

Minority Literature, Performativity, Resistance: The Case of Anglophone and Sinophone Malaysian Writings

Andrew Hock Soon Ng¹
Monash University Malaysia

Article Received: 8 August 2018

Article Accepted: 11 November 2018

Abstract

This essay demonstrates how non-Malay language writers in Malaysia attempt to subvert the state's promotion of a single-language (Malay) literature as national literature through the practice of authorial insularity, which is writing within one's religio-ethnic community. In the case of sinophone literature, this practice has the added significance of refusing submission to a literary heritage (Chinese) that is fundamentally foreign to its cultural identity. The works of Malaysian anglophone writers such as Salleh ben Joned, Che Husna Azhari and K.S. Maniam, as well as Malaysian-born sinophone writer, Ng Kim Chew, will be discussed to illustrate my overarching point.

Keywords

Anglophone Malaysian literature, sinophone Malaysian literature, minor literature, the pedagogical, the performative, resistance

Less than a decade after the Malay language, or Bahasa Melayu (BM), was constitutionally made the official language in 1963, the state would relegate any creative work produced in Malaysia not written in Malay to "secondary" status.² Accordingly, non-Malay writings would henceforth be without national value and be ineligible for state-sponsored literary awards, which in turn implied limited publishing opportunities and readership. Responses from affected writers would vary: National Laureate Muhammad Haji Salleh quickly abandoned writing in English to focus singularly on Malay poetry, Wong Phui Nam took a lengthy hiatus between his first two collections of poems (1968 and 1989), while Johnny Ong discontinued writing altogether after publishing his novel, *Long White Sand*

¹ **Andrew Hock Soon Ng** is Associate Professor at Monash University Malaysia where he teaches Literary Studies and Writing. He researches on Gothic horror, postcolonial writings and postmodern literature, and his monographs include *Intimating the Sacred: Religion in English-Language Malaysian Fiction* (HKU Press, 2011) and *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives* (Palgrave, 2015). Email: ng.hock.soon@monash.edu.

² This was because the elevation of the Malay language to national language also consigned the other languages spoken in the multiracial country to minority, or inferior, status. For a comprehensive discussion on the politics of Malaysian literature during the 70s, see Tham.

(1977). Others sought greener pastures for their creative pursuit elsewhere, with novelist Beth Yahp and the late poet Ee Tiang Hong migrating to Australia, the versatile Shirley Lim to the U.S., and writers Li Yung-P'ing (李永平) and Huang Jinshu (or more familiarly, Ng Kim Chew [黃錦樹]) to China and Taiwan respectively after completing their studies in the latter. Notwithstanding their relocation, these authors (with the exception of Li) would continue to steadfastly turn to their homeland for creative resource. There are also authors like K.S. Maniam and the late Lee Kok Liang who would remain in Malaysia but continue writing, realising full well their works would attract negligible interest and recognition. Three decades later, the legacy of the state's discrimination against non-Malay writings continues to be felt in the country's cultural scene despite the state's gradual relaxation of its language policy over the years, especially in relation to English.³ Although there are more anglophone and sinophone Malaysian authors today, only those – like Tash Aw and Tan Twan Eng – who write from, and/or are published, overseas enjoy worldwide readership and acclaim, while those who write and publish at home are known to just a select native audience (i.e. middle-class, educated and cosmopolitan and, of course, proficient in the language). Whether writing from home or abroad, any Malaysian or Malaysian-born author who consciously decides to write in a language other than Malay is already indirectly defying the state. In this regard, it is arguable that non-Malay, or minority, literature in Malaysia has always been a literature of resistance in a sense as it sought (and still seeks) to make productive inroads into the nation's biased cultural environment and redefine the Malaysian nation despite the odds stacked against it.⁴ However, it is not just the medium but, more importantly, what it *does not communicate* as well that underscores its oppositional propensity. Precisely, what this means will be elaborated in this essay where I consider how Malaysian minority literature has over the years tacitly articulated disagreement with the state's linguistic and cultural stance.

For organisation, I will divide my discussion into three sections, each of which considers a particular strategy undertaken by local/local-born writers to challenge the state's discriminatory policy. The first concerns a single author whose form of resistance is to incite controversy through his verses. Known for his provocative poetry, Salleh ben Joned remains unique in the Malaysian literary canon not only for his apparently blasphemous versifications but also for his unapologetic criticism against the state's linguistic and cultural myopia – a move that has arguably also resulted in his work being largely neglected by scholarship. Unlike Salleh, most Malaysian authors could be said to prefer a subtler means of

³ English would, for example, be introduced in government schools in 2003 as the medium for teaching science and mathematics (although this policy was reversed in 2012), and acknowledged as the language for international trade and cultural exchange. Source?

⁴ Here and elsewhere, "minority writings" refers less to their ethnic implication and more to the medium with which they are written.

refusing conformity to the state's racist agenda by opting for a more "insular" approach in their writings that I will explain and elaborate in the second and longest section which, moreover, draws on a framework interrelating Felix Guarrati and Gilles Deleuze's concept of minor literature and Homi Bhabha's competing perspectives of the people as pedagogical and performative. Still operating on, but also complicating, what I term as the practice of authorial insularity amongst Malaysian writers is the third section, which focuses on sinophone Malaysian, or *mabua*,⁵ writings, with particular attention on Ng Kim Chew's short stories. Here, I consider the counteractive strategies deployed by practitioners of *mabua* literature to repudiate not only the state's linguistic and cultural determinations, but also resist subsumption to a literary heritage that could potentially undercut *mabua* writings' uniqueness amongst Chinese literature.⁶ Finally, the various salient points raised throughout my investigation will be consolidated in the conclusion.

