

GLOBAL MALAYSIAN NOVELS: PROSPECTS AND POSSIBILITIES

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As contemporary Malaysian literature in English is increasingly gaining an international reputation, it cannot be read as primarily reflects of the nation anymore – a trajectory that has more or less underscored scholarship on anglophone Malaysian writer in the last three decades. This paper discusses the "global" nature of writers like Tash Aw and Tan Twan Eng, and elicits the advantages and problems when this category is appended to their works.

Keywords: globalization, Tash Aw, Tan Twan Eng, history, novel, postcolonial

In the last 50 years, despite increasing globalization, novels in English from Southeast Asia have struggled to make an international impact. In contrast to the worldwide exposure and sales of novelists from South Asia, such as Amitav Ghosh or Aravind Adiga, writers of prose fiction from Southeast Asia have generally been read in small local or regional markets. Poetry and short stories from Southeast Asia have recently obtained an increasing transnational exposure through publication in literary journals, many of which have now moved wholly or partially online. The novel, however, for a long time remained stubbornly restricted to national or specialist markets: major Filipino writers such as Dean Francis Alfar or Vicente Groyon, for instance, have made little impact outside the Philippines, and even major writers from Singapore such as Suchen Christine Lim are not widely distributed internationally. There has, of course, long been a tradition of novelists who have migrated from Southeast Asia and who write about migrancy: in addition to the many first generation Filipino-American writers, one thinks of Australian authors Hsu-Min Teo and Lau Siew Mei, Canadian Lydia Kwa, and Shirley Geok-lin Lim, an American citizen who still retains close contact with Malaysia. Yet novels written by Southeast Asians in English of Southeast Asia for a long time achieved little recognition. This is as true of a previous generation of writers as it is of the current one: Lloyd Fernando, K. S. Maniam, and Goh Poh Seng, for instance, while they may have received critical attention from some Commonwealth Literature and later postcolonial literary studies scholars, they have not achieved the international recognition showered on their South Asian contemporaries.

In the past decade, however, the pattern of neglect has been broken by two developments. First, the increasing pace of globalization has made it more difficult to make a neat division between "local" and diasporic texts. Second, a number of Malaysian novels have been published in the United Kingdom and the United States, and several have achieved considerable international recognition and sales well beyond a community of scholars or specialists, thus outselling canonical texts in the Malaysian Literature in English canon.¹ In the interests of focus, this essay will discuss two of these novels that have a number of similarities, and make only brief reference to others, such as Preeta Samarasan's *Evening is The Whole Day*.

The first of the two novels is perhaps the best known. In 2005 Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* was longlisted for the Booker Prize and won the Whitbread First Novel Award in the United Kingdom: it went on to become an international best seller. In 2007, a second Malaysian novel, Tan Twan Eng's *The Gift of Rain*, was also long-listed for the Man Booker, an achievement made more remarkable by the fact that it was published by Myrmidon Press, a publisher from the northern English city of Newcastle not known for its list of literary fiction. Stylistically, the two novels are very different. Aw's novel is densely literary and self-referential, a consciously literary artifact that reminds one of the work of Salman Rushdie or Michael Ondaatje. Tan's novel is much more of a family saga told through more conventional narrative strategies, recalling perhaps the work of authors such as Rohinton Mistry, although leavened with a liberal dose of martial arts action. Yet in other ways the novels, although produced independently of each other, are hauntingly similar. Both involve reminiscences from the perspective of a later time regarding events before and during the Japanese occupation of Malaya from 1941 to 1945. Both have racially ambiguous and hybrid protagonists, and both also centre – structurally and thematically – on processes of memory, on the recollection of past events by actors or descendants of actors in a more tranquil present.

