

“Trapped Between Worlds”: The Function of Memory, History and Body in the Fiction of Tan Twan Eng

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Abstract

This paper takes as its starting point Homi Bhabha's explanation of culture and diversity in his essay *The Location of Culture* (1994), in which he denotes cultural meaning as existing in a transitional space between clashing cultures and, associatively, between competing histories. The cultural space to which Bhabha refers offers a path to a reinvention of the hybrid self (and nation) beyond the more restrictive parameters of what Foucault has termed “the inscribed surface of events” (Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 344) that the body represents. With reference to Bhabha's delineation of spatial awareness and Foucault's observations of power discourse and the body as a site of knowledge and discursion but also as an inhibiting site of colonisation, and in light of previous English-language Malaysian fiction, I will examine the ways in which Tan Twan Eng (1972-) investigates the conundrum of memory and historical inscription, and his textual approach to the vexed questions of self-determinism and postcolonial agency in his novels, *The Gift of Rain* (2007) and *The Garden of the Evening Mists* (2012).

Keywords

Bhabha, Foucault, postcolonial, agency, memory, power

Introduction

Without memory, there is no culture. Without memory, there would be no civilization, no society, no future. (Elie Wiesel)

The theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualising an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. It is the inbetween space that carries the burden of the

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meaning of culture, and by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves. (Homi K. Bhabha)

The Malaysian author, Tan Twan Eng (1972-) has published two novels, *The Gift of Rain* (2007) and *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012), each of which has received considerable local and international acclaim. Part *glocal* novels in their sensibilities, part historical fictions, Tan portrays key moments in a Malay(sian) past through overlapping narratives and collective retrospection and each narrative, in its own way, questions the relationship between individual and composite memory and the inscribed histories of the Malay peninsula. In light of globalisation and the increasingly fluid concepts of what constitutes *self* but, conversely, the increasing rigidity in geopolitical borders and ideologies, how relevant does a postcolonial re-imagining of identity remain for this new breed of “Malaysian” writer? Although prominent Malaysian literature written in English has traditionally focused on diaspora within Malaysia itself, the concept of the *glocal* writer has become more relevant to English-language Malaysian writing over the last two decades. Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s novels, *Joss and Gold* (2001) and *Sister Swing* (2006) and Tash Aw’s *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005), *Map of the Invisible World* (2009) and *Five Star Billionaire* (2013) are examples of Malaysian (and expatriate Malaysian) writers addressing, but also looking beyond, local concerns in terms of content and audience. Within this framework, the fiction of Tan Twan Eng seeks to reassess Malaysian history and society primarily through examining the traumas of the Japanese Occupation and its aftermath. Tan may, personally at least, be writing from a position that is less immediately affected by legacies of upheaval and displacement than pioneer Anglophone Malaysian writers such as Lloyd Fernando, K.S. Maniam or Lee Kok Liang, but he is still negotiating transition and translation in the cultural, geographical and historical spaces of the country and its path towards independence.

In earlier postcolonial writing from across the globe, a fundamental position of the writer was one of resistance and redress from within European colonial or former colonial territories. Some of the principal aims of these writers were to explode Eurocentric mythologies and misappropriations in relation to these territories, to deconstruct European canonical hegemonies, and to attempt to reclaim spaces and identities that were denied and, in some cases, obliterated. These challenges, both pre- and post-independence, were initially primarily directed toward Western power and its legacy (and an element of this approach still lingers) but more latterly have closely addressed both the perceived dissemination of nation-state borders and the racial/cultural power dynamics and politics within those postcolonial nations themselves, and it is this retrospective reclamation of space and identity through memory(ies) which I most closely wish to analyse in Tan’s fiction.

To do this, it is worth noting Homi Bhabha's assertions in his seminal text, *The Location of Culture* (1994). Bhabha addresses, to use his own phrase, "how newness enters the world" and part of what I wish to assess is whether, by returning to the problematic position of collective cultural memory, new kinds of less restrictive national identities can be forged through older templates. Does Tan's fiction inhabit Bhabha's "Third Space," the "inbetween space" that carries the burden (but also the potentialities) of culture? Of the previous Anglophone Malaysian writers, K.S. Maniam certainly exhibits an understanding of this notion and of the timelessness of cultural memory, most particularly in *In A Far Country* (1993), *Haunting the Tiger* (1996) and *Between Lives* (2003) yet, despite the hope of a collective future that is provided through the acknowledgement of a shared identity and past, by the conclusion of these three texts Maniam's Malaysia is still shown to be as divisive as it is inclusive. Indeed, in attempting to coalesce the binary narratives of their individual ethnic origins with a multi-ethnic Malaysia a number of Maniam's characters, such as Kannan (*The Return*) and Muthu ("Haunting the Tiger") follow destructive paths that lead them to view themselves only through the prism of exiled ethnicity. The acceptance of shared identity as protean yet perennial, Maniam argues, is key to a truly cooperative sense of nation, yet the path toward it is fraught. What then of Tan Twan Eng's approach to history, cultural memory and national identity? This essay seeks to assess Tan's writing in terms of its approach to the Foucauldian coloniser/colonised binary of power and resistance, its evocation of individual and collective memory in a Malaysian context, and whether the texts express the national burden and heterogeneous potential of Bhabha's liminal spaces of hybrid identity.

