Physician, Heal Thyself: Nurture and Corrosion in Lee Kok Liang’s *Flowers in the Sky*

Bernard Wilson

*University of Tokyo, Japan*

If Lee Kok Liang’s body of prose-writing may be seen not only as a plea for Malaysian inclusiveness but also as a quest for an artistic wholeness, the apprehension that Lee feels in attempting in his first novel to replicate a Eurocentric canonical model, and his rejection of these more traditional narrative patterns in “Return To Malaya” and “The Mutes in the Sun,” finds a guarded resolution in *Flowers in the Sky*. The novel, a finely wrought though at times discordant equilibrium between not only the superficial binaries of temporal and spiritual, tragic and comic, Occident and Orient, but between the polyglot and multidimensional existences of immigrant Malaysians, returns, with qualifications, a clearer narrative voice(s) to Lee’s fiction. Whereas the heteroglossia of “Return To Malaya” emerges through a series of loosely-connected sketches and leads through its closing portrait to the terrifying silence of *The Mutes*, the multiple discourses in *Flowers in the Sky* are revealed in a balanced dialogue between eclectic cultural perspectives and philosophical standpoints. The interests of the dual protagonists, Venerable Hung and Mr. K (possibly a parodic reference to Kafka [Brewster 189]), though seemingly aesthetically polarised, intersect regularly in their shared diasporic loneliness and in their occupations. Both, as Harrex notes (36), are interdependent healers – Hung seeks to stem the corruption of the spirit through meditation and asceticism, K the corruption of the body through technology – and their characterisations are balanced by the comi-tragic sub-plots of Gopal’s clumsy pursuit of tantric bliss and the dying Ah Loi’s agnosticism.

---

1 Bernard Wilson is an Associate Professor of English in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Tokyo. His research and teaching interests are in postcolonial theory and literature, Orientalism, film and animation, and children's literature. He is widely published in postcolonial literature and theory, particularly in Southeast Asian Anglophone literature and in East-West interpretations in literature and film. An Australian, Bernard has previously held lecturehips in English at the Flinders University of South Australia and Chuo University, Japan. He was a Visiting Assistant Professor in the English Department of the University of Hong Kong in 2005, where he is now an honorary professor, and was a Cohen-Porter Visiting Lecturer at the University of Tel Aviv in 2006.
Lee’s interpretation of the supposed dichotomy that exists between spirituality and rationalism remains ambivalent in that his treatment of the four major religious influences in Malaysia (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam) and his portrayal of the effects of Western rationalism and pragmatism both contain serious, pointed observations that are invariably undercut by irony and burlesque. As a consequence, the conflicting styles are in themselves a reflection of the multiple cultural and historical discourses battling to be heard within the novel. The portrayal of Mr K, as Anne Brewster notes:

… bears witness to an ambivalence in the text between a desire to parody and a desire to imitate seriously the conventional realist novel. On the one hand there is a postmodern predilection in the narrative for de-psychologising individuality and turning away from depth and inwardness and, on the other, a realist inclination to create a sense of psychological depth. Because these two discourses are incommensurable we have in Flowers in the Sky an example of narrative schizophrenia, and the two different styles exist side by side without resolution or integration. This stylistic ambivalence can be seen as a product of the post-colonial dilemma of negotiating, in Bakhtin’s phrase, an “independent ideological life.” While working in the tradition of nineteenth-century fiction, the writer is aware of the fragmentation of twentieth-century life, a fragmentation that is especially real for ethnic minority groups such as those in Singapore and Malaysia. (189)

Brewster’s analysis of the source of this narrative discordance is lent further credence when one takes into account the fascination with European realist and modernist literary traditions that Lee reveals in his 1950s journal, Sketches & Vignettes & Brush Strokes. The oscillation between realism and parody (which one may further speculate partly derives from Lee’s familiarity with the uncertain and often condescending portraits of the Orient in nineteenth- and twentieth-century English literature) is, I would advocate, closely related to Lee’s conflicting personal responses to his periods of residence in Australia and Europe and to his problematic position in, and attitude towards, Malaysian society.