A first reaction to these two texts might be to dismiss them as products largely written for the international marketplace, with very little to do with contemporary Malaysia at all. Such a response, while often resulting in an *ad hominem* attack rather than a careful reading of the literary text, nonetheless does arise from real contemporary debates about the status and utility of what is still often called postcolonial fiction in a global marketplace. In looking at the history of the winners of the Booker Prize, Graham Huggan has noted that by the early 1990s a movement from a narrowly-defined "English Literature" to "Literature in English" had already occurred, with writers such as Salman Rushdie, J. M. Coetzee, Keri Hulme, Ben Okri, and Michael Ondaatje winning the award.² Yet Huggan suggests that this transformation, while welcomed at one level, might simply reflect a "symbolic legitimization of 'multicultural' and/or exotically

'foreign' goods" within a shallow, unreflective multiculturalism. Huggan illustrates this by analyzing the changing thematic content of Booker winners that are set in South Asia, or which have significant South Asian characters. Early winners from the 1970s, such as J. G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973), might be plausibly critiqued as Orientalist, even if they take an ironic perspective on Orientalist traditions. Later winners from the 1980s onwards, such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992), are much more radically revisionary, challenging both nationalist and Eurocentric historiographies. Yet, Huggan suggests, the process of their nomination, listing, and being granted the award results in the novels being paraded as "the latest in a series of publicly endorsed 'multicultural' products."³ The jury often consists of established British authors, and their selection of such postcolonial texts, Huggan suggests, represents forgetting as much as remembering. Such a celebration of contemporary multiculturalism and global cosmopolitanism tends to omit historical contexts of oppression, and ongoing inequality in the present. Indeed, such a fetishization of multicultural elements abstracted from power, which Huggan terms "postcoloniality," is in opposition to the radically transformative and emancipatory roots of postcolonial writing, which often addressed social inequalities under colonialism rather than simply celebrating cultural difference.⁴

We might, indeed, supplement Huggan's argument. The renaming of the Booker as the Man Booker in 2002 resulted from sponsorship from Man Group investment managers. Money from what is now the Booker Group, plc., generated from the exploitation of indentured labour on sugar plantations in colonial Guyana, is supplemented by profits from Man Group, plc., a company that originally made the barrels for the imported sugar in London, and which now oils the transnational capital flows so central to a new cycle of globalization after the end of the Cold War (Man Group plc., 2010).

Huggan's critique of the manner in which reception of South Asian texts neutralises their political efficacy has been matched by a critique of the class position of their authors. Leela Gandhi has produced one of the more nuanced accounts of this, examining what she calls the "Stephanian novel," produced by graduates of the elite St. Stephen's College at the University of Delhi. The authors of such novels, Gandhi argues, find themselves "in a deliciously 'win-win' situation,"⁵ achieving hegemony within the nation-state that is automatically "counter-hegemonic in relation to the 'West.'"⁶ Such novels, Gandhi suggests, do not challenge the parameters of the cultural worldview from which they emerge, offering "postcolonial middle-classes the narcissistic pleasures of self-recognition."⁷ Indeed, a persistent objection to much recent internationally disseminated Indian writing in English is that it portrays only an elite experience,

or experiences filtered through elite consciousnesses, in contrast to the greater variety of different cultural worlds depicted in writing in other Indian languages.

It would, of course, be easy to map such ideas back onto Aw's and Tan's novels. In the context of the Booker and their publication in Britain, both *The Gift of Rain* and *The Harmony Silk Factory* might be seen as offering the "exotically foreign goods" of which Huggan writes. In Tan's novel, there are often transparent pretexts for the "downloading" of anthropological information for a non-Malaysian audience. When Philip Hutton, Tan's protagonist, visits Ipoh as a young man, for instance, he is somewhat implausibly surprised by preparations for the Seventh Month of the Chinese New Year – the so-called "Festival of the Hungry Ghosts."⁸ While it seems odd in the context of the story that Philip had never noticed these yearly preparations during a lifetime in Penang, they serve as a prompt for an ethnographic digression by Philip's grandfather which Huggan might critique as exoticising. Aw is a more sophisticated writer, and indeed has consciously attempted to resist exoticisation. In an interview given in 2005, the author stressed that his portrayal of the central woman character of the novel, Snow Soong, as slightly-built, unfeminine, and incomplicit is aimed explicitly at countering "stereotypical expectations" engendered by novels such as J. G. Farrell's *The Singapore Grip*, in which "all the Chinese women seem to be servants or prostitutes."⁹ Yet the marketing of *The Harmony Silk Factory* confirms Huggan's point about the reappropriation of apparently subversive texts such as Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Rushdie's *Midnight Children*. The popular Penguin paperback version of the book abandons an earlier more neutral cover for a picture of a young Asian woman with bare shoulders and a flower photoshopped into her hair, eyes lowered coyly towards the reader, against a backdrop of jungle and mountains rising beyond.

