Thinking, Feeling, Reading: On Methodologies in Scholarship on Malaysian Literature in English

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Abstract

This essay is about the production of scholarship on Malaysian literature in English. On the premise that existing readings of Malaysian texts are largely based on the methodology of critique, it proposes that the emerging model of reading known as postcritique has the potential to contribute to the further diversification of scholarship on said literature. To illustrate its potential, postcritique is put to work on Lee Kok Liang's classic novel, *Flowers in the Sky*, leading to the argument that negative aesthetics is the hitherto unacknowledged strength of the text and that coming into knowledge of this value requires the reader to not only think but also feel his way through the act of reading and meaning-making.

Keywords: Malaysian literature in English, methodologies, critique, postcritique, Lee Kok Liang, *Flowers in the Sky*

This essay is about the production of scholarship on Malaysian literature in English. It seeks to better understand what it is that we do as specialists of literary studies when we perform critical readings of texts counted as Malaysian – reading here being underpinned by hermeneutics, which concerns itself with the meanings of texts, and poetics, which focuses on the conditions of possibility for the emergence of textual meanings (Culler, *Hermeneutics* 304-305). The question of "what (we do)" that I explore in this essay is entwined with the questions of "why (we do it the way we do)", "how (we practically go about doing it)," and "what-if (we were to do it differently)" – all of which directly relate to methodologies of reading. In contrast to the term "methods" denoting the ways in which data are obtained (e.g., by way of textual analyses, field observations, and interviews), "methodologies" is understood here as the contextual frameworks that "dictate the kinds of questions to ask and therefore the kinds of answers and outcomes" obtained (Grierson and Brearley 5). Methodologies are not so much about the specific theories one employs to read

literature (e.g., psychoanalytic, feminist, postcolonial) as they are about the principle-guided means and ends to which theories and texts are put to critical co-creation.

The same repertoire of methodologies is largely shared by scholars across the humanities and social sciences irrespective of whether their object of study is literature, film, or other forms of cultural production, and no one methodology is exclusive to readings of Malaysian literature in English. The question of methodology is as central to the varied disciplines as it is to the study of Malaysian literature, for it literally determines the kinds of knowledge that are produced and the ways in which the objects of study are understood. Yet, strangely enough, despite its centrality, methodology – or, more precisely, criticism of methodologies employed in literary criticism – has to date received virtually no dedicated attention in the study of Malaysian literature in English. To be sure, a rich variety of critical exegeses of individual Malaysian texts abound, as do general commentaries, reviews, annotated bibliographies, literary-historical accounts, interviews with authors and practitioners, first-person authorial accounts of their art, and so on. There is also no shortage of the occasional broad studies that take stock of Malaysian literature in English, a recent one being the 2018 special issue on twenty-first century Malaysian literature published by the journal, *Asiatic* (see, for e.g., Ng, "Reading"). Even there, as in elsewhere, conspicuous silence reigns where criticism of criticism is concerned. Combing through the Malaysia subsection of the comprehensive annual bibliography of Commonwealth literature featured in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* between 2003 and 2021, not one publication was found that critically examined the methodological approaches taken in readings of Malaysian texts. The same null result was arrived at after going through all forty issues of the journal, *SARE*, published between 1980 and 2021, that are available online. Criticism of criticism of Malaysian texts if it exists has proven to be elusive. This essay is but a step towards redressing the methodological silence that profoundly impacts how we read and understand Malaysian literature in English.

In the ensuing discussion, I begin by tracing the Malaysian origins of the study of Malaysian literature in English before positing that existing readings of Malaysian texts, although varied in foci and style, largely adhere to the methodology of critique, a term describing reading practices that share certain familial features, one of which is the inclination to privilege the deep, the symbolic, and representational over the surface, the literal, and the more-than-representational. I then contrast critique against an emerging model of reading known as postcritique before proposing that the latter, as supplement to critique, has the potential to contribute to the further

diversification of scholarship on Malaysian texts, especially the classics, that have for too long been yoked to the worn narratives of fraught Malaysia. To illustrate its potential, postcritique is put to work on Lee Kok Liang's classic novel, *Flowers in the Sky*, a text to which critique has been amply applied over the decades but has since waned in critical interest. Premised on my affective experience of the text as a thinking-feeling reader, and drawing on Bill Brown's thing theory, Gernot Böhme's theory of atmospheres, and Theodor Adorno's aesthetic theory, I argue that hiding in plain sight as the hitherto unrecognized strength of the modernist novel is the aesthetic value of the "ugly" that does its work by unsettling and priming the reader to rethink, beyond the standard concerns of critique, the functions and possibilities of modern art and the aesthetic experience.

