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# Narrating the racial riots of 13 May 1969: gender and postmemory in Malaysian literature

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**ABSTRACT**

The riots of 13 May 1969 are kept alive as social memory in Malaysia. As the government continues to ignore calls to declassify the documents on the racial riots, historical evidence of 13 May is scarce, and the 'truth' remains obscured. This article, however, moves away from the truth-seeking mission and studies three contemporary fictions by Malaysian women writers. They are Sinophone writer Li Zishu's (2010) *Gaobie de niandai* (The Era of Farewell), Anglophone writer Preeta Samarasan's (2008) *Evening Is the Whole Day* and Hanna Alkaf's *The Weight of Our Sky* (2019). It seeks to discover a feminized territory to explore how women writers of the post-1969 generation narrate the 13 May riots and offers critiques of the entrenched male-dominated, racialized narrative. It uses Marianne Hirsch's 2008 concept of 'postmemory' to examine the ways they constitute memories in their own right and articulate a new identity, one that is different from their previous generation. The article demonstrates how three women writers propose different ways to embrace the wounds of 13 May, thereby showing the importance of acknowledging the painful feelings and memories of the traumatic history as lived, not forcing them to be cured or reconciled.

**KEYWORDS**

13 May racial riots; Malaysian literature; Sinophone literature; Hanna Alkaf; gender; memory

> After May 13, thousands of Malaysians like myself withdrew into mass depression … . I had no nationalist idealism to imagine. The cultural parochialism that took shape in the aftermath of the riots in Malaysia, which includes race-based quotas, communalist politics, and separatist race-essentialised cultures, was absolute anathema to me. (Shirley G. L. Lim 1996, 204, 272)

> The 1970s was a time of intense questioning about the state of Malaysian society, coming out of a traumatic event [the racial riots of 13 May 1969]. There was a lot of confusion, uncertainty and a very profound loss of confidence in what was Malaysian politics, and Malaysian culture … . We were being pushed to ask 'what was Malaysian culture?' (Krishen Jit, quoted in Rajendran 2013, 145)

The 13 May riots that broke out in the aftermath of Malaysia's 1969 general election are often seen as a watershed in modern Malaysian history. A nationwide state of emergency was imposed soon after the riots, and the National Operations Council (NOC) was established with the then Deputy Prime Minister Tun Razak as the head. The NOC served as

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the caretaker government of Malaysia while parliament was suspended until the end of the emergency in 1971. An agenda for a 'new Malaysia' was carefully planned during the paralysis of the state mechanism in what Georgio Agamben (2005, 31) describes as the 'state of exception'. A declaration of *Rukun Negara* (National Principles) was proclaimed in 1970; the National Economic Policy and the National Cultural Policy were enacted in 1971 – all set out in the name of promoting and upholding national unity, as direct responses to the riots. For historian Farish A. Noor (2009), 13 May was not the result of racial conflict 'but rather the blueprint for further racial and religious polarisation'.

Intellectuals, artists and writers who were greatly upset by the post-1969 situation left the country, such as Shirley G. L. Lim and Ee Tiang Hong. Those who remained, including theatre director Krishen Jit, faced a difficult time of revising ways of living and creating artistic works. As an Indian Malaysian, Krishen chose to participate solely in Malay-language theatre after 13 May, to subvert the notion that Malay culture was the sole property of the Malays (Rajendran 2013, 150). However, his credibility was still disputed by some who saw him as an outsider to Malay culture, prompting Krishen to revise his views in the 1980s and shift back to English-language theatre (Rajendran 2013, 165–167). The Malay–English bilingual writer Muhammad Haji Salleh decided to write his creative works only in Malay, questioning provocatively whether he should 'lick the hand that strangles (his) language and culture' (quoted in Nor Faridah and Quayum 2001, 20). As for Chinese-language literature, Tee Kim Tong (2011, 91) has argued that post-1969 Sinophone Malaysian writers tend to produce 'light literature' with less historical and sociopolitical consciousness on the surface.

While 13 May is kept alive as social memory, there is difficulty in remembering and finding voices to articulate the memory. However, unlike other marginal histories that are often repressed, such as the history of the Left, as well as women's, student and labour movements, Malaysians are constantly reminded of 13 May. It continues to be used as a scaremongering tactic by certain groups that claim racial riots will break out again if the status quo is challenged. In other words, Malaysians are well aware of 13 May, and there has been a strong will to remember it. Yet, how differently do people remember it?

## Beyond truth-finding of the 13 May riots

The year 2019 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the riots. There were several commemoration activities, media reports, forums and documentaries about them,[1] demanding for the truth to be revealed. As the government ignores calls to declassify the documents on 13 May in the national archive or to set up a reconciliation commission (Malaysiakini 2019), the only official documents available are the then prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman's (1969) personal account *May 13: Before & After*, and the NOC's (1969) *The May 13 Tragedy: A Report*, both published in 1969, months after the riots. They characterize the incident as a Sino-Malay violent clash caused by several forces: first, the racialist campaigning and victory parade held by the Chinese supporters of the Democratic

[1]There was a series of commemorative events, including a public memorial at the Sungai Buloh mass grave site held on 11 May 2019, attended by the public, the victims' families and a state representative who agreed that 13 May documents should be declassified (Yap 2019).

Action Party (DAP) and the Malaysian People's Movement Party (Gerakan) before and after the election; second, the infiltration of communist agents in the campaigning; and third, the Chinese secret societies that were employed to carry out subversive activities. Sometimes in the official narratives, these three groups become one. The official report (NOC 1969) states that 196 people died in the riot (three-quarters of whom were ethnically Chinese), with 439 injured and 9143 arrested, although many perceived the numbers to be much higher.