We might go further and consider, as Leela Gandhi does with her Indian writers, the class position of Aw and Tan. Their status as middle-class Chinese Malaysians is, of course, not hegemonic in the manner of Gandhi's Stephanians, and the use of English as a medium of writing in Malaysia has a different valence from the use of English by Indian writers. And yet parallels could certainly be made. The experience of many middle-class Chinese Malaysians in going abroad to study because of ethnic quotas in Malaysia universities in the 1980s and 1990s has, almost by default, made many members of a transnational postcolonial middle class, and perhaps uniquely able to offer the pleasures of recognition that Gandhi characterizes as "narcissistic." Certainly the two novels in question do not engage with the local in the way that much writing in different languages published in Malaysia does. In this, there is also a contrast with other recent or contemporary Malaysian artists in different media who have achieved international recognition. The work produced by filmmakers such as Yasmin Ahmad and Amir Muhammad, for instance, or the visual art of Wong Hoy

Cheong, are much more embedded in the social politics of contemporary Malaysian society than either *The Harmony Silk Factory* or *The Gift of Rain*.

Yet such critiques seem founded on a series of oppositions that, when examined closely, are untenable. For both Huggan and Gandhi, the commoditization of the contemporary postcolonial literary marketplace implicitly represents a falling away from a more authentic postcolonial politics. In Huggan's case, it is a prior politics of the struggle for decolonization, in which texts said what they meant and meant what they said – when the process of political intervention for a postcolonial novel was much simpler. For Gandhi, escape from commoditization lies outside the world of the middle classes: although she does not specify what more inclusive South Asian writing might be, it might well be that produced in other languages, and from other class positions. Yet these other spaces that are somehow free of the pressures of the marketplace are, of course, illusory. To return to Southeast Asia, two generations of novelists in English in Singapore and Malaysia were published by two publishing houses, neither in itself free from the pressing demands of power. Fernando, Goh Poh Seng, and Catherine Lim, among others, were first published by Heinemann's Writing in Asia Series, edited by Leon Comber out of Hong Kong, and thus produced in close affiliation with an educational mission in English; Heinemann, above all, was an educational press. Fernando, along with Philip Jeyaretnam and others, was later published by Times, part of a Singaporean media conglomerate in the process of flexing its muscles. If we move to South Asia, Sarah Brouillette has documented how transnational publishers have not remained within the linguistic boundaries of English, but have published extensively in other Indian languages: the notion that the literatures of these other languages are spaces of authenticity free from the pressures of a global marketplace is thus untenable.¹⁰

What might happen, then, if we concentrate initially less on judgments of political efficacy of these texts—judgments which are frequently self-confirming, since they deploy ultimately subjective aesthetic criteria—and think rather think about the formal qualities of the novel itself? The novel's career in postcolonial literary studies has been a stellar one: it has been seen as a conduit for the dissemination of anti-colonial resistance and national high culture, often in a new national language. In the formulations of Benedict Anderson and Frederic Jameson, the novel is symptomatic of a new apprehension of time and space that enables the nation to be thought; in the period immediately before and after independence, it carries the symbolic function of a national allegory. Most accounts of the development of postcolonial literary studies, as I have noted elsewhere,¹¹ concentrate on the novel as almost a normative prose form, often neglecting the wider dissemination of short stories or essays. Many postcolonial literature classes, indeed, focus on the novel to the extent that they often feature

only novels or perhaps—as I have to confess has been my own practice—include a token collection of poems and a play.