Salleh ben Joned's Poetry of Aggression

One of the most vocal opponents of the state's language and cultural policy (which includes the stance on literature) is, in fact, a Malay writer whose contentious Malay poetry has prompted Muhammed Haji Salleh to declare it as "the most traumatic of experiences" for "the Malaysian poetry scene" (Muhammed Haji Salleh 16). The laureate's disquietude is largely due to the controversial poet's frequent use of manifest sexual imagery, and vulgar and/or insulting language.⁷ Moreover, it seems nothing is sacred when it comes to Salleh ben Joned's bilingual poems as they unambiguously mock what the state considers sensitive issues, including the claim to the supremacy of the Malay race and its alleged status as *bumiputras*, or "sons of the soil," and of course, the elevation of Malay language and literature and the corresponding devaluation of other languages and their creative outputs. Salleh is especially suspicious of the state's promotion of Bahasa Melayu as the "soul of the people" ("*bahasa jiwa bangsa*") to allegedly foster solidarity amongst the various ethnic communities, when it is a justification for privileging the majority race's language.⁸ As he posits,

⁵ The term is based on the combination of "ma" (馬) from "da ma" (大馬), the Chinese name for Malaysia, and "hua" (華) meaning literary talent or grace.

⁶ I will not discuss Tamil-language Malaysian Literature for two reasons: I am unfamiliar with the field, and due to the fact its representatives are far and few between. Moreover, its fiction is also purportedly somewhat formulaic and compromised in terms of quality. As one Malaysian Tamil literature scholar, Krishnan Maniam, observes, its "themes are conventional, and lack conflict and a surprise ending.... If you've read one, you've read them all" (quoted in Sankar).

⁷ See Ng's "The Sacred Profane in the Poetry of Salleh ben Joned," for a discussion of the poet's use of profanity in his poems.

⁸ The contention with the Malay word "bangsa" is that it is used to refer to the "people" or "nation," when its primary meaning is "race." It was the then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad who first

if the intent is veritably about national unity, the English language would certainly work better due to its “widespread use” in the country and the fact that it is “not identified with any particular ethnic group” (“Rojak is Good for Nation Building,” *As I Please* 58).⁹ The counter-argument of English not being indigenous to the land and hence unqualified for expressing the people’s “soul” is, for Salleh, inadmissible since he sees the language as able to concurrently transcend cultural boundaries and be identified with any culture to become part of its feature. In his words, “the English we speak in Malaysia today belongs to us. It’s *our* English; along with BM it expresses our ‘soul,’ with all its contradictions and confusions, as much as our social and material needs” (“Once Again, English, *Our* English,” *As I Please* 65; emphasis in the original). He notes elsewhere the hypocrisy of the state’s most passionate supporters,¹⁰ Malay authors and scholars of Malay literature, since they often betray a preference for English over Malay in their own writings – a point implied in the following poem “We got *Minda*, They only got Mind,” whose second stanza reads as follows:

Our *puisi*, our *nobel*, our *drama*, our *prosa*
 may be, in form, borrowed from the west;
 But our writers have shown their ability for
asimilisasi, from old *realisma* to *realisma majis*;
 From *modenisma* to *pasca-modenisma*.
 We know all the *teori*; no need to read
 the *karya kreatif* themselves. No need.
 Mario vargas llosa, gabriel garcia marquez;
 Magical names to know for the sake of *progress*. (*Adam’s Dream* 111)

That the stanza (and also the one before) revolves around the enterprise of Malay literature and its scholarship is unsurprising since the stakes for linguistic and literary paramountcy are highest here. By demonstrating how much of its nomenclature is borrowed from English, the stanza patently undermines the state’s claim of the Malay language and its literature’s apparent superiority: after all, if Malay is such a superlative medium, why are its most ardent supporters resorting to English for expressing knowledge as if implying the former is either incapable of performing or lacks distinction for, such a purpose?

used *bangsa* in the former sense, which as historian Rachel Leow notes “elided [the] crucial and endlessly contested distinction between race and nation” (Leow 189).

⁹ See also, “Once Again, English, *Our* English” (63-66). All references to Salleh ben Joned’s essays are from his collection, *As I Please: Selected Writings 1975-1994* (1994). That English remains widely used in Malaysia up until now despite its negligible support by the state has to do, on the one hand, with the country’s colonial history, and on another, with the fact it is taught as a main subject throughout primary and secondary education, thereby enabling the majority of Malaysians a degree of proficiency in the language. A possible third reason may be due to the fact that English can function as a bridge language in Malaysia’s multicultural society.

¹⁰ See his essay, “The *Transformasi* of Language,” *As I Please* (71-73).

Salleh notably does not limit his criticism against the state's language and cultural policy to only his anglophone writings. An example of his Malay poem that arguably communicates such an aim – and briefly digressing from my main focus – is “Sajak Berjela untuk Sesiapa Sahaja” (“Dangling Poem for Whomever”), which recalls a poetry recital officiated by a statesman with attendance from both Malay writers and literary enthusiasts.¹¹ On the surface, the poem appears to merely describe the event's sights and sounds; however, when read against the state's policy regarding literature's alleged nation-building significance, what becomes gradually obvious is a possible intimation of satire. The following discussion is based on my translation. Immediately announced in the first stanza is the event's nationalistic motivation:

Redeeming the people's pride–
the poet's responsibility...
The genuine goal of the NEP [New Economic Policy]¹² –
the poet's responsibility...
The poet is...
The poet...
The poet... (190)¹³

Presumably part of a speech to launch the event, the exhortative stanza's reference to the NEP conspicuously underlines the speaker's subject – Malay poetry by Malay writers, thereby eliding both the contribution of non-Malay poetry (and poets) and non-Malay versifiers who write in Malay to nation building.¹⁴ But when it comes to describing the poet, the speaker seems lost for words and fails despite several attempts. Stanza three would reveal, within parenthesis, that the speaker is a statesman who is:

(... unlike the run-of-the-mill minister:

¹¹ From his bilingual collection, *Poems Sacred and Profane/Sajak-Sajak Salleh* (190-91).

