

## Ecopoetics and ‘the Bestial’: Negotiating Human Dignity in Two Contemporary Short Stories from Singapore and Malaysia

Uma Jayaraman (*Independent Scholar, Singapore*)

### Abstract

*Humans often revel in their self-proclaimed ability to identify interactive possibilities between people and their environment despite common knowledge that Nature does not need humans but humans need Nature. There are significant instances of writing about humankind’s relationship with Nature, and the scientific as well as spiritual potential of this relationship that may eventually lead to a sustainable Earth. Correspondingly, creative writing is also increasingly preoccupied with mimicking ecological processes that sustain Earth. Jonathan Skinner has noted “how certain poetic methods model ecological processes like complexity, non-linearity, feedback loops and recycling.” Since its coinage, ecopoetics is a much contested term in contemporary literary theory, and has been subjected to multiple definitions. While the basis of an ecopoetic understanding of Earth centres on its scepticism about human exceptionalism, hyperrationality and consumerism, it has almost always been applied to poetry. In this paper, I view “green discourse” in fiction through the ecopoetic lens, and read representations of how human and non-human forms fail to interlock in two contemporary Southeast Asian short stories. I explore whether human dignity can be salvaged from the debris of anonymity conditioned by an anthropocentric perception of existence.*

### Introduction

Stories of humans emulating objects and creatures of the natural world are well-known to many of us. From the story of the *Pushpaka Vimana* of *The Ramayana* and Icarus’s waxen wings to the first glider of the Wright brothers, birds have inspired humans to fly. However, quite often, when humans have turned to the natural world for bettering their lives, they have also knowingly or unknowingly caused harm to the natural world. Repeated signals from the natural world in the form of tsunamis, landslides, volcanic eruptions and other natural calamities point to the need for redefining the ethics of human interaction with other non-human elements of the natural world.

Unsurprisingly, contemporary literary writings about nature have become increasingly sensitive to the ethical questions of human-nature interactions. Yeo Wei Wei’s “The National Bird of Singapore” and Angela Jessie Michael’s “Walking Women” are stories set in Singapore and Malaysia respectively, and capture the complex understanding of human relationships with a mutating environment. The stories raise concerns that can be read at the intersection of gender, social justice and what has been called “new domesticity” by

Valerie Padilla Carroll (59). This interplay of human and non-human forms highlights the connection as well as the disconnection between them. This registers “a deep dissatisfaction with existing social and cultural structures” that condition human behaviour (Hume 760). To examine these issues by exploring the relationship between forms, objects and the environment would be to view the stories through an ecopoetic lens.

In defining ecopoetry, Jonathan Skinner’s comparison of poetic methods with ecological processes such as non-linearity and feedback loops is a thought-provoking one. This definition can be understood using complexity theory deployed in strategic management. Nonlinear feedback loop has been defined as the “phenomenon where the output of a system is fed back to become input as part of a chain of cause-and-effect that forms a circuit or loop” (complexityacademy.io). In other words, all interaction is determined by a complex to and fro movement of input and output in machines. This can be perceived analogically in conversations between people within an organization. This pattern of cause and effect also determines the complex web of life comprised of living and non-living matter by which our environment is kept in a state of equilibrium. The relationship between predator and prey is a well-known example of such equilibrium.

Skinner’s definition foregrounds the idea that a state of perfect balance underscores the place of all things in the ecosystem. Nancy Cook, an ecocritic, explores “the “biological, social and political ways” (4) in which humans define where they are. The place of humans and other species depends on matching demands of the times to skill sets. The current discussion over jobs of the future alerts humans to the increasing replacement of humans by machines. The machines are programmed to efficiently step in and do several manual tasks. At another level, the ‘place’ for humans also pertains to their ability to reimagine the infrastructure of social and political roles. For instance, Michelle Obama’s speech at the Democratic Convention campaigning for Hilary Clinton on the 25<sup>th</sup> of July, 2017 (*Washington Post*) harked back to the traditional role of women as caregivers and binding agents of the family unit. This supports the feminist model approximating to “new domesticity”, which projects the traditional role of women into the public arena and empowers them by politicizing the role. My paper extends this argument to imagine new roles for humans who work towards a sustainable earth.

Currently, we live tentatively on ecotones. Ecotones define boundaries between different habitats. These habitats are exclusive living spaces or ecosystems of specific species. But, modern day technological advancements and webs of communication have enabled humans to live in more spaces than one. Mass migrations have affected human thought processes and lifestyles in ways that call for a redefinition of what constitutes a human being. In this respect, humans live on thresholds rather than within indigenous units of culture, behaviour and thought. This “edge effect” of living between adjacent ecosystems contributes to the tentative nature of human habitats and is at the root of the disconnection between human and non-human forms. In the contemporary globalized world, many factors pertaining to human existence such as food habits, apparel cultures, and even the thoughts humans promote are variegated like never before, owing to the world-wide movement of all consumables. The phenomenon of global movement has had an adverse impact on the preservation of indigenous cultures and practices. Such continual changes to human behaviour define the tentative nature of human habitat, which in turn, has cost the human

species the loss of culture as well as thought. The global movement has also redefined the way humans relate to one another and other species in their physical surroundings. In short, the tentative nature of human existence on ecotones underscores the disconnection of humans with their consciousness of the physical and cultural environment into which they were born.

The stories chosen for this article are excellent examples of this disconnection. Highlighting the “edge effect” created by dichotomies such as school/Nature (“National Bird”) and Home/Outside (“Walking Women”), the stories foreground the need for realigning what Ralph W Black has called “the interplay of human and the non-human” to encourage healthy ecologies that may sustain life on earth. My paper explores this interplay through the “new domesticity” model of reviving the traditional role of the mother (played by either gender) to make interactions between human and non-human lives ethical.

### **The National Bird of Singapore**

Yeo Wei Wei’s “The National Bird of Singapore” demonstrates the depressing repercussions of human desire to emulate behavioural patterns of birds to shape a nation’s identity. It tells the story about how a relief teacher’s attempts to make a difference in the life of a seemingly autistic student in his class have grim consequences for his career. Luke Lim’s wife leaves him after she has two miscarriages, but constantly dreams about their lost babies. He is neither able to let the parent in him die after the miscarriages, nor speak to his wife about how he feels, and so, the question lives “inside him like a moth in a glass jar. Sometimes, it beat its wings, fluttering with high energy; sometimes, as a still specimen” [*sic*] (“National Bird” 266). Moths are known for their adaptability to their surroundings but they thrive in wilderness. When denied the natural habitat, they are confused and show extreme behaviour. By implication, Luke fails to adapt to the new reality of his life after his wife miscarries their babies, precisely because he is unable to give vent to his deep hurt. In other words, he is denied the opportunity to follow nature. If he had been able to share his sense of loss with his wife, he would have survived the trauma in a natural way. He is like a moth in a glass jar that is paralysed by its desire to be free. He is overwhelmed by the contrary claims of the desire to hold his babies in his arms and the need to accept their deaths. As a result, Luke suffers a disconnection with his real energy, which is to nurture and care. When he becomes a relief teacher and meets Aaron, who has never been known to speak and is assumed to be autistic, he finds an outlet to connect to his nature as caregiver.

Luke finds his opportunity when he becomes part of a student project that seeks to draw parallels between humans and birds. Aaron, the “autistic” boy, likes to draw images of birds. So, he has been “recruited” to be part of this project. The students attempt to draw parallels, albeit far-fetched ones, between wild birds commonly found in Singapore and Singaporean national identity. While the majority of students look for birds that show resilience, intelligence, adaptability and competitive spirit because these are the qualities they would like to see in Singaporeans, Aaron chooses the merbok, a spotted dove. The choice of merbok is significant. Jim Burke, an erstwhile writer for *Asia Magazine*, and an avid researcher and blogger on Asian landscapes, people and practices, remarks that for Southeast Asians, the bird represents “a sport, a hobby, and a constant challenge” (*Asia Magazine*, May 2, 1971). Burke’s article elucidates this point by highlighting how the bird is

trained for up to three years with care and attention to be an able contestant in singing competitions for merboks. He elaborates that a fully trained merbok can sing scales to perfection and, as with human singers, there are alto, soprano and tenor merboks. The most interesting point Jim Burke makes here is that the three tones in which the owner aims to train a bird are the basic sounds that the bird is born with. The owner merely trains the bird to add tonal quality to the natural sounds. This means that humans, in an attempt to impose their will upon other creatures, should only work with what is familiar to the latter if they want the desired outcomes. By implication, attempts to stretch them beyond their aptitude may have negative outcomes. In notable ways, the merbok becomes a metaphor for Aaron's untapped potential. If nurtured with care and encouraged to play to his strengths, Aaron would succeed in realising his full potential but the school system moulds the students according to preconceived expectations. The students in Aaron's group reject his proposal to include the merbok in their list of birds because it does not exhibit virtues they are trained to look for. Just as humans take ownership of merboks to train them to win competitions, the school takes ownership of students and aims to direct them to prescribed paths. When Aaron falls short of the school's expectations, he is categorised as "autistic". In a conversation with two of his colleagues whom Luke meets over lunch, he tries to convince them that Aaron should be considered a good student because he finishes his school work and doesn't disrupt class. He also argues that Aaron is intelligent and perfectly able to speak, and his refusal to speak should not be made an issue (268). Even though the teachers admit that Aaron had not disrupted their classes and they also know that there was nothing conclusive found in the clinical tests he was sent for, they are unable to accept as normal a boy who does not speak. Mrs Tan, the school drama teacher, insists on the necessity of speech in life and referring to Aaron, she says that she "wouldn't cast him as a lamb" in her play "because he can't baa to save his life" (268). She also says that as all children have to be given roles in her drama class, she makes Aaron a tree or a door. This choice of role for Aaron reiterates society's obsession with defining human spaces as distinct from non-human spaces. Non-human forms are not endowed with the faculty of expressing themselves in human terms and as Aaron does not speak, he should not be deemed normal. Contrarily, if Aaron were allowed to train according to his aptitude, he too would be an achiever. For instance, he has a talent for sketching and this is the way in which he contributes to the group presentation. But the students of the class insist that he should speak during the presentation, since such non-verbal forms of communication have not been established by the school as acceptable. By expecting Aaron to perform in prescribed ways, the students stretch him beyond his natural abilities and this has a damaging impact on Aaron's sense of self.