This uncertainty manifests itself not only through the conflicting narrative styles of Flowers in the Sky, but in an almost obsessive insistence on providing contrapuntal cultural and philosophical positions through the numerous discourses of the text – a method that is first tentatively explored in London Does Not Belong To Me. Thus K’s cynical (“He did not believe in anything anymore. It made his life so much simpler” [31]) and materialistic (“The Church did not ask everyone to be poor” [29]) inclinations, implicitly associated in his mind with the West, compete and merge with a diasporic and spiritual yearning that results in a confused mythologizing of his own cultural heritage. K, in reflecting on a failed marriage and a lost ancestral heritage, attributes his present situation to the occidental betrayal of a mythical pastoral ideal:
He had been so imbued with Western thoughts that his married life had been ruled by concepts of the latest demagogue ruling Western psychology. If somehow he could feel like the heroes or even the villains of some Indian epic, perhaps his marriage would have a chance. She would have to change also. But that was impossible living as they did in the town. Any town, for that matter, in the world. They were all distorted by the disfigured reflection from the West. (145)

But the nostalgic sense of loss that so dominates diasporic Malaysian literature written in English and the attribution of cultural sterility to the expansion of Western ideals is invariably treated ironically in the novel: K’s vocation as a surgeon, which so defines his sense of self, relies on Western technology, and his pining for a supposed oriental ideal is immediately parodied by his attraction to the latest technological advances: “With a video, he thought, one could live in the jungle and be in touch with civilization” (146).

The specific and repeated use of Western brand names in the text – Rolex, Mercedes, Johnny Walker – and their seemingly incongruous use in similes (“she was as brown as Cadbury’s Fruit and Nut” [24], “little Christ so rosy and plump like the Lactogen baby” [27]) provides important cross-references between religious succour and temporal indulgence, and signifies an influence that permeates all ethnic groups and occupations. K’s consumerism is given prominence in the text, but Hung is also conveyed in a Mercedes as his temple attracts greater patronage; the motive behind Swami Gomez’s desire for material donations and the religious fame such contributions engender is problematic, and the police inspector Hashim’s sexual fantasies are expressed in relation to Western advertising and ideals:

Her arms were round, full of flesh, and he could imagine how they would look with the water running off them like in those TV advertisements for Lux. (74)

The long-held maxim of European (and later American) expansionism, that the West and modernity are interchangeable terms and that “by this logic, other societies can enter history, grasp the future, only at the price of their destruction” (During 23) is indeed part of Lee’s equation but as Simon During has since noted:

... the power of this logic is waning, and a new set of still hazy and abstract oppositions (including those between cultural and the post-cultural, the modern and post-modern) are coming into view. (23)

Lee, it is clear, positions his characters in relation to a range of ethnic and philosophical alterities which includes, but does not necessarily wholly condemn,
Western influence. Therefore, to suggest that the author’s overriding concern is an Occidental/Oriental dialogue of opposition between (Western) materialistic pragmatism and (Eastern) esoteric spirituality would risk oversimplifying the complexities of Lee’s narrative structure and thematic interests. Lee has, in *Flowers in the Sky*, moved well beyond the colonial angst expressed in *London Does Not Belong To Me*. The novel is as much concerned with ethnic relativism, the collision and occasional coalescence of a range of variant cultural mores, and with immigrant religions – Buddhism, Hinduism and, to a lesser extent, Christianity – adapting to and being transformed by the Malaysian landscape.

The fourth religion, the dominant Islam, is by virtue of its longer association with Malaysia so much part of the fabric of the landscape that it is considered only briefly, but the marriage of music and dialogue through the muezin’s prayer, which in Hung’s Buddhistic interpretation “reproduce[s] the balancing forces of the Yin and the Yang, a Oneness in Duality” (39), is nevertheless crucial to the plot and provides one of the most important representations of cross-cultural call and response, and of the novel’s central twinned motifs of spirituality and sensuality:

... for the first time in his life he heard the trembling cry that rose up in the hot evening air and flared out above the still coconut palms and spread and weaved itself above the padi-fields, meandering among the huts and buildings by the river, floating eerily, unusual, high-pitched, nasal and glottal, a cry that became a prayer and entreaty. Of that he was sure; although he did not know the language, he knew it was a prayer. This then was the balancing force. No one could have the strength to cry so loudly and clearly unless it came from within his depths. (39)

The amalgam of physicality and spirituality revealed in the interplay of harmonies (which also, significantly, contains a joyous release of language that is in direct contrast to the depictions of voiceless torment that permeate so much of Lee’s prose) provokes the age-old paradox of duality for the ascetic monk, whose religious tenets, although founded on the binary concept of balance and counterbalance, cannot provide a reconciliation of his spiritual vocation with his physical yearning. The clear sensuality that Hung associates with the call, and with which Lee imbues the passage, derives much of its evocative power from the landscape itself. The synthesis between *bumiputra*, land and religion mirrors the potency and allure of a sexual union and intensifies the sense of absence in the monk’s existence – an absence that has at its core exile from China and the repression of physical fulfilment. The image recurs, with more definitive sexual associations, near the conclusion of the novel:

