

Two Countries, One System: Fiction in Malaysia and Singapore

Reviewed by Salil Tripathi



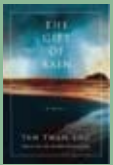
**Evening is the
Whole Day: A Novel**
By Preeta Samarasan

Houghton Mifflin,
352 pages, US\$24.00



**The Harmony
Silk Factory**
By Tash Aw

Fourth Estate,
362 pages, US\$15.00



**The Gift of
Rain: A Novel**
By Tan Twan Eng

Myrmidion,
447 pages, US\$23.95



**Breaking the Tongue:
A Novel**

By Vyvyane Loh
Norton,
489 pages, US\$14.95

DURING THE RUN-UP to Hong Kong's hand-over to China, officials in Beijing sought to allay concerns about the Communist Party's designs on Hong Kong by using Deng Xiaoping's phrase, "one country, two systems," to describe the central government's relationship to Hong Kong. Reflecting on the competition for foreign investment between Singapore and Malaysia in the mid-1990s, I asked a leading Singaporean bureaucrat what he thought of the cross-Straits rivalry. The official told me: "If you want to understand Singapore and Malaysia, you have to reverse what China says. Singapore and Malaysia are two countries, one system."

At one level, that was a seductive argument. There are many outward similarities — colonial heritage, languages, history, common cuisine, the unique blend of Malay society and the Peranakan culture of the Straits Chinese with a British colonialism-inspired judicial system that has permitted both countries to practice a brand of soft authoritarianism.

The hierarchies are clearly marked too, and everybody knows where he or she belongs. A Singaporean patriotic song candidly goes: "Every creed and every race, has its role and has its place." In Malaysia, the noted satirist and actress, Jo Kukathas, had this memorable quip in one of her plays: "In Malaysia, the Chinese do the work, the Malays get the credit, the Indian takes the blame." In Singapore, it would be hard to find anyone — Chinese, Malay, or Indian — making such

a remark in public. Both countries have used their notorious colonial-era laws to jail dissidents. And yet, Malaysia somehow appears freer; it is able to negotiate with its past more honestly, and the space for debate is wider than in Singapore.

Try as it may, Singapore cannot shed the republic's straight-laced image — the plethora of fines it imposes on people who deviate from the accepted code make even spontaneity seem contrived. And there is the casual nature of Malaysia, visible the moment you cross the causeway connecting Singapore and Johore, where the order that Singapore imposes on its people disintegrates. These are, indeed, two countries, with different systems.

Singapore's restrictions have created an army of well-groomed, appropriately attired and obedient citizens who know what's good — and not — for them, and dutifully behave as the state suggests. While Malaysia is anything but a full-fledged democracy, its relative openness permits a spectrum of debate, which allows for a certain flowering of creativity.

The recent spate of successes Malaysian novelists have enjoyed internationally can at least partly be ascribed to the differing political systems. In *Evening is the Whole Day*, Malaysia-born, US-educated Preeta Samarasan, who now lives in France, explores complex family relationships as well as the place of the Indian community in a rapidly transforming Malaysian society. In *The Harmony Silk Factory*, Taipei-born, UK-based Tash Aw digs deep into the past of a Chinese businessman, unraveling the mysteries surrounding his rise. And in *The Gift of Rain*, Penang-born, Cape Town-based Tan Twan Eng explores the moral choices and compromises a half-Chinese businessman must make to survive during the years of the Japanese Occupation.

Interestingly, none of the three is ethnically Malay, and all live outside Malaysia. This is not to suggest that Malay writers have shunned difficult issues:

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in the late 1980s, Rehman Rashid raised important questions about identity in his non-fiction narrative, *A Malaysian Journey*; opposition politician and former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim challenged political orthodoxy in his book, *The Asian Renaissance*; and blogger Raja Petra Kamaruddin is facing the consequences of bravery, and the prospect of a long jail sentence, for expressing his views against the state on the Internet.

