

Journeying into the “dark country”: Exploring Wong Phui Nam’s and K.S. Maniam’s fictive worlds of redemption and despair

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The aim of this paper is to investigate the different worlds of the Malaysian writers Wong Phui Nam and K.S. Maniam, especially those found in their early writing in terms of space, place and even time. It is interesting to note that Wong’s metonymical connections with his landscape are not unlike K.S. Maniam’s borderland correlations to his spiritual jungle-scape found in some of his important prose narratives. While these two writers appear to have very little in common, especially in terms of their depictions of landscape and consciousness, it would not be too much of a stretch of the imagination to notice that Wong’s poetics of space are at times not too different from Maniam’s evocation of the early Malayan landscape. An important consideration here would be both writers’ attempts at depicting the new Malaya in their work, where both have had to face the task of reimagining the nation in terms of a postcolonial space and place. Wong evokes a terrifying landscape within which half-monsters, absent gods, superstitions and rumour dwell. It is amidst all this outer turmoil that the poet evokes a “persona-self”¹ who struggles to achieve some kind of psycho-social wholeness of being, though often he is to be seen wandering the bleak wilderness both from without and within. Moments of self-transformation and even release are rare; and so too the poet’s search for cultural meaning within his newly independent nation. However, within Maniam’s highly evocative jungle-scapes the potential for meaning and cultural transformation is always present, whether or not it appears to torment his many protagonists in the forms of cultural trope or, more specifically, the colonial myth of belonging from within different sectarian groups. His physical landscape evoked in his writing often

suggests a relationship with a more numinous world where the superstitions, folk traditions and the various religions of the land come together to provide as much mystique as potential for redemption from the rough, geographical terrain of the tropical forest.

Where the early Malayan writer lacked an imaginative language of transformation and transcendence to view the potential in making one's homeland one's home, Malaysia's most prolific fiction writer K.S. Maniam has continually dwelt on the possibility of incorporating the consciousness of a nation into the landscape and, in so doing, has tried to transcend the many ethnic and sectarian boundaries of time and space that characterised his much-divided country of the 1970s and 1980s. He does this so memorably in his award-winning story "Haunting the Tiger" and the just as memorable "The Pelanduk" (The Deer), although it must be said that such a nation-building consciousness was already seen in his first novel *The Return* (1981) as well as some early short stories. In these stories his fictional characters often display a knowledge for the uncanny, employing it to fuse their mythical, often supernatural, imaginations with their immediate landscape so as to be able to merge with its pre-modern Malay identity. Maniam does this so that it enables his Indian migrant characters (products of the British diaspora) to be at peace and one both physically and spiritually with the new land of Malaya or Malaysia. For Maniam, the quest for what Coetzee would call an "authentic language" within one's own landscape (7) was often replaced by the immediate need to write a new postcolonial nation into being, thus creating for the country a much-needed new perspective of the landscape that could include a non-Malay perspective of things. To put that in another way, Maniam allows his readers the possibility of moderating the state-sponsored myths of nationhood and to delve into less hegemonic visions of nation and nationhood.

In his most important nation-building fiction, Maniam rarely employs the mode of realism. The narrative of “Haunting the Tiger”, for example, resides between the borders of a fitful dream and wakefulness (1996: 42). The story has surreal dimensions which suggest to the reader that the story is also a man’s journey of the soul and the final journey into the “dark country” (1996: 41) to shoot the tiger. Such a journey, for Maniam, represents a recent migrant’s journey which confronts older intimations with the land which speak of possessing it by way of pre-Islamic animism and Malay superstition, which he calls a “knowledge that resides within” (1996: 43). The object of the hunt — the tiger — then reverts to becoming a symbol of Malaya, of an earlier land, which can only be cornered and seized by way of the imagination through one’s senses. Zulkifli, the protagonist’s Malay friend, says emphatically that, “Nobody can possess it” (43), although Maniam hints earlier in the story that the experience of living within the land should satisfy the seeker and that such a pursuit is essentially one framed within the corners of the mind, fraught with unseen danger but with an enticing reward at the end of the journey: “On the mindscape that lay now between life and death, confused and murky, there rose a fresh, green land” (38).