As he sat, he thought what wonderful breathing that man must have to be able to carry the call, weaving it, stretching it, and holding it tremulously, like drops of dew on his web, and gathering in his voice, his feeling of centuries of joy and sorrow. But was this a passion, he wondered? The strength in the feeling. A passion. The call. And yet it was not to passion that his sittings should lead him; it was away from passion, away
from the bonds of flesh. This great reminder of passion, however, made him sit fervently. He did not quite understand it. He closed his eyes. (163-64)

Combined with the “potently Freudian” imagery that Harrex has noted (39) in Ah Lan’s drawings of “two carps, one very large, almost filling up the paper, and inside the first one, a much smaller carp, trying to get out through the mouth of the large one” (138), these passages are indicative, as in so many of his mute motifs, of Lee’s continuing association of multiple forms of repression (sexual and artistic, in this instance, but also cultural, social and political) with an inability to articulate one’s position. Hung, unable to speak the new languages of Malaysia, is neither able to verbalise his physical pain to K nor his sexual desire to Ah Lan. The repeated castration motifs (“Mr K saw at a glance that the hernia was going down to the balls” [7]; “… the tightness around his balls was discomforting” [10]) and references to Hung’s physical effeminacy (“The belly looked white and the skin was surprisingly tight and delicate, almost with the fullness of that of a young girl” [8].) signify an impotence that is contrasted with the fecund vibrancy in the brief sketches of the Islamic call to prayer, and with the portraits of the libidinous Malay police officers, Ismail and Hashim. The monk’s repression of Ah Lan’s attempts to achieve artistic and sexual liberation primarily stems from a denial of his own physicality, but also has at its source a metaphorical muteness and emasculation that represents his frustration at being unable to adequately express himself (physically or verbally) in a country where “everything had become grotesque” (132). Hung’s view of sensuality as anathema to spirituality (the counterpoint to which is provided in the sub-plot of Gopal’s tantric ecstasy) and his resultant confusion, is expressed through a masterful integration of the symbols – fish, hands, land, language – of his sexual, linguistic and cultural frustrations:

He had strained and strained, repeating the sutras, verse upon verse, until his nights were filled with words and in his dreams he saw the words dancing like flames or candles, or lying strung out on a white beach, glinting under the moonlight, in rows and rows as though they were fishes caught and arranged by human hands on the sands. (131)

The subsequent physical stigmatisation, seen by the monk as a necessary expurgation, must be viewed as a flawed response to the physical/metaphysical conundrum with which he is confronted. Hung, as immigrant, is silenced and emasculated not only by his adopted environment but, just as importantly, by the damaging repression of his sensual self, and while Lee draws a sympathetic (and empathetic) picture of alienation, loneliness and the difficulties of confronting the alterity of a contrary landscape, he also – while not promoting indulgence – warns against the dangers of self-censorship.

The Freudian symbolism so evident in Ah Lan’s drawings, and in her relationship with Hung, may also be gleaned in the semi-oedipal desires of K, whose
childhood absence from his mother, who leaves Ceylon for Malaysia ahead of him, manifests itself in a fascination with an archetypal symbol of nurture: large female breasts. “No point in not admitting it. Admit and be cleansed” (4), he decides in an ironic counterpoint to Hung’s physical denial. In K’s sexual encounters, Lee again weaves connections between the diasporic sense of loss and aphasia:

… what had fascinated him was how dark he had suddenly become against the paleness of the girl’s body and this had added to his fascination and when his thing came he shouted out the few earthy Tamil words he knew and when it was over, he remembered feeling very sad, very sad at not knowing the language well. In extreme moments of sex, one reverts to one’s mother tongue. (8-9)