Nation and Globalisation

As Sharmani Gabriel has observed in relation to a number of prominent cultural scholars (including Fredric Jameson and Arjun Appadurai) in her analysis of the work of contemporary Malaysian author Tash Aw, the effects of globalisation on the nation-state and on national identities have been closely debated and disputed with no general consensus (Gabriel 146). In simple terms, while much scholarship suggests globalisation has predominantly made borders more fluid, other analysis conversely argues that the perceived threat of the dissolution of the nation-state has resulted in a tightening of political and cultural control in many contexts. Central to much of this commentary is Hardt and Negri's sweeping work, *Empire* (2000), which approaches the effects of globalisation in neo-marxist terms, and argues that the new world order redefines concepts of sovereignty as existing on global rather than nation-state levels. Such debates have also clearly extended to the merits and demerits of the globalisation of literature and whether this transition undercuts, or reinforces, marginal literatures and their position in relation to traditional, hierarchical centres of power. While Appadurai largely

foregrounds visual and electronic media over the written word as more relevant to contemporary cultural fluidity and power discourses in *Modernity at Large* (1996), the notion of the literary world as closely aligned to the economic world and thus to inherent power hierarchies within it (the seeds of which argument may be seen in Said's multiple discourses on Eurocentric and Western power structures and imbalances, most notably *Orientalism* [1978] and *Culture and Imperialism* [1993]), is revisited in Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* (2004). Casanova dismisses what she views as the false perception that the advent of globalisation has brought with it a Goethean utopia of cultural dialogue on equal terms across nations. Literary *success* (in itself a disputatious term) ultimately remains dependent on proximity to traditional centres of literary output. Viewed in this light, modern world literature, which may seemingly offer writers of Malaysian English-language fiction, as an example of the periphery, the chance of broader readership, will more likely result in their being subsumed by familiar power structures.

In 1990, Appadurai had argued that the more complex, overlapping world of globalisation must be viewed in terms of the "tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization" ("Disjuncture and Difference" 295) rather than in terms of centres and peripheries and more recent socio-political movements have seen dramatic responses to this heterogenisation and the perceived flexibility of national borders. While both developed and developing nations have embraced the financial benefits of globalised trade when it suits, the political backwash of this has been a marked increase in unilateralism, isolationist strategies, exclusionism and jingoistic rhetoric, as witnessed by ongoing reactionary political movements in the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe, and in a regression towards increasingly autocratic behaviour in a number of other nations, as evidenced by relatively totalitarian stances in China and Russia.

Regardless of the merit of Jameson's much-discussed claim that "the nation-state today remains the only concrete terrain and framework for political struggle" (Jameson 65), the construct of the nation-state itself is built on a rather more problematic (and paradoxical) tension between the individual and the collective acceptance of the shared tropes of memory and history. These are, of course, necessarily fallible cornerstones on which to build because, to borrow from the title of Tash Aw's *Map of the Invisible World* (2009), just as a map may transcribe, describe and document spaces, in so doing it must also render those spaces limited and restrictive. To document and interpret history and memory, one must transcribe fixed, immovable symbols onto the movable, liminal spaces that constitute cultural and national intersections and interstices. In this sense, Aw's approach in his body of fiction is as much a discourse on the processes of storytelling and the multiple perspectives that history as narrative can provide. In a comparison of the fiction of Aw and Tan, Holden argues:

In contemporary Malaysia, Aw's narrative perhaps has the function of raising readers' awareness about how the past is narrativized, and the many possibilities of narrativizing a chain of events.... If Tan's text is concerned with the ambiguity of morality, Aw's is perhaps concerned with the ambiguity of how a figure is placed within a pre-existing historical narrative: the open-ended nature of interpretation highlighted in the novel suggests that heroes and villains are the products of stories we tell ourselves. (Holden 57)

While Aw's more diffuse narratives and use of characters that exist outside of national frameworks deliberately critique nation-building and the sovereignty of the nation-state, Tan's settings are more geographically and chronologically limited and, perhaps partly for this reason, more restrictive.

