NEP and the NLP. Lee's representation of his characters' thoughts focuses on exposing the ignorance and psychological dysfunction of those who habitually disparage and discriminate against others and blame national policies for everything wrong in their lives and in society. In short, his greater concern is to show that the causes of discrimination lie in the discriminator, not in the objects of discrimination.

Lee's critique of discriminatory behaviour is aimed primarily at those ethnic Chinese who presume their racial and cultural superiority, but are as gullible, ill informed, and confused about their traditions and belief systems as the novel's Chinese characters (principally Venerable Hung and Ah Looi). All his puzzles and mysteries involve Chinese religious beliefs and practices. To the 'unwary reader' the mysteries may seem to exemplify that 'subordination of realism to the operation of fantasy', which Paniker associates with Asian narratives (*ibid*: 164); but in fact they are stratagems to challenge his readers' blind faith in monks and stories of the supernatural, because the solving of

⁴ See, for example, *The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment*.

the mysteries and puzzles requires not only knowledge of Chinese religious literature, beliefs, and practices, but also the rigorous application of forensic logic and scepticism to the interpretation of the novel, especially its ‘unsaid’.

The issue of blaming the NEP and NLP for perceived social ills is addressed through one of Lee’s several treatments of space and time in the novel⁵. At the story level, the action takes place in two locations over six days, but in the thoughts and recollections of the first-immigrant characters (Hung and his sister, Swami Gomez, and Mr. K.) space broadens out to cover China, India, and Ceylon while time stretches back to the early part of the twentieth century. This geographical and historical survey reveals that the social problems for which the policies are blamed – racial polarisation, inefficiencies and corruption in government institutions, and communication breakdowns with or without English – have existed in the past both in British Malaya and in their old homelands.

Finally, Lee’s use of past time as a function of memory gives the novel’s durian-like structure its social significance. By surrounding the dynamic, forward-looking Ganesha event with the static, disgruntled ruminations of Hung and Mr. K., he suggests a way forward for the divided nation. We can choose to be the vital, sweet, seed-bearing fruit, like the characters in the Ganesha episode who respond to the present with integrity and a compromising spirit; or we can choose, like Hung and K., to live in the past and be the thorny and useless skin that will eventually be discarded.

Chuah Guat Eng’s *Echoes of Silence*

Arguably the first Malaysian English-language novel to be written in the style of the popular murder mystery, *Echoes of Silence* (henceforth *Echoes*) is an allegorical and deconstructive exploration of the Malaysian tolerance for non-, mis-, and dis-information (the ‘silence’ of the title) and its impact on those kept in ignorance. The novel owes its structure to the *Mahabharata*, and its narrative strategies to two Indian Mahayana

⁵ The treatment of place and time in *Flowers* is sophisticated and nuanced. A proper discussion of these categories will require a paper of its own.

methods of deconstruction: the metafictional method of the *Diamond Sutra* and a non-polemical form of *reductio ad absurdum* called *prasanga* in Sanskrit.⁶

The socio-political context of the novel is the 1969-1994 period. From the 1970s onwards, because of the NLP and anomalies in the implementation of the NEP⁷, increasing numbers of English-educated non-Malays left Malaysia to settle in western, Anglophone countries, convinced that in Malaysia, ethnic polarisation and inter-ethnic distrust would intensify, and they would be increasingly marginalised. However, the significant problems of the 1980s were, in fact, economic, political, and intra- rather than inter-ethnic. Adopting an anti-British and pro-Japanese development policy, the government launched a programme of heavy industrialisation, the implementation of which attracted accusations of ‘money politics’ and ‘cronyism’. Disputes among leaders of the ruling Malay party led to the formation of a splinter party, which in turn led to Constitutional and judicial crises, repressive police action against political opponents and the media, tightening of pre-existing laws prohibiting and inhibiting freedom of speech and information, and Constitutional amendments that undermined the independence of the judiciary.⁸ In 1991, the Vision 2020 proposal for Malaysia to achieve developed nation status in 30 years was announced. The opportunities subsequently offered by numerous, government-supported manufacturing and construction projects attracted to the country not only foreigners but also Malaysians who had earlier emigrated. By 1994, Malaysia was poised to be a Southeast Asian Tiger, and the price was rule of law.

In *Echoes*, the problems attendant on the above scenario are not addressed explicitly or directly. Rather, the fictional world is constructed out of the stereotype assumptions and narratives that underlie the problems, thus giving the novel its allegorical quality. The fictional district of Ulu Banir (the Malay words *ulu* means

⁶ For a more detailed analysis of the use of Mahayana metafictional and *prasanga* deconstruction in *Echoes*, see Chuah 2013.