Owing to the suppression of historical evidence, the 'truth' of 13 May remains obscured. There have been scholarly works challenging the official narrative, arguing instead that the incident showed a crisis within the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) (Goh 1971) or, in fact, was a planned coup d'état within the UMNO to depose Tunku who represented the outdated Malay aristocracy (Kua 2007). Some seek to trace back historically the seed of ethnic tension that culminated in the 13 May riots (Comber 1983; Abdul Rahman 2011), but most of the scholarship deals with post-1969 institutional changes and other aspects of the aftermath of 13 May. In recent years, some scholars have started to see the events of 13 May as 'sites of memory' (Nora 1989) that seek to break away from the fact-finding mission. For example, scholars have taken a postmodernist approach to deny a possible monolithic narrative on 13 May and demand that more stories be excavated (Farish 2009; Teh 2013); others have started to record oral stories from the survivors (Por 2017, 2020).

Building upon current scholarship on 13 May, this article takes a different approach to look at the less charted field of study, that is, fiction – a field that is often seen as antagonistic to 'facts'. This article moves away from the truth claims and site-specific articulation of the 13 May narrative and focuses instead on the empathetic engagement of contemporary novels in evoking memory, deriving from the present consciousness of the past. To examine the works of fiction written about 13 May, I propose not to reduce it to merely a historical event in which 'truth' and cause and effect need to be proven by shreds of evidence, but rather, to extend the meaning of 13 May as a 'present history' viewed through narrative lenses. This article sees 13 May as a heavily embedded social memory that contemporary Malaysians find ways to reckon with, and it uses Hirsch's (2008) idea of 'postmemory' to examine the post-1969 generation's ways to constitute memories in their own right.

Fiction, in this case, works towards traversing the bounded narrative of the 13 May history, one that is often told as a monolithic, traumatic national story. Fiction writers create the images of a reality that is no less 'real' than that produced by the historian, by mediating between the alternative modes of 'emplotment' and explanation (White 1985). In other words, the reality that fiction writers delve into is not necessarily one of facts and truths. In this article, I will show how fiction writers, who are sensitive to the powerful modes of fictionalization in the representation of history, narrate 13 May by extricating voiceless subjects from the national history and offering critiques of the firm structure of the prevalent narrative. First, I will give an overview of the narratives of 13 May in contemporary Malaysian literature, and then focus on the novels written by three women writers from different ethnicity who were born after 1969. I analyse how post-1969 women writers employ a gendered articulation to remember 13 May in their own right and critique the racialized accounts of nationalism in Malaysia. By exploring the gendered postmemory, I demonstrate

how contemporary women writers propose different ways to embrace the wounds of 13 May and acknowledge their painful feelings as lived, not forcing them to be cured or reconciled.

## Writing a national story: language, gender and postmemory

The 13 May incident has been constantly addressed in Malaysian literature in different languages. Poems were written soon after the incident, including Usman Awang's 'Kambing Hitam (Black Sheep)' (1969), Said Zahari's 'Hidden Hands' (1969), Tan Jing Quee's 'May 13 – Poem from London' (1970), Ee Tiang Hong 'May 13 – A Memory' (1976) and 'Requiem' (1976). These are mostly first-hand accounts by an earlier generation of writers, who have personal memories of the riot. Writers like Shirley G. L. Lim, Hilary Tham and Anwar Ridhwan also relate what they eye-witnessed during the riots in their memoirs *Among the White Moon Faces* (1996), *Lane with No Name* (1997) and *Cerita Saya* (My Story) (2018), respectively. Short stories and novels like Shahnon Ahmad's 'Al' (1970), Ding Yun's 'Wei xiang (Town besieged)' (1982), Beth Yahp's 'In 1969' (1991), Lloyd Fernando's *Green Is the Colour* (1993) and Shirley G. L. Lim's *Joss and Gold* (2001) also deal with the incident. The focus of this essay is on the second-generation writers instead, whose knowledge of the incident was transferred by the older generation.

For writers who experienced 1969 themselves, the momentous day of 13 May is one that they could never forget. As for Malaysians born after 1969, they live in the haunting memory of 13 May despite not having experienced the incident themselves. They inherited an indirect knowledge of it passed down or transmitted to them by the previous generation. They are, using Marianne Hirsch's (2008, 107) term, the generation of 'postmemory', which is not identical to memory since it is already 'post', but it 'approximates memory in its affective force'. However, growing up with the overwhelming memories from the past generation, the generation of postmemory 'is to risk having one's own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation' (107). By crafting an imagined space in their literary works, writers of the post-1969 generation arguably seek different ways to 'remember' 13 May by struggling to throw off the historical shackles. Instead of a sorrowful lamentation of the past, they create their own narrative of 13 May to resist the displacement of their stories, while seeing ways to articulate a new identity.

In this article, I study three contemporary novels written by Malaysian women writers who come from different racial backgrounds, whose works inevitably focus on the racial community they belong to. These are Chinese Sinophone writer Li Zishu's (2010) *Gaobie de niandai* (The Era of Farewell), Indian Anglophone writer Preeta Samarasan's (2008) *Evening Is the Whole Day* and Malay Anglophone writer Hanna Alkaf's (2019) *The Weight of Our Sky*.

This is a modest attempt to encourage communication and comparison between Malaysian literature written in different languages, while seeking to 'delink' language and ethnicity. Here, I call into question what Yildiz (2011) calls the 'monolingual paradigm', which asserts that every ethnic group or every nation should possess one language as distinctively their own, such as the mother tongue. This paradigm has essentially linked the possession of language to 'an exclusive, clearly demarcated

ethnicity, culture, and nation' (Yildiz 2011, 2). Three Malaysian writers featured here do not write in the national language – Malay – while Preeta Samarasan and Hanna Alkaf do not write in the language that would usually be perceived as 'their' language – Tamil and Malay – but rather, they adopt English and publish their works in the US. At the same time, their use of English is not 'standard' either, as they have incorporated and naturalized untranslated Tamil, Malay and Chinese words into their prose without italicization, challenging the norms of the Western-oriented global Anglophone publishing industry.