Both Aaron and the merbok are forcibly prescribed certain subjectivities; the bird is trained to sing and Aaron is expected to speak up in order to make a place for himself in the competitive academic world. His silence sets him apart to the extent that he is dismissed as a failure. Just as the students in Aaron's project group dismiss the idea that the merbok can represent a quality that humans should aspire for, the teachers in the school dismiss the idea that Aaron can be an achiever. The school wishes to train pupils according to prescribed forms of behaviour and categories of achievement, and such impositions invariably null the possibility of creating an inclusive discursive space for those who do not fit in. Just as we will never know if the merbok wanted to sing for competitions or if it has talents other than what it was trained in, Aaron's actual desires, his fears and anxieties will never be known to his teachers and classmates.

The bond that Luke establishes with Aaron by recognizing the boy's voice in his sketches, assignments and non-disruptive presence in class is beyond the comprehension of the school staff, who are trained to think in pragmatic ways. The affection that both Luke and Aaron share for the merbok hints at a bond between them. When they share photos they have taken of the bird, "a brightness came into their eyes and they shook hands as if they were childhood friends sharing a secret" (266). Their common interest is reflective of not only the bond between them but also their difference from the others at school, and the sharing of this commonality like a secret foregrounds their recognition of the unacceptability of this difference.

When Aaron, overwhelmed by the demand of the class that he should speak during the group's presentation, urinates in his shorts and runs to the toilet, Luke runs after him to console him, but he is suspected of sexually abusing the boy. The story ends decisively in favour of the discipline master's verdict of how he rescued Aaron from the abusive teacher. The incident is presented entirely through stories that the students and staff tell, and Luke's relationship with Aaron is recreated from the pastiche of notes collected from the gossip in school corridors. In this pastiche, the voices of Luke and Aaron are conspicuously absent. In the discipline master's narrative, the school is described as having returned to normalcy after confiscating Luke's laptop and removing his name from the teaching roster.

All this is accomplished with a stomach-turning efficiency, which exposes the patterns of predation that define the system. The staffroom is described as "the adult-world's extension of school. There were cliques and loners, achievers and dullards, idealists and pragmatists" (269). Caught in this system, two traits ironically make and break Luke: His good looks and his attitude to his students. Earlier on in the story, Luke is sexualized by the female teachers as well as the teenage students of the school. The school girls trail him and take photos of him with their mobile phones. Ms. Low from theatre studies hopes to be up close with him in her next theatre project. It is even rumoured that the lady principal gave him the job for his looks as he had no formal training as a teacher that could have helped his application. Also, Luke is made more visible by his ability to befriend Aaron, who hitherto has remained isolated because of his silence. Luke's relationship with Aaron is complexly conditioned by the loss of his unborn children, his own inability to speak to his estranged wife about his feelings, and his loneliness after their separation. Aaron fills this void in Luke's life, but the school teachers fail to see this. For them, the male teacher's out-of-the-ordinary concern for his student is a matter for suspicion. The narrative is silent about what happened on the fateful day in the washroom. This is in order to expose the extent to which narrow-minded modes of perception can influence opinion at the cost of human dignity. Aaron's silence is an important signifier of his difference from normal human behaviour. According to the teachers, silence is not a human trait and therefore Aaron is treated as a sub-human in three ways; he is ignored/used/represented as seen from the above textual examples. Aaron's ability to bond with Luke is symptomatic of his ability to enter the human discursive space. His silence, by implication, is a result of prescriptive systems. The narrative questions this complete disregard for human dignity and ability for re-invention. If the desire to re-invent exists, it does so in a few minds but these minds are myopically classified as "sick". Luke is first idolized and then demonized with a nauseating rapidity that sensitizes the reader to the death of human instinct at the hands of a clinically driven system of education.

The writer leaves us with the pinned-up portrait of the merbok in Luke's office, which reminds us that the natural world will remain trapped in school projects for grades.

The anthropocentric worldview of the school system causes the failure of innate human desires on the one hand and reduces creative humans to automatons. Angela Jessie Michael's "The Walking Women" explores a similar scepticism towards human exclusivity from the perspective of living on the edge of cultures and thought.

## **The Walking Women**

Humans overestimate the exclusivity of their place in a world contingent on a continuously evolving environment. One of the ways to root oneself in a changing world is to internalise known cultures and thoughts. However, keeping in view the rapidity with which changes occur in our everyday lives, we almost always live in a state of transition from one set of beliefs to another. This is an instance of living on the edge of culture and thought, a theme explored in Angela Jessie Michael's "The Walking Women". The story is set in a 1950s Portuguese settlement in rural Malaysia and tells the tale of two elderly women, Mary and Tonia, who will themselves to death so that they can be free from being marginalised and made emotionally vulnerable by a society to which they no longer seem useful. The situation of poverty in the 1950s Portuguese settlement depicted in the story can be traced to a decline in the fishing industry. Two prominent reasons for this decline were the battered economy of Malaya after World War Two and the dependence of the small-scale fishermen on capitalists for their boats, nets and equipment. Poverty of the fishing folk such as Tonia's son and Rose's husband could be because the agrarian economy of the region depends on poultry farming and fishing. A key environmental concern here is the converse relationship between these two industries. Mary Luise-Blue notes that:

The huge amounts of faecal waste produced by chicken farming, together with feathers, bedding (of low-cost organic materials), and dead chickens, are difficult to manage in landfills or as compost. Storage of waste or over fertilization of land with chicken manure can cause runoff into rivers, lakes and ponds. Manure contains phosphorus and nitrogen, and runoff that carries these nutrients causes algae blooms in fresh water. Algae blooms reduce sunlight penetration in water, cutting the oxygen supply to underwater plants.... This leads to fish kills. ("Ecological Impact")

Daisy's chicken farm is probably one of the many farms of the region with a lucrative business that affords her a bungalow and a well-tended garden. But their success adversely affects the lives of the fishermen, who, owing to poor supply of fish, are condemned to poverty. Mary, Tonia as well as Rose, Diana's maid, are affected and ironically have to depend on the very people who have been indirectly responsible for their predicament.

The story is set in a small village, where close proximity between the villagers conditions Mary and Tonia's lives. They are both widowed, and live with their grown-up children and their families. They try to justify their existence by contributing in meaningful ways to the day-to-day running of their households. As they neither have inheritance nor any source of income, they resort to asking friends and relatives in the village for gifts in cash or kind in exchange for small jobs and gossip. They are poor women who have outlived their

biological, economic and social usefulness, but as members of an extended family, they are grudgingly accepted as part of a familial unit. We are told that Mary is an “unspoken burden” (“Walking” 1). This implies that the family would be better off without her but nobody will ask her to leave home because it may stir gossip. Thus, whenever Mary spends the day out of the house looking for gifts and money to alleviate the tight finances of her son’s family and to justify her existence, her daughter-in-law welcomes it (1). Tonia’s father had been the Portuguese-Eurasian community headman and they had led a respectable life in the past. The tangible reminders of her respectability are the brass pin with the latticework head and the heirloom string of brooches that she proudly wears whenever she steps out of the house. Despite these, she is subjected to taunts and advice by people of her community who have done well for themselves.

However, these are also people who are cut off from the economic realities of the world. For instance, Diana, the wife of a successful poultry farmer, depends on Mary and Tonia for all her gossip about the village. Characters such as Diana’s mother and the D’Souzas have lost touch with the reality of the world. Whenever Tonia visits the D’Souzas, she is lectured on how to keep the younger generation under control. Mrs D’Souza’s attitude to Tonia confirms that she is unaware of the struggles of the poverty-stricken villagers. The gap between the rich and the poor is also highlighted by the distance between their dwellings. We are told that Mary and Tonia walk several kilometres to the dwellings of these privileged people whenever they look for gifts of cash and kind.

The idea of walking is significant in several ways. It is a physical journey that the two widows undertake for the purpose of procuring gifts for their families so that they can be useful. The rituals associated with the preparation of their journeys hint at their resilience and rootedness in their soil. Unlike Mrs D’Souza who wears frocks at all times, Mary wears a white sari and blouse, knots up her hair, and carries an umbrella to beat the heat. She wears black, cloth, slippers with rubber soles for comfort on rugged roads. She also plans all her stops and company based on who would accord due respect to her age. Similarly, Tonia fortifies herself with a carbohydrate and protein rich meal of “rice, sambal and dried fish” (4) before embarking on her arduous walk. Further, as she is hunchbacked, she covers the back of her head with a handkerchief to avoid the blistering heat. The author observes that even though the walk is arduous, their “legs would be autopilot” and “move on cue”. They have the skills and knowledge to frame what Evelyn Reilly calls “the human within the ecological” (Hume 755). They adapt to conditions native to the land and they are able to define human needs in terms of a clearly definable model of sustainability.

The model of sustainability can be better explained with the help of a tripartite relationship of human needs, nature and technology developed by Manfred Max Neef’s model of human scale development. A brief look at this model will help us contextualise how and to what effect the cultural consciousness and practices of these old women comes to loggerheads with the changing economic structure of their community. Manfred Max-Neef, a Chilean economist, in a lecture titled “transdisciplinary economics for sustainability” at Gordon Institute of Business Science (2013), explains the relationship between human needs, nature and economy by arguing that humans are subjects with finite needs that remain the same through the ages and cultures but are challenged by the changing face of satisfiers. Contextualising his argument in the field of economics, he asserts that the purpose of any

economic policy should be to generate conditions that will satisfy the fundamental human needs. According to Max-Neef, these human needs are not material but related to principles, values, laws, rules and traditions. According to this model, the quality of life depends on the possibilities people have to adequately satisfy their fundamental human needs.

If we apply the Max-Neef Needs<sup>1</sup> model to the lives of Mary and Tonia, we observe a distinct imbalance of needs and satisfiers. As Mary and Tonia are not property owners or wage earners, their needs are overlooked. Tonia has lived a simple but good life in the past and regrets the loss of this life which is now condemned to depend on the poor earnings and drinking habits of her son-in-law. She is in her seventies but has to work very hard at home to establish her usefulness. After a morning of hectic physical work, she sets out in the blistering heat to bring back gifts for her family so that she may be seen as contributing. She is described “as a little beetle scurrying headlong on its way” (4). She visits Diana to do some mending work for her so that she can rightfully take the money that Diana will pay. She also shares the gossip from her community which functions as entertainment but oddly enough, as sharing of information for some gifts. The usefulness of all characters in the story is determined by their well-defined economic roles such as owner, servant, fisherman but the two walking women do not have a socially defined role. Their journey to earn money and establish their worth ironically reveals to them that they lose their dignity by accepting gifts for their optional services.