⁷ ‘. . . NEP policy-makers tended to provide the greatest resources to those Malays who had already been socialized for mobility. The primary beneficiaries of NEP were the Malay civil servants who had themselves been favoured by earlier, colonial-era pro-Malay education and professional opportunities and their children’ (Sloane 1999: 6)

⁸ See Wain 2009.

‘origin’ or ‘source’ and *banir* means ‘buttress roots’) is multi-ethnic Malaysia visualised as a tree that is not supported by one grounded root but by multiple roots growing down from its branches. Lim Ai Lian (henceforth ‘Lim’), the main, first-person narrator, is the typical English-educated non-Malay who flees the country after 1969 and then returns for personal reasons, but never feels patriotic enough to invest in national development. The British characters – Lim’s lover, Michael Templeton, his father, Jonathan, and Cynthia Wickham – are types of ‘Orientalists’ who romanticise Malaysia. Puteh (Malay for ‘white’), the older woman of ambiguous ethnicity who remains mute while in the care of Jonathan Templeton but regains her speech after she marries a Malay, is suggestive of the “mother/motherland” (Chin 9). Her husband, Yusuf, and their son, Hafiz, respectively typify the Malays of the colonial and postcolonial eras. In this allegorical world, contemporary ideologies are examined; but no solution is offered because the examination applies the *prasanga* method, which works by assuming that a given proposition is correct, following the proposition to its logical conclusion, and then allowing the conclusion to speak for the proposition’s validity or absurdity (see Mookerjee 401).

On the surface, *Echoes* is simply a story about the unsolved murder of Cynthia Wickham in 1974 in the Templeton Estate, a large rubber and oil palm plantation owned by Jonathan, her fiancé-to-be. The story is told in 1994 by Lim, who happens to have been visiting Michael at the time of the murder. She attempts to solve the case, but comes up against an apparent communal conspiracy of silence. Suspecting that even Michael is hiding the truth from her, she breaks off her relationship with him. Soon after he returns to England, she discovers she is pregnant with his child. To give the baby a name, she marries Jonathan. In 1994, some years after Jonathan’s death, she receives news that Michael has died and left her all his property. Moved by guilt and uncertainty, she returns to Ulu Banir to solve the murder, but most of the people she talks to are old men with failing memories and no interest in finding the truth. As the story unfolds, the interiorised discourse is revealed to be about past silences and their reverberations into the present.

The interiorised discourse is plotted in a symmetrical structure adapted from an idea suggested by the *Mahabharata*, the 18-part epic with 18 chapters per part, in the midst of which is the *Bhagavad Gita*, the epic’s time-stopping ‘kernel’. Thus, *Echoes* is

mainly a 5-part novel with five chapters per part, and each part prefaced by Lim's narration of her present (1994). Parts 1 and 2 are set in 1974, the year of the murder. The central Part 3, which interrupts the linear time-flow of the murder mystery, is the so-called 'Truth Manuscript', a family history covering the colonial period from the 1890s to the Japanese Occupation (1943). Part 4 returns to 1974; Part 5 covers the period 1974-1994; and a 3-page Part 6 closes the narrative. The novel thus consists of three concentric time zones – the present, recent past, and distant past – set into dialectical motion by the narration, which takes the reader back and forth between present and past.

The dialectical discourse explores the various manifestations of silence through time: in human relationships, e.g. both within the single individual as well as between peers, lovers, husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants, rulers and ruled, perpetrators of violence and their victims, and people of different ethnicities; in regulatory systems, e.g. traditional customs and modern law; and in received knowledge, e.g. ethnographic, familial, communal, and national histories. The causes and effects of the various forms of silence are given a historical and/or psychological perspective by the presence of parallel events (e.g. acts of violence, failures of justice, and inter-ethnic relationships) in all three time zones – parallels that indirectly comment on one another through their thematic resonances and dissonances.

At the same time, anomalies and contradictions built into the characters' self-portrayals, narratives, and actions undermine their reliability. Lim's narrative, for instance, is questionable because of her English-educated, middle-class snobbery and her emotional attachment to the Templetons, while the 'Truth Manuscript' is Michael's imagined reconstruction of his parents' relationship before he was born. This metafictional device is suggested by the teachings of the *Diamond Sutra*, crystallised in the novel's epigraph, 'Not in form, not in sound/Is true enlightenment to be found'⁹. Whether applied to the murder mystery or the socio-political reality, the epigraph serves to remind the reader that appearances and words are unreliable guides to truth.

⁹ The couplet is the novelist's rendition. A more traditional translation reads: "He who seeks me by outward appearance/ (And) seeks me in sound/Treads the heterodox path/ (And) cannot perceive the *Tathagata*" (Lu 21). Note: "*Tathagata*" ("Thus-come One") is an epithet for Buddhas or "Awakened Ones".