The protagonist’s first strategy in the story is to possess the dark and fearful animal that inhabits the land (38, 42) and then his thoughts take on a philosophical dimension upon talking with his neighbour Zulkifli, who hints that to gain acceptance with the land, and hence peace of mind to live within it, comes not with just wanting to acquire or dominate the land physically but with the passage of time, of having dwelled in it, and within it:

“You have found something you want to hunt,” Zulkifli says at last.

“You know?”

“My forefathers had the same look in their eyes,” Zulkifli says.

“My father told me.”

“But you?” Muthu says.

“Deep inside. No need to show it so loudly to the world,” Zulkifli says smiling. “And you’ve lost the way.”

“You know so much,” Muthu says.

“Centuries of living here,” Zulkifli says. “We’ll go together one day.”

(42)

Maniam also works into his narrative a new twist to postcolonial notions of belonging and the search for home. Casting aside the earlier ideas of possessing the land through one’s mind, Muthu, with the help of Zulkifli again, is told that to arrive truly in and understand the new country one has to discard all earlier preconceived notions of the land. Zulkifli calls these notions “a purpose” and “a way of thinking” which might help the mind, in Muthu’s case, to seize the purpose for initially wanting to assimilate culturally with the land but which now must be discarded as it hinders the final process of gaining to a spiritual relationship with the land:

They enter into the deeper thickness of the jungle but though they feel the fearful eyes upon them, they see nothing. Zulkifli halts and stands there thinking. As Muthu watches him, Zulkifli seems to blend into the landscape. “I’m the chameleon!” Muthu protests within himself. He is more than determined now to wrest the sight of the tiger out of the man. “I know what’s wrong,” Zulkifli says. “There’s something foreign to the tigers nose. He won’t show himself until the smells are gone.”

Zulkifli fixes Muthu with a surveying stare. Muthu becomes nervous.

“What smells?” he says.

“Mind and body smells,” Zulkifli says.

Muthu is offended and turns away from him.

“Not in the way you can’t go near a person,” Zulkifli says confronting Muthu. “The clothes you wear, the thoughts you think. Where do they come from?”

“They’re just clothes and ideas,” Muthu says.

“They must fit into the place where the tiger lives.”

“Why must they fit in?” Muthu says. “I only want to break out from my father’s hold on me.”

“So you brought a purpose with you? Zulkifli says. “And a way of thinking. How can you get into the tiger’s stripes and spirit?”

“I can’t make the leap,” Muthu says, thinking of the chameleon.

“I didn’t make that leap,” the old Muthu muttered as he sat up in bed.

“Zul — that’s what I called him later — tried to make me. He wanted me to think myself like the tiger, to feel myself like one. I refused. Still Zul took me through the tiger’s abode, which was everywhere.” (45)

Because the young Muthu did not make that “leap” of the imagination, the older Muthu in the short story is left at the close still trying to gain metonymical passage into the new country, perhaps a leap into the land of trance-like illusion, something which seemed just as enticing and real at that moment. But to his wife he is seen as just trying to die so as to stop himself from having a recurring nightmare of not being one with the land, still muttering frightful and incoherent thoughts as he did at the outset of the story. It is these metonymical connections with the new landscape which depend so much on the workings of the characters’ subconscious that prove crucial to our understanding of Maniam’s fiction. While Wong’s poetry deals with an enlarged and tortured consciousness of his persona-self’s workings of the mind to make sense of external reality, Maniam’s protagonists are frequently seen making sense of their immediate world by way of inference and association, often within their subconscious and even unconscious. In some ways, then, Maniam’s fiction has also modernistic tendencies as Wong’s in so far as his probings of his characters’ consciousnesses and their way of wanting to understand their external worlds by way of inference and contiguity.