Nevertheless, these tensions between nation-state sovereignty and globalisation and the current political climate provide interesting reference points for Tan's two novels, their treatment of cultural and individual identity(ies), and their links to the problematic construct of national memory. Does his fiction reinforce, undercut or ignore Malaysian attempts to manufacture and maintain homogenous multicultural national identities? Does his investigation of memory and historical inscription constitute political allegory or subversive commentary in any way? And, given the recent failures of major Western nations to truly embrace the multiple ethnicities and identities which have been central to their own national narratives over the previous century, and their reversion to clearly homogenising strategies, to what extent can this writer – perhaps more fluid than earlier Malaysian writers, more confident of existing in the interstices – successfully negotiate these seemingly discordant, antithetical and competing memories?

While Tan's readership may be more global than many previous Malaysian writers, an audience perhaps partially attracted by his ability to meld local heterogeneity with the more pragmatic concerns of providing a level of exoticism to an international marketplace, he is nevertheless a natural generational heir to the concerns of the competing ethnic histories of nation and memory that dominate the sociopolitical allegories of Lloyd Fernando, and which are evident in the dislocation and silences in Lee Kok Liang's and K.S Maniam's fiction and the more transnational fiction of Shirley Geok-lin Lim. Fernando, in his two novels *Scorpion Orchid* (1976) and *Green is the Colour* (1993), most pointedly evokes the Singaporean interracial riots of the late 1950s and the May, 1969 riots in Malaysia as catalysts for cultural struggle and communal introspection. Tan Twan Eng chronologically repositions these reference markers to focus on earlier struggles in the national narrative: the Japanese invasion of Malaya and its aftermath, the Communist Insurgency of the 1950s, and, though Philip Holden reasonably suggests that “perhaps, we may have to stop demanding that the Malaysian novel in English address national questions directly, or that it reflect

on the state of the nation” (Holden 52), the settings of both of Tan’s novels in terms of chronology and location, and their thematic concerns, certainly lend themselves to readings, if not of national allegory, then of a space in which one may draw certain parallels between individual histories and national narratives.

The Gift of Rain: Power and Resistance

Mnemosyne, one must admit, has shown herself to be a very careless girl.
(Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*)

Through the retrospective gaze of the central character, the Eurasian Philip Hutton, Tan’s first novel attempts to connect at a historical and, in rudimentary terms, metahistorical level the disparate histories and ethnicities that merge and compete prior to, during and immediately after the Japanese occupation of Penang. Unlike a number of marginalised characters that figure prominently in much of the earlier postcolonial English-language writing in Malaysia (two such examples are Lee Kok Liang’s *Mutes in the Sun* [1963] and K.S. Maniam’s *The Return* [1981], each of which depicts characters existing in interstitial circumstances), Philip Hutton is oxymoronically representative of both centre and periphery. Though he is socially elite, his mixed Chinese-British heritage, in an environment that demands racial purity, nevertheless positions him in the ethnic interstices of Penang society. Predating, yet relevant to the burgeoning middle-classes of contemporary Southeast Asia, he is economically privileged by birth yet unmoored by his problematic sense of belonging. Born with the titular gift of rain, which is both a blessing and curse, Philip is quick to identify with multiple and competing Occidental and Oriental cultures and systems of belief: Western Christian principles are interwoven with Japanese Zen and Daruma philosophies, which in turn are seen to flower from the Chinese traditions of the Bodhidharma. The Penang Tan Twan Eng evokes is a microcosm of hybridity, threatened by the push for ethnic purity so prevalent on both sides of the globe in this period:

It was only just starting to occur to me what a strange place I had grown up in – a Malayan country ruled by the British, with strong Chinese, Indian, and Siamese influences. Within the island I could move from world to world merely by crossing a street.... One could easily lose one’s identity and acquire another just by going for a stroll. (66)

Ultimately, as Philip comes to comprehend in the face of British colonisation and the aggressive dictates for racial purity under Japanese imperialism, it is “the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 38) that defines his identity. The ultimate acceptance of his full name – Philip Armenius Khoo-Hutton – denotes the acceptance of this ethnic diversity, those

seemingly contrary forces within his identity finally interacting, if not in perfect harmony, then in acquiescence to the multiple cultural layers and the intermediate spaces between that which constitutes his hybrid self and that which constitutes his hybrid location.

The agent for this harmony ironically stems from his relationship with his teacher, Endo-san, and through his experiences of the contradictory nature of Japanese culture and occupation: resistant to Western imperialism yet instrumental in the brutal colonisation of other Asian countries under the auspices of Asian “co-prosperity,” depictions of calculated Japanese barbarity are juxtaposed in the text with images of cultural refinement and attention to aesthetic detail. The Penang of Tan’s narrative is an overwhelmingly patriarchal world invested with overt binary motifs of dominance and submission and covert references to homoerotic yearnings, and one in which female characters exist only in the periphery as reactive foils to the dominant male discourse. Emblematic of this Japanese cultural hegemony to which Philip submits, the character of Endo-san, in his role as mentor and betrayer, provides the Orientalist template of exoticisation and eroticisation. Forbidden both culturally and sexually, Philip fantasises over a life spent in submissive domesticity and instruction with Endo-san even while acknowledging the danger of publicly admitting his connection to him and, by implication, latent sexual infatuation with him:

Thoughts floated by like intoxicated butterflies: of taking care of him, preparing his meals, spending the rest of my life learning under his guidance; thoughts which would always remain thoughts, never becoming real, when even to acknowledge him in public was fraught with risks. (187)

The sense of cultural and sexual displacement Philip feels for the greater part of the narrative causes him to crave a stability that the teachings and philosophies of Aikijutsu and Zen, channelled through Endo-san in an intimate surrogate relationship, offer. This relationship is further complicated by Philip’s decision to work for the Japanese regime during the Occupation, which he justifies in the paternalistic tones of caring for family, but which is equally born of his infatuation with his teacher.

It is here that Foucault’s discussions of power and resistance prove valuable in analysing the central relationship expressed within the novel. Foucault’s famous assertion that “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1* 94) is clearly applicable not only to the relationship between the two central characters but to the coloniser/colonised delineation that is at the heart of the narrative. This is a polyethnic and polyglossic society and, as with all such fluid societies, multiple complex discourses of power

exist within it. Yet, as Philip learns, these discourses of power (whether cultural, political, or sexual) are not easy to define and process because, as Foucault notes:

There is not, on the one side, a discourse of power, and opposite to it, another discourse that runs counter to it. Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy. (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1 102)

In the sense that power is not necessarily a unitary, hierarchical relationship between ruler and ruled and power may also emerge from below, the central relationship, and indeed its value as a metaphor for the period in which Malaya was under Japanese rule, takes on a more fluid dynamic than the simple binary of subjugator/subjugated. Philip is the site of submission to Japanese power in both a physical and metaphysical sense in his relationship with Endo-san and with the Japanese imperial army and yet, in his role as collaborator and interpreter, may also be read as a site of problematic resistance, because “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart” (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* 100-01).

Like Philip, Malaysians have long exhibited a fraught sense of belonging and unity, most particularly among marginalised Chinese, Indian and Eurasian ethnicities after the UMNO *bumiputra* edicts of post-independence. *The Gift of Rain*, in locating its narrative prior to 1957 independence, offers the opportunity to position “past Malaysian identity along lines of connection and conjunction, attempting thereby to make less visible the ‘sutures’ of a multi-ethnic society” (Menon 38). Such an opportunity should offer, by implication, a reinterpretation of key historical moments and their part in ongoing and evolving national narratives, and it is in light of this that I will examine the protagonist’s attitude to self-determinism and predestination in the text.

Tan’s representation of the cyclical relationship of Philip and Endo-san across previous lives as inescapable karmic repetition evokes comparisons with the beliefs of the Chinese philosopher Zhang Taiyan (1869-1936), who had also been influenced by his visits to Japan, and who drew on Buddhist and Daoist teachings to propound a fatalistic karmic repetition in history. As Volker Scheid explains:

As a Buddhist intellectual, Zhang Taiyan employed the notion of karma as a tool for understanding historical process independent of the ideologies of progress and linear time that the West was then imposing on China. In this view, history is produced by the activity of karmic seeds. These seeds are brought to fruition through action, producing karmic fruits, which in turn

become seeds for new fruits and so on. Existence is perfumed by these seeds, which produce habits that have karmic consequences. This karmic cycle or *samsara* can only be broken by bringing into awareness and then transcending the conditioning brought forth by the karmic seeds. (Scheid 81; italics in original)

Yet while Zhang's philosophy offers some small hope of moving beyond the restrictive karmic cycle through achieving an awareness of it, the very *inevitability* of repetition in *The Gift of Rain* – despite Philip's ultimate acceptance of his hybrid self – offers little of this same caveat. Rather, it provides a narrative position that, when projected to Malaya/Malaysia itself, points to the inevitability of a repetition of coloniser/colonised power dynamics at an ethnic level in the country, and works against Bhabha's assessment that the relocation of the past may allow us to reinterpret and shape the present without the shackles of historical determinism:

The importance of such [historical] retroaction lies in its ability to reinscribe the past, reactivate it, relocate it, *resignify* it. More significant, it commits our understanding of the past, and our reinterpretation of the future, to an ethics of "survival" that allows us to *work through the present*. And such a working through, or working out, frees us from the determinism of historical inevitability repetition *without a difference*. It makes it possible for us to confront that difficult borderline, the interstitial experience between what we take to be the image of the past and what is in fact involved in the passing of time and the passage of meaning. (Bhabha, "Culture's In-Between" 59-60; italics in original)

In line with Bhabha's assertions, and in direct reference to Malaysian society and Tan's work, Leon and Koh have observed that "the process of healing... can only begin with the recuperation of lost histories" (111) and indeed Tan's trauma narratives of the Japanese Occupation and beyond, though also partially dealt with by earlier writers, as Lim (2011) has noted,² clearly offer new scope for acknowledgement, reclamation and healing. In *The Gift of Rain*, through "the intersection of the personal narrative of experience and the public narrative of place" (Leon and Koh 120), healing and an acceptance of self is seemingly achieved, yet it is also just as clear that this "healing" is problematic, rooted as it is in Endo-san's deception, in Philip's unreliable interpretation of his relationship with his teacher and with his colonial Japanese masters, and in his acceptance of karmic repetition as a root cause of historical inevitability.

