Chuah Guat Eng, *Days of Change: A Malaysian Novel.* Kuala Lumpur: Holograms, 2010. 277 pp. ISBN 978-983-43778-1-6.

Malaysian Literature in English boasts very few novels, either because they are difficult to construct, time-consuming to write, or promise little financial returns because most Malaysians would rather read works written by international writers than by home-grown ones. Hence, whenever a local writer goes boldly where few others would, it is with both apprehension and applause that I would read his or her novel, and, as in this case, have the honour to review it.

Days of Change, Chuah Guat Eng's second novel, is purportedly a sequel to her first, *Echoes of Silence*, written sixteen years ago. As with many commendable sequels, this novel could be read as a stand-alone narrative without requiring extensive knowledge of the first in order to appreciate it. Indeed, much of the strength of the first novel is retained (or shall I say, recaptured) in this second one as well: an intriguing storyline fluidly rendered; clear, crisp writing befitting the detective genre; and a sensitivity to place and atmosphere often lacking in local narratives in English. Some of the passages evoking the bucolic landscapes of the *kampong* environment are finely depicted, and not without a profound touch of pathos, knowing that such landscapes remain only in the writings and memory of the protagonist, Hafiz (and therefore, of the author herself), as such places have been largely effaced by modernisation today. In fact, for Hafiz, the kampong is intertwined with the memory of his father; so interconnected are the two that the remembrance of one invariably evokes the other. As he confesses toward the end of the novel:

> To think of my father is to see again the lengthening shadows of the afternoon; feel again the cool comfort of bath, soft cotton sarong and loose Malay shirt; hear again the quietness surrounding my young voice reciting from the Quran in a language I didn't, and still don't understand. (253-54)

But Chuah is careful not to romanticise the kampong and thus dilute the realism of her writing. While the kampong folk in *Days* are often dignified, shy and simple, the novel also portrays those who are avaricious and difficult, thus providing a more believable balance with regard to the inhabitants that populate any community. Moreover, juxtaposed with the pristine characteristic of the kampong's environment is also the poverty, the debilitating ennui that can sometimes result in violence, and the constant fear and threat of progress. Indeed, a major theme in the novel is the clash of civilisations, but without one uplifted and aggrandised over the other; both progress and tradition have their strengths and faults, and *Days* cautiously distils them for our appreciation.

One of the more successful aspects of the narrative is the author's dexterity in handling several yarns, as if knitting an intricate, multicoloured sweater. The primary story is Hafiz's amnesia and his attempts to recollect his fragmented memories with the help of a Chinese hexagram. Slowly recording every shard of remembrances into several notebooks, Hafiz pieces together the events leading to his memory loss, and indirectly, rediscovers himself when the pieces of his life's puzzle are finally refitted back into their necessary, if now different, places. As such, Hafiz's activities of remembering and recording do not merely serve to reconnect him to himself and his past, but function as instruments of redemption. Like psychoanalysis, they allow Hafiz to retell an old story anew – this time from different perspectives and recast into different versions – so that a liberated, better, person may emerge in place of the old, tired and dis-eased one: for that was precisely Hafiz's life before his accident, one infused with hatred, revenge, a loss of faith, and meaninglessness. But *Days* is also a murder mystery (there are two murders), a family romance, a parable (along the lines of "the sins of the father will be visited upon his children"), a trauma text and, to an extent, a supernatural tale. It is no small feat that Chuah could pack such divergent narrative strains into a single novel, and still come up with a story that is cohesive, readable and intelligent.

Unsurprisingly, the murder mystery and the (dark) family romance are interlinked plots. With a hint of incest thrown into the mix, this subplot is also the most pronounced in the novel's treatment of colonialism's impact on the lives of kampong folk. Partly set in the contemporary, and partly during the Communist insurgence in Malaya (1950s), the narrative cleverly suggests that the thematic relationship between death and kinship is perhaps allegorical of the way Imperialism has forever, if subtly, changed the fabric of the Malay society, so much so that the Malay way of life (or *adat*) cannot but retain the contamination of Imperial ideology. In this way also, the novel resists romanticising the kampong through its portrayal, especially, of Hafiz's parents, and especially his mother who is simultaneously the epitome of the kampong wife/mother *par excellence,* and the narrative's *femme fatale.* And unlike the conventional murder mystery, the ones in this novel find no closure, but whose irresolvability remains an important point for which to meditate on the nature of familial-ties, tradition, religion and love.

The ambiguity of trauma lends itself well to tales of the supernatural, and Chuah exploits this link in a rather intriguing way. After his accident, Hafiz finds himself in the home and ministration of Pak Endot and Mak Soh, two traditional healers, in a place called Kampong Basoh. Of course, Hafiz is, at this point, suffering a terrific memory loss; later, after his identification by his friends and return to his home in Ulu Banir, Hafiz decides to visit the old couple again to repay them for their kindness, but is instead told that there are no such persons and that Kampong Basoh does not exist. In the tradition of the fantastic tale that straddles psychological ruptures and actual haunting without consolidating for the

reader the certainty of one over the other, *Days* follows in the footsteps of works like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1988) and Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). However, *Days* affects the collapse of the psychical and metaphysical into each other with a distinctly Malaysian flavour: Hafiz's sojourn in Kampong Basoh could be read against the framework of a belief amongst the Malay folk in the existence of the *orang bunian* (equivalent to the Western fairyfolk) who, despite being unseen by the living, live parallel to, and often mimics, the socio-cultural structures of, the latter. Hafiz later tries to convince himself that his "experience" in Kampong Basoh is nothing more than a protracted dream during a coma, but the starkness of his memory refuses to allay his doubts, but instead, increasingly determines his future vision. It is possible, in this sense, to interpret Hafiz's eventual redemption as one aided, and not merely prompted by, the supernatural.

However, I cannot help but feel that the narrative is often significantly marred by casual recourse to stereotypes and "myths" which, unfortunately, not only perpetuate prejudices, but are rather unnecessary to the story (which therefore make the prejudices all the starker). For example, I do not see why the narrative has to suggest that Haji Abu Bakar, the unscrupulous and powerful government official who is trying to wrest land from Hafiz to build a theme park, and the cause of Hafiz's accident, is latently gay (and later punished with bankruptcy and death); or why there is the need to perform racial profiling every now and then; or why the women in the novel are uniformly two-dimensional, and have relevance only insofar they are related to Hafiz (and usually either as relative or lover). It could be argued, of course, that these prejudices stem from Hafiz's blinkered view of the world prior to his "days of change," but such a reading, I feel, is an over-generous assessment of the narrative, simply because, as I pointed out, such faults could have been easily omitted without affecting the force of the storyline in any way. Another problem with which I struggled while reading the novel is the fact that the story is supposed to be about an amnesiac trying to recover his memories; but what I find instead is that Hafiz has too *many* memories, all flooding effortlessly into the pages of his notebooks. Chuah may be a deft author with her clever plots and skilful writing, but she is less careful when considering the premise of her novel and constructing her narrative accordingly.

Still, for a novel written by a Chinese woman using the first person's point-of-view of an elderly Malay man (which is itself an achievement), and multiple subplots deploying various genres – all woven into a complex, arresting story – *Days* is indeed a work of merit and reflects its author's maturity and assuredness in what she does.

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