The predominance of the novel in these contexts has perhaps two causes. The first is its association from the nineteenth century on with national high culture through the study of literature at universities (and later at secondary schools) as universal education spread. When colonies sought their independence as nation-states the novel became an ideal mode of cultural expression: indisputably modern, yet able to contain and re-present tradition, just as the modern frame of the newly independent state would contain and rationalize the primordial energies of the nation. Yet there is also a second, more material, reason. The novel is in many ways a uniquely disembedded literary form. Unlike the majority of poems and short stories, which appear in journals, magazines, and newspapers, the novel appears in only one guise: as a commodity that is easily transported from one geographical context to another. Such material factors, I think, account for the transnational popularity of postcolonial novels and also their frequent appearance in postcolonial literary studies classes; if picked up by a major publishing house, the novel, as a packaged commodity, can easily be bought and sold through either physical or virtual bookstores. Anyone who writes fiction knows one of the clear effects of the commoditization of the novel: the decline in global markets for short fiction, which seems increasingly limited to small magazines and the training grounds of the creative writing programme. At the same time, the presence of web-based journals in Southeast Asia such as *Cha*, *High Chair*, or *QLRS* have arguably enabled poetry and short fiction to remain embedded within local reading communities in the way the novel has not.

It may seem paradoxical that a symbol of national high culture has made itself so amenable to the cultural flows of global capitalism that threaten to erode the nation-state's autonomy. Yet this realization is important. It substitutes a more material reason for the "turn" towards magical realism, postmodernism, and new ironically self-conscious exoticism in transnational novels over the last twenty years. Rather than representing a falling away from ideals, the changed content of the novels is a response to the changing nature of markets, and the intensified commoditization of the novel form. And this means, perhaps, that we have to stop demanding that the Malaysian novel in English address national questions directly, or that it reflect on the state of the nation: it may be that other art forms are actually more suited for carrying out these tasks.

If the Malaysian novel in English can no longer be a national form, then, what questions should it address? Here we might usefully turn to an essay by David Harvey. In his influential "The art of rent" Harvey yokes together what might seem to be rather disparate phenomena: the Marxist notion of monopoly rents, and the growing commodification of art forms under globalization. Artistic

production, Harvey notes, can be seen as seeking monopoly rents in two ways. The first, and in many ways the most obvious, is the international market in art, in which the scarcity of a Picasso – or indeed, we might add, a painting by Georgette Chen or Chua Ek Kay – results in its having a unique value; art traded in this way constitutes a monopoly. Yet Harvey notes that there is another way in which artistic production in a globalized world seeks monopoly rents: through the production of discourses of authenticity associated with a particular cultural form, place or product. It is unlikely that the Forbidden City in Beijing will ever be auctioned off to the highest bidder, and yet its image forms the basis for the marketability of many cultural products.

For Harvey, the function of art as commodity results in a series of contradictions, not least of which is one between the global and the local. Harvey illustrates this by drawing on a comment by a young American that she preferred the Europe depicted in Disney World in Florida to the reality of Europe itself: there was more going on, and there were no strange languages or dirt.¹² While acknowledging how laughable as this comment is at one level, Harvey notes how quickly Europe is now in the process of Disneyfying itself for tourists. And such a response, Harvey elaborates, has an effect in terms of local politics. Globalization, as we know, does not destroy the local, but rather provide incentives for the production of discourses of authenticity. Tourism campaigns stressing the uniqueness of a local culture may also paradoxically incite nativist movements that resist commercialization. Harvey does not mention this, but it seems to me in Malaysia and Singapore, this conflict is to a degree mediated by state-sponsored notions of multiculturalism that frame the way in which cultural identity is seen. Multiracialism thus becomes a kind of Disneyfication of identity which satisfies both the external demands of a global cultural marketplace and the internal demands of governance.