Repeatedly, the concept of self-determination as agency for change is parried and dismissed. Philip's evocation of Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken" to argue for the necessity of free will (a position which emphasises Philip's naivety

² Ooi Cheng Teik's 1948 novel, *Red Sun Over Malaya: John Man's Ordeal* and Chin Kee Onn's 1952 novel, *Marai-ee* both provide graphic details of the brutality of Japanese Occupation.

given that the poem may just as legitimately be interpreted in terms of the deception of arbitrary choice and, indeed, as representative of Phillip's own tendencies toward self-delusion) is immediately countered by Michiko's response, "Who created the two roads in the first place?" (401). Though he tentatively explores individual responsibility ("we all have the power to choose" [425]) this is again countered in the text by the inevitability of predetermination through references to Western religious philosophy in the form of Isaiah, Chapter 46, Verse 10. Ultimately, Philip concludes:

While I now accept that the course of our lives has been set down long before our births, I feel that the inscriptions that dictate the directions of our lives merely write out what is already in our hearts; they can do nothing more. (431-32)

While Philip eventually posits the heart as the pre-determiner of karma, thereby confusingly prioritising emotional connection while inherently negating freedom of choice and self-determinism, this is a position which I would argue carries with it an almost Calvinistic surrender to predestination that is a deeply troubling response to individual and social obligations in national and ethnic conflicts and in national narratives. The text provides a conclusion which, as Lim notes, is disquieting because of the location of the emotional centre of agency:

... Philip's privileging of the heart silently produces a loophole that effectively allows Philip to accept responsibility for his actions and decisions during the Occupation and to simultaneously disavow it by displacing the cause of his actions and decisions to a source outside his power, namely his autonomous heart. (Lim, "Agency and the Pedagogy" 237)

If relocating and reimagining key historical narratives allows us, in Bhabha's terms, to unpack the past and reinscribe it so as to move beyond "the determinism of historical inevitability repetition" (Bhabha, "Culture's In-Between" 59), *The Gift of Rain*, through promoting karmic determinism as the ratification of inevitability over agency and choice, and the heart over the mind, marks the lives of the principal protagonists in such a way as to abrogate this responsibility.

The Garden of Evening Mists: The Inscribed Body, the Aphasic Mind

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body. (Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History")

The postcolonial theorist, Elleke Boehmer asserts that locating a voice from an imposed silence is “perhaps one of the key distinguishing features of the postcolonial: the conversion of imposed dumbness into self-expression, the self-representation of the colonial ‘body’ of its scars, its history” (Boehmer 272). Though Tan Twan Eng, in his own words, abhors categorisation and has stated his lack of familiarity with the work of writers such as Lloyd Fernando and K.S. Maniam (Lim, “On Art and Artifice” 20-21) his two novels, while stylistically disparate from many previous Malaysian Anglophone texts, do share common ground with these authors (and with Lee Kok Liang) in their examination of trauma and memory in a Malayan/Malaysian setting. Each of Fernando’s two novels examines political and racial upheaval as a violent catharsis from which new national tropes may emerge, while Lee Kok Liang’s previously-mentioned novella, *The Mutes in the Sun* (1963) and other short stories such as “Dumb, Dumb, by a Bee Stung” in *Death is a Ceremony and Other Stories* (1992) represent the silent and mutilated spaces of Penang/Malayan society, dealing specifically with deformity, aphasia and the inability of Malaya’s disenfranchised to articulate their identity and place in that society. Similarly, Maniam’s first novel, *The Return* (1981) evokes these twin themes of muteness and marginalisation through its depiction of a society in which, for many of the initial immigrant Tamil community, “words will not serve” (K.S. Maniam, *The Return* 173), while his subsequent writing invariably probes the myths of origin in correlation to multiethnic, collective paths to national identity. Inevitably, despite Tan’s global audience and reticence to have his fiction linked to the specific national tropes or prescriptive writing of these earlier authors, the narrative focus and thematic thrust of his two novels places him firmly within this tradition, at least in a superficial sense.