And yet, Samarasan, Aw and Tan all matter because they are from ethnic minorities and provide a different perspective on a Malaysia where the government's preferential policies benefit the majority, not minorities. More importantly, they provide a local voice looking at the country and its past.

Until recently, fiction about Malaysia or Singapore looked at these two places from an outsider's perspective, where the natives did quaint things — the Chinese at a tin mine, the Malay at his rice paddy, and the Indian on a rubber plantation. In W. Somerset Maugham's gin and tonic-soaked, frangipani-flavored short stories we learn a lot about how those who managed the plantations lived — the natives were an afterthought. In Paul Theroux's *Saint Jack*, we meet a character who is more of an outsider, figuring out innovative ways of making a buck, in some ways presciently imagining the trajectory Singapore would take in its desire to root out vice and scrub clean Bugis Street, the once-notorious haunt of prostitutes and transvestites. But the focus of these works is the expatriate community. In *The Singapore Grip*, J.G. Farrell takes us close to the moral abyss of colonials who were powerless and about to flee the island as the Japanese army came marching relentlessly through the Malayan jungle. And in Anthony Burgess's Malayan Trilogy (*Time for a Tiger*, *Enemy in the Blanket*, and *Beds in the East*), we see the slowly loosening grip of an old order, and the lament of a colonial teacher who understands the changes occurring, but feels powerless, due to his own inadequacies, to do anything about them.

This corner of the empire, it seemed, had not written back, until now — despite the fact that the contemporary history of Malaysia and Singapore is fascinating: in the last two decades alone, Malaysia has seen the world's tallest buildings rise on a former race-course; a former deputy prime minis-

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ter hounded out of office, assaulted in jail, and now attempting to reclaim lost glory; the mysterious death of a Mongolian woman allegedly having an affair with a senior politician; and a colorful former prime minister who fancied himself standing firm against Jewish financial capital. Singapore, too, has had its excitement: a major British bank collapsed at the hands of a rogue trader based in the city-state; an American teenager was flogged for vandalizing a judge's car; and a Singaporean teenager shocked many by performing in a documentary film in which she was said to have broken the record for having sexual intercourse with multiple men in a given period. But you won't find novels dealing with gritty, contemporary themes so easily in either Singapore or Malaysia.

Malaysian authors have turned to the past, and with good reason: there is much that remains to be learned from it. Until recently, history seemed to have been a taboo, but not anymore. Aw agrees there has been squeamishness about dealing with the past, and "without a frank analysis of where you're from, you can never talk about where you are, or where you're going. Singaporeans and Malaysians are both guilty of this — Singaporeans more so than Malaysians. It's as if we only want to talk about our present, in which we are rich, comfortable and bourgeois. It's safe; the past is somewhat murkier. The problem with this approach is that it encourages an antiseptic view even of the present, which is of course full of problems, but these problems never get talked about because we haven't learnt how to write about them in an intelligent, sensitive, critical way."

But the past is no longer a foreign country. This generation of Malaysian novelists is developing a literary culture in which an entire range of issues — particularly race and identity — can be explored in a historical context before taking on the present and the future. Aw adds: "The historical setting of the relevant novels does not make them any less relevant to modern readers."

Aw was born in Taiwan and grew up in Kuala Lumpur. He moved to England in his teens, and studied law at the universities of Cambridge and Warwick. After working as a lawyer in London for four years, he studied creative writing at the

University of East Anglia, the alma mater of Ian McEwan and Kazuo Ishiguro. In *The Harmony Silk Factory* (which won the 2005 Whitbread First Novel Award, the Commonwealth Writers Prize for South East Asia and the South Pacific Region as the best first book, and was on the long list of the Man Booker Prize that year), Aw adopts a Kurosawa-like technique in presenting the story of Johnny Lim from three different perspectives — his son's, his wife's, and that of a friend.

The novel is set in the 1940s, and Lim is the son of poor Chinese immigrants who goes on to become a textile tycoon — as well as a smuggler, a political activist, and a murderer. His son Jasper, the narrator of the first part of the novel, is clearly not impressed by dad, calling him a "liar, a cheat, a traitor and a skirt-chaser," and he wants to get to the bottom of the true story of "the Infamous Chinaman." Jasper is suitably unassuming when he says: "We all know the retelling of history can never be perfect, especially when the piecing together of the story has been done by a person with as modest an intellect as myself."