The politics of language in the literature is a recurring issue in post-1969 Malaysia. The 1971 National Culture Policy affirmed the dominance of Malay culture and language, but the measures, however, have not been successful in encouraging a large number of non-Malay writers to switch to writing in the national language. Instead, since linguistic boundaries have been clearly drawn, works from different literary traditions have hitherto been circulated and studied independently of one another. This has created a significant gap in understanding Malaysian literature in a more encompassing approach, and productive dialogues between different linguistic spheres are urgently needed.[2] This article does not intend to tackle the complicated politics of language, but instead seeks to fill the gap by using gender as a communicative lens to convey the narration of a national story.

The narration of the nation is often framed in terms of gender. The national structure is imagined, formulated and organized according to masculine patterns of authority in which men are the core and sole members, while women are embodied as a passive, abstract metaphor of the bearers of tradition. Men are cast as the actors of national culture, who, in the roles of leaders, activists or writers, narrate the postcolonial nation, while women are 'more often than not cast as symbols or totems' (Boehmer 2009). That shows why nations are called 'motherlands', and the languages of people/nations are called 'mother tongues', but the nationalist actors are called the 'founding fathers', and in the post-1969 Malaysian case, the *bumiputra* (sons of the soil). Where are the *bumiputeri* (daughters of the soil) then?

For many, the mainstream 13 May narrative manifests the image of DAP party men versus UMNO men, respectively, representing the Chinese opposition and the Malay incumbent, marching on the streets of Kuala Lumpur (KL). These 'national fathers' dominate the articulation of nation-building and the racialized remembering of 13 May, and women are often excluded from the picture. In the literature, women in male writers' work are portrayed as domestic, familial and apolitical. Often, they are pictured and politicized as traumatized figures of vulnerability and helplessness. For example, in Lloyd Fernando's (2004) *Green Is the Colour*, the strong, determined

[2]Recent scholarly interest in the field of 'Sinophone studies' derived from US academia has put Sinophone Malaysian literature in the international spotlight. Translations of Sinophone Malaysian literature into English have been carried out by scholars and translators from the UK and US. For example, Ng Kim Chew's *Slow Boat to China and Other Stories* (2016) has been translated by Carlos Rojas, and Ho Sok Fong's *Lake Like a Mirror* (2019) by Natascha Bruce. A number of English-language studies in Sinophone Malaysian literature have been published, such as Alison M. Groppe's *Sinophone Malaysian Literature: Not Made in China* (2013), E. K. Tan's *Rethinking Chineseness: Translational Sinophone Identities in the Nanyang Literary World* (2013) and Brian Bernards' *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature* (2015). It is noteworthy that these studies generally frame Sinophone Malaysian literature in the concept of global Chinese literature, thus a focus on the Sinophone writers' ethno-cultural-linguistic (read: Chinese) identity is naturally foregrounded.

female protagonist Siti Sara escapes from a disgruntled marriage with her religious husband Omar. However, her self-discovery is always reliant on her male counterpart Yun Ming. He heroically saves her just when she is almost raped by the shameless politician Panglima whom she clumsily asked for help to save Yun Ming. *Green Is the Colour* casts the male character, Yun Ming, as a rational, faithful civil servant, the chief actor who mobilizes, while Sara, the *bumiputeri*, symbolizes the feminine mask in the national discourse that is in essence masculine. In other words, Sara's liberation is subjected to Yun Ming's actions, and often she becomes immobilized and vulnerable without him.

Notwithstanding, Malaysian women writers find their voice in writing about national stories such as 13 May. In fact, those who write about 13 May, especially at length in the form of a novel, are mostly women, including Shirley G. L. Lim, Preeta Samarasan, Hanna Alkaf and Li Zishu. Interestingly, Beth Yahp's ([1991] 2017) 'In 1969', Preeta Samarasan's (2008) *Evening Is the Whole Day* and Hanna Alkaf's (2019) *The Weight of Our Sky* coincidentally depict a tense situation during the 13 May riots when a woman goes into labour, while in Shirley G. L. Lim's (2001) *Joss and Gold*, a child is conceived at the height of the riot in KL. This, on the one hand, symbolizes 13 May as a watershed that gives birth to a new generation who are beset and forever embedded in the history of 1969. On the other hand, the writers question patriarchal accounts of exclusivist nationalism by focalizing the images of the mother who delivers the future generation in a difficult situation, while men are busy with rioting outside. As Chin and Kathrina (2018, 2) argued, 'third-world' feminist writings share striking similarities in their highly politicized language, and 'are often imbued with political purpose that is aimed at protest, dissent and insurrection against the hegemonic systems of power and domination'. This essay also seeks to discover a feminized territory, in which women writers explore different routes towards dismantling the entrenched male-dominated, racialized 13 May national narrative.

## Metafiction of 13 May: Li Zishu's *The Era of Farewell*

*The Era of Farewell* (henceforth *TEF*)[3] is a metafictional story set against the 13 May incident in Ipoh. The novel starts from page 513 instead of 1, implying that contemporary Malaysian history starts from 13 May. *TEF* lays out three layers of narrative. Each layer is seemingly independent but is tightly entangled with the others. While most novels are written in the third or first person, *TEF* is written in the second person, addressing the protagonist as 'you'. In the first layer, the protagonist ('you') reads a novel titled *The Era of Farewell* (henceforth *TEF-2*), a 'grand book' that 'you' obtained from the oldest library in town. It is a book that, according to 'your' mother, might be written by 'your' father whom 'you' have never known. 'You' are a prostitute's son who stays in the Mayflower Hotel with 'your' mother who passed away at the beginning of *TEF*. The novel that 'you' have been reading constructs a second layer of narrative – the story of Du Li An, a ticket seller at the movie theatre in town who is attacked by a madman on 13 May 1969, and is rescued by Gang Bo, the head of gangsters. Du later breaks up with her lover Ye Lian Sheng – a high school teacher who is an activist in

[3]All quotations from this novel are my translations.

an opposition party during the 1969 general elections – and agrees to be Gang Bo's second wife.