The Garden of the Evening Mists continues Tan’s exploration of individual and collective memory through the trauma of the Japanese Occupation and the subsequent Malayan Insurgency. Set in Cameron Highlands in Malaysia, like *The Gift of Rain*, the tale is retrospectively narrated and shifts between a past and present voice – in this novel centring on the reflections of Yun Ling Teoh, a recently-retired judge, and her past relationship with the Japanese gardener, Nakamura Aritomo. Central to its thematic schema is the binary of remembrance and absolution, symbolised in the text by the twin statues of Memory (the goddess, Mnemosyne and her innominate sister, the goddess of Forgetting), located on the lawns of the grounds of Majuba, a Boer tea settlement in Cameron Highlands. Just as Philip in Tan’s previous novel is dislocated by, but ultimately accepts, his hybrid self and his past collusion with the Japanese military, Yun must attempt to come to terms with the loss of her sister during the Japanese Occupation, and the impending loss of her memory, through the acknowledgement and acceptance of her past. In this novel, the protagonist’s actions lead the reader to speculate that history and moving beyond its restrictive

parameters entails a specific physical documentation of it, through the tattooing of Yun's body and through her memoirs, in order to achieve absolution and enlightenment, and to counter the ongoing debilitation of her aphasic memory loss.

Given that the principal focus of Tan's novels is the intricate connections between history, memory and the individual, it is useful for the purposes of discussing this text to refer to Michel Foucault's view on the relationship between genealogy, based as it is "on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times" (Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 341), and the body as a privileged site of history. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault posits that the history of ideas, as understood in contemporary terms, rests not upon the continuity of key moments as had been commonly perceived but, in essence, on the *discontinuities*, the ruptures in history that legitimately express the sheer complexity and multiplicities of the historical document:

The document is not the fortunate tool of a history that is primarily and fundamentally memory.... In our time, history is that which transforms documents into monuments. In that area where, in the past, history deciphered the traces left by men, it now deploys a mass of elements that have to be grouped, made relevant, placed in relation to one another to form totalities; it might be said, to play on words a little, that in our time history aspires to the condition of archaeology, to the intrinsic description of the monument. (Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* 7)

In *The Garden of Evening Mists*, the primary Chinese-Malaysian narratorial perspective is interspersed with snippets of other historical narratives (Boer-South African and, to a lesser extent than Tan's previous novel, Anglophone), but it is also overlaid with the culturally-specific Japanese aesthetics of *nihon teien* (traditional garden design), *ukiyo-e* (woodblock prints), *horimono* (traditional tattooing), and *kyudo* (archery). In the "liminal transcultural space" (Poon 192) of Cameron Highlands, these competing voices and aesthetics represent, to a certain extent, discontinuities because they constitute what may be described, in Bakhtinian terms, as a form of heteroglossia: the discourse is paradoxically unified and disrupted by its intrinsic hybridity, in much the same way as the disparate yet interconnected ethnicities and histories that form contemporary Malaysia. This multiplicity of perspectives and aesthetic prisms provides both truth and duplicity, both continuity and *discontinuity*, just as Aritomo (like Endo-san before him) is both true to his cultural upbringing and sense of obligation (*giri*) yet also false to himself in his deception of Yun Ling. As such, both of Tan's novels are fundamentally concerned with reclaiming and preserving identity(ies) through reordering and reinterpreting overlapping and competing historical spaces – one metaphor for which is the concept of borrowed, interwoven scenery (*shakkei*) –

and each novel thus attempts to build an awareness and understanding of these connections but also seeks to expose the narratorial gaps that exist in individual and collective histories.

In this novel, the author attempts to coalesce these competing histories through providing, as the Singapore scholar, Angelia Poon terms it:

a meditation on the transcultural mediation and aestheticization of memory by deliberately intermingling and overlaying various cultural features, artistic traditions, and ethno-cultural subjectivities when it comes to the processes of memory. (186)

Poon is critical of the text, criticisms with which I concur, primarily because of its simplistic cultural representations, which depend on elitist perspectives and a hierarchical interconnectedness between Japanese and Chinese cultural tastes. Malays and Indians are given only superficial representation, either as lower-level functionaries or, as in the case of a party guest at Majuba House, mouthpieces for nationalist *bumiputera* propaganda (60). From both postcolonial and feminist perspectives, she mounts a valid argument that the narrative is ultimately dishonest in that the protagonist, initially positioned as a strong and determined woman, willingly cedes control of her life (and her body) to the ephemera of memory, thus acknowledging her life's futility and invalidating any inscription of meaning to it. In this narrative, aesthetics are prioritised to a point where all history is rendered valueless, just as resistance and agency are negated by karmic determinism and a surrender to emotion (the heart) in *The Gift of Rain*.