Rani Manicka's *the Japanese Lover*

Rani Manicka, of Jaffna Tamil descent, was born and educated in Malaysia; but like many younger, globally mobile Malaysians, she divides her time between Malaysia and the UK. Given her ancestry, it is unsurprising that *The Japanese Lover* (henceforth *Lover*) is the most 'Indian' of the three novels discussed here. Indeed, the novel, is dedicated to 'all Malaysian Indians, wherever they may be', Manicka has described it as 'a call for Malaysian Indians to love themselves, love the colour of their skin . . . to stand up and be counted'¹⁰. But *Lover* is also a postmodern work that gives a fascinating insight into the kind of storytelling that can emerge from a fusion of the Indian art of fiction and the narratives of contemporary western sciences. To date, *Lover* has not received the scholarly attention it deserves, a situation I hope to rectify with this paper. However, as someone aware of, but not cognisant with, the varieties and complexities of Indian literature and Hindu thought, I shall limit my discussion to those aspects of the novel that I respond to as a non-Indian, focusing on its technique of interiorisation.

Despite its popular-romance title, *Lover* is a serious work advocating self-examination. A brief comparison with *Flowers* may be useful. Sociologically, the novel addresses from a Ceylonese viewpoint the Malaysian problem Lee addresses from a Chinese viewpoint: an obsession with skin colour and a tendency to discriminate against those with darker complexions. Like Lee, Manicka seems to hold the view that the solution begins with psychological health through self-examination, rather than with faulting either the perceived 'Other' or the socio-political system. In *Lover*, there are poverty-stricken Indians, but the focus is on psychological, not economic, issues. There is some discussion of discriminatory behaviour towards Indians by other ethnic groups, in particular the colour-conscious Chinese, but the focus is on how the Indians and Ceylonese discriminate against darker skinned individuals within their own communities. Both novelists are thus critical of their fellow-ethnics. While Lee exposes Chinese

¹⁰ "The Japanese Lover: Interview with Rani Manicka". 26 May 2010. http://media.bfm.my/assets/files/TheBiggerPicture/2010-05-26_BiggerPicture_THEJAPANESELOVER.mp3

arrogance and ignorance, Manicka exposes Indian and Ceylonese lack of self-esteem and communal solidarity.

The novel centres on the life of a woman named Parvathi. As in many traditional Indian narratives, it opens with a request for a story. It is Kuala Lumpur in 2008, and a young journalist asks Parvathi, then 92 years old, to tell of her experiences during the Japanese Occupation. The memories evoked by the request form the ensuing story, told by an omniscient narrator. It begins with Parvathi's birth in Northern Ceylon in 1916, an astrologer's prediction that she will marry a very wealthy man, and her father's decision from that moment to treat her as an investment. He confines her throughout her childhood in a room with mud walls and no windows and then, by deceit and trickery, arranges her marriage to Kasu, a very rich, much older man, reportedly a widower, in British Malaya.

On their wedding day, Kasu realises he has been tricked and, extremely upset by Parvathi's dark complexion, plans to send her back to Ceylon. Circumstances conspire against him, however. First, Maya, his cook and a woman with mystical powers, having recognised the divine in Parvathi, prevents him from doing so by casting a spell on him. Then, Parvathi chances upon a hidden ancient temple on his land adjoining Adari, his palatial home. Recognising that the temple will enhance the value of his property, Kasu decides to let her stay. Parvathi is then groomed to fit into his Anglophile life style. She learns English, western ways, and the social skills required to host the lavish parties he throws for his foreign and local business associates; and she learns to socialise with the other married women of the Ceylonese community. When Kasu's mistress, a celebrated dancer, dies, Parvathi becomes stepmother to Rubini, Kasu's daughter from the liaison. Later, she has a son of her own, Kuberan, who grows up to be something of a sociopath.

In 1942, Kasu dies. Adari is taken over by Japanese soldiers and Parvathi has to live above a shop she owns in town. To protect Rubini from the soldiers, she agrees to be the Japanese general's secret mistress. They fall in love and secretly go through Hindu rites of marriage at a temple. When the war ends, he returns to Japan, but they agree to meet in Kuala Lumpur on the day the Malaysians get their independence from the British. Parvathi's wealth is greatly reduced because Adari has been burnt to the ground and with it the documents proving her ownership of many properties. She is forced to stay on in the shop-house, where first one brother and then the other turns up from Ceylon, taking

advantage of her widow status to manage the shop and line their own pockets. After Rubini's marriage to a man named Bala, the three of them move to Kuala Lumpur, where Rubini has a house left her by Kasu. On Independence Day, Parvathi waits for her Japanese lover at the appointed place and time, but his wife turns up instead with news of his death and a gift from him. Kuberan dies of cancer in 1967; and Maya dies soon after the May 1969 riots. In 2007, Bala returns with news of HINDRAF (Hindu Action Force), an NGO set up to fight for the rights of Indians. The novel closes with Parvathi's death.