Harvey's ultimate project, the excavation of "spaces of hope" through and oppositional cultural production that emerges from the contradictions brought about by globalization,¹³ in many ways describes the artistic practice of alternative artists in Malaysia today. What though, of the global postcolonial novel? Clearly the monopoly it seeks is of the second kind that Harvey identifies: the novel as a text is infinitely reproducible, but it achieves its authority through an appeal to authenticity, to the ability to reproduce one cultural context or milieu for readers in another. Huggan's analysis shows that this feature of the novel as commodity is in many ways divorced from the content of the text itself. Many recent postcolonial novels are, thematically, highly suspicious of the notion of any form of cultural authenticity, and yet their position as commodities makes it almost inescapable that they will be read as expressions of a particular cultural context. It would be impossible, I think, not to market either *The Gift of Rain* or *The Harmony Silk Factory* as Malaysian novels internationally.

One could, of course, follow Huggan further, and examine textual strategies of "strategic exoticism," in which "postcolonial writers/thinkers, working from within exoticist codes of representation, either manage to subvert those codes... or succeed in redeploying them for the purposes of uncovering differential relations of power."¹⁴ Yet such discussion, as Huggan himself notes, leads to a paradox: the more these writers deploy exoticist codes, the more they become a "further symptom" of exoticism in postcolonial writing even as they subvert it. Such a mode of reading risks becoming trapped in a circle of interpretation that Aw himself recognized too well in his interview comments that while his novel attempted to do something "entirely different" from much postcolonial fiction he was aware that "the packaging and selling of the book" conformed to pre-established norms.¹⁵

A more fruitful approach to the novels might be to think of audiences, and indeed to realize that the global nature of audiences in English for fiction is changing. The life of the novel as commodity means that its audience will also change with changed flows of capital, and will capture new readers. In early 2010, on a visit to Penang, I went to MPH Books in Gurney Plaza in search of copies of Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid*, which was out of print in Singapore. The staff member at the inquiry desk had never heard of Fernando, and did not realize he was a Malaysian author: a database search eventually revealed four copies in the Johor Bahru branch. If my memory does not mistake me, though, Aw's second book, *A Map of The Invisible World*, was on display in a paperback edition different from those produced for the U.S. and U.K. markets. Whatever worries scholars might rightly have about the lack of availability of Fernando's book, and the cultural forgetting that this suggests, Malaysians are reading Aw's work both in Malaysia and in the diaspora, as are other readers who, like myself, have some knowledge of Malaysia. The same would apply to Tan, whose novel was prominently displayed in Kinokuniya and Borders in Singapore.

What kind of reflection on contemporary Malaysia, then, do the novels promote? If we judge them in relation to a previous generation of writers, their concerns seem tangential to questions of the nation. Neither novel, for instance, attempts to assemble a representative cast of characters of different ethnicities that embody the nation, in the way both Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* and *Green is The Colour* do. Indeed, in both novels Japanese and European characters are much more prominent than Malay or Indian ones. Nor do we have the intense exploration of an embodied ethnicity within a larger social world that is frequently characteristic of the writings of K. S. Maniam. The protagonist and narrator of *The Gift of Rain* is the Eurasian Philip Khoo Hutton, while *The Harmony Silk Factory* is centrally concerned with the ambiguous parentage of Jasper, the narrator of the first of its three parts. While Aw's book is clearly written in a more ironic mode than Tan's, it is possible, from a postcolonial perspective, to criticize similar failings in both.

Both novels, while criticizing British colonialism, also manifest a sentimental attachment to its representatives, and have complex and rounded British characters. Both, conversely, reproduce stereotypical images of Malayan Communist Party guerillas. Clearly, neither of these novels represents an attempt at revisionist history.