Maniam's characters are often caught up between the metaphysical worlds of communal identity and national consciousness, between the self and belonging to the new country. Tang Soo Ping would call these spatial and cultural negotiations of Maniam as being the nature of living within a "borderland state" of crossings and identity (57) whereas Homi Bhabha would more generally refer to them as having to exist within the "ambivalent margin of the nation space" (4). Citing Bhabha, Bernard Wilson adds that some of Maniam's central characters also exist in the "ambivalent margin of individual space" (393). In "Haunting the Tiger", the protagonist's inability to actually die, as a result of not being able to accept Zulkifli's notions of discovering a spiritual acceptance in the new land, suggests the ambivalence of the writer's approach to postcolonial aspirations of belonging. On one level the story can be read as a brave exploration of the possibilities of integrating the migrant self into the nation-state consciousness by way of renegotiating a marginalised identity around the many facets of self and nation. However, we must remember that we are dealing with Muthu's awakened consciousness and the delusions of his mind. A sharp irony greets us towards the close of the story: while Maniam hints that a migrant's sense of rootedness can be achieved through the imagination alone, he also points out through Muthu's experiential awareness, the dense metaphorical jungle. It is what is within his mind that will provide the most resistance to achieving any kind of liberation from the anguish of deracination. After all Muthu is continuously unable to die because he had rejected Zulkifli's suggestion that Muthu should "think... like a tiger", make that leap in his mind to "get into the tiger's stripes and spirit", and hence become part of the new land. Perhaps ironically the destructive desire of wanting "to possess the tiger by surprising it" — killing it — might have ensured a more peaceful dying for Muthu; such is the ambivalence of Maniam's mythopoeic and allegorical strategies (45).

I have shown that the desire to understand one's new world, or such knowledge about one's place in it, anticipates violence in the plot or destructive tendencies within Maniam's characters, and vice-versa. It is when they are able to avoid such destructive desire or conflict that a semblance of peace is to be felt in their lives and the possibility of finally *arriving* in the new country is to be gained. Thus, by rejecting Zulkifli's philosophical approach to assimilating oneself with the new land, Muthu rejects any kind of arriving in the new world because he refuses to let his individual consciousness be incorporated into the state-sponsored, Malay national psyche². It is not his stubbornness that gets in the way, but what he feels is his antipathy towards the dominant culture privileging or essentialising itself over a minority one. "Haunting the Tiger" then should be read as the inability of the different ethnic groups in Malaysia to find any sort of compromise in terms of achieving lasting, cultural heterogeneity (and hybridity). Maniam himself has said that he aspires to a kind of nationhood where all the different ethnic groups co-exist peacefully and equitably, saying that he has "always been concerned with getting all cultures to join together rather than advocating the supremacy of one culture" (quoted in Wilson: 396).

We have seen his protagonist Muthu going in search of the supernatural presence of the tiger, a potent symbol of both transformation for the local inhabitants as well as cultural understanding of the new nation-state of Malaysia. Muthu's jungle also invokes the earlier spiritual beliefs of the land wherein the older religions of Southeast Asia seem to reside. In the story "Haunting the Tiger", for example, the journey into the heart of this new abstracted land is to go in search of something "satisfying", though the path "screamed with lives and shook with dangers" (1996: 38) and later Muthu's and Zulkifli's faces "are covered with an intensity as visible as the serenity of an ancient Buddha statue" (1996: 42). We are told that it is from the

“loss of self” of the protagonist and his companion that he discovers a new, emerging consciousness (1996: 37). This new mindscape induces the protagonist to view the physical world before his eyes, in both the short story “Haunting the Tiger” as well the novel *In a Far Country*, as some kind of new land or a new Malaya, a symbolically new homeland on the rise. Even when his characters are unable to conceive of such a land, Maniam imbues both the landscape and his characters with a sense of a world awaiting discovery, often through their extravagant senses as well as over-wrought superstitious natures:

How does one describe the land one lived in but never saw? It was more tangible than the concrete one we flitted through every day. Darkness gave its true dimensions. Then it vibrated within our hearts. If we saw, perhaps through some quirk of optics, a flame beside the drain, then it was a dead pregnant woman’s soul come to haunt the real world; if we heard rumours, echoed voices among the hills, they were the chanting and tinkling of banana-tree spirits dancing in the courtyard of the night. The quick rush of the communal bath shed signified some unappeased soul’s feverish bathing. We were hemmed into our rooms, houses and into our minds. But for all these there were a lot of colours in our invisible world. The gigantic figures that filled our imaginations were turned out in bright togas, arms heavily braceleted, necks studded with gold and heads aureoled by intricate crowns. Fair, gentle men and women (gods and goddesses, I suppose) fought off the more scheming and brutal characters in battles that clashed over our sleeping heads. The tension between good and evil shimmered therefore like an inevitable consciousness within our heads. (*In a Far Country*,14)

These are some of the borderland connections which help carry their inspired longings for a new homeland as well as the imaginative insight of their minds. With Maniam’s fictional characters

there usually tends to be a good dose of hope in such longings, so long as they are able to resolve the conflict between their egos and capacity for violence.