Origins and Methodologies

Malaysian literature in English and academic scholarship on it are relatively new discourses that are, by artificial yet necessary epoch demarcation, no older than their postcolonial namesake, Malaysia, which came into being in 1963 (see Holden). They made their first formal appearance in Malaysian academia in 1966 when Lloyd Fernando created and launched a pathbreaking course on Commonwealth Literature at the English Department of the University of Malaya. Introduced at a time when the prevalent belief was that only Western canonical literature was worth studying, the course, then "uncommon anywhere in the British Commonwealth" (Lim 230), included works by the post-1965 Malaysian pioneers: Lee Kok Liang, Ee Tiang Hong, and Wong Phui Nam. In the early days, exegeses of Malaysian literature in English by Malaysian scholars were seldom conscious or explicit about the methodologies they employed, although they tended to take the aesthetic, linguistic, or sociological approach, or a blend of these. With the rise and succeeding saturation of poststructuralist theory and postcolonial theory as its "supplement or surrogate" (Felski, *The Limits* 77), however, readings of Malaysian texts from the late 1990s onwards had become increasingly more self-reflexive, theory-driven, critical, and politically-assertive. Readings of this description, which predominate current scholarship on Malaysian texts – as well as textual practice across the humanities, including literary, film, cultural, and visual studies – are broadly recognisable as "critique."

The term critique varies in meaning and usage but certain salient features may nonetheless be discerned. As Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski explain, some scholars treat critique as synonymous with literary and cultural theory, the "main effect" of which is, for Jonathan Culler, "the disputing of 'common sense' [...] views about meaning, writing, literature, experience" (*Literary* 4). Other scholars, by contrast, view critique more specifically as an offspring of "the hermeneutics of suspicion," conceptualised by Paul Ricoeur as an "art of interpreting" (33), "a tactic of suspicion" (26) and "a battle against masks," all attributed to the "three masters of suspicion" (33), namely Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Critique and the hermeneutics of suspicion are alike insofar as both are techniques of deciphering and unveiling that approach texts suspiciously and symptomatically. However, unlike the hermeneutics of suspicion which Ricoeur conceives as a methodology among other methodologies, critique positions itself "as a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities" (Sedgwick 125).

The tendency to be vigilant and suspicious towards appearances and to metaphorically drill below the surface to unearth latent or hidden significations are commonly attributed to critique but they are not its only features. Critique also links the text and the world even when the text does not; hence characters, events, situations, actions, and other textual features come "freighted with, and held to stand for, broader philosophical meanings or social structures" (Anker and Felski 6). As illustration, in Netty Mattar's reading of Anna Tan's "Codes," the concerns of the cyberpunk short story are not confined to the text itself but extend beyond fiction into present-day Malaysia as the article "explores the effect of the hierarchical orderings of global information networks on local Malay Muslim female subjectivity" (9). Similarly, Zainor Izat Zainal's eco-critique frames four contemporary Malaysian novels in English including K.S. Maniam's *Between Lives* as aligned "to the key phases in the history of environmentalism in Malaysia" (343) before analyzing their relationship with real-world environmental politics. Critique's linking of the text to the world is also evident in its commonplace referencing of the author, often reading the text as a direct or indirect testament of authorial biography and views on broad-ranging matters including writing, society, and politics, as will be illustrated subsequently in my review of selected readings of Lee Kok Liang's novel, *Flowers in the Sky*. In addition, critique is characterized by its intellectual rationalism and wariness towards the aesthetics expressed in the register of emotions, moods, and dispositions (Anker and Felski 11). As Terry Eagleton writes, where once scholars could, like literary critic Frank Kermode, make a statement to the effect that "reading a certain poem by

Wallace Stevens made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end," it would be brow-raising for such a statement to be made today, especially by untenured academics (hence precariously-positioned) as it is "the kind of thing anybody might say, and academics are not paid for being just anybody." Eagleton agrees in principle with Felski that critique is a dominant genre of contemporary writing about literature and that it tends to privilege thinking over feeling.