It might be argued that the situating of the majority of the discourse time of the novels in the period of the Japanese occupation, perhaps loosens the purchase of the narrative of a national history. Two novels written in diaspora that are set in a later historical period, for instance, Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Joss and Gold* (2002) and Preeta Samarasan's *Evening is The Whole Day* (2008), while largely free of an overt pedagogical national agenda, still seem to feel pressure to recount the violence after opposition victories of May 13, 1969, an overdetermined event in all post-independence Malaysian historiography. While in Lim's novel the reference to the event is well-integrated into the narrative, and indeed provides a climax to the first section of the novel, in Samarasan's text May 13 can only be brought into the narrative by a *deus ex machina*, in which a central female character, although eight months pregnant, inexplicably decides to visit Kuala Lumpur at election time. In contrast, it might be felt, the movement by both Aw and Tan to a moment before the founding of the nation succeeds because it removes a reader to another place: one that is like and yet not like contemporary Malaysia. And in doing so each novel promotes a different form of what the Russian formalist Vladimir Shklovsky calls "defamiliarization" – a distancing that enables a reader to see the everyday or habitual in a new light.¹⁶

Both novels, of course, cannot escape the nation: indeed, they return to a period of history which both colonial and national historiography of Malaya and then Malaysia considered crucial: the Japanese occupation. Colonial historiography could scarcely contain Japanese military victory, and the British returned to Malaya after the Second World War only to prepare for eventual departure. Yet images of Japanese violence – while very real – in the occupation have tended to erase the histories of Japanese communities in Malaya and the Straits Settlements before the Second World War: a stress on the privations of occupation and the occupation itself as a rupture which provoked a rise in national consciousness has been central to nationalist historiography. Both Aw and Tan, in restoring Japanese characters to their texts, seem to hint at a larger series of Asian connections which exceed the history of colony to nation, and which perhaps foreground contemporary pan-Asian connections which scholars are now tracing back into the past.¹⁷

Of the two novels, *The Gift of Rain* perhaps makes the simplest intervention into history. Tan portrays his most important Japanese character, Hayato Endo, sympathetically. While the majority of the novel is set just before and during the

Japanese occupation of Penang, it is narrated retrospectively from the perspective of Malaysia of the 1990s. Its protagonist-narrator, Philip Khoo-Hutton, is visited by a Japanese woman with a connection to the man he calls "Endo-san," and thus becomes a pretext for his recollection of the events of the occupation. Many other Japanese characters, however, do not rise above the level of stereotypes – clearly Tan's project in the novel is not to write another version of history. What emerges most clearly in the narrated lives of both Endo-san, as Philip calls him, and Philip himself, however, is a sense of profound moral ambiguity. Faced with the violence of occupation, neither character is confronted with a simple Sartrean choice: neither feels able to simply say no to cooperation with power, and each hopes, in that cooperation, to do good. Philip's moral ambiguity persists until the narrative present. He has been instrumental in the preservation of heritage buildings in Penang, and yet his own role in a remembered version of the past is subject to passionate debate: some survivors of the occupation see him as a spineless collaborator and traitor, others as someone who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to mitigate the worst effects of the Japanese occupation. This sense of moral ambiguity in politics would surely have resonance for contemporary Malaysian readers. If the opposition gains in the March 8, 2008 general election seemed to prefigure a new kind of politics in Malaysia, the disappointment for Malaysians in succeeding years has been that politics for most parties has inevitably perhaps been very much business as usual: it has proved difficult, if not impossible, to separate out a public sphere in which rational and morally unambiguous action is possible from the pressures of various other kinds of power. What I do not suggest here is that *The Gift of Rain* is an intended – and indeed therefore prophetic – allegory for the state of the contemporary Malaysian nation. What I am suggesting is that it may, as a commodity, become embedded in certain local economies of representation: it may take on a particular meaning for Malaysians, and those who know Malaysia.