At the beginning of *TEF-2*, Du Li An is reading a novel titled *The Era of Farewell* (henceforth *TEF-3*) – the only novel that she has ever read in her life. *TEF-3*, the third layer of narrative, is most possibly written by a female writer called Shao Zi, one of the few works that she published using that pseudonym. As we later find out, Shao Zi might be the personification of a street vendor named Du Li An who died of heart failure at the age of thirty-five. The third narrative layer forms the second half of *TEF-2*, which 'you' are reading, but Shao Zi's stories are narrated by a literary critic Di Si Ren (literally, 'The Fourth'), who has been madly engaged in researching Shao Zi's works throughout his life. In other words, what 'you' have been reading in *TEF-2* is The Fourth's narration and critique of Shao Zi, but 'you' have never read Shao Zi's works. 'Your' knowledge about Shao Zi depends completely on The Fourth's judgement, and, as we know, 'you' have found him to be an unreliable narrator.

The complex plot forces us to read cautiously, in case we lose any information. Before going further, it might be useful to see how 'you', the protagonist, find *TEF-2* in the library:

> The book has no front page. You somehow do not believe your eyes, so you look over it again and again. But it really doesn't, not even a copyright page or a title page. It does not state the publisher, nor the writer's name. Even more strange is that the page starts at page 513; it seems that the first page of the book is, in fact, page 513 of the novel … . This is a book you find in the library. It is thick like a brick, being put at the corner of a bookshelf. The bookshelf is adjacent to the shelf of 'History/Memoirs', but its categorization indicates 'Others' … . (Li 2010, 523–526)[4]

*TEF-2* is an 'other' book, which is hard to categorize by a conventional library system. The illustration of the found book also shows the mystification of 13 May as an uncategorized episode that is placed in the most marginalized position, hoping not to be seen by people. The metafictional plot and the twisted stories in *TEF* tell how complicated a 13 May story can be, and how eagerly the author has tried to bid farewell to 13 May – as the title suggests.

In the prime of her life, Du Li An breaks up with poverty-stricken Ye Lian Sheng after Gang Bo rescues her on 13 May 1969. Ye Lian Sheng, who supports an opposition leftist group, is detained on the day of the riots. After his release, Du Li An is already engaged to Gang Bo; she will be his second wife. The 13 May incident is crucial for Du as she begins to abandon her old life associated with the leftist struggle, turning to the protection offered by physical force and economic capital. However, this materialistic turn and financial independence do not guarantee the liberation of a woman. Further into the multi-layered narrative, we find the more power and money Du gains after she marries Gang Bo, the more she feels alienated.

In the economic boom of post-1969 Malaysia, Gang Bo's household has gained wealth from the earnings of the Chinese secret society Jiande Tang. They possess the first colour television in the neighbourhood, and Du Li An and her stepdaughter Liu Lian often rent videotapes of popular Hong Kong drama series. Soon, Du, who used to be a diffident housewife, takes the opportunity to accumulate private savings to buy a restaurant and

[4]All translations in the article are mine unless otherwise stated.

then a terraced house, before Gang Bo is abjectly expelled from the gang and has to rely on her. It is then that she starts an affair with Liu Lian's lover Ye Wang Sheng, who happens to be her old lover Ye Lian Sheng's twin brother. Wang Sheng, unlike Lian Sheng, is a dissolute womanizer and money-grubber. Du pays him for their sexual relationship. The commodification of her sexual desire suggests that Du's subject formation relies on the workings of modern capitalism, which also helps Du achieve power fulfilment. Her quest for commodities arguably dramatizes the confinement of subjectivity in the post-1969 situation, which chases economic modernity parallel with the New Economic Policy (NEP) logic. As a non-*bumiputra* Chinese woman, Du manages to be self-sufficient, standing on her own two feet to accumulate wealth. However, Du is never content – one of the reasons being that she is infertile.

When Du Li An unexpectedly comes across her old lover Lian Sheng in 1989, the year that sees the collapse of the global Cold War structure, she has been secretly seeing his brother Wang Sheng for some time. Soon afterwards, Du takes the initiative to leave Wang Sheng. She gives him a bundle of money after their last sexual tryst in an old hotel in town, the Mayflower, which is also where 'you' have been living with 'your' mother. She finally recognizes that it is Lian Sheng that she cannot forget, not Wang Sheng. Du inevitably succumbs to feelings of alienation during that night. Her days with Lian Sheng are long gone. Her pursuit of material goals over the last twenty years has made it impossible for her to connect with her previous life.

However, this self-reflection is short. After bidding farewell to Lian Sheng in 1969, and then Wang Sheng in 1989, Du soon adopts one of Liu Lian's twins. Wang Sheng, the father, has long since run away with his company's public funds and does not know about Liu Lian's pregnancy. Significantly, Liu Lian's son becomes Du's next source of fulfilment in life. Du helps Liu Lian to find a place to give birth secretly and helps her to deal with her premarital pregnancy. In exchange, she gets Wang Sheng's son. Again, she uses money to fulfil her wish – to become a mother. While sympathizing with Liu Lian's plight, she keeps a safe distance from her, just as she does with her other female friends. This is Du's strategy for survival in a patriarchal society – she refuses to build solidarity with other women. In the narrative, she observes them from a distance in a manner akin to men gazing at women. In this case, Du's agency stems from the quest for both economic and sexual capital, which in turn reinforces the patriarchy and capitalism that she is subordinated by in the post-1969 situation. We could probably see that Li does not set out to write a feminist story, but one that challenges the dominant perception of female emancipation that is uncritical of material gain.

The *TEF* and *TEF-2* stories continue from generation to generation, and the plots seem to repeat themselves over and over. As we see from the perspective of a reader of *TEF*, 'you' also have a twin brother whose name is J. And, like Lian Sheng and Wang Sheng, 'you' both know about each other's existence but never live together like brothers. We can easily link the characters of the two narrative layers, for 'you' and J are Liu Lian and Wang Sheng's children, Du is 'your' adopted mother, and the *TEF-2* that 'you' have been reading is not written by 'your' father (as implied by 'your' mother), but by Shao Zi, the pen name of Du. That makes 'your' mother the writer and manipulator of all of these narratives.