At first reading, *Lover* seems to be the uncomplicated kind of text that Paniker might describe as being 'like grapes . . . sweet all through' (*ibid*: 5). But the impression is deceptive. The interiorised discourse, which centres on the issue of self-esteem, consists of a complex meshing of dialectical themes and tropes. The central trope is Parvathi, whose character is developed through the dynamic interplay of the various ways she is perceived or assessed, each affecting her sense of self and self-worth. To illustrate the point, we shall consider an episode where four ways of assessing Parvathi are in play: social, economic, self-generated, and transcendental. On her wedding day, society sees her as the fortunate bride of a wealthy man; Kasu sees her as a bad business deal, worthless as a tycoon's trophy wife because of her dark skin; Parvathi, made aware for the first time of her skin colour and sensing from Kasu's displeasure that she has somehow failed, sees herself as her father's victim, but nonetheless an imposter. Only Maya perceives the transcendental in her.

This type of interplay is established in the opening chapter and runs throughout the narrative, changing dynamically as it picks up the resonances of themes and tropes from within the text and outside it. The dialectic between mundane and transcendental perceptions of individuals, for instance, ramifies endlessly, often with ironic effect, because the characters' names (e.g. Parvathi, Sita, Maya, and Kuberan) resonate intertextually with the whole body of Indian literature about their divine namesakes. As a result, the interiorised discourse is as limited or as expansive as the reader's knowledge and insight. An example is the episode where Kasu forbids Parvathi to use that name because it is also his first wife's name, and calls her Sita instead because she is 'inconsequential' (60). For the informed reader, it draws into the text Parvathi, the dark-skinned goddess, and Sita, the wife of Rama, causing shifts in the reader's assessment of

all the characters directly and indirectly involved. Is Parvathi, the dark-skinned girl from Ceylon, whose divinity has been recognised by Maya, not more worthy of the goddess' name than Kasu's fair-skinned, Anglo-Indian first wife, who has eloped with an Argentinean polo-player? Is Kasu's Anglophilia so profound that he does not know that the epic Sita is also divine? Is he consciously or unconsciously trying to limit Parvathi's personal growth to the domestic role of perfect wife and mother exemplified by the epic Sita, a role that the epic Sita herself rejects in some versions of the *Ramayana*? Is it not ironic that his Sita goes on to do what the epic Sita would never do – sleep with her captor and enemy? Is it not doubly ironic that his Sita turns out to be a less than perfect mother, spoiling Kuberan so that even he, towards the end of his life, blames her for his lack of moral compass?

The novel's intertextual potential reaches beyond Indian literature. Still staying within the discourse on self-esteem, the narrative explores the dialectics of Indian and European cultures and worldviews, giving the novel its postcolonial and postmodern aspects. The postcolonial aspect emerges from the fusing of Indian epics with the kind of stories read by English-literate Malaysian children. One of many examples is the Grimm's fairy tale, *Beauty and the Beast*, Parvathi's favourite story while learning English. Its theme of a beautiful woman held captive by a beast who only comes to her at night, when he is transformed into a gentle lover, resonates with the Sita-Ravana story in the *Ramayana*, and the Greek myth of Cupid and Psyche. These resonances are alluded to or hinted at throughout the narrative, affecting our perceptions of Parvathi/Sita and her two beasts: Kasu, the Anglophile too obsessed with skin colour to see her beauty, and Hatori, the pale-skinned Japanese lover, who does.

The postmodern aspect of the discourse on self-esteem arises from the dialectics between Indian and western views of the universe, of time, and of medicine. One may understand it as a reminder of the limitations of the west's compartmentalised and dualistic approach to knowledge compared with the breadth, depth, and non-dualistic fluidity of the Indian approach. But one has also to recognise the tongue-in-cheek postmodernity in little touches such as having the 92 year-old, dying Parvathi ruminate on DNA and an old, uneducated woman like Maya describe the ancient temple as a

‘stargate’, a word the contemporary reader is bound to associate with the literature of popular science fiction and TV documentaries about ‘ancient aliens’.

Many other aspects of the narrative are not discussed here, among them the significance of semiological codes like the swan, the clown, the peacocks, the dolls, and the business of men dressing up their wives and mistresses. It is hoped that what has been discussed succeeds in conveying the wit and brilliance of the interiorisation in *Lover*; wit and brilliance that would be lost on readers unfamiliar with the Indian art of fiction.

Conclusion

In this paper, I described three Malaysian Anglophone fiction-writers’ debt to the philosophy and art of fiction made available to them by past Indian diasporas. In the process, I highlighted the writers’ creativity in adapting Indian narrative techniques to suit their purpose of addressing, as descendants of past (non-Indian) diasporas and members of ethnic minorities, issues peculiar to Malaysian society: ethnocentric discrimination and the erosion of self-esteem caused by it, and the tolerance of unjust and misleading silences.

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