¹² Introduced immediately after the racial riots of 13 May 1969 (the country's only major racial conflict to date), The New Economic Policy, which after 1991 was replaced by the National Development Policy (NDP), was intended as affirmative action to raise the economic and social status of the Malays (and to a lesser extent, the Indian minority), which were far behind those of the Chinese, thereby resulting in resentment that eventually culminated in violence. The aftermath would reveal that the majority of fatalities were Chinese.

¹³ Penebusan maruah bangsa–
tanggungjawab penyair...
Matlamat murni DEB [Dasar Ekonomi Baru]–
tanggungjawab penyair...
Penyair adalah...
Penyair...
Penyair...

¹⁴ Writers belonging to this category are admittedly few. Amongst Chinese authors, the most well-known is the poet, Lim Swee Tin.

This minister has an artistic soul,
He is a regular declaimer of poetry.) (190, 191)¹⁵

Considering his inability to explain who/what a poet is, the revelation is patently ironic. That these bracketed lines are repeated in stanza six only reinforces this since their formal features could strategically denote (i.e., spoken as aside or in hushed tones) either awe for his “legendary” artistic soul or disdain for his insubstantial self-importance. Apparent in the poem is also a series of images (the surrounding pollution in stanza two; attendees who ignore the ants crawling upon, and biting, them in stanza five) that subtly consigns a public event to bathos and undercuts the importance of what it promotes, which is national literature. Clearly, the poem’s account of a politically-inflected literary event is incompatible with the latter’s supposed lofty and urgent significance, but the strongest indication of satire is perhaps the seventh and final stanza regarding the responses of the event’s three honoured guests: while the first two (both are mentioned by name and are well-regarded practitioners of the arts in Malaysia) respectively express cynicism (“sinis”) and perplexity (“bingung-ransang”), the third – who is dressed in black as if in mourning and although unnamed, is likely Salleh himself due to his designation as a “Malay apostate” (“Melayu murtad”) – is “giddy with rage” (“rasa mengamuk dilanda pitam”). Dissimilarity notwithstanding, their reactions are designed to bolster Salleh’s view that anyone who understands “what literature is all about” would be unpersuaded by the idea of a National literature, thus annulling the worth of the recital as a *literary* event (“Neither a Campaign nor a Conspiracy,” *As I Please* 62).

While Salleh tends to mount a direct attack at the state’s agenda with his writing, most non-Malay language writers would adopt – at least as I see it – a more indirect form of resistance that on the surface does not appear resistive at all. In the next section, which draws on a framework interrelating Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of minor literature and Homi Bhabha’s concept of the nation as either pedagogical or performative, I will consider how several local writers strategically subvert the state’s racially-motivated language and cultural policy by assuming the practice of what I term authorial insularity.

Malaysian non-Malay Language Writings as Performative Minor Literature

Despite publishing only two books of poetry (one bilingual and one anglophone) and a collection of essays written in English, Salleh ben Joned remains one of the more recognizable anglophone Malaysian writers to date if mainly for the controversy his works invite. Given Malaysia’s notorious (because ambiguous)

¹⁵ (Ini bukan sebarang menteri:
Ini menteri berjiwa seni,
Ini kaki deklamasi puisi).

Sedition Act (introduced in 1948 and revised in 1969), which makes any exploits inciting disaffection amongst the population against the government or promoting ill-will between the races or classes punishable by law, it is surprising that he has never been legally charged. But if Salleh is unfazed by the Act, the same cannot be said of the majority of non-Malay language writers whose works evidently avoid politics and issues deemed precarious or provocative by the state.¹⁶ In this regard, while the prolific anglophone writer K.S. Maniam may justify setting his works primarily within the boundaries of his religio-ethnic (i.e., Hindu Tamil) community as “only natural” since “[i]t is commonly accepted that a writer writes about what he knows best” (Maniam 263), his decision is also likely informed by the threat of sedition for purportedly and/or unwittingly offending another ethnic or religious community with his writings.¹⁷ As a result, Malaysian literature – both Malay and non-Malay – in general tends to adopt the practice of authorial insularity, whereby a text would chiefly revolve around the ethnic and/or religious community peculiar to the author, while downplaying or avoiding altogether the others.¹⁸ However, without dismissing the circumscriptions undeniably imposed on Malaysian writings by the Sedition Act, it is also possible that the practice especially in non-Malay literature is periphrastically meant to underscore a resistive propensity against the state’s politicisation of language and literature for racial reasons. Inconspicuously vented as such, its defiance is also arguably more effective when compared, for instance, to Salleh ben Joned’s manifest profanity and pointedly obscene invectives (hence the neglect his work has hitherto suffered). Read in this light, Maniam’s apparently innocuous explanation above may actually belie an oppositional agenda. Precisely how authorial insularity in Malaysian minority literature achieves this effect will be explored in the next few paragraphs where

¹⁶ Malay literature, on the other hand, seems less susceptible to the Act’s censure. For example, several overtly political pre-independent Malay narratives that clearly portray other races in derogatory terms have since become classic works studied in both schools and universities. Then there is the publication of the 1971 Malay novel, *Interlok*, which despite its alleged insult against the Indian community, not only failed to receive any reprimand from the state, the justice system or the reading public, but was even included in the Malay Literature syllabus at secondary school level in 2010 and whose writer, Abdullah Hussain, was made National Laureate in 1996.