As Du's adopted child, 'you' have been searching for the lost narrative of 'your' past. 'You' are the next generation who wanders around the old town Ipoh, peeps into the lust-

filled environs of the Mayflower Hotel and looks for the absent father to no avail. Towards the end of *TEF-2*, which 'you' have been reading, 'you' are impatient with the long-winded depiction of Du's dream, which spans over twenty pages. 'You' finally feel bored of the hollowness of this 'grand book', as the lives of the characters and the old town seem to mirror the empty, hollow dream – leading to nowhere. 'You' finally return the book to the library and feel a sense of loss about the lightness of your backpack. That lightness of history is unbearable, but 'you' still need to bid farewell to it in order to carry on with your new life – the fate of the post-1969 generation.

In the epilogue, that problem of 'lightness' raised by the narrator seems to also invite an inquiry into the role of literature in our time, especially the status of Sinophone literature in Malaysia. The narrator reveals that 'you' left out many parts of *TEF-2* as they happen only after 'you' died. A Chinese women writer, Marianna Du, wins a big literary award in Europe for her Anglophone novel *Adieu* (Farewell), which is about her family history in Malaysia. Press and government officials, including the Prime Minister, highly praise her as 'a national writer of international standard' thanks to Malaysia's multicultural education policy. Li's trenchant critique of the conundrum of the post-1969 National Cultural Policy is obvious. Despite the authority's exclusivist definition of the national language – Malay – it has naturally disarmed itself in the face of the global hegemony of the English language, as seen in the official praise of *Adieu*. Compared with the fate of *TEF*, a Chinese-language novel in Malaysia, *Adieu* would be celebrated as the 'national story', although it is 'discovered' externally by the globalized literary industry and not the national literary scene that the post-1969 government strives hard to establish.

## Class submerged: Preeta Samarasan's *Evening Is the Whole Day*

The 13 May racial riots are often referred to as the 'Sino-Malay riots', as it implies that Malays and the Chinese have been contesting power in the political and economic spheres, but not Indians. Preeta Samarasan's (2008) debut novel, *Evening Is the Whole Day*, challenges this dominant narrative by exploring the life of Indian Malaysians who also bore witness to and experienced 13 May and the post-1969 atrocities. Similar to Li's *TEF*, the novel is set in Ipoh, an out-of-the-scene site of the 13 May racial riots.

Tata, the first locally born child of the Rajasekharan family, bought the 'Big House' from its British owner Mr McDougall who left Malaya before independence. On 31 August 1957, Independence Day, Tata moves into the Big House. Symbolically, he put his index finger on the switch, and 'there was Light … ' (Samarasan 2008, 25). At this moment, he echoes the iconic national scene of Tunku Abdul Rahman shouting '*Merdeka*' (independence) on a colonial cricket ground in KL, declaring the birth of the country. Tata is hopeful about the birth of the new nation as he tells his son Raju (Appa) that: 'It's our country, not the white man's … . Just work hard and the world could belong to you here' (Samarasan 2008, 18). Compared to how Appa's family has turned out after the riot, however, Tata's hopes seem to be in vain. Here, the narrator seems to remind us that, despite the 'Light' that Tata sees in his new house, it is still a colonial product. The spectre of residual colonial ideology haunts the Big House from generation to generation, and it continues to strike the youngest member of the family – Aasha, who keeps seeing the ghost of Mr McDougall's illegitimate daughter in the

house. In addition, the narrator also hints that the racialized discourse of 13 May in effect colludes with colonialism. Residual colonialist thinking is manifested through the name-calling on 13 May, as the novel shows how the racial problem is articulated in the colonial language:

> [E]very man, Chinese, Indian, and Malay, forgot his contempt for the views of the departed British and savored the taste of his old master's stereotypes. *Coolie*, they hissed. *Village idiot fed on sambal petai. Slit-eyed pig eater*. They'd been given a vocabulary, and now, like all star pupils, they were putting it to use. (Samarasan 2008, 121; emphasis in original)

The novel's protagonist, Appa Rajasekharan, is a spirited lawyer of Indian descent from an upper-middle-class family. Appa is politically active during the 1969 election; he works for the opposition party as he sees it as a strategy to resist Malay supremacy and for Indians to be recognized as proper citizens. His legal education and training and his class background allow him to participate in the civil movements, unlike his lower-middle-class wife, Amma. Ironically, we learn later that she is more embroiled in the 13 May incident than anyone else.

Even though Amma is heavily pregnant with Suresh, their second child, she insists on moving to KL temporarily to take care of her sister Valli, who has just given birth. One can well imagine what happens next. Amma enters into labour at the height of the riots, but her taxi is besieged by the violence outside. The fact that Samarasan makes Amma the witness of the riots positions us to view the incident through the eyes of an Indian woman, who is helpless like Amma in the besieged car. Suresh, we learn, was born in the taxi driver's back room. That night of bloodshed saw 'dreams sent up in flames and ideals abandoned in dirty back alleys' (Samarasan 2008, 133) – a newborn post-1969 generation.

Appa, in turn, is overwhelmed emotionally by the riots despite the victory secured by his party. He gives up his political activities and applies for a job as a public prosecutor. Looking back at his former nationalist sentiments, he moans that his grandfather 'should've stayed far, far away from the bloody boat that brought [him] here … . In India I would've had a real chance' (Samarasan 2008, 135). Later, as a prosecutor, Appa wrongfully convicts an innocent working-class Malay man, Shamsuddin bin Yusof, for murdering a Chinese schoolgirl called Angela Lim. At the same time, in his house, his maid Chellam, a poor seventeen-year-old girl from the estate whose monthly salary is directly sent to her drunkard father, is wrongfully accused of causing the death of Appa's mother, Paati.