My reading of Wong's sequence *How the Hills Are Distant* demonstrates that to understand the notion of a homeland he has had to create for himself notions (in this case a landscape built on tropes of the imagination) of a discursive space with which to rediscover and redefine loosely-held notions of fluctuating borders and transcending commonly-held national boundaries. His spatial identification of such a "borderland" nation of colonial and postcolonial Malaya fluctuates somewhere between a concrete localisation of space and an imaginative dislocation from it, thus making his themes of place and displacement all the more poignant, though difficult. We only have to compare, for example, the "flame beside the drain" which Maniam's characters witness and fantasize about in the passage above with Wong's catalytic moonlight which stirs more than just the senses in Part VI ("Song") of the sequence "Candles for a Local Osiris":

I hesitate at the gate, the moonlight
tindery, as the garden of my certainties
would crumble at a touch
and the land return to silence huge as thunder.
I hesitate at the gate, bearing your death,
the season's wound, as nightjars
lodged in the trees make
peculiar comfort of their round burden of dumbness;
afraid to enter, though the flesh
is loud elsewhere with its dying,
as I would not meet in my narrow bed,
the savagery of the heart
howling in a dream of quiet towns,
of fallen bridges where the water

passes in coils of its own dark will. (1993: 56)

Where hope resides in Maniam's dreamt up landscapes and mindscapes, which are often filled with energy and colour, Wong's poetic landscapes are eerily silent (or carrying a "burden of dumbness" as in the poem above), thus paving the way for terror to "howl" from within the taut hearts of Wong's personae. While Maniam's characters spontaneously make sensuous connections and associations from within and without their physical topography, Wong's persona-selves seem only capable of sensing a silence which in turn induces absent spaces in their eyes and minds. Their resulting vision is that which paradoxically intones that haunting alterity of the landscape. Another problem which Maniam's fictional characters do not seem to possess is the lack of the facility for language, whereas Wong himself has acknowledged that his verse deals with the problem of a received tongue being unable to reconnect with the reality of his outer world. Language for him today, he says in his short introduction to the volume *Against the Wilderness*, lacks immediacy and has "to be from made-up speech, which catches echoes from places and times when the word was still interfused with the world as presence, and when it still had power to invoke form and spirit that could free the self from the horror of blind subsistence on inchoate dream, instinct and desire" (2000: 161).

While it would be simpler to regard such symbolic connections with the notions of postcolonial space and place as simply "metaphorical", Bill Ashcroft, in his article, "Is that the Congo? Language as Metonymy in the Post-Colonial Context", emphasises the fact that in the "western tradition" metaphor privileges the revelation of "unexpected truth" (3). He compares this point to Homi Bhabha's distinction between metaphor and metonymy, which prefers to regard the first device as the importing of "universalism into the post-colonial text" whereas the second allows for the possibility of reading "tropes of the text as metonymy, which symptomises

the text, reading through its features the forces which traverse it” (3). What this has to do with Wong’s poetic strategy is that he invokes, through his poems, a poetic space which is not unlike an absent cultural space which his verse continually seeks to fill. Oddly enough, it is when the contiguity of these spaces is left unfilled that the power of his theme of the cultural dislocation of space and place is most powerfully felt. Moreover, the metaphorical ability of his words gives rise to his inability to articulate and even comprehend the haunting alterity of his local landscape. The colonial language which the poet employs then has only the effect of having a synecdochic association which negotiates distance better than if it tries to identify with the truths of his situation or the cultural space he tries to evoke (Ashcroft 6). Paradoxically, language has only the ability to reiterate the feelings of loss arising from, and absence within, the psychological terrain of the land and environment.