¹⁷ A characteristic of the Malaysian people is the interrelatedness between their race and religion, whereby a Malay is invariably also a Muslim, while a Chinese would be associated with Buddhism, and an Indian with Hinduism. Christianity and to a lesser extent, Islam, are also embraced by a considerable proportion of the Chinese and Indian population, but the Malays are prohibited by law to convert. For a Malay person in fact, as stipulated in Article 160 of the Malaysian Constitution, renouncing Islam is tantamount to renouncing his or her ethnicity.

¹⁸ Exceptions include anglophone writers Lloyd Fernando, whose two novels include major characters from all main ethnic groups in Malaysia; and Lee Kok Liang, whose novel, *Flowers in the Sky* (1981), will be discussed later in this essay.

selected works by various authors will be read within the framework of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of "minor literature."¹⁹

The three characteristics of minor literature delineated by the French theorists (and without going into the details of their discussion) are broadly reflected in non-Malay language Malaysian literature. In the case of the first, i.e., "language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari 16), it should, moreover, be understood that it is less the Malay language itself, and more the state's overvaluation of it (and devaluation of others), that is deterritorialized by Malaysia's minority literature when considering how it has, in the present century, received worldwide recognition while appreciation for Malay literature remains largely confined to the country. Tash Aw's debut novel, *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2004), and Tan Twan Eng's *Garden of Evening Mist* (2012) are just two examples of anglophone works that have won international literary prizes,²⁰ while Sinophone works like *Retribution: The Jiling Chronicles* (2003, Jiling chun qiu [吉陵春秋]) by Li Yung-P'ing, *My South Seas Sleeping Beauty: A Tale of Memory and Longing* (2007, Wo si nian de chang mian zhong de nan guo gong zhu [我思念的長眠中的南國公主]) by Zhang Guizhing, and Ng Kim Chew's collected short stories, to mention just three, are hallmarks of modern Chinese literature and have been selected for translation into English by the prestigious University of Columbia Press. It is thus ironic that writings once deemed secondary and devoid of national value by the Malaysian state have instead collectively become the nation's pride today. Or, restating this scenario in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's first characteristic, Malaysia's minority literature and the languages in which they are written have arguably, if indirectly, deterritorialized the state's idea of National literature and the alleged supremacy of the official language by redefining them instead as objects with limited international value.

Less clear is non-Malay language literature's exemplification of the second characteristic, which states that "everything in [minor literature] is political" (Deleuze and Guattari 17), when considering (with the exception of Lloyd Fernando and to a lesser extent, Shirley Lim's novels) how rarely it engages with the country's politics and its charged racial and/or religious overtones. As Malaysian playwright Kee Thuan Chye notes:

A writer of any race communicating to such a variegated society is apt to be viewed with misgiving by some quarters. He can hardly take a stand on any issue without drawing ire or suspicion. We do not have as yet a developed Malaysian consciousness to which a writer can address his views with sanguinity; the

¹⁹ The term "minority literature" in this essay refers less to its ethnic implication and more to the medium with which it is written.

²⁰ Respectively the Whitbread Prize (for first novel), and the Man Asian Literary Prize.

consciousness of race [and I would add, religion] subverts such a covenant between writers and audience. (Kee 69)

Accordingly, if Malaysian literature tends to offer mostly culturally insular, apparently apolitical perspectives, it is consciously to leave out unsaid issues that may draw “ire or suspicion” from religio-ethnic communities distinct from the writer’s. However, when Malaysian minority literature is understood in reference to Homi Bhabha’s essay, “DissemiNation” (1994), it is equally plausible that its religio-ethnic self-reflexivity is neither indifference to, nor avoidance of, politics, but a strategy to dissimulate its political propensity. Admittedly slightly dated, Bhabha’s insight concerning the relationship between the nation and its people is nonetheless useful in clarifying my point about authorial insularity as a sophisticated resistive approach. Bhabha contends that narrating the modern nation is invariably fraught with contradictions due to the disjunction between the nation “as the event of the everyday and the advent of the epochal” – that is, between a totalising, yet-to-arrive telos and immediate lived reality (Bhabha 141). The reason has to do with “the concept of the ‘people’... as a double narrative movement” (Bhabha 145), whereby the people are, on the one hand, “historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic,” while also “a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference” (Bhabha 141, 145) on the other. He further explains:

We then have a contested conceptual territory where the nation’s people must be thought in double-time; the people are the historical ‘objects’ of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin *in the past*; the people are also the ‘subjects’ of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity: that sign of the present through which national life is redeemed and iterated as a reproductive process. (Bhabha 145; emphasis in the original)

The idea of “double time” clearly indicates that the people are simultaneously determined by, and that which determines, the nation. The people, in other words, are split between what Bhabha terms the pedagogical and the performative: as the former, the people are products of the state’s hegemonic imperative and desire for homogeneity (as in the case of Malaysia *via* ideological state apparatuses like the official language and national literature) to paradoxically achieve a socially undifferentiated romanticised past, or origin. As the latter, they “[provoke] a crisis within the process of” signifying the nation (Bhabha 145) by refusing the former and subscribing to a nation that is always evolving and defined by contemporaneity. Arising from this condition of splitting, Bhabha asserts, is a tension that “[turns] the reference to a ‘people’... into a problem of knowledge that haunts the symbolic formation of modern social authority”

(Bhabha 147, 146) and, by extension, invests the discourse of the nation with a degree of ambivalence. This is because the people as performative “interrupts the self-generating time of national production [that is, the idea of the nation as transcendent history] and disrupts [its] signification... as homogenous” (Bhabha 148). In “articulating the heterogeneity of the population,” the people are instead “confronted with a nation split within itself” to thereafter become “a 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 148; emphasis in the original). Bhabha’s view pointedly describes the situation of postcolonial Malaysia, whose multiple minority discourses and histories, and tensive cultural landscape certainly mark it as “a liminal signifying space.”