In this sense, their journey is a metaphorical representation of loss of self-esteem. All their words and actions are calculated to secure this fundamental need. We are told that Mary enters Diana’s house not from the front gate as a guest or the back gate as a servant but from the side gate as a relative, and freely demanded food and drink from the lady of the house. Tonia, adding to these sanctions, takes the liberty of calling the servant, Rose, a thief. Rose, Diana’s Portuguese-Eurasian servant, doubly marginalized by the patriarchal as well as the wage labour structures of the feudal economy, overthrows traditional perceptions of family structures and rural traditions, and labels both Mary and Tonia as parasites who live off moneyed people. Rose is both right and wrong. Mary and Tonia have a complex relationship with the land-owning people. If their livelihood has been affected by the chicken farming, then their actions can be justified as a way of reclaiming their lost livelihood. But viewing their relationship with society in terms Needs-Satisfier model, Rose can be seen as foregrounding the changed dynamics of society where Mary and Tonia’s needs fail to correspond with what society can offer them. They bank on age-old traditions of respect for age, seniority and kinship deeply ingrained in the psyche of the people native to the region to stake claim to the patronage of moneyed relatives but it earns them little more than Diana’s indifference, Mrs D Souza’s taunt, and Rose’s spite. This is a complete let down and snaps the last vestige of connectedness with the soil. By nullifying the internal

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<sup>1</sup> Nine needs are identified in the model: subsistence (food, health, shelter); protection (care, work, solidarity); affection (care, love); understanding (community); participation (rights, responsibilities); leisure (idleness, creativity); creation (curiosity, imagination); identity (sense of belonging); freedom (self-esteem). I am indebted to Maria Mies for drawing attention to the Max-Neef model to explore fundamental human needs.

systems of connectivity through tradition and moral values that the two old women had built with Diana, her mother, the D'Souzas on the one hand. This breakdown also challenges their associations with other natural domains such as the church, the school, mosque, the jail and the blistering heat. Mary and Tonia have lived in this 'habitat' with its heterogeneous 'populations' but within a clearly perceived homogeneous ecotope of known behaviours. The imbalance of needs and satisfiers precipitates the loss of self-esteem and the two women starve themselves to death.

In this sense, these deaths can be seen as ecological loss. Mary and Tonia's real value did not lie in their ability to procure material things but in their connectedness to the traditions of their native soil that underscores specific behaviours and responses to situations. Tonia makes a feeble attempt to sustain this world by laying claim to soothsaying powers. This is a coping strategy for Tonia and defines her attempt to connect with the collective unconscious of skill sets and knowledge systems, "the coming together of all the sentences and images we have experienced" (Hume 761) that traditional community believed in and thrived on. She claims that she will be able to tell whether Diana is expecting a baby boy or girl, and also the thief who is stealing eggs from her farm with the help of her magical powers. Curiously enough, Tonia's prophecies come true but the narrative states this only in passing. This highlights that the realisation of the prophecies is of no value after Tonia is dead as it does not satisfy her need to belong and contribute to her community. The posthumous account of the realization of Tonia's prophecies also exposes Diana's callousness, and by implication, the callousness of the community. Diana is shown as a good-hearted woman but her goodness is tinged with a sense of patronage that is alienating. Rosie Omar, among others, draws attention to the tradition of maintaining family ties in rural Malaysia of the times. Thinking along these lines, we may say that even though Diana is depicted as the Malaysian model of a good woman who has a "firm hold on tradition, religious values, and close family relationships" ("Being Old"), she does so out of habit than kindness and care. The disconnect that is examined in terms of poverty, economic re-structuring and the death of cottage industries can be extended to hint at the confused perception of one's place in the larger scheme of things. The last lines of the story foreground these deaths as ecological loss in that Tonia's prophecies about Diana's child and Rose's thievery are proved right. This is an ecological loss because in neglecting people whose lives are deeply ingrained in the soil, its history, traditions and the collective unconscious, the human community of the small Malaccan town has endangered native knowledges and failed to create internal ecologies that provide sustenance in the larger scheme of things.

To conclude, these short stories from Singapore and Malaysia explore the disconnection between the human and the non-human worlds owing to lives lived on the edge of culture and thought. Reading the stories through the feminist model of 'new domesticity' (a being of share and care), it is possible to suggest that shedding straightjacketed systems of perception, reviving cultural memory and daring to step into the unseen and unknown regions of non-human worlds has therapeutic potential for injured human dignity. Human dignity thrives on self-esteem, which in turn, can be attained by being part of a larger ecological system of balance and harmony.

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# Music in *The River's Song* by Suchen Christine Lim

Qi Feng LIN (Nanyang Technological University)

## Abstract

*I focus on the music metaphor in Suchen Christine Lim's novel The River's Song, which is set in the river community on the Singapore River prior to its "clean up" by the government during the 1980s. The Chinese classical music in the novel reflects the Chinese vernacular character of the community, which had a close relationship with the river. This music is one of many sounds of this community, the sum of which can be interpreted as a metaphorical music that reflects the human-river relationship and the resulting ecology of the river. While music can be transplanted from its place of origin, such as the transplantation of Chinese classical music from China to Singapore, the metaphorical music of a place is unique to the locale, which I use to analyse the impact of development on the river community and the environment.*

## Introduction

Singapore is a city-state that is located at the tip of the Malay Peninsula. The founding of modern Singapore in 1819 by the British has transformed the sparsely settled island into an important British colony.<sup>2</sup> Since its independence in 1965, Singapore has pursued pragmatic economic and social policies and transformed into a cosmopolitan city. The Singapore River played an important role in the economic and social history of Singapore.<sup>3</sup> In this article, I focus on Suchen Christine Lim's use of the music metaphor in her novel *The River's Song*, which is set in the river community on the Singapore River prior to its "clean up" by the government during the 1980s. The Chinese classical music that Lim employs in the novel reflects the Chinese vernacular character of the community, which had a close relationship to the river. The music metaphor accentuates the disruption that the clean-up campaign brought to the community; the Chinese classical music career of the two main characters can be interpreted as a way to remember this lost community. The profound social and environmental changes resulting from development along the river, as vividly portrayed in Lim's novel, brings to fore an ambivalence towards development and the tension between the local and the global in the city-state.

In the next section, I discuss Singapore's postcolonial condition and its unique position in terms of its relative developmental success, which gave its society an international and Westernised character. In the following section, I expound on the way music is used in the

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<sup>2</sup> I thank Professors Chitra Sankaran and John Whalen-Bridge for their encouragement, and Professor Sankaran for organising the inaugural ASLE-ASEAN conference.

<sup>3</sup> Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles (1781–1826), an official with the English East India Company, founded a British trading post on the island on February 6, 1819 because the river mouth formed a natural sheltered harbour and was an ideal location for defending Britain's trade route through the Straits of Melaka (Turnbull 25–29). In 1822, Raffles established the commercial quarter to the southwestern bank of the river and allocated to the Chinese community the entire area adjoining the commercial quarter, which became Chinatown (Turnbull 38).

novel to depict life in the river community prior to the clean-up of the river, before finishing with concluding remarks.

## Singapore's Postcolonial Condition

According to Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, postcolonial ecocriticism raises the need for “a broadly materialist understanding of the changing relationship between people, animals and environment” that “requires attention...to the cultural politics of representation” (12) as well as to those more specific “processes of mediation...[that] can be recuperated for anti-colonial critique” (Cilano and DeLoughrey 79). During the colonial period, indigenous relationships to the environment in the colonies were threatened or replaced by Western relationship to the environment that is dominated by instrumental rationality. After decolonization, such encroachment continues in the developing world through the Western ideology of development.

Development is an ideology which the developed world imposes on the developing and, like the ideology of progress, reflects the linear and teleological thinking of the West. It is a historically-produced discourse that was contingent on post-war political imperatives: fear of communism and pressure from the Cold War, the perceived need to address poverty and overpopulation, the need to find markets, the faith in modern science and technology to address social ills as well as in public intervention in the economy (Escobar 31–38). One of the themes of postcolonial ecocriticism is to challenge such ideologies of development, but without necessarily rejecting the concept of “development” itself as only “a tool of the technocratic west” (Huggan and Tiffin 19). Indeed, development, broadly construed, can yield tangible benefits to the people and the environment in the developing world.

An analysis of a country's postcolonial development needs to take into account its colonial and postcolonial experience. Among former colonies, Singapore's postcolonial experience is unique in two ways.<sup>4</sup> First, it lacked a history of anticolonial struggle on its path towards independence. Second, it unwillingly gained independence after it was ejected from Malaysia in 1965. This abrupt independence compelled the small city-state to pursue economic development. Post-independence Singapore made known its appreciation of the British colonial legacy in its bid to attract investment from Western countries and Japan.<sup>5</sup>

In his study of Singapore's post-independent developmental experience and its contribution to the image of the Asian modern, C. J. Wan-Ling Wee argues that during the 1960s, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) utilised elements of the British, and later American, West as the source of its “postcolonial identity and state formation” (8). Further, for the sake of creating a society that facilitates export-oriented industrialisation, this naturalised version of the West “was used to *detritorialise* ... the various immigrant and local cultures,” itself

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<sup>4</sup> A recent resource on Singapore's postcolonial condition is a special issue in *Interventions*, vol. 8 issue 4, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> This reliance was reflected in founding Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew's (1923–2015) decision in 1961 to leave in place the statue of Stamford Raffles, the British founder of modern Singapore, near the Singapore River, as suggested by a Western economic advisor (Lee 66–67). The astonishing economic development that ensued is emphatically captured in the title of Prime Minister Lee's memoirs, *From Third World to First*.

aided by the fact that the immigrant Chinese and Indian segments of the population were already partially deterritorialised (8, emphasis in original). Finally, Wee argues that during the 1980s and 1990s, the PAP attempted to reterritorialise cultural space through the “Asian values” rhetoric, though the Asian financial crisis prompted the PAP to end this rhetoric (11) and return to affirming global capitalism as “universal truth” (30). The upshot is that elements of the West have become parts of Singapore’s “Asian-ness” (13).

Singapore’s highly modernised, forward-looking, and globalised postcolonial condition is reflected in the country’s ethos and literature. The rapid economic and urban development and the resulting rapid disappearance of physical reminders of the past contribute to the prevalence of the trope of forgetting in the Singaporean psyche, a trope that scholars and artists have addressed. Janadas Devan observes that Singapore’s history unfolded “as leavings, as partings, as separations, as sudden, unaccountable breaks” and that such piquantly unpleasant experience resulted in the country being “the product of forgettings” (22). Examples include its abrupt separation from Malaysia and its efforts to develop multiculturalism, which relegates and hence induces the forgetting of ethnic-based cultural nationalisms (28, 32). On the other hand, Tay Kheng Soon and Robbie Goh suggest that “remembering to forget” is more egregious because it is “a sin of commitment” (20) as Singapore leaves its backward past behind in its efforts to reinvent itself as a global city.