Having thus outlined some salient features of critique, I should now make clear that it is not my intention to imply or suggest that scholarship on Malaysian texts produced in the genre of critique is homogeneous or lacking in variety. Both Malaysian literature in English and scholarship on it have been growing steadily since the 1960s, and have seen exponential growth especially in the past decade with the emergence of new young authors and scholars. There are now more texts than ever for scholars of Malaysian literature to engage with, which has in turn led to a significant increase of academic scholarship in quantity and variety. A quick browse of the annual bibliographies in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* will dispel any doubt one might have about the existence of the sheer variety of critiques in terms of textual and thematic focus, writing style, theoretical engagement, the production of insights, and so on. That there is still a lack of criticism of criticism, as highlighted previously, does not in any way detract from the variety that exists within critique itself. Notwithstanding, a key question I pose in this essay is: should the existing diversity of these critiques hold us back from further diversifying existing scholarship on Malaysian literature in English in all directions, including experimenting with what I will unpack as postcritique, however problematic the concept itself may be?

I will return to address the above question later in the discussion. But first, I want to make another qualification: that the classification of heterogeneous readings of Malaysian texts under the rubric of critique does not imply that all said readings simultaneously contain all the delineated features of critique. These heterogeneous readings are similar but only insofar as they manifest the Wittgensteinian idea of family resemblances (Anker and Felski 4). As Alastair Fowler explains, "Representatives of a genre may [...] be regarded as making up a family whose septs and individual members are related in various ways, without necessarily having a single feature shared in common by all" (41). In a "complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" (41), some readings may share one or more familial features of critique, while others may share some other features. Some may be more or less vigilant and suspicious than others. Some may drill deeper, remain closer to the surface, or inject extratext into the text to produce complex interpretations. As

well, some may be more or less inclined to draw connections of varying densities between the text and the world. Conceived in these familial terms, critique may be taken to affirm Graham Huggan's assertion that it seems "over-schematic" to claim that critique is "basically extractive" (133).

Although critique thus conceived remains a dominant, charismatic, and largely productive way of reading literature today, it has also simultaneously been facing increasing resistance. In the 1960s, as Malaysian literature in English was being birthed, Susan Sontag had already famously voiced her disagreement with the modern style of interpretation. Sontag agrees in the broad philosophical sense articulated by Nietzsche that "There are no facts, only interpretations" (5). What she disagrees with, rather, is interpretation of the type attributed to Marx and Freud and characterized by "an open aggressiveness, an overt contempt for appearances." In place of the latter type of interpretation, Sontag advocates an "erotics" of reading that seeks to recover the individual sensory experience of art. Since Sontag, a growing number of scholars, including Sedgwick, Latour, and Felski have articulated a similar disenchantment with critique. Best and Marcus, and Gallop are among the contemporary scholars who in principle share Felski's view that, while critique has its place in textual criticism, it is also, like all methodologies, "finite, limited and fallible" (Felski, *The Limits* 192). These and other scholars have consequently proposed various alternatives or supplements to critique that qualify as what Felski terms the "postcritical," a term "not to be confused with the uncritical" but whose vagueness allows it "to serve as a placeholder for emerging ideas and barely glimpsed possibilities" (*The Limits* 173). Ultimately, what counts as important in postcritical reading is the act of "forging links between things that were previously unconnected [and] creating something new in which the reader's role is as decisive as that of the text."

Postcritical methodologies are wide-ranging, an oft-cited example of which is Sedgwick's "reparative reading" which conceptualizes the reader as a thinking-feeling subject instead of a singularly thinking one. Often invoked also are Best and Marcus' "surface reading" and Gallop's "close reading," both characterized as prioritizing "what is evident, perceptible, [and] apprehensible in texts" (Best and Marcus 9) and yet susceptible to being overlooked. Another example is "eudaimonic reading," a postcritical methodology that prizes and consciously chooses to focus on emotions of well-being like "gratitude, serenity, and contentment" and lived aspects of well-being like "physical health, control over one's environment, relationships with others,

membership in a supportive community, and meaningful work" (Pawelski and Mores 1). As the final example of postcritique, there is also "more-than-representational reading" which gives full weight to the affects that are often undervalued, ignored, or overlooked by those doing the representational work of critique (see, for e.g., Thrift; Lorimer; and Carolan).