But the Johnny that emerges is complex. Smart but also sensitive, a victim of British managers who routinely humiliate him, he stabs his manager, flees, and through ingenuity, ends up taking over the Tiger Brand Trading Co. Jasper is convinced that Johnny is a possible collaborator with the Japanese who uses his business as a front to cover his illegal activities. The second part of the narrative takes us on Johnny's honeymoon to the Seven Maiden Islands with his wife, Snow Soong, who is not only exceptionally beautiful but is also the daughter of the wealthiest man in the Kinta Valley near Ipoh. Snow and Johnny have an unusual honeymoon, because they don't travel alone. Mamoru Kunichika, a Japanese academic, an English mine-owner, Frederick Honey, and Honey's compatriot, the sexually ambiguous Peter Wormwood, accompany them. Snow does not love Johnny; theirs is a marriage of convenience, and she becomes infatuated with the Japanese academic. In the third part of the novel, Wormwood, now in a retirement home in England, recalls his encounters on that trip, and Johnny emerges in a sympathetic light. It is impossible fully to know

someone, Aw implies, because appearances deceive. Jasper wants to convince us that his father is a bad man; Snow finds him weak and simplistic; Wormwood finds him endearing, and Kunichika emerges as a Japanese spy.

Silk is the fabric that weaves the three narratives together: Snow describes music as the notes that “seemed to weave in and out of each other, no longer discernible, like a length of shot silk held up close to your eyes.” Later, Wormwood will call shifting memories “sensations that the years have layered on top of the initial emptiness, like sheet after sheet of silk covering a bare table.”

We encounter these three competing nationalities — British, Japanese, and Chinese — one more time in Tan Twan Eng’s elegant novel, *The Gift of Rain*, long-listed for the Man Booker Prize in 2007. Here, too, there is a Japanese man, reclusive this time, who turns out to be a spy for the Imperial Army in the years leading up to the Japanese invasion of Asia in December 1941.

Tan’s novel begins with a Japanese woman, Michiko Murakami, coming to visit Philip Hutton, the half-Chinese, half-British son of the owner of a British trading company in Penang; but being half-Chinese, he cannot belong fully to either British or Chinese society. He enjoys going to a tiny island his family owns, where a Japanese diplomat rents a villa owned by his family.

The diplomat, Hayato Endo, teaches Philip the martial art of aikido (Tan himself is a practitioner). In return, Philip enthusiastically shares the secrets and history of Penang, unaware of his *sensei*’s hidden agenda. Endo is a spy for the Japanese.

Tan has made skilful use of the ambiance: the descriptions of pre-war Penang are powerful, and his metaphors shine — waves unroll like Chinese scrolls and clouds look like a dragon’s belly. He also makes excellent use of *aikido*, a softer martial art, like judo, where you learn to fall correctly instead of attacking the rival, and

use the attacker’s momentum to counter the attack. Indeed, the skills he learns from Endo help him survive: by offering to be a translator for the Japanese, Philip spares his British family from being interred. But he must strike deals with the Communist resistance too, forcing him to choose between irreconcilable alternatives.

Preeta Samarasan’s focus is the Indian community, and like Aw and Tan she centers her novel on a family and its relationship with the landscape. Samarasan, though, takes the story further, to the politically sensitive terrain of the May 13, 1969 race riots that recast intra-communal relations in Malaysia. That seminal event led to Malay dominance fortified through the peculiar affirmative action program adopted to benefit the majority community, with the cost borne by the Chinese and Indians who were neither colonial exploiters nor necessarily always beneficiaries of the colonial dispensation. Arguably, many young Chinese and Indian students had little choice but to go abroad to pursue higher education, since Malays got preferential treatment at most colleges. It also meant that only those Chinese and Indians who could afford to go overseas or get scholarships could do so; poorer students had to settle for admission locally, if at all, and not necessarily at the best colleges.