In order to further problematize the issue and to focus on the question of causality (what/who causes 13 May), the narrator tells the story of rumour and fact. During the 13 May riots, the government constantly warned the media and people not to spread rumours; several newspapers were shut down. 'Rumor in a red dress, Fact in coat and tails, and together they began a salacious tango in the streets' (Samarasan 2008, 120). Eloquently, the dance of rumour and fact in the city intermingles with the real events that are happening. The novel refuses a direct suggestion of cause and effect, but instead sees it as a combination of rumour and fact. In addition to the depiction of the riot scene, the omnipotent narrator tells the story of Chellam and the murder case that Appa prosecutes. The two strands of the story are embedded within the 13 May discourse, highlighting the parallels between them.

The novel starts and ends with Chellam's expulsion from the Big House and Appa's daughter Uma's departure to study in the US. Throughout the story, we know that Chellam is wrongfully accused. In fact, Paati is pushed by Uma, but the only witness, Aasha, lied to frame Chellam. Conversely, the working-class Shamsuddin is prosecuted by Appa as the murderer of Chinese schoolgirl Angela Lim. Yet, we know that 'the jury and the judge are on someone's secret payroll. They agreed on Shamsuddin's guilt before … the trial began' (Samarasan 2008, 169). Apparently, Shamsuddin is framed by someone from the upper class and his *bumiputra* status does not help.

The framing of Chellam and Shamsuddin works towards elaborating on the ramifications of rumour and fact, in which the power of rumours has invented another strand of reality that interferes with our understanding of what really happened. In other words, the degree of truth is covered up by the reproduction of rumours. The information or knowledge that we receive has already been appropriated by the dissemination of rumours. Here, the author singles Appa out as the bringer of injustice, for he has not only abandoned his socialist ideals after 1969 but also ironically executes his aim through violent means. At the moment of conviction, he abuses his power as a prosecutor to convict voiceless victims such as Chellam and Shamsuddin. In this regard, Samarasan reminds us that the oppressors and the oppressed are interchangeable, for Appa's racial minority status does not absolve him from his crime.

The novel not only showcases the political bankruptcy of Appa as a nationalist but also insinuates his moral bankruptcy. We see this in both his career and his personal life, where he has an affair with a Chinese woman and ends up having three children with her. What is more, he physically harassed Uma, his own sixteen-year-old daughter, one night in her room. Samarasan (2008) exposes his corruption since the 1969 election but does not blame it on the event itself. Instead, she points out that the social injustice that patriarchal nationalism imposes on society is replicated at the household level, often at the expense of exploitation in gender and class.

The novel further highlights the class struggle submerged in the name of racial politics. In this regard, Shamsuddin represents a vulnerable figure in socioeconomic terms, even though he is supposed to be a beneficiary of the pro-*bumiputra* regime. Samarasan (2008) reiterates her dissatisfaction over the social violence disguised in the racialized narrative, which has exploited real, marginalized groups. Clearly, throughout the novel, Chellam is the greatest victim for she is unable to speak for herself. She has no capital, as Appa has been giving her monthly salary to her drunkard father. She cannot proclaim her innocence over Paati's death. She is forced to enter the urban space, living with a middle-class Indian Malaysian family who despise her from the beginning. Ironically, the novel opens with the title 'The Ignominious Departure of Chellamservant Daughter-of-Muniandy' and ends with 'The Glorious Ascent of Uma the Oldest-Eldest'. In the first scene, Chellam, who has been dragging her shabby suitcase out of the Big House, is asked to leave the family after being accused of causing Paati's death, while Uma is packing her beautiful suitcase with piles of clothes and souvenirs for the next stage of her life at Columbia University in New York. At the end of the novel, Uma leaves for New York and Chellam returns to her estate house and commits suicide one year later. The juxtaposition of the fates of these two young female characters encapsulates the betrayed promise by the post-1969 regime to eradicate poverty and promote education. Chellam succumbs to social injustice at the intersections

of class, gender and race, while Uma packs her bag and leaves for 'better' education in the US.

In the post-1969 situation, ethnic minorities such as Indians and Chinese face many political and economic challenges. Yet, the existence of an estate girl like Chellam unsettles the prevalent narrative as she represents the multiply marginalized human being. The silencing of class struggles in post-1969 identity politics also shows how racial politics are always useful for the authority to disguise the real, urgent problems in Malaysia.

Nevertheless, it is Chellam who reveals the truth of Appa's affair to the family, and that is the last straw that pushes Chellam away and tears the family apart. Together Appa and his Chinese mistress bear three children, all of whom call him 'Pa'. What is even more intriguing is that Appa and his mistress speak Malay to each other, 'a language that displayed neither one's sharp wit to full effect' (Samarasan 2008, 280). The narrator reminds us that Appa used to hate Malay and is proud of his horrendous grasp of it. '"I've no use for their bloody *Bumiputera* tongue," he scoffs whenever he gets the chance' (267). Obviously, the passing of the National Language Act in 1967 has directly impacted English-educated professionals like Appa, who believes the colonial language is superior.

Appa has no choice but to speak Malay with his working-class mistress and children. Appa's affair with the Chinese lady showcases an uneasy picture of hybridity that is not the kind celebrated in some postcolonial studies. This hybridity is felt with the utmost distress. Its products are Appa's mixed-blood children, who will 'always be bastards', as the Chinese mistress puts it (Samarasan 2008, 281). The children will grow up speaking Malay – a language that they and their parents do not 'own', a language that does not manifest their cultural identity and will not guarantee them a *bumiputra* status but will push them beyond the margins of the country's dominant racialized narratives – as they do not belong to any well-defined racial categories. Here, we can see the author's effort to break through the logic of national language identity, for she redefines Malay as a grassroots language that minority groups can use to communicate with each other. Appa's mixed-blood children should have the right to access the national language and to possess it as their own, though not without barriers. As a whole, Samarasan reclaims Malay as the language of every Malaysian, not of one racial group; the national language should be a non-hierarchical one that also belongs to the lowest class of people.