The varied ways of reading collectively referred to as postcritique are sufficiently well-known to require no major rehearsal here. Still, before proceeding to put postcritique to work on Malaysian literature by way of demonstrating its potential usefulness in further diversifying scholarship in the field, it bears pointing out that the general characterization and distinction drawn between critique and postcritique have not gone uncontested. Bruce Robbins, for instance, charges that Felski's conception of postcritique is as susceptible to faultfinding as the methodology of critique she characterizes as faultfinding. Robbins also argues that Felski's call for readers to be as articulate about their loves as they are about their adversaries risks occluding the operations of power and the resultant injustices that critique is tasked to expose (see also Felski, "Response"). Carolyn Lesjak on her part proposes that, from the viewpoint of ideology critique, surface reading "falsely materializes texts, thereby enhancing their inertness and forgetting about the real things and real people behind them" (249). Lesjak acknowledges nonetheless that, from the side of surface reading, ideology critique may be seen as guilty of the opposite act of dematerializing texts. Contra Lesjak, Toril Moi argues that the dichotomy between deep reading and surface reading rests on a false premise, and that, ultimately, reading is reading in that it boils down simply to "the willingness to look and see, to pay maximal attention to the words on the page. What we do next, what we choose to focus on, is up to us. We are responsible for our own reading" (35). These are but a sampling of arguments and counterarguments in an ongoing larger debate relating to critique and postcritique that is unlikely to conclude anytime soon. A fair position to take meanwhile would be to conceive of critique and postcritique not as wholly distinctive or opposing methodologies that cannot coexist within a single reading but rather as concepts in productive tension with each other and as ways of reading with overlapping familial features that emphasize, with varying intensities, specific interests, views, tendencies, and other aspects of what scholars consider important in literature. Though contingent, this approach to thinking about reading methodologies enables us nonetheless to trace general patterns in the production of scholarship on Malaysian literature in English.

Thinking, Feeling, Reading Malaysian Literature

In a recent essay, Grace Chin notes that historical and political developments in Malaysia – especially as they relate to the "divisive discourses of race and ethnicity" (1) – have extensively shaped Malaysian literature in English, and that Malaysian texts, "especially those by the older-generation writers like Lloyd Fernando, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Lee Kok Liang, and K.S. Maniam," have generally responded to said discourses by "espousing inclusivity, hybridity, and plurality." Following Mohammad Quayum, Chin iterates that the "very same discourses" that have shaped Malaysian literature and to which the latter has responded "have also taken their toll on the literary scene" (1-2). She observes that even the new generation of transnational and diasporic Malaysian writers, most of whom are non-Malay minorities, tend to directly or indirectly reproduce in their works the invariant idea of Malaysia as "the site of marginality, exclusion, exile, and loss" (2). I should add that this tendency is also entirely in line with the practice of critique which, as Eagleton observes, largely lauds margins and minorities as "goods in themselves" and regards as precious in a literary text "what is marginal, subversive, aberrant or non-normative." Against the foregoing background, Chin examines, via Zen Cho's *Spirits Abroad*, how Malaysian literature seeks to unbind itself from the limiting tropes. Chin's article is worth mentioning here also for what it says, albeit in passing, about scholarship on Malaysian literature, especially the classics. If Malaysian texts have been shadowed by the "polarizing and binary politics of postcolonial Malaysia" (2), as Chin underscores, could the same be said also about the readings of these texts? Have the readings, too, been generally locked into the same discourses that have circumscribed the texts on which they are based? Indirectly, Chin answers in the affirmative when she writes that "conventional notions and discourses of otherness and marginality […] have been established as part of the MLE [Malaysian literature in English] tradition and its attendant scholarship" (2). She implies that readings of Malaysian texts have also had to deal with the same "conventional notions and discourses" without necessarily being able to rewrite the terms of engagement, just as not all Malaysian texts have challenged conventions in the way that Cho's *Spirits Abroad* is argued to have done.

Chin is right to point out that readings of the works of pioneers like Fernando, Lim, Lee, and Maniam, as first-responders and products of their time, tend to dwell on the same divisive discourses that delimit the texts. To make this observation is not, of course, to deny or downplay

the collective contributions of the readings in question. Drawing on the distinctive critical perspectives and language of critique, the readings have probed, problematized, and penetrated the depths of Malaysian texts that had previously only been approached in less theoretically-sophisticated terms. They have helped readers to visualize the relationship between the text and the world, and to obtain a firmer grasp of the ways in which the race problem in literature and society unfolds and intersects with religion, class, gender, and other categories of concern. They have enabled scholars of Malaysian literature to intervene as activists who could, by means of textual practice, strive to expose the oppressive structures of power and knowledge, and possibly even contribute to progressive social change. Lastly, they have contributed to the creation of a safe discursive space in which concerned parties, including one's own students, may partake in conversations about the sociopolitical issues that cleave Malaysia and cast a long shadow on its literary production. These are significant contributions, undoubtedly. Notwithstanding, the question arises as to the effectiveness of putting critique to work repeatedly over decades on the same handful of Malaysian classics to interrogate the same set of issues arising from the same intractable race problem in Malaysia. It would be fair to say that such an effort tends to deliver diminishing returns in gratification and insight, and that it ultimately ceases to be productive when the points it makes, which may have been novel in the first few times they were made, lose all power of revelation with over-repetition and become banal, even tiresome, to the scholarly audience.