What we are left then in Wong’s poetry is a critical space with permeable borders and a fragmented self, encapsulated within a stark landscape that borders on a nightmarish vision of an untamed soul, one that breeds chaos. And since the landscape evoked is just a place of the strange emanation of a god’s “absence”, it really is without a real gesture of conclusion. In Part V of the sequence “Candles for a Local Osiris”, even the cityscape of Kuala Lumpur becomes just another emanation of such a god, an emanation from some materialist’s hell:

This city which whiten before mid-morning
into the furnace of the overhanging sun
is place of your absence. All is adrift:
mazes of short streets; sudden intersections;
where the traffic, stalled, is laid out in miles
of fuming junk; lopped trees; steam-hammers blasting in
more certainties for the spreading landscape

of towers, bridges, car parks, overpasses... Dust
swirls in the clear, hard fire of the small noon sun.

(1993: 55)

The landscape is in some ways a relocating of James Frazer's Fisher King story which Eliot employed so memorably in his *Waste Land*. However, Wong's poetic strategy suggests that his is an ambivalent fertility, paving the way for the spawning of the transmogrified body of a local Osiris. I would like to suggest also that it turns up and transforms itself instead in different, disrupted historical/literary spaces as in the poet's use of biblical and antiquated Greek and Roman allusions, in a little bit of colonial and pre-colonial Malayan history gleaned from the depiction of the local landscape and in the condition of "exile" in "Li Po's words" (1993: 30), a phrase from Part XIX of *How the Hills Are Distant* which obviously foreshadows much of his later translations of classical Chinese poetry. At other times, it is not some deific transmogrification but a mythic beast-like creature that roams the streets and its felt power suggests that it is often within us all in much of the sequence.

To disentangle oneself from such a dour landscape is, for me, the outcome of meaning for Wong Phui Nam; his discovery of a landscape full of strange beasts and creatures is really an inverted search for unity once having realised the futility of that search and the creation of a disingenuous and disalienating postcolonial space of nation. With no originary space to ponder, or go back to, Wong's mythic strategy in *How the Hills are Distant* can either be seen as ending in some kind of Modernist futility or the poet is then free to defer such meaning, or preclude closure, and begin a reading that calls for a reconstruction of identity rather than just homing in on the solace of loss, or what Homi Bhabha implies, "to be unhomed is not to be homeless" (quoted in Banerjee: 59). Wong finds a depth of meaning and history in his employment of a

mythic landscape in his quest for “disalienation” but the outcome is usually the creation of even more reified space, of even more layers of trope and even the beginnings of cultural paradigm, but without any means of unity or resolution. The reader, as I have stated, is left, on the one hand, with a powerful, though unassuaged, sense of historical and cultural emptiness, and, on the other, a disruption of those feelings and layers of incongruous poetic space. Extricating oneself from these proliferative layers, spaces, these depths of meaning and struggle, is one of the reasons why Wong’s early poetry is usually acknowledged for its enunciative and heartfelt power of loss.

Thus, what the fiction of K.S. Maniam and the early poetry of Wong Phui Nam have in common is that their major work both have had to deal with the coming to terms with the idea of a new homeland, a new Malaya, which challenges our imaginations in different ways. Being faced with a crossroad, or intersection of sorts, all of Maniam’s important narratives have avoided the tendency to simply incorporate the state-sponsored version of the understanding of the land without first discovering the different imaginative ways the landscape yields ideas to each and every one of its denizens. Wong, on the other hand, forges by way of powerful metaphorical language a totally different understanding of a migrant’s understanding of the land. His journey must begin with a primeval approach to landscape, wherein the psyche (or spirit) must first make bleak connections and ascertain for itself the possibility of finding a kind of religious redemption within it. Yet no one is sure if such a transcendent state is possible at all since even local gods are only able to realise a grotesque fertility, engendering themselves emasculated.

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Notes

1. A term which I liberally use to describe Wong's various personae in his early sequence of poems, *How the Hills Are Distant*. The "persona-self" often exhibits various stages of psychic growth and is often lost within a bewildering and treacherous landscape trying to discover a wholeness of being. He or she takes on various forms of being, ranging from the human to spirit-like forms, and even sometimes is just a "raw soul" looking for spiritual direction. Also, for an extensive discussion, please refer to my article, "[A] country where one cannot wish to be": Place and the Mythic Imagination in Wong Phui Nam's *How the Hills Are Distant*' (Jeyam 75-94).
2. We must remember that the national emblem of the independent Malaya, and later Malaysia, is the emblem of two tigers.