Philip Holden suggests two possibilities for studying postcolonialism in Singapore, considering its unique multicultural society and relatively developed status. The first possibility is the practice of “remembering otherwise” by recovering the “many elements wilfully effaced from Singapore’s national narrative” (351). While such recollection is a welcome complement to the national narrative and a powerful critique of the state, it risks seduction by nostalgia for a past that one is unfamiliar with (352). The second possibility is to identify and describe the presence of a “colonial shadow” in the ostensibly postcolonial condition which, by providing a possibility of “defamiliarization in the present,” creates space for raising questions (353–354). Singapore’s exceptionality as a polity and its position between the developed and developing countries unsettles the present, particularly through its uniqueness, as an economically developed island city-state, against the familiar categories of the nation-state and postcolonial development.<sup>6</sup>

Singapore’s relentless modernization is reflected in its literature. Rajeev Patke observes that novelists in Singapore raise questions that “turn repeatedly towards the rapid and disorienting transformations undergone by the social environment [in Singapore], which leaves the central characters of narrative fictions caught uncertain between disaffection, curiosity and uncertainty about their own and their society’s future” (376). Noting that Singapore’s desire to be a global city is compelled and complicated by its city-state status, Shirley Lim observes that English language literature in Singapore is centred on the local that is imagined in relation to a globalized Western other, with a notable absence of the imagination of the rest of the Southeast Asian region (214, 217).

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<sup>6</sup> Extrapolating from Holden’s work, Chua Beng Huat observed that as a city-state with a considerable number of its citizens residing abroad, Singapore also challenges us to imagine a postcolonialism “decentred not only with reference to any specific colonial metropolitan centre but also to the nation-state” (239).

In sum, Singapore's postcolonial condition is marked by a calculated embrace of Western economic development and, at the same time, recognition that Singapore is at its core an Asian society. Singapore's city-state status and resulting geopolitical vulnerability prompted its early political leaders to resolutely pursue modernisation, thereby exacerbating the concomitant deterritorialisation of its ethnic cultures. Wee observes that "[w]hile life-worlds have always been colonised by market forces and administrative systems, it is the *extent* to which the PAP state is committed to the instrumentalising notion of modernity as a tool for its nation-building that is notable" (21, emphasis in original). This instrumental and pragmatic developmental stance led to a committed effort by the government to transform Singapore's environment, in some cases leading to resettlement of communities and loss of traditional ways of life. In *The River's Song*, Lim vividly depicts the often overlooked human cost of development of the Singapore River.

### The River's Song

Suchen Christine Lim (1948–) was born in Perak, Malaysia and moved to Singapore in her teens. Lim's oeuvre thus far has been dominated by historical fiction; all five of her novels were set in Malaysia or Singapore during the colonial and post-independent history of the two countries, ranging from the late nineteenth century to the late twentieth century. Lim considers historical fiction as a much-needed complement to history. While history tends to be centred on political actors and extraordinary individuals and is influenced by political imperatives, fiction is able to focus on the ordinary or marginalised individual ("Keeper of the Creative Flame" 154). Place is an important thematic in Lim's writing. Lim believes that deep down, humans are "tribal" and that "a sense of place and history gives us our identity," which is even more important for nations with a short history, such as Singapore (151,152). Lim suggests that her childhood in Malaysia gave her "a sense of space and mountains and blue sky," thus making her sensitive to "the very earth" of Singapore (143).

In the traditional Chinese stories that Lim grew up with, the poets and peasants sang and revealed their sorrows to the river. She employs this trope by titling her poignant but unsentimental novel *The River's Song*, reflecting how the Singapore River received the sorrow of the people and was the site of joy and celebrations ("In Conversation" 213). During the colonial period, there was no pressing need to clean up the unsewered squatters, tenement buildings, farms, and industries along the Singapore River. The post-independence government implemented a demolish-and-rebuild policy where the immediate planning aims were to remove slums from the city centre and provide amenities and optimise the use of scarce land for economic development (Kong and Yeoh 247–248).<sup>7</sup> In 1977, Prime Minister Lee initiated a ten-year campaign to clean up the river (Joshi et al. 652–657). The concomitant resettlement of homes and industries reconfigured the lives of the river-people.

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<sup>7</sup> From the late 1990s onwards, the city-state's urban renewal policy shifted from the "demolish-and-rebuild" emphasis of the early post-independent years towards one that accommodated conservation of urban heritage (Yeoh and Huang 412–416).

Lim's novel traces the relationship between Wong Ping-ping and Wong Fook Weng from the 1960s to the present. The river plays a central role throughout the novel. Ping and Weng met on the streets of Chinatown when it was flooded after a downpour and their adolescent years together revolved around Chinatown and the river. The parents of Ping's mother met at a river in China and eloped to Singapore. Weng's mother drowned in the river when he was a young boy. Living in a hut by the river in Kampong Squatters ("kampong" means village in Malay), Weng and his father, Chong Suk are constantly reminded of Weng's mother. Life, hope, and tragedy intermingle in the Singapore River.

The novel unfolds against a backdrop of a rapidly developing Singapore, which the characters have to negotiate on top of the vicissitudes of their lives, not least through their moving away from the river. Weng's family, who was living in a squatter hut on the river, was resettled in high-rise public housing. Ping had earlier moved in with her mother, who had married Uncle Chang, son of a wealthy family. Like Singapore's physical and economic transformation, Ping's move from Chinatown to a wealthy neighbourhood was exhilarating though not without painful adjustments. Indeed, the anguish that Ping and the evicted river people felt from adjusting to the new environment is captured in a scene in which Ping, who was about thirteen and had moved into the residence about four months ago, jumped on and broke her bed in a fit of angst. Uncle Chang's deadpan response was to buy her a new bed (*The River's Song* 109).

The opening scene of the novel is particularly arresting and foreshadows the novel's plot (11–12). Incongruent with the modern buildings along the Singapore River, Weng was dressed in funeral garb and plays a lugubrious tune on his Chinese bamboo flute, or the *dizi* (it is not clear whether he had come from a funeral). The Prime Minister had declared on the same day that his Clean River campaign was a success, which dates the scene to the end of the campaign in 1987. This scene is striking in two ways. The first is Weng's occupation, as we later learn, as a professional musician. To make a living as a professional artist is an uncommon feat in a country whose psyche revolves around economic development. His unusual profession is accentuated by his annual spontaneous and hence unlicensed performance at the River, which draws curious onlookers and a handful of aging former residents of the river; the latter recognise the tune and the poignancy of his act. The second is the fact that all the major characters in the novel play a traditional *Chinese* instrument. The Chinese classical music represents a resistance against the English-speaking technocratic elite.<sup>8</sup>

## Music and Place

The constant motion of water in the river is evocative of agency by nature as well as life-forms in or near the river. Hence, it is not surprising that writers have described the

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<sup>8</sup> Lim notes that the English educated dominated government and mainstream public discourse and thinking during the 1960s and 1970s and led to the dismissal of the art of the non-English speaking population as not culture ("In Conversation" 212).

movement of the river as creating some form of art. In *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold (1887–1948) describes the river as creating an evanescent painting along its banks; the silt that is deposited by the river along the bank becomes a canvas that is serendipitously coloured by vegetation (Leopold 51–52). He also describes in musical terms the (phenomenal and noumenal) harmony of an undeveloped Rio Gavilan in the Chihuahua watershed in Mexico and uses it to criticise how reductionistic science and progress are disrupting this music (149–154).

Lim invokes both literal and metaphorical senses of music. In its literal sense, the Chinese classical music was enjoyed as a form of live social entertainment and symbolised the ethnic roots of the Chinese community on the River and in nearby Chinatown.<sup>9</sup> More important for our purposes, it symbolised the Chinese vernacular character of the river community. It also represents the emotional ties across the generations, as illustrated by Weng's learning the *dizi* from his father (whose primary instrument was the *pipa*, a lute-like instrument) and Ping's learning the *pipa* from Weng's father in secret. Ping's mother, a former noted *pipa* performer in Chinatown, forbade her to learn the instrument, thus forshadowing their estrangement when Ping moved to the United States after high school.

Lim invokes a metaphorical sense of music when she describes the sounds on the river:

Weng ran out of the hut, pulled off his shorts and jumped into the river. At the crack of dawn the river had stirred to life. Fires were lit in the stoves in his neighbours' huts. Bare-chested boatmen squatted on the decks of their bumboats brushing their teeth with a bit of coconut husk, gargling into their tin mugs like hundreds of tenors and baritones in the choir. This was the music Weng had heard since he was a toddler on his parents' boat, when they still lived on a boat then. He swam out to the middle of the cool brown water. (57)

Here, Lim depicts the sounds of the river as constituting a rhythm of human life. Sound is an important element of the urban landscape. The "sonic ecology" of cities can be described as "a permeable, modulating, fleeting and occasionally persistent soundscape within and across different social and physical sectors of the city" (Atkinson 1913). Thus, while the Chinese classical music symbolises the life of the river community, the sonic ecology of the river and its surrounding locales, which is caused by humans and non-human elements, can be interpreted as a metaphorical music. This metaphorical music of the river community includes the Chinese classical music that was played in the community, most notably by the major characters. While Leopold's phenomenal and noumenal music of the Rio Gavilan are audible and inaudible respectively (in the literal sense), the literal and metaphorical music in the novel are both audible.

The use of music, either in the literal or metaphorical sense, to interpret and describe rivers and its ecology in general, requires special care to avoid two misconceptions. First, the ability of music to achieve harmony means the music metaphor has a tendency to lead to an

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<sup>9</sup> The coolies' appreciation of Chinese music in the novel reveals a softer cultural side to the "masculinist immigrant ethos which has become almost axiomatic in our thinking of the Chinese in Southeast Asia within the context of capitalist modernization" (Poon 29).

interpretation of nature existing in an ideal, harmonious state or that its relationships with humans are harmonious. However, no ideal, harmonious state of nature exists. Rather, nature is in a constant state of flux. Underscoring the subtleness of this point, ecologist Daniel Botkin, using the language of music and harmony in a way that tantalizingly confirms yet refutes this misconception, writes: “nature undisturbed by human influence seemed more like a symphony whose harmonies arise from variation and change over every interval of time” (62). The challenge for humans is to recognise that this “symphony” consists of several compositions that are being played at the same time and come together in a discordant way, and to choose between the compositions. Thus, the mode of human interaction with the environment can be considered as consciously or unconsciously leading to a particular composition in this “symphony” of nature. In the novel, we encounter two such compositions. The river community’s habitually close relationship to the Singapore River prevented them from realising that their activities are severely polluting the river. On the other hand, the clean-up of the river is a conscious effort by the government to control river pollution while improving amenities and realizing the economic value of the waterfront. Both relationships result in different compositions in the “symphony” of nature. Neither relationship is harmonious.