Samarasan tells the story of a lawyer, Rajasekharan, who seeks a political life in newly independent Malaysia, his family and its intergenerational clashes. Samarasan uses language with gusto, interspersing English prose with Tamil words, and not bothering to explain them. In an interview, she said it is time for authors to tell stories in their own idiom; if as a child she had to learn Cockney rhythms, she says she sees no harm in a reader having to deal with terms such as *char kuay teow* (fried flat noodles) or Tamil curses.

Rajasekharan’s grandfather had come to Malaya at the turn of the 20th century to work in the docks. His father starts as a shipping clerk, ris-

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ing to own a shipping company. To mark his success, he buys a house that was once owned by a Scottish businessman who flees the country with independence at hand. The Rajasekharans thus live in the Big House on Kingfisher Lane. The eldest daughter, estranged from her parents, is planning to leave for studies in the US. Imagined slights lead to permanent resentments, clandestine adultery and incest. Rajasekharan has studied in London, and marries the girl next door, much to the consternation of his mother. A plantation girl is hired to look after the matriarch, but after the old woman's mysterious death, she is sacked.

In embracing post-independence Malaysian history, Samarasan's novel is bold; it deals with 1969 using rumor and fact as allegories for the miasmatic world of the riots. In tackling these riots, Samarasan's is the first serious attempt since Lloyd Fernando, who died earlier this year at the age of 82. Fernando's 1993 novel, *Green Is The Colour*, was a major effort to identify the strands that tied communities together during the period of ethnic strife in Malaysia.

Samarasan provides a breezy, witty history of contemporary Malaysia early in the novel. She poignantly notes the static worldview of a Malaysian *kampung*, or village: the Malay toiling in the paddy, the Indian in the plantation, and the Chinese, high on opium, working in the tin mine. *Plus ça change...* There are rules of behavior, but wealth rides roughshod over these. Some Indians, through patronage or luck, have reached the top of the social aristocracy, like the Rajasekharan family. Many, like the servant-girl Chellam, remain at the bottom.

Samarasan's multi-layered novel includes a child who can communicate with ghosts, a brother who tries to make sense of the world through humor, a mother who is never happy with herself despite having risen above her class and a ne'er-do-well cousin who knows much but can tell little and is misunderstood. The plot gets complicated as it attempts to interweave private miseries with public histories, shifting the story backwards through flashbacks.

The story is different in Singapore. Authors in Singapore have appeared to take a microscopic view of the reality around them, focusing on individual stories. In so doing, they have often attempted to use the nation's size as the reason why big themes are difficult. But a society's creativity is not correlated to its geographic area and population. Small island nations that were former colonies have produced great writers — Derek Walcott, C.L.R. James, V.S. Naipaul, Michael Ondaatje, and Romesh Gunasekera immediately come to mind.

But writers in Singapore seem to have less choice in deviating from the official narrative than their cousins across the Straits. For example, in 1994, Singaporean writer Catherine Lim wrote an essay in *The Straits Times* entitled, "The PAP and the People — The Great Affective Divide," in which she said that while Singaporeans respected the efficiency of the ruling People's Action Party and were grateful to it for bringing Singapore economic success, they lacked any real affection for it. She added that the reason for this was that the PAP was committed to achieving economic glory as a way of avoiding other issues, and when anyone raised an idea that appeared to interfere

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with that thinking, they were slapped down ruthlessly. The technocratic and professional nature of the party's leadership made them appear unemotional and alienating; as a result, there was no warmth towards the leadership, she said. After she wrote another article in the same vein, then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong responded by saying Lim should take responsibility for her views and step into the political arena if she wished to debate the government. In true Singaporean fashion, Lim apologized, saying she had the utmost respect for the government.

Singaporeans who challenge the political system have not fared well. Opposition leader Joshua Jeyaretnam, who died in September, was bankrupted after ministers successfully sued him for defamation repeatedly. Several others who challenged the system had to leave the country. Not rocking the boat, it would seem, is the wise policy. Foreign publications that have criticized the government routinely lose defamation cases, and have paid hundreds of thousands of dollars in fines.