On account of their longevity, the early texts by the Malaysian authors cited by Chin are relatively more vulnerable to interpretative exhaustion. After all, they have been in existence since the last decades of the twentieth century, giving scholars much more time to thoroughly interrogate them than they have had with newer, less-explored works by an expanding and lively roster of younger authors represented by Tan Twan Eng, Tash Aw, Zen Cho, Yangsze Choo, YZ Chin, Bernice Chauly, Joshua Kam, Ivy Ngeow, Sreedhevi Iyer, and others. A sign of the classics having been maximally mined may be found in the plateauing number of readings on them that have been published to date; for some time now, fresh readings have slowed to a trickle, suggesting that, as far as critique goes, much of what could be said has more or less been said. Given the circumstances, scholars interested in (re)reading the classics may of course attempt to find different ways of using critique to produce non-reiterative insights. Alternatively, they may, if they view critique as but one of several valid reading practices, choose to experiment with postcritique

as framed and qualified earlier to see if a more reparative and multisensual approach may offer something a little different. In what follows, I explore how postcritical methodologies may be deployed to read Malaysian literature in English. The discussion will be anchored to Lee Kok Liang's *Flowers in the Sky* (1981), a classic Malaysian novel to which critique has been amply applied but has since waned in critical interest. But, first, a quick overview of *Flowers* and key scholarship on the text.

As noted in the blurb on the back-cover of the 1991 edition, *Flowers in the Sky* (henceforth *Flowers*) is set in "an unnamed Malaysian seaside city" and revolves around the lives of two main characters whose paths intersect over the five days that frame the novel. Both are first-generation immigrants to Malaysia: "an old Chinese Buddhist monk" from China called Venerable Hung, and "a successful Indian surgeon" from Sri Lanka named Mr. K. These paratextual descriptions are evident on the surface of the text, neither hidden nor hiding. The universalizing claim in the blurb that the two men "embody the ideals and limitations of humans," though, is not a statement of fact but one of critique. In fact, much of what critics have said about *Flowers* emerges out of the same logic of reading in which the surface, the literal, and the non-representational are subordinated to the deep, the symbolic, and the representational, where "X is really – or, really means – A", "Y is really B", and "Z is really C" (Sontag 5).

Syd Harrex's critique of *Flowers*, for example, calls attention to the way in which the fictional world of *Flowers* is authorially intended to serve as a microcosm of Malaysian society. According to Harrex, "Lee is concerned to portray his main characters [Hung and Mr. K] as members of the Chinese and Indian communities respectively, with some attention directed to the Malay community through the character of Inspector Hashim and the occasional backdrop presence of the religion of Islam" (Harrex 37). More recently, Bernard Wilson, who has written extensively on Malaysian literature, makes a case for the author-text relationship in *Flowers* – specifically, how the narrative styles of the novel and the various positions taken by the key characters are "closely related to Lee's conflicting personal responses to his periods of residence in Australia and Europe and to his problematic position in, and attitude towards, Malaysian society" (2). Lastly, Andrew Ng (*Intimating*) presents readers with an alternative to the conventional interpretation that frames Venerable Hung's dilemma as one stemming from the temptation of the flesh. As support, Ng cites the episode in which Hung, having chanced upon a drawing made by Ah Lan, a mute female servant with "soft and plump" (Lee 129) arms, instructs

his sister, Pek Sim, to tell Ah Lan to cease drawing on account of it being a "pleasure loving" (138) activity discouraged in Buddhism. Ah Lan had drawn "two carps, one very large, almost filling up the paper, and inside the first one, a much smaller carp, trying to get out through the mouth of the large one" (138). Against Harrex who reads the drawing as "potently Freudian" (Harrex 39), Ng interprets Hung's reaction to the drawing with a twist, as pointing not to lust for the female body but, unexpectedly, to "a guarded homosocial tie" (Ng, *Intimating* 85) between Hung and his Master, the "powerful disciplining figure" in the monastery in China. It is a tie that Hung has unconsciously internalised and "refuses to relinquish."