Second, studying the music of a location underscores the importance of place. However, music and place can also be dissociated. As Holly Watkins observes, music occurs in a physical space, but also constitutes a place of sorts by invoking in the listener a metaphorical time and space (405). The mobility of music—that it can be performed or enjoyed at different places by different peoples—means that its place of origin can be easily relegated to distant memory (408). The music of a place, like its ecology, is constantly in flux.

The Chinese classical music in the novel recalls Watkins’s observation on the relationship between place and music. The music emerges from and nurtures the river community. Indeed, the attachment of the community to the locale speaks to their emotional bond to the place and to their livelihoods, which is anachronistic in present-day Singapore. On the other hand, and as mentioned earlier, the music is not restricted to its place of origin, as seen in how the music was transplanted from China. A more poignant example is Weng’s annual return to the Singapore River to play his *dizi* to commemorate the evicted river community, a music that signified not only the Chinese culture from China but also the life of the lost river community (Lim, C. 155–158, 186–187). Weng’s *dizi* music stands out in the sonic ecology of the river, which has become a cosmopolitan space that is homogenized by globalisation and market forces.

In contrast, the river’s metaphorical music—the sounds of the river and its habitants—is created by the life and processes of the river and hence both share the same fate. The human community and its sound, or metaphorical music, disappeared following the clean up of the river. The disappearance of the metaphorical music, which emerged from the river community and which the Chinese classical music constantly reminds one of, underscores the painful adjustment the community experienced due to their eviction. The eviction of the river people is one of the more striking instances of the deterritorialization of the Chinese immigrant culture during Singapore’s modernization drive.

The clean-up of the river resulted in the eviction of the river community from the river, as well as environmental and economic benefits, thus invoking an ambivalent attitude in the novel. Although the river community's consciousness and livelihoods were centred on the river, the community did not pay particular environmental attention to the river. Only when the eviction troubles begin does Weng realise that the river is a "cesspool in the heart of the city" (59–60). Considering the extent of the pollution, it is difficult to imagine young Weng and Ping swimming in the polluted river (45–46). At the end of the novel, Ping visits Singapore from the United States, her first in a long time, and reflects on the changes along the river. The river's tributaries and the hut of Weng's family, which had no electricity or running water, were replaced by swanky new hotels and condominiums. Ping displays resigned acceptance to the constant transformation of the landscape and the resulting forgetfulness in the city-state (282–283). The river is now clean and hosts human activities, and its corresponding sonic ecology, that are in keeping with modern standards of sanitation and economic productivity.

### **The Music of Development**

An important characteristic of Singapore which Lim's novel underscores is its single-minded focus on economic development and modernization, which resulted in changes in the urban environment and a latent forgetfulness in its residents. Following its clean-up, the river was reclaimed for three functions: economic utility, public access, and its cultural and historical value (Chang and Huang 2090–2098). The music and sonic ecology associated with the hotels, condominiums, and food and beverage outlets that were subsequently established along the river are distinctly different from that of the river community before the clean-up.

Lim's novel raises two related questions. First, what musical idiom can one make of current Singapore society, considering its ethnic and cultural diversity, commitment to economic growth, and status as a global city-state? Such an idiom, if it exists, would inevitably be influenced by Singapore's economic development and entail a pragmatic stance towards the environment. Indeed, one might ask whether a unified multicultural musical idiom and an indigenous form of environmentalism in Singapore can emerge from the populace, which is made up of the indigeneous Malays and deterritorialised immigrant ethnicities, to the extent that their identities, cultures, and livelihoods are not homogenised and overtaken by modern economic development. At the same time, Lim's focus here on the Chinese community raises the issue of the ways in which the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia can contribute to ameliorating the environmental predicament in the region.

The second question is whether metaphorical music can encourage a sense of place and rootedness in Singapore, and whether this sense of place and rootedness can be preserved in spite of economic growth. Singapore's rapid and disorienting transformation is already unsettling to some and means its sonic ecology is constantly changing. A good place to explore this question is the Singapore River, where the river's role in the city has been recast from a hub for transportation and local culture to one for consumption, business, and leisure that is mainly targeted at an urban audience. The present sonic ecology of the river does not possess sufficient local character as well as rootedness to instill a sense of place in its listener. A location in Singapore that is oriented towards the local would presumably possess a stronger sense of place.

As Singapore seeks a balance between the “excesses of global urbanism and the parochialism of vernacular concerns” (Chang and Huang 2085), the society’s perspective on the environment will continue to change. Using the music metaphor while recognizing its fluid quality can help us understand and reflect on the changes in Singapore society and its environmental perspective.

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## A Sense of Place, a Sense of Home and a Sense of Self: Ecological Imagination in Hoang A Sang's *The Dreams of Chestnut Colour*

NGUYEN Thi Dieu Linh (*Hanoi University of Education*)

### Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to explore the ecological imagination in *The Dreams of Chestnut Colour*, a prose writing collection by Vietnamese writer Hoang A Sang, using the ecocritical lens and focusing on place, dwelling, home and self. By defining *The Woodland* and *The Urban* as localized, symbolic and psychical places, the author exposes the contrast between them, which is related to the urbanization and the cultural conflicts between the minority Tay people and the majority Kinh people. By choosing both memories, dreams and daily life stories to perceive *The Woodland* and *The Urban*, Sang describes a metaphorical journey in which he discovers his identity and that of the Tay people.*

### Introduction

*The Dreams of Chestnut Colour* is a prose writing collection by Hoang A Sang, a Vietnamese writer and journalist. The collection was published both in print and online newspapers from 2007 to 2012, and then published by Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing House in 2014. Being a member of the Tay<sup>10</sup> ethnic group, the author was born in 1976 and grew up at Cao Bang province where Tay people live in the valleys and the mountains. At the age of eighteen, he moved to Hanoi for his tertiary education, subsequently starting his career as a painter, writer and journalist. Though a resident of Hanoi city for more than twenty years, he still identifies himself as an exile from the urban environment, which has alienated him from his selfhood and the surrounding world. In his attempt to overcome this alienation, he has re-created the ecological imagination of *The Woodland* which is localized in his hometown, Pac Thay village.

The concept of place plays an important role in this book. The collection is divided into two parts which are named “*The Woodland*” (including 13 pieces of prose writing) and “*The Urban*” (including 14 pieces of prose writing) and can be read as a metaphorical journey enacted between these two places, via which the author attempts to explore his sense of home and his sense of self. The purpose of my paper is to explore the ecological imagination in this collection, which is related to the “dwelling”, a key concept in ecocriticism (Garrard, 2004). In his book, A Sang depicts dwelling as space, in which the interaction between us

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<sup>10</sup> The Tay is one of the fifty-four ethnic groups in Vietnam today. They live primarily along the lower slopes of the mountains in northern Vietnam. With a population of 1.7 million, the Tay is the second largest ethnic group after the majority Kinh people. Having settled down in Vietnam from the second half of 1000BC, the Tay lived off agriculture. They speak the Tay language (part of the Tai-Kadai group of languages) and Vietnamese, which is their second language as well as their formal language at school. Generally, they practice Then—a native belief in which they worship natural gods, tutelary gods and ancestors. In recent years, their lives have been changed rapidly because of the process of modernization in Vietnam.

and the environment helps us to learn more about ourselves. As Donelle N Dreese states in her book, entitled *Ecocriticism Creating Self and Place in Environmental and American Indian Literature*, “An important conviction of ecocriticism is that we are interconnected with the world around us and, therefore, studying the environment involves studying how human beings affect and interact with the environment” (Dreese, 2002, 4). In addition, this collection also connects ecological imagination with urbanization, environmental changes, and cultural conflicts between the minority Tay people and the majority Kinh people. Kate Rigby’s idea of “reconnecting the social and the ecological”, where she negotiates Bate’s view that ‘ecological exploitation is always coordinate with social exploitation’, may be of relevance (Rigby, 161).

Ultimately, it is important for mainly urban readers to know about the inseparable connection between A Sang’s stories and the Tay people’s idea of storytelling. In the Tay traditional culture, oral storytelling plays an essential role. Because they do not have their own writing system, it is the oral storytelling tradition that allows them to transmit their understandings of themselves and the surrounding world from generation to generation. Therefore, to them, reality and imagination are two sides of the same coin, and likewise, recovering lost stories and inventing new stories are not differentiated. In his book, A Sang defines himself as a storyteller who is a part of the Tay storytelling tradition. Most of the stories about The Woodland are re-told to the character “I”, who is the audience, from his father, his grandfather, and other old people in the village who are the storytellers. And then, character “I”, as a storyteller, recreates these stories in his own way.

There are two kinds of the ecological imaginations of the Tay in *The Dreams of Chestnut Colour*. Both of them are culturally situated, and therefore, are influenced by culture in their own ways. One kind comes from urban people who have become biased in the way they see and think about minority cultures, including the Tay’s. Firstly, urban people are prejudiced against the Tay under the assumption that minority people always live in a “natural” and “wild” way. Moreover, the urban people think of their natural environment as something harmonious and romantic so that, occasionally, they come to take photos to post on the social network (“The Curse of the Upland Terraces”, “Ice and Snow: the Tragedy of Pain and Beauty”). Another misunderstanding, widely shared among urban people, is that minorities including the Tay have been considered as closely embedded in “nature” and “wilderness”, which leads to their being stereotyped by urban people. The urbanites align “minority” with the things that are described as “rather rare in the urban” such as “minority food”, “minority wine”, and even “minority whore” (“Masqueraded ‘moth!’”, “The Dream of Chestnut Colour”, “The Orientating Little Stream”, “The Life of the Whore and Virtue Revival Moments”). Moreover, the author himself, often from the perspective of the narrative “I”, also co-opts the ecological imagination of the Tay to embody a sense of nostalgia for the past (even a past that he has never lived), as well as idealistic expectations for the future. Indeed, the Tay have provided not only the locations but also the imagery for this kind of imagination. Yet, A Sang has strong doubts about both types of idealized imagination. As we know, he alludes to the image of “dreams” frequently in twenty-seven pieces of prose writing, including the title of the book. Thus, living in The Urban and dreaming of The Woodland can be considered as a kind of reterritorialization. As Dreese mentions in her book: “Part of the reterritorialization effort involves recovery of lost stories and cultural practices, but that effort also involves imagination and invention” (2002, 114).