Authors in Singapore, therefore, must tread warily. They must acknowledge where the boundary markers are — those tacit lines beyond which they must not go. Those lines, though, are ever changing, ever shifting, making the game of what's permissible and what's not a constant challenge.

So a writer like Philip Jeyaretnam — a lawyer, and the son of Joshua the politician — deals with the island-state's history obliquely, through a personal narrative. In his moving novel, *Abraham's Promise*, the protagonist is a tutor called Abraham Isaac. He coaches a student taking O-level exams in Latin, and the process of teaching the young boy takes him back to Rose, the woman he loved, his obstinate sister Mercy, and his wife Rani. As a young man in the 1950s and 1960s, he was filled with youthful passion to join the political process, but as he grew older, he mellowed. In a city without idealism, he finds himself distanced from the world around him, baffled by the culture of money, and estranged from his successful son. There is reconciliation at the end, but it is a life lived in regret. The *New York Times* called it “a novel of regret for actions not taken and words unspoken, eloquent in the spareness of its prose and the gradual unveiling of the narrator's self-deception.”

One overtly political novel from Singapore in recent years is the late neurosurgeon Gopal Baratham's *A Candle or the Sun*. Because of its controversial nature, the novel was published in Britain in 1991, although it was available in Singapore. Based broadly on the case of a group of Catholic activists whom the Singapore government branded as Communists and arrested, the novel focused on Hernie Perera, a supervisor of the furniture department of the oldest

store in Singapore whose real passion lies in writing. When his store merges with another firm, Perera's life changes. His father is dying, and his mistress is involved with a Christian group that wants to challenge the government. She wants to follow the group's leader into exile. Perera is upset by this, and agrees to pass on information about the group to the government, in return for a writing job, only to realize the Faustian nature of the bargain later.

Another noteworthy Singapore writer is Vyvyan Loh, now based in the US, who grew up in Singapore and has joined her Malaysian cousins in taking on the Japanese occupation with considerable finesse and élan. Her novel, *Breaking the Tongue*, is set around the fall of Singapore in 1942, and revolves around a Chinese family. There is Claude, who is expected to be more English than the English themselves; his father, Humphrey, who can't believe that Britain might surrender to the Japanese; and the matriarch whose sound words everyone ignores. Claude sees the folly of clinging to an alien culture towards the end of the novel as the world around him lies in ruins.

In summing up the relationship between recent Singaporean and Malaysian fiction, Aw concludes: "The problems faced by both countries are the same, and have less to do with official political censorship than a deeply-ingrained conservatism. In the case of Singapore, for example, day to day life is very relaxed, but you have a self-censoring society that is cautious of everything." There is a Hokkien word for it, *kiasu*, or "afraid to lose." That mentality inhibits thinking outside of the box, making Singaporeans excellent at implementing and following instructions, but not necessarily at being innovators.

Political scientist Garry Rodan at the Asia Research Centre at Murdoch University in Perth has written extensively on Singapore and Malaysia. He explains: "Besides systematic repression of competing political values and especially any attempt to organize collectively to advance

such values that has never been matched to the same degree in Malaysia, the PAP has also institutionalized an acutely technocratic and materialist worldview and ideology that has no parallel in Malaysia. This worldview and ideology not only reduces the idea of the 'good life' to a seemingly unproblematic set of development indices that need not be debated, but is pivotal to the rationale for the exclusive control over power by the PAP."

But Malaysia should not feel too pleased. Samarasan says fiction writers have more leeway only because, as a cynical official once told a friend of hers: "Nobody has the time to read books. Censoring films is a different matter."

Two countries, certainly; one system or two, it does not make writing about them any easier. And that's where fiction offers the advantage: you can re-imagine the past and make things up. Until the authorities find out.

Salil Tripathi is a former correspondent of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* in Singapore. He is now a writer based in London, working on a novel set in Singapore of the 1940s — and 1990s.