Given that the "timeless" spaces of the Majuba tea-plantations and of the Japanese garden, Yugiri, are under constant threat from the harsh reality of the Malaysian climate and terrain, it is clear that they function as contradictory symbols of permanence and ephemera, of superficial containment and atavistic regression in equal parts. Yet what is also clear is that, while a purity of vision and acknowledgement of origin is important to individual and collective consciousnesses, it is the heteroglossia of the narrativised landscape itself, the infusion of the borrowed scenery of *shakkei* and the acceptance of multiple spaces, that Aritomo and, ultimately, Yun Ling must come to understand as fundamental to their sense of self and location. This is in part represented by Aritomo's disappearance into the jungle, which may be read on the one hand as a symbolic immersion not into the controlled landscape of the Japanese garden which he has created, but into the uncontrolled Malaysian landscape itself, on the other (in correlation to Yun Ling's aphasia) as the nullification of memory and the futility of historical interpretation: all is transient, nothing has permanence. Though Aritomo's final act may be read as a redemptive affirmation of self and a disavowal of rigid nationalistic tropes, in that he is no longer *Japanese* per se but a hybrid of his old and new selves, there is no definitive narratorial confirmation

of this. The text may just as easily be interpreted in nihilistic terms; his disappearance may be read as commensurate to Yun Ling's acquiescence to her condition and to the impermanence of memory, as is symbolised by her musings on the Japanese Buddhist monks' inscriptions on the emperor's waterwheel in Aritomo's garden:

I am relieved to see [the waterwheel] is still there. But it no longer turns, no longer grinds the water with the patience of a monk. Lichen daubs the sides of the wheel and two of its paddles are missing. The waterfall is now a trickle, and the pond is choked with algae and drowned leaves and broken-off branches. . . . The inscriptions beneath the remaining panels are grouted with moss; the writing is fragmented, the prayers garbled and weakened, and I realize that a day will come when they will be silenced completely. (168)

Though the water wheel has a superficial association with cyclical karmic repetition it, the text implies, like history and memory, will eventually be irrevocably silenced. This is a repression of voice however that, unlike many prominent narratives in postcolonial Malaysian English-language writing, does not represent the marginalisation and suppression of ethnicities and individuals in opposition to a dominant colonising and/or controlling force. Rather, Tan's narrative(s) may lead the reader to surmise that all action, all agency in the coloniser/colonised binary, is emptied of determinism and thus of responsibility or culpability.

Though Yun Ling speculates that "memory must exist before there's forgetting" (36), Tan's text ultimately prioritises the latter over the former. In an attempt to reconcile two distinctly disparate types of *forgetting*: the self-imposed repression of memory (symbolised in the novel by the glove which hides her mutilation at the hands of the Japanese), and her inevitable aphasic loss of memory, Yun Ling's body becomes the sacred site of remembrance, initially through her mutilation and later through horimono tattooing. The former is a violent act of degradation and possession perpetrated upon the body without consent, the latter is a symbolically sexualised and, despite initial reluctance, compliant act which signifies the pain and pleasure of remembrance. Each act, I would argue, marks the body as the location of historical meaning but also marks the body as the possession of a patriarchal colonising force for, as Sigrid Weigel has noted when discussing the notion of body space in relation to the philosophies of Walter Benjamin and Foucault:

... the body is not outside history, nor is it understood as nature in opposition to culture. The body, too, has a history, it is simultaneously a matrix of history and a site in which history takes place. (Weigel 40)

Yun Ling, held captive and brutalised by her Japanese captors, and her sister Yun Hong, systematically violated by Japanese soldiers in her role as a comfort woman, are clearly specific sites in which history and culture have coalesced and collided in the body. The sisters have been mutilated and muted; inscribed upon as they are by their colonial oppressors, they must attempt to assert identity through reclamation and reversal because, “representing its own silence, the colonized body speaks; uttering its wounds, it negates its muted condition” (Boehmer 272). Thus, though Yun Ling seeks to deny the mutilation of her hand, the narrative leads the reader toward the inevitable assumption that she must ultimately acknowledge and embrace its disfigurement in order to liberate herself and locate her voice. Further, the horimono inscribed on her body, which depicts key moments in her past fused with a map of the garden of Yugiri, constitutes the matrix and site of history in which nature and culture also converge. In making her body the site of the past, it may be argued that Yun Ling is reclaiming that history while synchronously liberating herself from it in a mnemonic act of decolonisation, even while allowing that the empty space left within the horimono tacitly acknowledges that no history can be complete, no history can be fully visualised or recorded. Yet, as is emblematic of this novel and *The Gift of Rain*, this position too is negated: if the map and images Aritomo creates on Yun Ling’s body are intended to represent her liberation they may just as equally be interpreted as possession. In branding Yun Ling’s skin, Aritomo codedly marks her as his property continuing, in Foucauldian terms, the cycle of patriarchal possession and violation that is central to Yun Ling’s understanding of her and her sister’s existence. She remains within the realms of the colonised, her submission to Aritomo’s desire a capitulation to domination rather than a deliverance from the colonial chains that have bound her self-perception.