## The Woodland and the Urban: a Sense of Place

Two parts of the collection which are named “The Woodland” and “The Urban” indicate a sense of place. In twenty-seven pieces of prose works, it is the narrative “I” that recreates the ecological imagination on the interlaced “spiderweb” and thereby travels between the two places. The narrative “I” describes and contrasts The Woodland and The Urban as localized, symbolic, and psychical places.

Firstly, being localized places, The Woodland and The Urban are identified as Pac Thay, the village and Hanoi, the capital. The center and the heart of The Woodland is the author’s hometown “ban Pac Thay”—“Pac Thay village”<sup>11</sup>. The Woodland is localized in Pac Thay village with all its own history and culture as well as social relations and belief systems. Therefore, it carries ecological and cultural significance. The Urban’s setting is Hanoi. Being the capital city of Vietnam, Hanoi is regarded as the political and cultural center of the Kinh people. This city is not only the dwelling place of many generations of the majority Kinh people and the place where their culture is preserved, but also a symbol of urbanization and modernization, particularly in northern Vietnam. As a center, it imprints its cultural values unwittingly or deliberately on the surrounding places. By building a contrast between these two places, A Sang implicitly underlines the historical and cultural oppression of The Urban imposed upon The Woodland.

The imagination of The Woodland and The Urban has been created to represent the dichotomy between nature and human artifice, as well as life-giving and life-destroying places. A Sang describes The Woodland as affirming of both nature and culture. He depicts his hometown with vivid natural scenes such as mornings in the field, full moon nights and old forests. On the contrary, in The Urban, the moon appears “yellow, fragile and maudlin”, and as he claims: “I could not be moved by this kind of moon” (“Be Wildered Moon in the Urban”). Likewise, the eucalyptus tree becomes “deformed and lonely” (“The Lonely Eucalyptus Tree”) and wild animals lose their survival instinct (“The Animals Which no Longer Remember the Woodland”, “In the City, Both the Babbler and I are Affected!”).

The existing conflicts between The Woodland and The Urban tend to escalate when it comes to cultural and ethnical problems. According to A Sang, the Tay’s traditionally harmonious interactions with the environment are different from the discordant manner in which the urban people interact with theirs. He reinforces a sympathetic relationship between human and the natural/non-human world by using images and metaphors to underscore the Tay people’s culture, which emphasizes sustainable living. For example, being a member of Tay ethnic community, he assumes that the non-human world around us is mortal in exactly the same way as we human beings are. Moreover, our mortality is presented as being dependent on that of the non-human. In “The Water-wheel and My Aunt”, he tells the life story of his aunt named Nhin and the water-wheel of the family named Coon Ta Linh. His aunt was born at the same time as the family made the water-

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<sup>11</sup> “Village” is the English translation for both “*lang*” and “*ban*” in Vietnamese, which are low administrative divisions of Vietnam. But while “*lang*” connotes a village in the plains where the Kinh people live, “*ban*” is the village on the low mountains in northern Vietnam where the Tay people live.

wheel, and lived a lonely and silent life like the water-wheel, which is regarded as the only one thing still remaining “loyal to the Tay tradition” but also the first thing to be forgotten in modern life.

Another story that affirms this idea is “The Orientating Little Stream”, in which the author emphasizes the interaction between the little stream in his hometown and Tam Loong—the most recent storyteller of Tay oral tradition. Tam Loong is described as the oldest man, and also the only man in the village who has been to the sea, and even out of the country to South Africa. On his return, Tam Loong spends the rest of his life beside the little stream narrating stories to children, and at last dies sitting beside it: “I will remember that evening forever. I saw the little stream and the oldest man of Pac Thay village become one, and it seemed they were telling a story together” (Hoang, 2014, 144; my trans.). Ten years after the death of Tam Loong, the little stream also “disappears from the earth” and “dries out in pain” (Hoang, 2014, 145; my trans.) as a consequence of the people’s actions, such as digging through the mountains, felling the trees and killing the fish in the stream. By linking the fates of the human and the non-human world, A Sang presents the idea of the death of The Woodland, which involves the entwined death of nature, people and minority cultures. Nothing in the Tay community or culture changes without causing an impact on others or being affected by others.

While all the stories of The Urban happen in present time and in “reality”, most of the stories of The Woodland are narrated through A Sang’s reflections on the past that are associated with the memories of himself and the Tay people. Within Pac Thay village, there exist significant differences between Pac Thay in reality and the Pac Thay of his memories and imagination. First of all, both The Urban and The Woodland are currently locked in the inevitable process of expanding industrialization. Most of the “woodland” that the Tay ethnic group inhabits has been undergoing rapid changes caused by human exploitation and urbanization. The interconnectedness between humans and their natural environment has been broken, due to the estrangement of both humankind and nature. Therefore, in his attempt to re-create this interconnectedness, he invokes memories and dreams. This also means that the imagination which is built upon the past and fiction can help him escape from the facts of present urban development. In “The Secret of The-Morning-Life”, he writes: “Now, truth only appears in my dreams of sunrises in my village. And what I am seeing and living with in this city appears fake. That can be a possibility! No wonder I love to dream all the time and never want to wake up in the urban sunrises” (Hoang, 2014, 175; my trans.). A journey between The Woodland and The Urban as psychical places can only be a product of the imagination.

In brief, A Sang’s dominant sense of place in this collection is based on the contrast between The Woodland and The Urban. These two imaginings, described as localized, symbolic, and psychical places, expose the author’s idea of the organic relationship between human and nature/ non-human world. According to his perception as well as the Tay people’s, the lives, the changes, and even the mortalities of all entities in the world depend on each other. By making a metaphorical journey between these two places, A Sang shows his respect to nature and the non-human world to which humans belong.

## The Dreams of Chestnut Colour: A Sense of Home and a Sense of Self

In *The Dreams of Chestnut Colour*, A Sang gives the title a double meaning. Firstly, it is the “chestnut colour” in reality. His hometown used to be the land of old chestnut trees. But then, due to the process of urbanization and industrialization, “a forest of old chestnut trees has been completely destroyed only in two years”, which he regards as “a horrific period” (“The Dreams of Chestnut Colour”). In recent years, realizing the economical and ecological benefits of chestnut trees, they have been planting them again, but of course it will take a long time to restore “chestnut colour” to the woodland. Besides this realistic meaning, “chestnut colour” is also a metaphor for nostalgic memories. The shadow, the colour and the flavor of chestnut trees were part of the author’s childhood, which is related to the dwelling of the Tay ethnic community. Therefore, “chestnut colour” signifies his sense of home and his sense of self that now only can be re-created in “the dreams”. Firstly, for A Sang, the senses of place, of home and of self are inseparable. “Home” may be defined as a place which can make people feel like they belong, as well as where they can be themselves. Therefore, “home” embodies both physical and psychological signification. As Dreese states: “The quest stems from a basic human need for safety and acceptance, which can come from any writer, of any ethnic origin, who is sensible to the feeling of not having a safe place to inhabit either physically or psychologically” (2002, 122). This kind of feeling is what A Sang attempts to explore and express in his book.

Two parts of the collection describe his journeys between the Woodland and The Urban. At the same time, they also chronicle the process of A Sang discovering himself by defining the interaction between him and these two places. For children who were born and grew up in The Woodland (Pac Thay village) like him, The Urban (Hanoi) previously represented “a dream” of a better life on both physical and mental levels. He came to Hanoi to make this kind of dream come true. And he did. He has a successful career as a journalist, painter and writer. He has a house and a family. But paradoxically, as he admits: “I have been living in this city for many years, but I still do not understand what ‘dream’ is; I only vaguely realize my own selfish ambition” (Hoang, 2014, 201; my trans.). In The Urban, as he describes, the interconnectedness between human and nature/non-human world has been destroyed. Thus, it becomes an unsafe place for someone like A Sang, who was born and raised in The Woodland with a sense of himself as an inseparable part of nature/non-human world. While The Urban is described as a place where “we will forget a terrible experience in three minutes, collect thousands of lies in three days, and cannot remember anything after three years” (Hoang, 2014, 216; my trans.), The Woodland is defined as a place to conserve the “purity” and “innocence” of our souls (“Masqueraded ‘moth’!”). Therefore, although he has lived in the city for twenty years, deep inside he still desires a place that can make him feel like home as well as determine his identity.

From The Urban, he comes back his hometown, Pac Thay village, to seek this kind of place. But both The Woodland and he have changed a lot. Thus, when he returns to visit his hometown, most of the local people do not even know who he is. They think that he is a stranger who comes from the plain/the city. Then they talk to each other about him in their native Tay language in front of him, assuming he does not understand what they say. This situation forces him to re-define himself. He writes: “Who am I now? My appearance has changed a lot; even my thinking is very different, of course. There is only one thing that

remains: my beloved Tay language! And now even that beloved language is pretending not to know who I am! [...] Suddenly I feel myself a stranger” (Hoang, 2014, 248;249; my trans.). The connections between him and The Urban as well as The Woodland at the present time are broken, and consequently he feels that he exists as an exile in both places.

Therefore, in order to locate a safe territory, he reimagines the real landscape of “Pac Thay village” through dreams and memories. In his writings, he and his imagined village are described as mirror images of each other. They create each other so that one can never be fully identified without the other. This ecological imagination is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the prose writing entitled “The Orientating Little Stream”. In Pac Thay village, there used to be a little stream which villagers call “Khuoi Slao” (Girls Stream). At the beginning of the prose, A Sang writes: “I grew up beside the little stream” (Hoang, 2014, 137; my trans.). He and the other children grew up not only “beside” the stream, but also subsumed it in their imagination. On one hand, being an essential part of native life, this stream instills in him the sense of a safe dwelling. On the other hand, as Tam Loong the Old Man, who is the storyteller of the village, and the only man who has experienced the world outside the village at that time, told the children to follow this little stream, and that it would guide them to the ocean. The imagination of the little stream, which can lead them to the ocean, produces the idea and belief that the traditional culture of the Tay can lead them to the world outside without them losing themselves. Khuoi Slao is redefined as “orientating stream”, in both the physical and spiritual senses of the term. Therefore, after the death of Tam Loong and the stream, A Sang continuously seeks for it through memories. By doing so, he also searches for his own identity.