Nonetheless, the author seems less hopeful about the possibility of social integration in Malaysia. Therefore, it is no surprise that at the end of the novel, Uma will finally leave to seek a 'better' future in the US, where, as Appa tells his mixed-blood children, 'you can go there broken, and tomorrow find yourself whole' (Samarasan 2008, 339). Though ironically written, this final sentence of the novel projects Samarasan's despair over the impenetrable racial politics in Malaysia. Uma's departure is an emotional breaking away from her past, her broken family and her guilt (towards Chellam), achieved through her adoption of diasporic subjectivity. However, as we can imagine, for a broken character like Uma and for other characters in the novel, it is impossible to bid farewell to trauma and wounds merely through a physical departure.

## Feeling pain: Hanna Alkaf's *The Weight of Our Sky*

Although Hanna Alkaf's (2019) debut novel, *The Weight of Our Sky*, is categorized as young adult (YA) fiction, it is also a historical fiction that carefully addresses the 13

May riots. It tells the story of sixteen-year-old Melati who lost contact with her mother during the riots, and the readers follow her searching journey in KL through familiar landscape: the Rex Cinema, Kampung Baru, Chin Woo Stadium, National Stadium. Nonetheless, the defamiliarized KL with a twenty-four-hour curfew inevitably stimulates feelings of fear and estrangement for young Melati.

While growing up in KL, Melati, a huge fan of the Beatles, accompanies her best friend Saffiyah to the Rex Cinema in Petaling Street on 13 May to watch Paul Newman's new film. A group of Chinese gangsters breaks in and singles the Malays out from the audience. Melati is saved by a Chinese lady, Auntie Bee, while Saffiyah, we learn later, is among the 196 official deaths. Melati manages to escape because she was not *tudung*-clad, and thus could not be identified as a Malay. As can be seen in the novel, during the conflict, people are killed according to their appearance.

Melati has obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD) and believes a djinn is living within her body. In order to please the djinn, she has developed a ritual of tapping three times, to prevent bad things from happening to her loved ones. Melati has suffered from OCD since her policeman father died in the 1967 Penang *hartal* riot – a protest in response to the devaluation of the Malayan dollar but which later became a riot with racial connotations and was seen as a precursor to 13 May. The author's careful, subtle portrayal of Melati's illness opens up a discussion of the emotional dimension of the 13 May narrative. Emotions, feelings and moods are always reduced to the private and feminine, which are discussed less in the grand historical narratives of 13 May.

After her father died, Melati vowed to be her mother's guardian. However, her inner djinn constantly blames her for losing contact with her mother, Nurse Salmah, during the riots. The more Melati feels anxious, the more threatened she feels by the djinn. In following Melati's journey in search of her mother throughout the novel, we are made to confront the djinn, too. The story is abruptly interrupted by the djinn's murmuring, and we have to wait patiently for Melati to perform her tedious ritual to appease it, before continuing the journey. Thus, the author urges us to face and experience Melati's daily physical and mental challenges.

It is not difficult to regard Melati's djinn as the spectre of lurking racial conflict created in the 1967 or 1969 riots. Mental illness and racial conflict are both taboo topics that are often repressed and stigmatized; both are things that the teenage Melati cannot grasp well but is compelled to confront with her mind and life. Nevertheless, if readers of this novel set out in search of further historical information about 13 May, they might overlook the author's careful handling of the portrayal of OCD suffering as an invitation to reflect on the process of construction of 'stigma' and the emotions of a stigmatized body.

Different labels of stigma are tagged on Melati's body: an OCD sufferer (a disabled body), a Malay (who carries the burden as the perpetrators of 13 May), a traitor of her own ethnic group (who left Saffiyah to die and travels with a Chinese companion), a modern Malay girl (who does not wear *tudung* and indulges in Western popular culture) and an unbelieving Muslim. These different forms of stigmatized identities are interlinked and not fixed. Through the emotional depiction of OCD, the author invites readers to enter these various stigmatized identities together. She temporarily removes the heterogeneities between these identities, calling upon us to reflect on the 'affective dynamic' of stigma and feelings that drive stigmatization (Love and Michalski 2015). How do we discover and experience the construction of stigmatization, then move

forward to feel individuals' feelings of anger, shame, mania, helplessness and other emotions when it comes to facing social and historical stigma?

By looking into the operation of stigmatization, the novel sets out to broaden or even challenge the dominant 13 May narrative centred on the blaming discourse evolving around victims and perpetrators. It allows complex and multifaceted stories to be released and acknowledged; it envisages various kinds of 'bad feelings' generated by stigmatization, such as Melati's despair, the anger of Saffiyah's father, and, more importantly, distrust and suspicion between ethnic groups. These are all real feelings of 13 May, which have to be captured and recognized as they arguably form the 'structures of feelings' of (post-)1969 Malaysia.

Marxist critic Raymond Williams (1977) paid close attention to the 'structures of feeling' as 'social experience which is still in process, often indeed not recognised as social', prompting us to acknowledge and analyse the emergent, or pre-emergent forms of feelings that are 'actively lived and felt' (128–135). Such feelings that are yet to be formalized or defined are often articulated in art and literature. In that sense, the novel's setting can be seen as a strategy to capture the feelings permeating the year 1969, through the eyes and experience of Melati. Those feelings, yet to be formalized in the post-1969 state-led solution to racial tensions, emerged as a structure of a particular social experience and relationship that defined the year 1969 – the feeling of (dis)trust.

While taking shelter at Auntie Bee's house during the riot, Melati befriends Vincent, Auntie Bee's son. Their relationship illustrates how (dis)trust became the most important element of the structures of feeling in (post-)1969. Vincent accompanies Melati in the search for her mother, during which process Melati finally pours out the secret of her deals with the djinn; she believes Vincent would think her mad, like many others. Later, she bursts into tears when Vincent holds her hand tightly and sings her The Beatles' song 'Here Comes the Sun' – the first time she has found solace with someone who understands her. When they finally make it to Melati's house in Kampung Baru, which had already been burned down, they meet a heavily pregnant Malay woman stranded inside a shophouse. Vincent goes out for help, while the woman whispers to Melati: 'Will he come back? But he's Chinese, can we really trust him?' Melati answers confidently: 'I do. I trust him completely'. But the djinn does not. Melati feels the djinn's 'fingers still prodding and poking away at my heart, sending a stab of fear through it with each touch' (Hanna 2019, 170).