Reading characters in fiction as symbolic representatives of the larger society, interpreting literary texts as testaments to authorial biographies, and probing beneath the textual surface to draw out latent meanings – these are some of the key strategies of critique that have been used by virtually all scholars of literature at one point or another, present scholar included. Readings of *Flowers* that employ these strategies have undoubtedly expanded the horizons of the thinkable, enabling readers to make far richer sense of the text than they would otherwise, even if they were not in agreement with every claim made. To continue to approach *Flowers* in the same way, though, may not be sufficient to steer one away from the same impasse of scholarship underscored by Chin, which we saw earlier. For me, at least, critique appears to have run up against its limits with *Flowers* to finally reveal what we might call, following Bill Brown, the "thing" of the text. In Brown's "thing theory," the "thing" is that which asserts itself when objects stop working, "when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily" (4). We are confronted by the "thingness of objects," for instance, when the texts that have all along been productively mined for interpretations become all but depleted, no longer able to readily offer up new insights. The appearance of the "thing" thus presents readers with an opportunity to look with new eyes *at* the text instead of *through* them, much like how we habitually look through a transparent window, until the habit is interrupted, forcing us only then to pay attention to the hitherto ignored "thingness" of the window, streaked with dirt as it may be. Apprehending *Flowers* thus is how I set out to approach the text, attending first and foremost to the vagaries of the affects from which critical readings are supposed to be independent, taking them as foundational to the embodied practice of reading and meaning-making. My argument is that it is only by giving due recognition to the affects triggered by the act of relating to *Flowers*, no matter how inappropriate they may appear to the literary fraternity, that

the reader may come to recognize the hitherto unrecognized experimental side of the text that deploys negative aesthetics to unsettle and prime the thinking-feeling reader to re-evaluate the functions and possibilities of modern art and the aesthetic experience.

For the longest time, it had been a mystery to me why and how *Flowers* – as material object that could be held in the hand, and as words forming ideas held in language – was able to consistently induce in me a certain heavy mood akin to the feeling one gets upon entering an unaired room. Brought on by contemplation of *Flowers*, the mood, at once vague and familiar, is difficult to put into words. At best one could describe it as approximating a dull sense of discomfiture, uneasiness, and listlessness, a lingering atmospheric effect akin to the onset of a migraine, and an uninviting feeling that seemed to emanate from *Flowers*, as if it sought to rebuff the reader and prevent him from coming too close. To relate to *Flowers* in this way cannot be reassuring for any reader, experienced or otherwise. After all, *Flowers*, it should be noted, is no ordinary text that one could simply brush aside on account of one's feelings; it is rather a formidable classic in the Malaysian canon that specialists of Malaysian literature are implicitly expected to appreciate, one that is, furthermore, endorsed by K.S. Maniam, a titan of Malaysian literature, as "literary, artistically seminal and, in the development of the Malaysian novel in English, a quietly but daringly experimental work" (195). Lee's place in the pantheon was practically assured when, in the same essay, Maniam averred in critique-mode that, "until Kok Liang appeared on the Malaysian literary scene," the Malaysian novel "did not attempt to go beneath the tensions of everyday living, banal social encounters, historical impact and sociocultural reactions in order to mine a deeper core of experience" (187).

Given the status of *Flowers* and Lee as the author, it seemed almost heretical to respond to the text in the way that I did. Adding to the seeming irreverence was the fact that the response was not an ephemeral thought or feeling that could be had or shed at will but one experienced as an embodied truth – bone-deep, as it were. With the benefit of hindsight and Silvan Tomkins' theory, it is possible to frame my heterodox response as totalizing in the biopsychosocial sense, as one first triggered autonomously, despite oneself, on the prelinguistic, preconscious, and precognitive levels – as *affects*. In Tomkins' theory, affect is a somatic response characterized neurologically as neural firing and physiologically as "delineated by sets of muscular, glandular, and skin responses" (Frank and Wilson 4). Beyond the control of the will, affect is differentiated from "feeling" which relies on language to describe "our awareness that an affect has been triggered,"

and "emotion", defined as "the combination of whatever affect has just been triggered as it is coassembled with our memory of previous experiences of that affect" (Nathanson xiv). Attempting to account for the affective response, then, I did consider, as would most readers, if the cause was the lesser reader rather than the celebrated text, before eventually coming to be assuaged by Fredric Jameson's argument that the operation of reading "does not assert the superiority of the interpreter or 'intellectual' over the apparently more plebeian readership" and that, in the end, "we are all plebeians when we read" (492). I did consider also if my response had arisen from potential prejudice on my part against the forty-year "old" novel, although I quickly ruled it out given that I had previously enjoyed even older and mustier Malayan/Malaysian novels in English. Ooi Cheng Teik's *Red Sun Over Malaya: John Man's Ordeal* (1948) and Chin Kee Onn's *Ma-rai-ee* (1952) are but two texts that immediately spring to mind. So, if the cause was not the subject, then might it be the object, namely *Flowers* itself?

