

Eddie Tay, *Colony, Nation, and Globalisation: Not at Home in Singaporean and Malaysian Literature*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011. 161 pp. ISBN: 978-9971-69-543-9

Home is where one starts from.
T.S. Eliot

Dislocation of culture, of place, of self, have long been associated with postcolonialism and diaspora, and these are dislocations which have now been exacerbated in the late 20th and early 21st centuries by the rapid onset of transnationalism and globalisation. For Singaporeans and Malaysians and for those Europeans involved in the past business of empire in the region, however, the concept of “home” and its relationship with identity has always been fraught, as Eddie Tay’s book eloquently argues. The distinction between “home” and “not being at home,” as the title of the book indicates, provides the impetus for a selective but comprehensive analysis of both writing *about* and writing *from* and *for* Malaya, Malaysia and Singapore, spanning as it does literature from the colonial era to contemporary diasporic and/or transnational writers.

The rendering of the Malayan/Malaysian (and to an even greater extent the Singaporean) historical canvas through a distinctly colonial prism locates it solely within Eurocentric parameters and inscription. Ignorance, Tay asserts, equates to obliteration and the writing of the region’s “history” in imperial terms, with scant reference to pre-colonial narratives, ensured that the colonising strategies for the region far exceeded fundamental economic and political imperatives. More insidious than physical force or economic inducement, the moral justification of “noblesse oblige” underpinned and permeated British colonisation and reinforced a Eurocentric cultural hegemony, as is evidenced by the depiction of *amok* as emotional “other” to the supposed British/European characteristic of restraint, “a colonialist stereotype created out of disavowed elements of the European self” (27).

Frank Swettenham’s “Real Malay” and colonial texts written by three females (Isabella Bird, Emily Innes and Florence Caddy) serve to illustrate such dichotomies, though from varying perspectives. The inconsistencies in Isabella Bird’s oxymoronic depictions of Malaya and its people place the Malays as both enlightened and primitive, as colonised and coloniser, while reinforcing the elevation of the British moral imperative over other more supposedly venal attempts at European colonisation. Each of the three texts is class-driven and each, in its own way, falls prey to the vagaries of class and cultural bias: Caddy’s writing is positive in its representation of Malays when Malay interests are in

line with the colonising ethic of the British, while Innes finds a connection with the marginalisation of natives but only as a projection of her own mistreatment at the hands of the upper echelons of the British Civil Service. In highlighting these inconsistencies, Tay charts not only the illusion of “home” but also the disillusion of “empire” – a disenchantment that may be seen to gain momentum with Somerset Maugham’s “The Book Bag” and Anthony Burgess’ *Malayan Trilogy* which act, like a number of their texts whose settings are in the region, as counter-colonial discourse, employing mimicry as subversion of the status quo and as flagging the sunset of empire.

Part II of Tay’s treatise shifts in focus towards those authors specifically associated with and labelled as Malay(si)an and Singaporean, assessing the gradual disaffection with empire and the reconstitution of self, firstly through an exploration of Lee Kok Liang’s European experiences and subsequent return to Malaya. Singaporean and Malaysian Anglophone literature has been overwhelmingly concerned with the creation of “nation” and the individual’s relationship to this formation and is invariably underscored by rejection and ostracism, responses that emerge from an innate inability to *belong* initially because of the political machinations of colonialism, but also because of the blighted potential in what may be termed neocolonialism (in Malaysia) and monolithic politics (in Singapore).

Perhaps for this reason, a significant portion of post-independence Malaysian and Singaporean literature has trod a tenuous path between individual artistic integrity and collective economic and political directives. Edwin Thumboo’s “public” poetry, most fundamentally represented by “Ulysses by the Merlion” and literary responses to it such as those by Alfian bin Sa’at, reveals what Tay terms the “synthetic” nature of Singaporean nationhood, while Karam Raslan provides a distinctive Malay voice that links social Darwinism to political edicts whose primary function is to create a Malay-dominated state in an ostensibly plural nation. In line with this tension between state and individual, in the examples of Philip Jeyaretnam’s *Abraham’s Promise* and Gopal Baratham’s *A Candle in the Sun*, we may see that a question fundamentally relevant to Singaporean literature is what constitutes, in both a literary and personal sense, *responsibility* to the artistic self and whether this may be equated with a responsibility to state-sanctioned edicts. Alternatively Malaysia, by virtue of the politicised dominance of Bahasa Malay as the national language and the consequent legitimisation of a national Malay literature at the expense of other sectional literatures, has forced Malaysian Anglophone writers to occupy a different space to Singaporean writers: the former ostracised by Malay-dominated UMNO directives, the latter confused by an attempt to balance artistic integrity with an allegiance to the economic and political imperatives of the island-state. K.S. Maniam’s trilogy of novels embodies the marginalised Malaysian perspective, arguing for an uncompromising exploration of memory

in opposition to the political propensity for either the selective use or suppression of the nation's past.

This shift in the focal points of identity may be further witnessed in what is tentatively termed transnational or diasporic writing. Simon Tay (*Alien Asian*) and Hwee Hwee Tan (*Mammon Inc.*) define themselves in relation to nebulous points of reference emerging from globalisation and the crass consumerism it has engendered, through commentaries on America and the developed world on a macro scale but also, by implication, through coded critiques of Singapore. But, although the shift in literature loosely associated with Malaysia and Singapore in contemporary times has ostensibly been from national to transnational, as Eddie Tay rightly asserts, “the national, it would seem, is already transnational” (133). As such, he makes the important point that *The Harmony Silk Factory* and *Breaking the Tongue* (as perhaps befits their global status) write *about* home but not *back to* home – dealing with the past in a manner which renders all history subjective (and thus diminished) – while the use of parody and the carnivalesque in *Playing Madame Mao* renders the Australian-based Lau Siew Mei's writing more topically relevant in both universal terms and in its specificity to the region because, unlike Aw's and Loh's texts, it “interrogates not just the process of writing history but, more importantly, any form of governmentality legitimized by history” (150).

Postcolonial interpretations of literature have often been, by their very nature, overwhelmed by the theoretical positions they seek to inscribe on the texts they examine. Eddie Tay's focus, while making legitimate use of a number of the tenets within postcolonial and related theory, does not become mired in them. The book is clearly written and cogently argued in its chronological treatment of the shifting emphases in national and social impetus in Malaya, Malaysia and Singapore, both from within the region itself and from without, and is a valuable and welcome contribution to academic criticism on the writing of empire, Malaysian and Singaporean Anglophone literature, and the often surprising but valid links between what constitutes *home* and *not at home*.

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