The spectre of a diasporic loss of voice – a notion that K.S. Maniam also extensively explores throughout his prose fiction and one that remains central to the new literatures in English and to ethnic minority literature – also equates to a diminished capacity for core emotional and physical connection, replaced as it is in K by the “arid and selfish” language of the former coloniser in which “all that remained were logic, resentment, abrasiveness and a general distaste for the stupidness of the non-English educated” (30). Similarly, Hung, who regrets the inability of his disciples in this “strange hot land” (121) to discuss the tenets of Buddhist doctrine, “feels that he is alone, a voice that has no tongue, a tongue that has no voice” (34), while Gopal avidly reads Tantric literature but with limited understanding because “his Tamil was spoken and colloquial, and the script was beyond him” (55). For the émigré in the ethnic plurality of polyglot Malaysia, each language used invites associations with the absence or loss of another. K, “a Ceylonese Tamil who could not speak Tamil, though, in his case his complexion had not suffered any sun-change” (4), equates the loss of his ancestral tongue with emotional and spiritual atrophy; at the same time he acknowledges the political shift to Bahasa Malaysia as justified but doubts its accuracy for his occupation, for which he needs the clinical efficiency of English.

But although the inability to communicate that haunts both Hung and K is prevalent in all of Lee’s writing, and stems from the alienating social and political environments in Europe and Asia in which Lee’s characters are positioned, in Flowers in the Sky the Malaysian landscape is no longer depicted as overwhelmingly negative but is rather, as befits the contrapuntal structure of the novel, shown as a contradictory source of comfort and despair. For K, unlike Hung, the similarities between the terrain of his birthplace and the Malaysian island on which he lives, evoke the conflicting diasporic binary of nurture/abandonment:

But always, even when he smelt the breeze of the sea in the mornings under the great rain tree, at the back of his mind, was the scrumpy and humiliating hut of his uncle who more often than not came tumbling in late of night smelling of toddy and vomit. Even the salt of the sea could not wipe out the smell. (27)
Though K mythologises his ancestral past, the nostalgic sentiment with which he may be tempted to view his childhood in Ceylon is tempered by the realities of impoverishment. Absence, linked as it is to a shadowy, problematic ancestral and linguistic past that is often canonised by immigrant and ethnic minority writers, also reveals itself in Lee’s prose as a result of contemporary society (derivative of Western influences, in part, but also of hybridity) blighting and corroding the perceived sanctity of that diasporic ancestry. And, although Flowers in the Sky is balanced rather than overwhelmingly nihilistic in its philosophical viewpoints, corrosion – physical, spiritual, societal, linguistic – is crucial to the narrative:

... he fell back on pat answers. Each time he repeated them he felt their corroding effect, a little each time... his belief was tinged with streaks of corrosion. He was not able to simply believe anything. (111)

The corrosion of spirituality, society and language, largely evoked through the characterisations of K and Hung, is given further variation in the text through the physical and psychological effects that cancer, and her husband’s death, have on Ah Looi, whose search for an explanation for her life and affliction amidst the polymorphous forms of religion on the island, further denotes the paradox of cultural relativism and the confusion that can stem from the profusion of religious and cultural signifiers in a heterogeneous society:

She prayed, but she did not know what she prayed for at times. She prayed at Chinese temples, Indian temples, wayside shrines, during festivals and on the birthdays of the gods. (110)

Hybridity, the coalescence of cultural signifiers from colonising and colonised cultures, has at its core adaptations (coerced or otherwise) within marginalised cultures to hegemonic cultural impositions. Ah Looi, though, is less concerned with hegemonic colonising forces than she is with the superfluity of choice that the diverse cultural backgrounds of these cohabitating ethnic groups constitute – a multiplicity of otherness that can be enriching and dynamic but for her engenders confusion and oppression.

Homi Bhabha’s comments on the eclectic abundance of influences in the postcolonial hybrid culture serve to emphasise the difficulties faced in confronting these diversities:

Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement, whether they are the middle passage of slaver and

---

3 As in K.S. Maniam’s fiction, this is not a call to ethnocentrism or exclusionism but rather to an acknowledgement of the sterility of some aspects of contemporary society – particularly the effects of globalisation (the curse of modernisation for so called underdeveloped or developing nations) at the expense of local culture and traditions.
indenture, the voyage out of the civilising mission, the fraught accommodation of Third World migration to the West after the Second World War, or the traffic of economic and political refugees within and outside the Third World. Culture is translational because such spatial histories of displacement – now accompanied by the territorial ambitions of global media technologies – make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by culture, a rather complex issue. It becomes crucial to distinguish between the semblance and similitude of the symbols across diverse cultural experiences – literature, art, music, ritual, life, death – and the social systems of value. The transnational dimension of cultural transformation – migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation – makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification. The natural(ised), unifying discourse of nation, peoples, or authentic folk tradition, those embedded myths of cultures’ particularity, cannot be readily referenced. The great, though unsettling, advantage of this position is that it makes you increasingly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of tradition. (Bhabha qtd. in Lye)

