A PASSION FOR OTHER LOVERS: REWRITING THE ‘OTHER’ IN OOI YANG-MAY’S FICTIONALISATION OF MULTIETHNIC MALAYSIA

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The fear of and fascination with the idea of the ‘other’ lover inform English-language literature set in postcolonial Malaysia in multiply contradictory ways that pinpoint at once the diversity of colonial cultural legacies and the pitfalls, as well as the potentials, of what Benedict Anderson (1983) has so influentially termed “imagined communities”. Ooi Yang-May’s recent novels fascinatingly engage with the problematics of representing the ‘other’ and, by extension, ‘othered’ groups and communities in postcolonial fiction. Colonial traditions and postcolonial revisionism with all their attendant clichés are provocatively fused to engender an important ambivalence that forces a significant revaluation of racist, nationalist, and also traditional literary stereotypes. To the pairing of ethnically ‘other’ lovers, Ooi’s second novel, Mindgame (2000), moreover adds another level of ‘otherness’, as it were, as homosexuality is treated both as a central social concern in Southeast Asia that is regularly associated with ‘Westernisation’ (as a synonym of cultural corruption as well as of globalising modernisation, which is in itself a conflicted duality) and, at the same time, as an extended metaphor for alterity. The ways in which other, alternative, communities in Malaysia can be imagined are critically tested out with reference to the function the ‘other’ has in differently imagined communities. The vital question is not what such imaginaries put in, but what, and whom, they leave out. Ooi’s dystopian scenarios play out multiply othered embodiments of, in Bhabha’s words, the “death-in-life” of communities defining themselves through exclusion (1990:315).

By focusing on the ways in which Ooi’s novels juggle with stereotypes in order to expose them, this essay aims critically to re-examine the representation of passion for otherness and sameness in novels by Malaysian women writers more generally and, particularly, how these conflicting desires make the idea of the multiethnic community problematic. Orientalism has of course long been seen as capitalising centrally on discourses of effeminacy and working through
the female or feminised ‘other’ as representative of colonised spaces. Despite the indisputable usefulness of such readings, recent calls for a “post-postcolonial” criticism (O’Connor 2003) have, however, importantly picked up their unfortunately rapidly standardised patterns to question the viability of the typecasting such institutionalisation can inadvertently involve.

Recent Malaysian literature in English forms a particularly revealing conduit for the increasingly self-reflective reworking of both orientalist and occidentalist stereotypes. Occidentalism in postcolonial Malaysia, in fact, does not simply work along the lines of clichéd dualities, such as the foreigner versus the local, the coloniser versus the colonised, the neo-imperialist ‘Westerner’ or ‘Westernised’ versus the nationalist. Instead, it is further made problematic by the duality of the Malay and the non-Malay in a systematic marginalisation of the Chinese-Malaysian, the Indian-Malaysian, and in an additional complication, the aboriginal population, the Orang Asli.1 It is these intersecting discourses of otherness that are shown to clash fruitfully in Ooi’s fiction, generating the revaluation of typecasting state rhetoric that constitutes such a central theme in both her novels. Their heroines, we must not forget, are Chinese-Malaysians, a hyphenised identity that has further been influenced by their education abroad, in ‘the West’, where they have entered into close relationships with ‘Westerners’. As they return to the changed places of the past, they are confronted not only with a hostility to the ‘local’ girl’s ‘Western’ lover, but more importantly, with the dismantling of their ‘Asianness’ as they become newly categorised as ‘non-Malay’ and, at the same time, as a ‘Westernised’ local. This stereotyped story is, however, intriguingly transformed as their othered lovers come to embody what Bhabha has usefully termed “the unheimlich terror of the space or race of the Other” that constitutes the reverse side

1 Lo significantly situates the negotiations for Malaysia’s independence in a commercial bargain before she explores the workings of nationalism in 1980s theatre productions: in 1957 the United Malays National Organisation-led Alliance government guaranteed the protection of British investments in the country by setting up a Malay/non-Malay dichotomy that established the political hegemony of the Malays while protecting the economic interests of a predominantly Chinese bourgeoisie (2004: 9–10). Bumiputeraism then received its most significant thrust after the race-riots of 1969, leading to the establishment of the 1971 National Cultural Policy, which identified the principles of Malaysian culture as: (1) based on an indigenous Bumiputera culture, (2) able to incorporate “pertinent” elements from the other cultures and, (3) focused on Islam as an important element in the formation of the National Culture (2004:15). Bumiputera status was extended to include the Orang Asli, but not the Chinese or Indians.