Reading Malaysian minority literature in light of Bhabha’s theory clarifies its function as “counter-narratives of the nation” that question, even if only discreetly, “the boundary that secures the cohesive limits of the... nation [and] imperceptibly turn [the nation] into a contentious *internal* liminality providing a place from which to speak both of, and as, the minority... the marginal and the emergent” (Bhabha 149; emphasis in the original). Far from being devoid of politics, Malaysian minority literature is potentially deeply political. The religio-ethnic insularity informing the practice of authorship, in this regard, is instead like a gesture of insularity to counter the state’s dismissal of non-Malay languages and literatures from the nation’s cultural space. Or to use Bhabha’s terms, it is effected *as performativity* to challenge the state’s *pedagogical* motivation denying heterogeneity: by emphasising the nation’s multifaceted “everyday” rather than its significance as a homogenous teleological endpoint, Malaysian minority literature patently foregrounds the people as *lived reality* and minimises their link to the grand-narrative of nationalism that is tenuous to begin with. To illustrate, I will consider the fiction of three ethnically distinct writers, the first of whom is Che Husna Azhari.

An engineer by training, whose creative output is primarily the short story, Che Husna, like Salleh, is one of the few Malay authors who deliberately opts for the English language as her medium of composition. Given that the performative nature (in Bhabha’s sense) of Che Husna’s short stories has previously been explored,²¹ I will limit my discussion to what I see is a peculiar quality of her authorial insularity evident in them. When asked in an interview if she felt marginalised by her community for writing in English, her response – after clarifying that English is her first language – is an emphatic “Indeed, no!” and that her medium of choice “is of little consequence to these feelings of acceptance,” although the rest of her answer also seems to becloud the issue

²¹ See Wong.

(Quayum 243).²² Probably unrelated and whether done consciously or otherwise, this strategy of obfuscation is also a trademark of her short stories; like the dissolve in classical Hollywood films, plot development in her stories is occasionally invested with an ideological premise that grows increasingly uncertain even when she overtly takes a stance. Take the story “Mariah,” which deals with the contentious issue of polygamy in Islam and is obviously focused on Cik Yam, the “model” first wife (*Melor* 83) who, after much agonising and prayer, allows her husband – a religious leader (or imam) no less – to marry another woman, thereafter becoming “a paragon of virtue” in the eyes of the villagers (*Melor* 81). At the same time, however, that the title bears the “other” woman’s name implies her centrality to the story. This, as a result relocates narrative focus back to Mariah and her relationship with an elderly man whose unbridled lust eventually deposes a longsuffering and dutiful wife from her hitherto position as his sole partner. In this way, ambiguity is introduced into the narrative as the story could be read as both supporting polygamy and criticising men who justify their marital unfaithfulness with its practice. The various attempts in “Pak De Samad’s Cinema,” to cite another example,²³ at representing the protagonist as a personable *gebeder* (which according to the story describes a man who displays a combination of machismo, strength, fearlessness and tempestuousness (*Melor* 101), and adoption of a rather light-hearted tone do not, in the end, disguise the fact he is really a dangerous brigand whose heinous crimes include murder. Figuratively corresponding with his dual representation is either censure against, or glorification of, gangsterism amongst the majority race, the latter of which is not so far-fetched if we believe Sophie Lemiere’s claim that gangsters have allegedly been long involved, albeit covertly, in Malaysian politics as the ruling party’s paid “connivance militants” (Lemiere 93).

Importantly, the kinds of characters that Che Husna tends to privilege in her stories are those usually cast in secondary, antagonistic roles, or rarely featured, in Malay literature. Whether a second wife, a hoodlum, a witch (“Mek Teh, Mother Andam”), a female religious teacher (“Ustazah Inayah”), her characters are, moreover, sensitively and sympathetically portrayed to underscore their “reality” as people rather than as stock devices for specific narrative functions. In this way, Che Husna’s stories reflect Bhabha’s notion of “counter narratives” that provide a discursive site “from which to speak both of, and as... the marginal” (Bhabha 149) in terms of not only the language in which they are written, but also

²² She further justifies her stance by stating that English does not render less “real” what her stories convey and ending with an observation of born-and-bred British who experience cultural alienation in London.

²³ Other examples of stories that purportedly engage strategic obfuscation to invest their respective ideological inclination with ambivalence include “Mek Teh, Mother Andam,” the story of a beautician eventually destroyed by her association with the forbidden arts, a practice condemned by Islam; and “Ustazah Inayah,” which revolves around a female religious leader who is also involved in politics.

their subject matter: Malay people who are unrepresented in the process of nation-building. As performativity, her fiction arguably stages resistances against the state's delegitimisation of certain individuals from its pedagogical narrative, but in a way – at least based on my reading of her two stories – that is ideologically ambiguous to suggest conformity with the *status quo* after all.