Additionally, for anyone who desires to trace the original identity of his community as well as himself, embarking on a journey back to the past is unavoidable. By re-telling or re-creating stories of the past, A Sang attempts to define the identity of the Tay ethnic people. He leads us in tracing back the past to find out the true meanings behind tangible and intangible cultural heritages of the Tay people, which are gradually disappearing under the process of modernization. In particular, the funeral customs of the Tay people are associated with the important role of the Shaman in the past. In “The Shaman and the Divine Stories of the Tay people”, through the stories about traditional funerals which are told by his grandfather, who is also a Shaman, A Sang explores the notion of life and death within Tay culture. They think that everything in the world, either human or non-human, has a soul, but the most complicated soul belongs to humans. Therefore, the Tay people need Shamans in funerals to help their souls find their way back to nature. These stories play an important role in the survival and continuity of Tay culture.

Through the memories of his childhood and through the stories which are told by his father or other old men in the village as part of the Tay oral tradition, A Sang attempts to seek a sense of home and a sense of self. The Woodland, or rather, the ecological reimagining of The Woodland, connects him to the environment and to himself. This reimagining acts as a journey into The Woodland as both a physical location and as metaphor. It is also a journey into the past and into the traditional values of Tay ethnic culture.

## Conclusion

Thus, *The Dreams of Chestnut Colour* emerges as a record of a physical as well as an internal journey alternating between The Woodland and The Urban, the past and the present. Being born and growing up in The Woodland but working and living in The Urban provides A Sang the opportunity to recover memories, stories and dreams of his hometown, and simultaneously reflect upon daily city life. The interaction of memories and dreams with daily life creates a flexible shift in the relations of The Woodland and The Urban imaginations.

A Sang's book leads us to re-define and re-interpret the significance of the concept of place as not only a geographical but also a psychological and ideological entity. Through the journey between The Woodland and The Urban to seek a sense of home, A Sang expresses his feeling of alienation, the feeling of not belonging to both places. The reason for this is the broken connectedness between human and nature/non-human world due to urbanization and industrialization. Therefore, in his writings, he exposes a desire to reconstruct the imagination of his hometown and the Tay community through childhood memories, daily dreams, and lost stories, in order to create an ethnic identity which is most compatible with his sense of self.

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# The Literary Geography of The Japanese Army Camp in Chang-Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*

Chaiyon TONGSUKKAENG (Mahasarakham University, Thailand)

## Abstract

*Most studies on Chang-Rae Lee's A Gesture Life heavily focus on questions relating to the diaspora's Asian-American citizenship and cultural assimilation. However, not many critics have examined the geography of the Imperial Japanese Army Camp in Southeast Asia, particularly in Burma, where the tropical environment is significantly represented in Lee's novel. This paper discusses Andrew Thacker's idea of literary geography in the novel in order to engage with historical dynamism and the brutality of World War II through the plight of 'comfort women'. The novel portrays Doc Hata, a retired Japanese-American medical supplier, whose past experience as a paramedic officer in Burma haunts a problematic relationship in present-day America with his adopted, fallen daughter. The representation of the infirmary, the comfort house, and the clearing epitomises the savagery of the army camp in connection with Doc Hata's identity crisis. I argue that Lee's memory of war challenges and resists forms of political ideology and its proprietors that dehumanise the victims. This reveals shame, guilt, and loss, as represented by the savagery in the local landscape, which in turn is embedded in the global historical significance of World War II.*

## Introduction

Memories of the past are commonly anchored in places, landscapes, or dwellings. Chang-Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* (1999) is a moving novel which explores the role of memory in reconstructing the past through representations of places during World War II and raises questions about diasporic identity in the contemporary American context. By engaging with the main character, a Japanese-American's experience of war in Southeast Asia, this paper examines the significance of literary geography, which invokes historical significance in connection with an individual's racial identity crisis.

## Literary Geography and Memory Studies

Literary geography delineates the relationship between literature and places or the environment. That means descriptions of the external environment, the landscape, climate, humans, animals, buildings, etc. all significantly contribute to the storyline of the literary work. The writer's consciousness of the environment in literature is oriented towards his or her imagination of space and of geography, such as mapping and drawing boundaries. The specificity of places greatly influences literary creativity in which social and cultural dynamism are embedded. William Sharps traces the creation of imaginary places to Charles Dickens' novels set in London, the Bronte's County, and to the Romantic Poets' Lake District in Cumbria (*Literary Geography*, 1904). By locating a sense of place in *The Country and the City* (1973), Raymond Williams seminally points out the consciousness of the city and the country as well as a regional geography in England to show how urbanisation has transformed the rural areas (also cited in Neal Alexander, 2015). Virginia Woolf later adopts

the term 'literary geography' to emphasise the imagining of both existing places and imaginary locations; for example, Wessex in Thomas Hardy's novels and William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. Andrew Thacker (2005) in "The Idea of Critical Literary Geography" engages literary criticism with places, history, and socio-cultural powers.

Thacker demonstrates three key ideas in reading a text with a framework of critical literary geography. First, the nature of metaphor, which is referred to in the text, mapping, location or boundaries, relates to social and historical spaces. Reading literature requires a metaphorical interpretation of space and its cultural and political implications. Second, Thacker persuades readers to examine a small geographical feature in a cultural context such as streets, shops, and other small spaces of consumption. This might need to be considered both from internal spaces such as the psyche and body of an individual, as well as external spaces such as houses, cities, countries, or continents, in order to see the represented spaces in a formal or traditional context. Last, we should study the implication of representation in a literary text as readers can link a represented place with the actual place. In reading literary works geographically we can arguably study how a social space constructs or influences a writer's literary purpose. As Thacker concludes, a literary text represents a social space, yet that social space also shapes a literary form (63). In *A Gesture Life* Chang-Rae Lee uses both the American and Southeast Asian settings, which are distinct in time and place, to illustrate Doc Hata, the Japanese diasporic's, problematic relationship with the past war and his present identity crisis.

Another lens through which we could engage with literature focusing on history and a sense of place is memory studies, which analyses a collective experience wherein social and cultural memories interact through the process of literary creativity as historiography. While social memory is about oral history, and generational memory is open to a constant shift of interpretation, cultural memory has greater stability due to its embeddedness in collective practices. Both memories function as re-remembering the past in connection with place specificity. Axel Goodbody (2011) argues that literary works respond to a crisis of the past, articulate untold memories, and create stories out of them. For instance, the Holocaust, part of the collective memory of Germany, when reimagined in literature, would constitute "literary re-remembering". The importance of memory studies lies in "a process of intertextual revisitings and reconfigurings of tropes, narratives, and images to reshape the public perception of nature and the environment" (pp. 58-59). Thus, literary works can reconstruct a sense of belonging to places through the recollection of personal and social memories in the form of narrative or poetry. Thus, to "re-member" the history of these places or to "re-imagine" the myths of place will create a poetics of intertextuality (Tongsukkaeng, 2014).

### **Re-examining a Problematic Asian-American Racial Identity**

*A Gesture Life* represents wartime memory through a depiction of an ex-paramedic whose traumatic experience in World War II haunts his present day life in America. The Imperial Japanese Army Camp in Burma becomes a symbolic place where the protagonist re-lives his memory overwhelmed by a sense of guilt and loss. In this novel, Lee depicts Doc Hata or Franklin as a respectable citizen of an affluent town near New York, beset by a conflicting sense of belonging and alienation, since the parallel narratives of America and the Japanese Army Camp in Burma undergo the remembering process. His psychological damage and

fractured relationship with his adopted Korean daughter Sunny brings him back to the memory of war in Southeast Asia, where the savagery, brutal killings, and sexual violence are crucially re-imagined. The camp becomes a focus or symbolic space where that history is embodied in the landscape as well as in the human psyche. Lee's novel can be seen as a form of re-membering the past through the contemplation of a local landscape which resists forms of conflicted political ideology between the Axis and the Allied Powers. As Goodbody contends, "places are special symbols of events and associated values, because they possess an indexical relationship with their meaning." Historical places such as battlefields and war-related landscapes are connected with social values such as patriotism and nationalism. Thus, "not only do they bridge the gap between mental constructs and reality, they are also typically sites where individual and collective memories reinforce each other" (60). Fallen soldiers, veterans, and other families as well as victims are intertwined with those past, heroic memories of loss and death. The representation of the Japanese Army Camp is compared to Hata's dwelling – a Tudor house in an affluent town, Bedley Run, where the protagonist's identity is displaced. More importantly, the themes of Asian-American identity are prominent in this novel, since cultural assimilation and a question of citizenship seem to be conflicted issues.

Lee opens the novel through the first-person narrator, Franklin Hara or Doc Hata, a retired medical supplier who displays faultless manners, politeness, and generosity to neighbours. This leads to problems when dealing with his adoptive daughter Sunny, who has changed from an obedient daughter to a rebellious one. Her transformation is the result of a tension between the freedom that she yearns for and her father's expectations. Hata's life, based on decorum, social etiquette, and respectability reveals the complicated issues of recognition, race, sexuality, and citizenship in America (see Lee 2009 and 2005; Jerng, 2006; and Carroll, 2005). Lee explores cultural assimilation through Hata's identity as one that does not fit into the rest of the society. His sense of guilt for failing to properly raise Sunny brings him back to the memory of the Army Camp in Burma where he had an intimate relationship with a comfort woman. The flashback from the present to the 1940s takes the narrative back to when the Japanese Army invaded East and Southeast Asia.

Lee engages his literary geography with the description of the protagonist's conflicted identity in his displaced dwelling in the suburban bourgeoisie. When Hata sells his declining medical supply business, his daughter Sunny runs away to her dubious friends and drug addicts. Sunny criticizes the constructed facets of Hata's identity, which are made out of 'gestures' in order to assimilate into American culture (Kang, 2003). As Sunny observes, Hata's careful façade leads to her decision to leave him:

"You make a whole life out of gestures and politeness. You're always having to be the ideal partner and colleague."... "Well, no one in Bedley Run really gives a damn. You know what I overheard down at the card shop? How nice it is to have such a 'good Charlie' to organize the garbage and sidewalk-cleaning schedule. That's what they really think of you. It's become your job to be the number-one citizen." (95)

Lee critiques the tension between outward appearance and underlying racial intolerance. Although his affluent house provides security and respectability, it is merely a façade through which people perceive his social status, like the term 'Doc' that his neighbours use to address him, though he is not a real doctor. Contrary to prevalent Asian-American

narratives of marginalized, harsh conditions of working-class life, Lee's novel depicts an educated professional. Asian Americans are no longer 'yellow perils'. Instead, we see "an almost Oriental veneration as an elder" (1). Bedley Run's community seems to welcome this Japanese immigrant at the beginning but eventually ostracizes him from mainstream society when his daughter rebels and leaves him. Their relationship reaches a crisis point when Sunny gets pregnant by her addict boyfriend, which prompts Hata's decision to abort her baby, leading to their breaking-up.

