

Why aren't the bad guys punished in Malaysian crime fiction?

Ninth of ten fortnightly articles for Star Two, published on 13 August 2017

In the previous article, I noted that in 1993 and 1994, three novels were published that address the erosion of rule of law and civil liberties resulting from the multiple Constitutional crises of the 1980s. And I discussed Lloyd Fernando's *Green is the Colour* as a study of the lust for power and K S. Maniam's *In a Far Country* as critique of the practice of imposing one's culture and values on others.

It is now time to look at the third novel, *Echoes of Silence* (1994), a murder mystery, as well as later novels written in the crime fiction genre, to see whether and how they may have been influenced by the undermining of our justice system following the removal of the Lord President of the Supreme Court in 1988.

Crime, or some form of wrongdoing, lends spice to any story, and we find plenty of it in post-Independence Malaysian Anglophone fiction: murder, assault and battery, amok, rape, domestic violence, prostitution, arson, war-time crimes, and crimes of corruption. But before 1994, none of the novels can be said to belong to the popular crime fiction genre, which includes the murder mystery, detective stories, and crime thrillers.

The only pre-1994 novel in which a murder is committed and the murderer apprehended is Lee Kok Liang's *The Mutes in the Sun* (1964). Significantly, however, although the murderer is put on trial, there is no detection because the deed is done in broad daylight in front of several people.

Arguably, the first full-length novel identified by scholars as belonging to the murder mystery genre is *Echoes of Silence*. In it, a murder takes place and the protagonist-narrator sets out to solve the mystery as an amateur sleuth. However, it deviates from the popular form because the murderer, although identified, is not brought to justice. This deviation, like the title, marks *Echoes* as a novel about the silences in Malaysian society – misinformation, disinformation, and lack of information – that make us complicit in the wrongdoings and injustices perpetrated around us.

It was about one and a half decades before the next crime genre novels appeared: Sharmini Flint's *Inspector Singh Investigates: A Most Peculiar Malaysian Murder* (2009), and Rozlan Mohd Noor's *21 Immortals: Inspector Mislán and the Yee Sang Murders*. As the titles show, these novels belong to the police procedural sub-genre; the crime detection is done by professional detectives in the police force.

This does not mean that we don't have any other crime novels. Quite a number have been published since the beginning of the present millennium. Most of them are written as thrillers and tend to be regarded as "pulp fiction", which is a pity because they are very well written, highly entertaining, and nearly always have social-critical content.

Marie Gerrina Louis' *The Eleventh Finger* (2000), discussed two articles ago, is a psychological study of a victim of child abuse and also a critique of the inadequacy of existing child protection laws. Brian Gomez's *Devil's Place* (2003) is a darkly humorous account of a young man accused of multiple murders fleeing from his pursuers while trying to find the real killer and clear his name, but an important element in the plot is the issue of corruption in high places.

Rozlan Mohd Noor's *Inspector Mislán* series take on board serious social issues, among them the corruption of higher-ups in the police force that prevents police detectives from doing their job and bringing the guilty to court (*The Yee Sang Murders*), the plight of a Malay woman with an unfaithful husband (*The DUKEExpress Murders*, 2011) and the persecution of members of the LGBT community (*The UTube Serial Rapes*, 2012). In addition, his political thriller (*the Gods*) is a critique of the way politicians and policy makers manipulate the minds of the people.

Mamu Vies's *Dog Pound* (2014) tells the story of a down-and-out young man drawn into a clandestine fight club circuit controlled by corrupt politicians. Hadi M. Nor's *Family Values* (2014) deals with the moral degradation of wealthy members of the Malay elite who indulge in occult practices to satisfy their lust for money and power.

Now, here's the curious thing about our crime novels. In most of them, justice is not done; the culprits are not arrested and brought to court. In some, the really wicked ones either go unpunished because of a corrupt system or they die in some bizarre accident (as if by divine justice). In others, the culprits are themselves the victims of past injustices, and even though they may have confessed their crimes, they are protected by their loved ones' conspiracy of silence. Or, if they are innocent, they flee the country to evade the law.

Should we interpret this curious phenomenon as a reflection of our authors' lack of faith in our justice system after 1988? Perhaps.