During the 13 May riots, trusts were broken. Can we trust someone regardless of what race they are? The author chooses not to romanticize the feeling of transethnic trust between Melati and Vincent based on love and understanding. Instead, Vincent leaves Melati alone later, precisely because of distrust. Returning from Kampung Baru, they find Vincent's parents have been attacked by rioters and sent to Chin Woo Stadium for shelter. Just when the anxious Vincent is ready to rush to the stadium, the panicked Melati is appeasing the djinn by tapping her fingers, thus delaying their action. Furious, Vincent denounces Melati for preventing him from saving his parents, declaring: 'I wish I will never see you again'. In this episode, despite the trust gained during their journey together, Melati is immediately reduced to a 'Malay' – not so different from the rioters who hurt his parents. Melati then embarks on a lone journey searching for her mother without Vincent, frequently interrupted by the djinn in her mind. The relationship is arguably depicted as a careful, gendered critique that emphasizes Melati's self-discovery

and independent search for answers, as a transethnic romantic relationship and an (un)reliable man are no antidote.

Vincent is a flawed male protagonist who saves Melati but also hurts her badly. The fact that the author does not romanticize this relationship could be an honest attempt to confront the contradictory elements of the (post-)1969 structure of feeling – the co-existence of trust and distrust in the society. In addition, this structure is arguably *produced* by the social environment. To capture this structure is to acknowledge its ambiguity, to not simplify a reconciliation model that could be achieved easily. This is a strong reminder that the healing process for 13 May is not straightforward, that a better future of mutual trust would be realized after the truths are revealed is in fact an oversimplified imagination, if not a problematic one. Consequently, if we presuppose a positive, progressive future, any kind of 13 May narrative and record would inevitably lead to such a future. What we might overlook and constrain, at this juncture, is the bad feelings in the process, as they would be deemed worthy of concern only if they promise to 'get better', to get rid of the historical ghost.

In fact, Melati is not unwilling to be 'cured' and to get rid of the djinn. Her mother had been trying hard to cure Melati, including bringing her to the traditional religious healer. After each session, Melati tells herself to get better, but that effort soon fails. Her mother witnessed the pain whenever Melati fought hard with the illness. Melati said: 'the Djinn might inhabit my body, but he held us both captive' (Hanna 2019, 62). Obviously, the possession of the historical ghost is not confined to one's body, but also one's surroundings. To please her mother, Melati chose to tell a lie, saying that she felt better and healed. However, at the same moment, she groaned at heart: 'I vowed I would never let her know my darkness again' (Hanna 2019, 62). It is thus shown here that a stigmatized body felt bigger pressure, not when confronting her illness, but instead when constantly pressed to 'get better'.

In this sense, if we see the djinn/ghost as an evil that Melati must overcome no matter what, we might overlook the author's important appeal: come and experience together the real feelings of stigmatization; do not reduce them if they do little to help us achieve historical reconciliation. These real feelings embedded in the social memory of 13 May cannot be overlooked by a reconciliation episode. For the 13 May witnesses, survivors, victims' families, perpetrators and individuals, as well as the post-generation who have inherited the memories of 13 May: has an appropriate space been prepared to allow their mixed feelings of hurt, suffering, distress, melancholia, shame and mistrust to be articulated? Yet this does not mean that people can only pessimistically accept reality and are unable to envision the future. On the contrary, this urges people to reflect deeply on a future that would embrace these feelings and voices. Indeed, a future that Melati and other stigmatized bodies would want to live in is the one that acknowledges their painful feelings as lived, not forcing them to be cured. The post-generation of 13 May relate to the previous generation by feeling the painful living connection between them.

In the end, Melati is finally reunited with her mother after an arduous journey. Days after the riots, she stands in front of Saffiyah's grave, hearing the djinn saying it was 'your fault'. She has accepted that the djinn will stay in her body forever: 'I've come to accept that the Djinn and I are always going to be locked in a battle for control of my brain and my body, that he will never truly go away and leave me in peace' (Hanna 2019, 273). To truthfully acknowledge the everlasting ghost in one's body is also to take responsibility, as

the novel implies in the Malay proverb: *di mana bumi dipijak, di situ langit dijunjung* [where we plant our feet is where we must hold up the sky]. By not covering up the feelings of loss and distrust, the novel invites readers to step forward to understand the dark sky of Melati and many stigmatized bodies in the 13 May history.

## Concluding thoughts

This article brings together three Malaysian women novelists who deal extensively with the 13 May racial riot in their works. However, it is not the article's concern to see them as representatives from their own racial community so as to show how each community perceives the traumatic event differently. Instead, it makes a detouring approach by adopting a gender lens, through which the complexity of the memory of 13 May can be further unpacked from the entrenched racialized national narrative. Li Zishu challenges the racially bounded 13 May narrative with her critique of development materiality after 1969 in the portrayal of an alienated woman. Preeta Samarasan highlights the class struggle and language diversity submerged in racial politics in post-1969 Malaysia. Hanna Alkaf articulates the emotions and feelings of the traumatic memory, inviting readers to experience the riot scene together with her protagonist. All of them, born after 1969, feature in their novels common themes of parting from the previous generation, seeking to constitute their own 'postmemory' of the riot and articulating a new identity. As Li's character feels overwhelmed by the unbearable 'lightness' of history, Samarasan's character chooses to depart from the native country to become 'whole'; Hanna Alkaf, in a different tone, urges us to acknowledge the painful feelings of 13 May as lived, not forcing them to be cured in the optimism for reconciliation.

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