Like Che Husna in relation to Malay-Muslims, K.S. Maniam would consciously feature only Hindu-Indians in his writings, although characters from other races are sometimes included for mostly cameo roles. Another notable quality of both writers' expression of authorial insularity is the concentration on a *specific segment* of their respective ethnic and/or religious communities. Just as Che Husna's fiction is not about the Malay-Muslim community in general but the *Kelantanese* Malay-Muslim community, Maniam's writings in multiple genres are exclusively focused on working class Tamil-Hindus, not the Indian population as a whole. Consider, for instance, his playlet "The Cord," which is based on a longer play of the same title and revolves around an estate-worker and his son's long-standing enmity towards their cruel, autocratic supervisor that would have culminated in extreme violence if not for the father's decision in the end to forgive their oppressor, thereby resulting in an ambiguous conclusion. Here, not only do the three characters belong to one particular segment of society, they cannot be mistaken for any other due to the concerns addressed by the play that are peculiar to their social group. There are also numerous references to Hindu symbology (such as the *uduku* as an instrument of enlightenment, to cite one example) that, alongside the play's class-specific issues, could potentially engender a sense of defamiliarisation in an audience unaffiliated with the play's focus group. But defamiliarisation, aesthetically speaking, is not the same as alienation; instead, as Lawrence Crawford proposes, its objective is "the production of difference [as] a means for restoring perception of the world" (Crawford 212).²⁴ More directly – and at the risk of simplifying Crawford's disquisition – to defamiliarise is to paradoxically clarify something by embodying it as difference *but not to the point of unrecognisability*, and as such, implicates that something in both knowing and unknowing. With regard to "The Cord," the defamiliarisation it engenders is meant to accentuate the audience's appreciation of not only what social unbelonging and inequality signify, but how they are culturally defined as well. On a metanarrative level, this could be read as a comment on the state's prejudicial practices filtered through culture that render certain segments of the population unwelcomed. Alternatively, in highlighting the plight of working class Tamil Hindus, whose longstanding economic disadvantage is familiar to Malaysian history, the play could also be accusing the state of implementing affirmative action (the NEP) that excludes (again due to

²⁴ Crawford's observation is based on a comparison between the aesthetic concept of defamiliarisation according to Viktor Shklovskij's and Jacques Derrida's *différance*.

prejudice) the very segment of the population it is supposed to benefit.²⁵ But because of its entrenchment in the problems and the symbology of specific class and religion respectively, the play's metanarrative significance is only presumed, which like the narrative ambiguity in Che Husna's stories, allow its assertion of resistance against the dictates of politics.

Less stringent in its ethnic and cultural insularity is Lee Kok Liang's *Flowers in the Sky* (1981) due to its focus on two protagonists, a Buddhist monk of Chinese origin and his Indian physician, a Christian named Mr. K., and its deployment of a host of multi-religion-ethnic characters for its comic subplot. At the same time, however, the novel's underlying politics is also less subtle to a reader sensitive to its representation of the various ethnicities and religions in Malaysia. Constituting the theme in both its main and subsidiary plots is religion, especially the question of faith; while the former recounts the monk and the doctor's individual spiritual crisis, and the latter revolves around a religious procession and the ensuing pandemonium it inadvertently causes that overnight reverses a declining Hindu temple's fortune (Lee 94) – both of which tellingly elide the religion of the racial majority. And although the subplot does feature a single Malay character – a police inspector no less – in a substantial role, that he is also the text's only “villain” is potentially telling. Notwithstanding the novel's racially diverse characters, that its two protagonists remain largely disconnected from each other figuratively attests to the religio-ethnic divide characterising Malaysian society; as John Barnes surmises, the lack of communication between the monk and his doctor merely “serves to emphasize how impossible... any living relationship [is] between them,” and by extension, the different racial groups (Barnes 189). But to see *Flowers* as therefore completely devoid of any substantive relationship between its religio-ethnically disparate characters would also be inaccurate. While admittedly incidental, a scenario that foregrounds a meaningful connection between characters divided by race and religion does occur in *Flowers*, and hence to conclude this part of my essay, I will address this scenario in conjunction as well with Deleuze and Guattari's third characteristic regarding minor literature.

The reader is told that Dr. K.'s prominence is due to his perfect success rate, which he maintains, in part, by sending “complicated [read hopeless] cases to the government hospitals” (Lee 101). But in the three days spanning the narrative, he would meet a patient whose faith in Buddhism as she succumbs to cancer would not only change his view of death, but also help rekindle his Christian faith, which he had long neglected to pursue money and status. In deciding against sending her elsewhere to die – his usual practice – K. testifies to his recognition, perhaps for the first time, of death (and by implication life too) as a singular, inimitable

²⁵ Of the three largest races in Malaysia, the Indians continue to be the most disadvantaged economically, with a substantial portion of their population living in working class estates or urban slums, and subsisting at near-poverty level. For a useful exploration of this issue, see Gopal and Karupiah.

event that must be treated with respect and dignity (Lee 168–69). Herein is a meaningful connection made between individuals of dissimilar ethnicities and religions that for one of them would be a life-changing experience, thus disproving the observation concerning the novel's insistence on an insurmountable religio-ethnic rift.²⁶ In this way, moreover, does the scenario also allude, in my view, to minor literature's final characteristic, whereby "in it everything takes on a collective value" (Deleuze and Guattari 17). Just as the religio-ethnic divide is bridged in *Flowers* by an incidental meeting between two characters, the apparent disassociation from politics amongst Malaysian minority writings resulting from authorial insularity is dissolved by the value they collectively reflect as resistive literature that stresses the nation as performative (i.e., as everyday reality, multifaceted, dynamic) rather than pedagogical (as homogenous and objectified). In the final analysis, what appears as individual expressions of potential political dissidence could, in fact, be read as part of a larger and consolidated strategy to tacitly refute the state's depreciation, and in turn affirm the contribution, of minority languages, literatures and communities.