To draw a comparison, unlike the elderly woman Sellamma in Maniam’s *Between Lives* (2003), who immerses herself in the land in an act of spiritual communion and defiance that acknowledges a sacred and shared Malaysian origin between its principal ethnicities, the marking of Yun Ling’s body and Aritomo’s unexplained disappearance into the Malaysian jungle may be read as signifiers of submission rather than immersion, as voices silenced and bodies colonised rather than reinvented through connection to a greater, shared memory and purpose. If one views *The Garden of Evening Mists* through the prism of Bhabha’s liminal “third space,” neither Yun Ling nor Aritomo inhabit the margins from which self can be reinterpreted, but rather a chasm in which agency and self-determinism are eliminated. Thus, Yun Ling’s philosophical observations in the text – “For what is a person without memories? A ghost, trapped between worlds, without an identity, with no future, no past” (25) – are inevitably counterpointed and negated: “Emptiness: it appealed to me, the possibility of ridding myself of everything I had seen and heard and lived through” (81).

For Maniam, as for Lee and Fernando, silence and forgetting invariably function in their fiction as repressive acts representative of systemic ethnic or socioeconomic marginalisation but from whose intermediate positions resistance will occur and reinterpretations of shared histories may emerge yet, in *The Garden of Evening Mists*, as Poon notes, memory seemingly functions only as aesthetic paradox:

In the novel, specific wartime losses are glossed over eventually in favour of abstractions such as absence, impermanence, and the ephemeral. Memory, according to the narrative and moral logic of the text, is merely an illusory substitute for what has inexorably evaporated and vanished. It leads nowhere. The deepest insight the novel can offer is that everything fades away with time. (Poon 198)

Yun Ling's inevitable submission to Aritomo and to her condition translates, in symbolic terms, as an acceptance of historical impermanence that constitutes a moral vacuum and reinforces the inevitability of the coloniser/colonised relationship: language will be silenced and memory will be expunged, history can only exist in terms of individual and cultural perspectives, truth is mere subjectivity. And while this is rational in one sense, it is overwhelmingly nihilistic in another: representing thought and memory in this way may provide a pragmatic textual approach, but it negates the responsibility and agency that are rightly associated with the colonial/postcolonial context in which this narrative is set.

Conclusion

Reconstructing memories (individual, collective, national) and reclaiming a voice for the silenced and marginalised are deliberate and conscious acts. If one views this in connection to a postcolonial understanding of agency and responsibility it is interesting to again return to K.S. Maniam who, in a reflection on his own writing and its aims, refers to what he sees as the "mystical experience of the larger personality that resides within us" (Maniam, "Fiction into Fact" 265). This larger personality may, in essence, be delineated as the recognition of an individual and collective memory within a Malaysian context that connects with multiple pasts that are omnipresent and evolving, and which do not dissipate with the passing of the individual. From Maniam's perspective, memory is not *ephemeral* but *perpetual*; it is a shared responsibility of the community, and one in which the writer plays an active role in his or her choice of character and context. For writers such as this:

Borderline existences... are linked to concepts of multiple identities which depict subjects as able to partake in different cultures at the same time. Accordingly, the protagonists of postcolonial texts... refuse to be located either

here or there; they insist on being related to many different places and communities, avoiding to be part of either us or them. Due to their unstable positionalities, these subjects dissolve the boundaries between cultures and nations that have gone unquestioned for a long time. (Lossau 65)

Just as Foucault argues that the individual permanently exists within discourses of power, and that where power is located there will be (and should be) multiple discourses of resistance, similarly the role of the writer in this process, and in this context, is crucial to a continued exploration of agency and responsibility. This is particularly relevant at a time in which, on both a global and local level, such responsibilities are often diluted or obfuscated, because it is crucial that the heterogeneous nation may continue to define itself both from without and, even more importantly, from within its borders, and from the multiple tensions that exist between locations of power and the struggle against these points of power.

It is therefore, as Bhabha noted, salient to look beyond simple coloniser/colonised binaries and comprehend the ever-present hybrid discourses that signify multiple histories and multiple points of resistance, the “liminal signifying space that is internally marked by the discourse of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference” (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 212). And though, at certain points in each of Tan Twan Eng’s novels, the narrative may be interpreted as a polemic which subverts traditional colonising discourse(s), in each instance that position is itself subverted and negated and traditional dichotomies are reinforced. Thus, despite providing narratives that in many ways seemingly celebrate the inherent hybridity of Malaysian culture and question its history, the author ultimately ignores the opportunity for reinvention and reclamation of nation and self that these two texts, given their positioning and context, should offer. It is an opportunity missed.

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