A parallel argument might be made for Aw's novel. *The Harmony Silk Factory*, as we have noted, is a much more self-reflexive text than *The Gift of Rain*, and thus much less concerned with a process of historical rehabilitation. While its central Japanese character, Mamoru Kunichika, is certainly magnetically attractive, he is not sympathetically depicted, and indeed at times is portrayed almost as a Gothic villain in the mould of Bram Stoker's Count Dracula. This is particularly curious because the character is partially modeled on a historical figure, Yoshichika Tokugawa, a trained biologist who spent much time in Malaya in the 1920s and 1930s as a scientist, and regarding whom much rehabilitative work has been done in order to portray him as a "good Japanese" during the occupation of Singapore. Many of Aw's characters, like Tan's, are morally ambiguous, and yet the novel's focus is less on individual narrative choices than the way they are narrativized. Aw's novel questions the reliability of narrative in two distinct ways. First, each of its sections is told by a different narrator, and

each narrator is clearly only able to articulate a limited perspective. While perspectives on events sometimes intersect, the pieces of narrative never quite cohere into a whole, and indeed many of the puzzles introduced early in the novel remain stubbornly unresolved. Second, each of the sections contains a series of narrative pastiches, which draw attention to the way that the narrative is told as much as its events: in Seymour Chatman's terms, the discourse, rather than the story, is foregrounded.¹⁸ Thus Jasper's initial account of his father's life lapses into the style of late colonial history and ethnography; Peter Wormwood's story of the climax to the adventures of a motley group of travelers in Malaya just before the beginning of the Second World War revisions the narrative through the conventions of opera.

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. The first two pages of the novel explicitly raise this question: Jasper repeats his father's stories, in which Johnny makes a spurious comparison between an inaccurately-remembered account of the story of Hang Jebat and his own life. "Death," Jasper concludes, "erases all traces, all memories of lives that once existed, completely and forever. This is what Father sometimes told me. I think it was the only true thing he ever said" (Aw, 2005: 4). 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. These stories are necessary to nations, and to every form of politics, but they are also necessarily provisional, and carry their own particular powers of narrative seduction. For a Malaysian reader, or a proximate other in this case, the relevance of Aw's novel may well be in suggesting the limits of narratives of heroic resistance, and the need to abandon them if they no longer have utility.

Both novels, then, are transnational commodities that travel well beyond Malaysia's borders, and which meet with a variety of receptions there. Yet the fate of the global Malaysian novel, I would argue, does not make it less Malaysian, just as rubber, palm oil, and indeed now products of industrial capitalism such as Proton cars, have both transnational and local social contexts. As the novel becomes ever more commoditized through the spread of electronic reading technologies, I would argue, this does not necessarily mean that it loses a local purchase. Yet its purchase on the nation – and indeed on Malaysian contexts that are not necessarily national – will, in an age of global capitalism, be different from that of a previous generation of novels.

NOTES

1. The definition of what precisely constitutes a "Malaysian novel," of course, is a vexed one, and part of a problematic of postcolonial literary studies that this paper explores. Both of the novels explored in depth in this essay are written by Malaysians and wholly set in Malaysia, but are published and distributed – and thus presumably find the majority of their audience – outside Malaysia.
2. Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), 109.
3. *Ibid.*, 116.
4. *Ibid.*, ix.
5. Leela Gandhi, "Indo-Anglian Fiction: Writing India, Elite Aesthetics, and the Rise of the 'Stephanian' Novel," *Australian Humanities Review* 8 (1997), para. 20. <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-November-1997/gandhi.html/> (accessed 11 March 2012).
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, para. 22.
8. Tan Twan Eng, *The Gift of Rain* (Newcastle: Myrmidon, 2008), 157.
9. Peter I. Barta, "The Postcolonial Novel: An Interview With Tash Aw," *Intertexts* 9, no. 2 (2005): 119.
10. Sarah Brouillette, "South Asian Literature and Global Publishing," *Wasafiri* 2, no. 3 (2007): 37–38.
11. Philip Holden, "Reading for Genre: The Short Story and (Post)colonial Governmentality," *Interventions* 12, no.3 (2010): 444.
12. David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Toward a Critical Geography* (London: Routledge, 2001), 396.
13. *Ibid.*, 411.
14. Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, 32.
15. Barta, "The Postcolonial Novel," 117.
16. Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 18.
17. In Aw's case this is a conscious strategy: He comments to Barta that he deliberately made Kunichika an attractive Asian, as a foil to the ineffectual Englishman Peter Wormwood (Barta, 2005: 120).
18. Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 19.

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