Sinophone Malaysian Literature in Search of a Tradition

The preceding observations regarding Malaysia's anglophone literature are applicable, for the most part, to its sinophone counterpart as well. Like the former, Chinese-language writings by Malaysian (-born) authors correspondingly demonstrate a degree of authorial insularity that arguably signifies a rejection of the state's position on language and literature.²⁷ In the fiction of local writer Li Tianbo (李天葆), for example, the recurring focus on Chinese migrants in Malaysia and their struggle to adapt to a new environment likely allegorises the minority race's on-going experience of unbelonging even after sixty years of Malaysia's independence from the British. Beyond the language factor, his writings are redolent of Chinese-Buddhist myths and symbols in the way Maniam's are with Indian ones is possibly illustrative of another strategy to foreground the centrality of a single ethnicity at the expense of the others. Unless the reader is familiar with the respective legends of Guanyin, Guan Yu and Sun Wukong,²⁸ his appreciation of Li's story, "A Linked Chronicle of Zhoufu Characters" (Zhoufu renwu lianhuan zhi [州府人物连环志]), to cite an example, would likely be limited. Admittedly, characters from other religio-ethnic backgrounds do appear in his writings, but they only reinforce the Chinese migrants' sense of alienation. More extreme is the authorial insularity expressed in Li Yung-P'ing's writings, whose exclusionary approach (as exemplified by his

²⁶ As proffered by Harrex, among others.

²⁷ Readers interested in the history of sinophone Malaysian literature should consult Groppe's excellent monograph, especially the second chapter.

²⁸ Respectively the Goddess of Mercy, the God of War and Monkey from *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji* [西游记]).

best known work, *Retribution*, among others) is to set their narratives solely in China, and engage the Chinese people as their primary (and often only) characters, thereby voiding all references to Malaysia and the other races. It is a strategy that invariably also signals Li Yung-P'ing's severance of authorial ties with his original homeland and his "cultural identification [with] an abstract, textual, and idealized form of Chineseness" instead (Groppe 188).²⁹

In contrast to Li Yung-P'ing, Ng Kim Chew actually sees *mahua* writing's identification with a Chinese literary tradition as "hinder[ing] the expression of a Sinophone Malaysian subjectivity" (Groppe 88) and undermining its distinctiveness as literature that is, to borrow Groppe's subtitle for her monograph, "not made in China." A sinophone Malaysian-born writer whose short stories David Der-wei Wang has labelled "inventive" due to their seamless interweaving of history, myth and autobiography (Wang 289), Ng's comment also reflects his own authorial practice, which conscientiously adopts a resistive stance not just against Malaysia's biased policy on language and literature, but also the influence of China's literary tradition. Since the formal strategies and themes respectively deployed and addressed by Ng to assert the latter have been discussed separately by Carlos Rojas and Alison Groppe,³⁰ I will confine my observation to a specific feature apparent in Ng's fiction that I opine is related to his rejection of the admittedly "vastly impressive textual tradition" of a "distant nation" (Groppe 121).

A recurring motif in Ng's stories is the enigma of Yu Dufu (or Dafu) (1896-1945), a *real* Chinese author who relocated to Singapore from the mainland during the war and later became one of the strongest proponents of early sinophone writings in Southeast Asia, and whose final days in Sumatra remains shrouded in mystery, with some believing he was executed by Japanese soldiers, while others claiming he survived the war by assuming a different identity until his death much later. Ng engages the question of Yu's ambiguous end in a series of loosely interlinked historiographic metafictional stories such as "The Disappearance of M," "Death in the South," "Deep in the Rubber Forest" and "Supplication."³¹ All these stories centre on unpublished manuscripts (discovered in one story in a dilapidated hut located deep in a rubber forest) by Yu under another name that results in intense debates amongst scholars in an attempt to locate him and confirm their authenticity to, in turn, learn the truth about the famed writer's fate at last. Written to variously simulate a report or investigatory notes, the stories'

²⁹ This is actually a criticism raised against Li and his writing by local sinophone scholars. By "idealized form," these scholars are suggesting that Li's China is a romanticised cultural space shaped more by his imagination and desire than by historical reality. For discussion, see Groppe, especially chapter six.

³⁰ See Rojas (2016) and Groppe (chapter four)

³¹ The four stories are translated into English and collected in *Slow Boat to China and Other Stories* (2016).

ludic quality typifying postmodern literature is evident in their appearance as meticulous research to tantalise the reader with Yu's verification, only to fall short of arriving at such a conclusion in the end. One way of understanding the significance of Ng's motif is to correspond it with the anxiety of influence that authors feel towards their predecessors, or in this case, contemporary sinophone Malaysian authors towards past authoritative Chinese literary masters. The equally compelling desire for both Yu's presence and absence implicating Ng's characters arguably symbolises the situation of sinophone Malaysian writing in its claim to uniqueness as a tradition while ironically subverting it at the same time by turning to China for imaginative resource and its writers as influence. For this reason, Ng consciously turns away from the mainland (and Taiwan) to write instead about his original homeland and to a lesser extent, the rest of Southeast Asia. The evocation of a distinctly Malaysian atmosphere for setting, engagement with the country's history (especially the communist insurgency between 1948 and 1960) and multiracial society for themes and characters, and inclusion of Malay words transliterated into Chinese, are all overt conventions Ng deploys in his stories to precisely "refuse... [uncritical] endorsement of a Chinese cultural identity for Sinophone Malaysian [writings]" and "[express]... a Sinophone Malaysian subjectivity" instead (Groppe 110, 88).

Ng Kim Chew and Li Yung-P'ing are clearly polar opposites in their profession of sinophilia. If Li's work reflects an absolute rejection of Malaysia as the traditional foundation of local sinophone literature, Ng's involves a refutation of China for the same reason. Li likely considers himself a Chinese (rather than Malaysian) author, and for this reason, it is perhaps inaccurate to describe his narrative assertion of racial exclusivity as authorial insularity since it appears more a withdrawal altogether from engaging a multiracial and multi-religious reality. With Ng, however, and notwithstanding his identification as neither a Malaysian nor a Chinese, but a diaspora, writer,³² authorial insularity remains a feature in his stories; but while their focus is still mainly on the Chinese people of Malaysia and issues specific to the minority race, they often feature sympathetic Malay characters in somewhat significant roles as well to suggest the possibility of solidarity between the races. Notably, despite their dissimilar positions regarding the tradition to which *mahua* literature belongs, both Ng and Li are nevertheless exceptions amongst sinophone Malaysian writers, as the majority of them tend to align their works with the literary traditions of both China and Malaysia.