By way of answering the question on the source of the mood – which I have described interchangeably as feeling, affect, atmosphere, experience, and response – it would be instructive to cite here a strikingly similar real-life experience recounted by Gernot Böhme. The population of Böhme's hometown, the city of Darmstadt, had once complained that "There was a bad smell in the air" (19), suspecting that it came from the production site of a chemical and pharmaceutical company. Despite testing made on the air quality, no toxic substance was found, indicating there was no problem. "But there was a problem: the inhabitants of Darmstadt 'did not feel well'." For Böhme, the population's "feeling" was neither imagined nor groundless but the result of the "aesthetic impressions" made by the immediate environment. Between the "objective factors of the environment" and the "aesthetic feelings of a human being" lies what Böhme terms "atmosphere":

> Atmospheres are quasi-objective, namely they are out there; you can enter an atmosphere and you can be surprisingly caught by an atmosphere. But on the other hand atmospheres are not beings like things; they are nothing without a subject feeling them. [...] to talk about atmospheres, you must characterize them by the way they affect you. They tend to bring you into a certain mood, and the way you name them is by the character of that mood. (20)

In Böhme's aesthetic theory of atmospheres, it is not only the natural environment that contributes to the formation of affect-triggering atmosphere. Atmospheres are in fact very commonly and deliberately staged by human agents to alter moods across contemporary life events in politics, culture, sports, commerce, and so on. Persons, things, spaces, and constellations of these all radiate atmospheres, although most times people are unsure why they are affected and whether the mood they experience emanates from their surrounding or from within themselves. Some people, though, are more attuned to what is in the air, such as Pek Sim in *Flowers* who insists at the hospital where her brother, Venerable Hung, is seeking treatment, that "all women must leave the room when a monk undress[es]" (Lee 6). Otherwise, says the nurse, citing Pek Sim, "The atmosphere will be wrong. Like bad air. It would hurt his spirit." Interestingly, and directly relevant to our immediate purposes, words, too, are capable of producing atmospheres that are felt bodily first before cognition kicks in a split-second later to make sense of the affects. Words are employed to produce stories, and the "particular quality of a story, whether read or heard, lies in the fact that it not only communicates to us that a certain atmosphere prevailed somewhere else but that it conjures up this atmosphere itself" (Böhme's 58-59). Tomkins articulates a similar idea when he writes that "language is the lens of thought through which affects can be brought to a magnifying, searing, white-heat focus" (325). Extending from this, entire discourses, too, may be conceived as generative of mood-modifying atmospheres, including the discourse encompassing Lee Kok Liang's oeuvre and all that has been said about his life and writings within and beyond the context of Malaysian literature in English.

An aesthetic concept, atmosphere is what permeates the space between *Flowers* (as object and discourse) and the reader (as a thinking-feeling subject). The heavy mood produced by the proximity between the two may well have been intended by Lee Kok Liang by way of stage setting *Flowers*; or it may have been fortuitously realized without authorial intention. Either way, the atmosphere – which attests counterintuitively to the strength of the novel, as I will unpack – is real and stems largely from what is readily apprehensible on virtually every page of the text: the profusion of sense-assaulting imagery invoking dysphoria, dislocation, disease, dying and death, racism, misogyny, self-loathing, crass materialism, postcoital depression, premature ejaculation, carnal male obsession with female breasts, sinister nightmares experienced on the deathbed, the "unceasing sweat and stench of indolent disciples" (24), and the ineradicable smell of "toddy and vomit" (27). To compound the ugly feelings generated by said imagery, moments in *Flowers* tend

to add up to produce unflattering composite images of most of the characters, save those serving stock roles, making them appear dislikeable, disturbing, and even repelling at times, despite any redeeming qualities they may have been endowed with. If reading is feeling, and feeling is judging, then my position differs radically from scholars like Kirpal Singh who argues in his critique of *Flowers* that, because "Lee's empathy impacts upon us, his readers," we, too, "find it extremely difficult to be judgmental about his fictional characters in any fundamental way(s)" (209). Against Singh, there were moments when, the more I became privy to the intimate details of the characters' lives as the narrative unfolded, the stronger the urge I had to look away in a manner that recalls how Mr. K, the doctor-protagonist of *Flowers*, was compelled to avoid "looking into the eyes of those he was about to operate upon" (8), as if the gaze would be too revealing and too much to bear.