And indeed, as much as the displacement of cultures by Western expansionism and globalisation, which K tends to attribute to his self-perceived spiritual and emotional ennui, Lee also proffers the surfet of influences and choices in a polyglot multi-ethnic society as potentially debilitating in the search for metaphysical answers: a fracturing of self through hybridity that is simultaneously postcolonial and postmodern. Though the central themes in the text show a continuation of Lee’s interest in the universality of loss, suffering and celebration, the recurring motifs, as Shirley Lim notes (152), are confused cultural symbols. The Cantonese/Western antithetical significance of 666 (respectively denoting joy and the mark of the antichrist) that closes the novel effectively parodies this universality and provides a final ironic perspective on cross-cultural connections, just as the clinical, specific chronology provided by the chapter headings works antithetically against the use of overlapping and interwoven time (memory, multiple perspectives, spiritual reverie) within the narrative.

The primary plot of the novel contrasts Buddhistic asceticism and materialism/pragmatism, and if Ah Looi’s confused hybrid agnosticism offers no alternative, Tantrism, in which the physical and metaphysical are equally celebrated as life forces, provides a serio-comic resolution. The polarities of Theravadan Buddhism, which views physicality as debased, and cynical consumerism, which provides superficial comfort while corroding the spirit, are in sharp relief to Gopal’s discovery of his Shakti in the form of the maid, Nila. The marriage seemingly offers a positive middle passage that rejects Hung’s abstinence and K’s sensual but materialistic disposition and offers erotic/religious fulfilment, but one that is only arrived at through serendipitous circumstances (the mysterious discovery of the Ganesh idol washed up on the beach) and a comic misreading of the rituals of

4Gopal’s tantric philosophy is grounded in Hinduism but the common tantric elements are also to be found in Tantric-Buddhism, though with some different emphases.
courtship. The level of irony and the parody in this sub-plot are clear, yet the gap between sensuality and spirituality that is successfully – if fortuitously – bridged proffers a more life-affirming alternative.

Ultimately, *Flowers in the Sky* is, to borrow from Bhabha, a text that is transnational and translational in its depiction of multiple cultural and historical influences and in its simultaneous occupation of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial space. As befits the complexity of the hybrid state, through its portrayal of the diasporic condition – ethnic, individual and linguistic fragmentation, cross-cultural confusion and (occasional) connection – it ensures that categorical definition is, at best, contentious. Invariably, and appropriately, Lee’s principal characters are no longer overtly shunned or peripheral, yet they remain (with the exception of Gopal) individually and collectively unfulfilled. Through Lee’s writing – from his first tentative journal entries in *Sketches & Vignettes & Brush Strokes* and his experiences in London and Paris, which express both his sense of alienation and his deep misgivings regarding his own worth as an artist, to the more confident but continually questioning core of his later short fiction and finally to the delicate thematic interconnections inherent in *Flowers in the Sky* – we may witness the pioneering exfoliation of the colonial/post-colonial Malaysian writer. Although Lee had written a small number of short stories set in Malaysia before writing *London Does Not Belong To Me* in the early 1950s, it is the severing of the colonial umbilical cord evinced through his first novel’s semi-autobiographical narrator’s rejection of a European centre (and its rejection of him), that ensures Lee is able to transcend his colonial angst and sense of peripheral inferiority. This initially painful but salutary experience liberates the author to address the more immediate multifarious ethnic and philosophical concerns of post-independent Malaysian society. In his short fiction, so resonant of deformity and divisiveness, he expresses the grief of a marginalisation and exile that is more intense in its depiction because, occurring as it does in his homeland, the sense of loss and alienation is multiplied. Although *Flowers in the Sky* continues to chart the corruptive processes of transplanted cultures (Harrex 39) and the residual transience and loneliness experienced by immigrants, the twin thematic foci of alienation and exile so dominant in his other Malaysian fictions are softened by an approach that renders miscommunication and misunderstanding across ethnic groups and cultural philosophies as tragicomedy in equal parts thereof.

WORKS CITED


-------. Kok Liang, Sketches & Vignettes & Brush Strokes. Unpublished edited manuscript held at The Centre for Research in New Literatures in English, Flinders University of South Australia, Adelaide.


© Copyright 2007 Asiatic, ISSN 1985-3106

http://asiatic.iium.edu.my
http://asiatic.iiu.edu.my
International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)