Conclusion

It is, of course, arguable that the practice of insularity as a resistive strategy is nothing more than an interpretive notion, and that the reason why writers tend

³² Author's interview with Ng Kim Chew, to be published in a forthcoming issue of the journal, *Southeast Asian Review of English* (2018).

to limit their storyworlds to specific ethnic groups and cultures has to do with familiarity (passim Maniam) or anxiety over unwittingly transgressing the country's Sedition Act. However, aligning non-Malay language Malaysian writers with either of the latter two motivations alone invariably fails to explain why they would persist in their craft despite overwhelming odds posed by the state in an attempt to undermine its worth and possibly suppress its development. I am, as such, more inclined to the possibility that authorial insularity is effected by such writers in order to stake what Bhabha terms a performative stance against the state's pedagogical-oriented one. In the case of sinophone Malaysian writers like Ng, the stake is likely even higher in that resistance is also mounted against becoming coopted by a greater, but vastly different, textual tradition. What remains undeniable, nevertheless, is how non-Malay language – particularly anglophone and sinophone – Malaysian literature has come a long way since the 1970s, and its critical international acclaim in the present century that is nothing short of phenomenal when considering its history is certainly deserved.

Works Cited

- Barnes, John. "The Fiction of Lee Kok Liang" [1985]. *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*. Eds. Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks. Petaling Jaya: Longman, 2001. 184-90.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London, New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Che Husna Azhari. *Melor in Perspective*. Kuala Lumpur: Furada Publishing House, 1993.
- Crawford, Lawrence. "Viktor Shklovskij: *Différance* in Defamiliarization." *Comparative Literature* 36.3 (1984): 209-19.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- Gopal, Parthiban S. and Premalatha Karupiah. "Indian Diaspora and Urban Poverty: A Malaysian Perspective." *Diaspora Studies* 6.2 (2013): 103-22.
- Groppe, Alison M. *Sinophone Malaysian Literature: Not Made in China*. New York: Cambria Press, 2013.
- Harrex, Syd. "Scapel, Scar, Icon: Lee Kok Liang's *Flowers in the Sky*" [1982]. *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*. Eds. Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks. Petaling Jaya: Longman, 2001. 174-83.
- Kee, Thuan Chye. "Dilemma of a Dog Barking at a Mountain: Pragmatist-Idealist Dialectic and the Writer in Malaysia." *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*. Eds. Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks. Petaling Jaya: Longman, 2001. 67-72.
- Leow, Rachel. *Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016.

- Lee Kok Liang. *Flowers in the Sky*. Singapore: Federal Publications, 1981.
- Lemiere, Sophie. "Gangsta and Politics in Malaysia." *Misplaced Democracy: Malaysian Politics and its People*. Ed. Sophie Lemiere. Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2014. 91-108.
- Li Tianbo. "Zhoufu renwu lianhuan zhi." 州府人物連環誌 [A linked chronicle of Zhoufu characters]. *Yi shui tian ya: Mahua dangdai xiaoshuo xuan, 一水天涯 : 馬華當代小說選* [A Stretch of Ocean Between Ends of the World: An Anthology of Malaysian Chinese contemporary fiction]. Ed. Kim Chew Ng. Taipei: Juge. 208-30.
- Li Yung-P'ing. *Retribution: The Jiling Chronicles*. Trans. Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Lin. New York: Columbia UP, 2003.
- Maniam, K.S. "Fiction into Fact, Fact into Fiction: A Personal Reflection" [1987]. *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*. Eds. Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter C. Wicks. Petaling Jaya: Longman, 2001. 263-68.
- Maniam, K.S. "The Cord (The Playlet)." *Sensuous Horizons: The Stories and the Plays*. London: Skoob Books, 1994. 109-25.
- Muhammad Haji Salleh. "The World of the Individual and Contemporary Malaysian Poetry." *Tenggara* 24 (1989): 5-24.
- Ng, Andrew Hock Soon. "The Sacred Profane in the Poetry of Salleh ben Joned." *Kajian Malaysia* 30.1 (2012): 1-21.
- Ng Kim Chew. *Slow Boat to China and Other Stories*. Trans. Carlos Rojas. New York: Columbia UP, 2016.
- Quayum, Mohammad A. "Che Husna Azhari." *Peninsula Muse: Interviews with Modern Malaysian and Singaporean Poets, Novelists and Dramatist*. Ed. Mohamad A. Quayum. Bern: Peter Lang, 2007. 235-58.
- Rojas, Carlos. "Language, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Literary Taxonomy: Ng Kim Chew and Mahua Literature." *PMLA* 131.5 (2016): 1316-27.
- Salleh ben Joned. *Adam's Dream*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2007.
- . *Sajak sajak Salleh/Poems Sacred and Profane*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2002.
- . *As I Please*. London: Skoob, 1994.
- Sankar, Uthaya. "What Tamil Writers?" *News Straits Times*, 11 Feb. 2004.
- Tham Seong Chee. "The Politics of Literary Development in Malaysia" [1981]. *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*. Eds. Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks. Petaling Jaya: Longman, 2001. 38-66.
- Wong Soak Koon. "Intervening into the Narrative of 'Nation': Che Husna Azhari's Kelantan Tales." *Sun Yat-sen Journal of Humanities* 16 (2003): 49-61.