### **The Southeast Asian Geography and the Imperial Japanese Army Camp**

Lee's narrative shifts across time and space in order to signify the character's haunting memory of war. Hata's search for Sunny in Ebbington, where youngsters gather for a house party, becomes a revelatory moment. His troubled memory of an intoxicating party takes him back to a comfort house in Singapore. His sense of responsibility as a good father is challenged by his adopted daughter's sexual promiscuity. As the narrative portrays Hata's objection of that scenario, I argue that Lee raises an important issue of parenthood which invokes an ethics of adoption. There is also a cultural dynamism and difference in terms of parenthood, silence, and gender tension between a father and a daughter, especially in the context of an absent mother figure, as the girl's sense of alienation develops.

After experiencing the wild party, Hata's sense of guilt is reinforced by a past memory in Singapore where he visited a clubhouse for military officers. The connection between Sunny's promiscuity and the clubhouse represents disillusionment in which sex and violence are blurred. In his recollection of the past, one young girl is killed leaping from the second floor to escape sexual violence and slavery. Hata faced an ethical dilemma as to whether he should rescue the other girl from sexual torment or to let the scheme continue its function, namely, to release men from sexual tension. The horrible moment of unnamed Korean girl asking for help in the military club in Singapore is embedded in Hata's memory which is then mediated in the comfort girl called Kkutaeh or K whose plight becomes worse at the military camp in Burma-Siam. The correlation between the settings of Ebbington and Singapore is revealed through Hata's consideration of sexuality, political conflicts, and his medical ethics. Discovering Sunny's sexual promiscuity is a morally challenging experience for Hata. On the one hand, he deplores the sexual depravity. Hata states that he was "not fond of women who are prostitutes" (106). On the other, he ironically acknowledges his intimate and tragic relationship with K, a Korean prostitute. Nevertheless, as a military officer, visiting the clubhouse challenges his sexual morality as well as his humanitarian values.

The measure to keep up the health and safety for the comfort women is mainly decided based upon the well-being of the army. Lee's reference to the causes of these women's tragedy, such as abduction and conscription, signifies the loophole of the Japanese army's regime which dehumanises and victimises these women to serve their political ideology. Hata's conversation with a young soldier, Corporal Endo, suggests the paradox between honour and dignity that Japanese soldiers hold on to and the savage reality of war when these women are sexually exploited, assaulted, and ultimately dehumanised. Hata's reasoning reveals Lee's characterisation of this flawed war hero:

I had answered the way I had for obvious reasons, to assure the corporal of the commonness of all our procedures, and yet the imminent arrival of these “volunteers,” as they were referred to, seemed quite removed from the ordinary. Certainly, I had heard of the longtime mobilization of such a corps, in Northern China and in the Philippines and on other islands, and like everyone else appreciated the logic of deploying young women to help maintain the morale of officers and foot soldiers in the field, though I never bothered to consider it until that night. And like everyone else, I suppose, I assumed it would be a most familiar modality, just one among the many thousand details and notices in a wartime camp. But when the day finally came I realized that I was mistaken. (163)

The deployment of comfort women as ‘volunteering’ is arguably a false or deceptive scheme, which the Japanese government historically utilised. The mobilisation of these comfort women from the Far East to Southeast Asia suggests sexual slavery to maintain the soldiers’ morale, although Lee often counter-argues the roles of these women to help the Japanese army. To clarify this, Lee’s opinion towards war and the exploitation of comfort women is contradictory because the writer is against the cruelty on the one hand. However, Lee uses Hata’s voice to imply the necessity of this barbaric mechanism during the war to achieve its pharaonic project on the other hand.

The Japanese army faces many threats. Aside from venereal diseases that the medical officers tried to control through the comfort house, tropical diseases widespread in Southeast Asia also weakens and eventually kills soldiers. Skin and fungal infections are common among officers while other fatal ailments such as malaria, dengue, dysentery, and cholera are metaphorically swallowing the whole camp. Historically, the army faced many health and safety challenges in the tropical environment of Burma, since the camp was afflicted by malaria and cholera. These diseases devastated not only the Japanese but also POWs (prisoners of war) and ‘romusha’ (local labourers) (See Richard Flanagan’s *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, 2013). In *A Gesture Life*, the landscape of Southeast Asia is represented as diseased, where tropical maladies are rampant. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee (2014) refers to the diseased environment as one laden with ailments and germs, and ultimately death. Likewise, the depiction of India and the idea of tropical malady is a stereotype of settings in Rudyard Kipling’s novels. Mukherjee argues that Kipling’s imagination of India as a diseased environment leads to the justification of colonialism to impose the ruling system, development, and medical sciences on India. Mukherjee says that cholera is a discourse of diseases and ailments that represent India as the land of death (84). Even though the colonial question is not raised overtly in *A Gesture Life*, the tropical environment is obviously subject to similar exoticisation.

In relation to diseases and ailments, the environment of the comfort house becomes a focus of Hata’s medical experience which is complicated with sexual jealousy. Lee imagines the comfort house as lacking basic needs and hygiene, in order to critique this established crime of the Japanese government. These women’s ‘duty’ to relieve the soldiers’ sexual desire is deemed a sacrifice that they need to undertake for the Japanese Empire. Notably, the comfort house reflects how the domestic space implicates the psychological effects on these women, as well as on medical officers who keep them. Metaphorically, it is a ‘coffin’ as sexual violence against them is obviously noted. For example, some girls severely bleed and are inflicted with venereal disease after they service the soldiers. Thus, they are sent to

the infirmary for medical treatment. As the novel shows, the writer critiques the traumatic past which haunts the main character in relation to place specificity. The landscape of Burma is not clearly defined by its locality, which is distinct from Thailand or India, but is generalised by the tropical environment, which in turn is represented as dark, suffocating, and wild in relation to the Army's barbarism. In the same way, the infirmary is a symbol of shame and guilt that Hata has tried to bury in the past; yet, this haunting memory never disappears.

Equally important, the infirmary is depicted as a space of conflict; it is where medical ethics are challenged by sexual jealousy and gender politics when Captain Ono and Hata fall for the same girl, K. Captain Ono's disagreement with the deployment of comfort women is challenged by his medical ethics and duty:

It was not against my field training, certainly, to treat a patient in such a way with the aim of returning him to his duties as soon as possible, for in wartime it was never a question of salubrity, really not for anyone. Rather, as the doctor had already pointed out to me, it was a matter of standards, in this case to apply the level of treatment that was most appropriate for the situation, and for whom. In this schema the commander had his level, and the officers theirs, the enlisted men and others yet another, and so on and so forth, until it came to the girls, who had their own. All this was inviolable, like any set of natural laws. (227).

Ono aims to succeed in his profession, which is to heal injured soldiers in the battlefield. However, treating comfort women is inevitably part of his responsibility and a morally ambiguous burden. He sees these women as mechanism to accommodate the military's scheme to fight for victory. He disregards the dehumanization of these women. In so doing, Lee's criticism of the Japanese military regime is observable in the infirmary: a space of honor and profession in which Hata has to uphold standards of hygiene and medical treatment. But this is complicate by sexual jealousy.

Besides, the infirmary reflects environmental deterioration in Southeast Asia. The black flag is used to signal disease outbreak. This alerts Hata to prepare for his duty. The flag suggests both the sexual transmitted disease and the girls' approaching death and/or failure of the army itself. Sexual morality and jealousy plays an important role in this conflict between both military officers, whose feelings for K problematise the plot and lead to Ono's and K's deaths. The infirmary represents confinement, romances, and sexual jealousy as Ono's comment on providing examination for the comfort women demonstrates: "You examined them, yes. But in doing so you abandoned far more important principles. This examination room, for example, is a disgrace and besmirchment upon our practice" (184). Ono's remark suggests his perception of the scheme as defacing the dignity of his medical profession, because he is committed to saving the lives of soldiers afflicted in battle, not the sexually exploited prostitutes.

After K's sister cannot bear the miserable duty in the camp, she decides to ask for help from Corporal Endo to liberate her from this savagery. Endo kills K's sister by slashing her on the clearing and this crime against the army is a challenge against political ideology. Endo, Hata and K are aware of this brutality (sexual slavery) and savagery (killing K's sister) imposed on the women; however, no one could stop this barbarism. Endo's murder of K's sister is

considered a crime against the army's property, devalued as 'armament or rations.' Sexual objectification in this regime is regarded as part of the patriotic mechanism: devotion, sacrifice, and thus an honor for the Japanese Empire. The most crucial and tragic subplot here lies in the Japanese sense of 'honor' and fighting spirit. As Lee suggests, 'hara-kiri' or ritual suicide by disembowelment becomes a heroic death that an officer offers Endo, whose death is a form of liberation from physical misery and also a sacrifice to those unfortunate women.

The horror comes full circle after K kills Captain Ono by stabbing his neck in self-defense in response to other soldiers' sexual assault; she is then taken by blood-hungry soldiers to the clearing. As a contested space of freedom and death, the clearing signifies the barbaric creed of the whole Japanese army where law is not enforced humanely, as on women who are not identified as vulnerable victims. This incident, that depicts thirty soldiers running after one woman to rape and kill her, is horrifying and demonstrates how men have become wild and savage. Their brutal act is perpetrated on the clearing, the same place where K's sister was killed. Ironically, the killing of enemies is not depicted in this novel, but the brutality of sexual violence against women is highlighted. Being dismembered, as the saber foreshadows, K is removed from suffering; her sense of duty toward the comfort house is nullified. Here, patriotism or nationalism do not go hand in hand with the barbarism of killing the enemies. Instead, sexual violence and savagery are inflicted on Korean comfort women.

In summary, *A Gesture Life* depicts a sense of alienation in an individual whose identification with being an American is problematized by his past memory. Lee's critique of social memory is facilitated by an individual's traumatic experience which implicates the politically contested space in the Southeast Asian landscape through the shift of narrative. Lee examines Hata's identity crisis in an American context by paralleling it with a sense of displacement experienced in World War II Southeast Asia. *A Gesture Life* thus illustrates the literary geography of memory which travels across time and space, from America to Southeast Asia, from an individual's psyche to the external landscape.

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