Instances of the characters radiating negative atmosphere in *Flowers* are found across the text and are too numerous to cite here in full but a few examples relating to the two main characters should suffice as support. Take Venerable Hung, the Buddhist monk from China who immigrated to Malaysia to spread the religion. Even if we were to read him purely as an individual, as representing no one but himself and least of all his ethnicity or country of origin, Hung, by virtue of the way he is portrayed in the novel, gives credence nonetheless to Malaysia's racist stereotype of the ethnic Chinese as an outsider who does not and can never belong to the land. Despite having lived in Malaysia for "nearly forty-five years" (Lee 23), he remains unable to acclimatize, communicate in any local languages, or forge a sense of local rootedness. What he succeeds in doing instead is to emit negative energy by ceaselessly griping about "this strange country" (132) where the "sky burns with the fierceness of ten million joss-sticks" (34) and "everything had become grotesque" (132). He projects himself as learned and respectable but this is undercut by his condescension towards his temple disciples whom he regards as rough, dark, oily, uneducated, and malodorous. Like Mr. K, Hung also possesses an unmistakeable misogynist streak. As example, in public, he scolds Ah Lan, the mute temple assistant, for being forgetful till she become tearful, after which he rationalizes that "his sister, Pek Sim, was not much better" (33) and that "women were like that. They could not carry a thing in their heads" (32). They were unlike him, he reflects, as he remembers everything and could recite a wide range of the sutras "without missing a word," accepting the skill with false humility as "his Karmic talent" (32-33).

Compared to Hung, Mr. K, the "Ceylonese Tamil who could not speak Tamil" (4), fares worse, giving off repelling vibes most times as he does through word or deed. Although a highly successful surgeon with a flourishing private medical practice, Mr. K stands out more in the narrative for the self-conceited and often arrogant, racist, and sexist manner in which he relates to the people around him and sizes them up, especially women. With his nurse, Miss Tang, for instance, Mr. K "sometimes wondered if she had slept around, what with her big breasts, big for a Chinese girl, that is […] But then one could not be sure. Chinese girls could be unpredictably cold and virginal, or worse, lusty and money-minded" (6-7). About Ah Lan, the mute servant-girl, Mr. K fantasizes with predatory relish: "With a fairness like hers, she would shine and glow in the bed and her flesh would be very smooth and warm with health and strength. With that black hair tossed among the pillows, and beads of perspiration […] Her breasts were not bad. For a Chinese, they were large" (153). Mr. K's obsessive objectification of the female body was evident from young, as made clear in the opening pages of the novel. At four years old, he was already paying attention to the "large breasts" (4) of the servant girl bending down to clean him in a tub. When he reached marriageable age and "his mother arranged his marriage, his only stipulation was that his bride should have large breasts, the bigger the better" (4; for more instances of mammary fixation in *Flowers*, see Lee 6, 7, 25, 47, 56, 59, 70, 74, 76, 85, 87, 98, 99, 104, and 153). Ironically, despite Mr. K's machismo, the sexual act is, for him, a thing of shame and humiliation, even when it does not transpire. Life with his wife, Mrs. K, has become sexless because, as he suspects, there was a time "when he could not satisfy her and she ridiculed him. He should have got that desensitizing cream and made love to her for a long, long time. But he had some pride in himself" (29). When he does have sex with a "Chinese girl" (8) at a hotel after the Medical Association Annual Dinner, the act ultimately descends into existential ugliness: "what had fascinated him was how dark he had suddenly become against the paleness of the girl's body and this had added to his fascination and when his thing came he shouted out the few earthy Tamil words he knew and when it was over, he remembered feeling very sad at not knowing the language well. In extreme moments of sex, one reverts to one's mother tongue" (8-9).

Significantly amplifying the ugly feelings experienced by the reader in relation to the aforementioned imagery and characters in *Flowers* are the multiple allusions and references to Malaysia's decay and decline attributed to the racial policies adopted by the country. Emerging from the same divisive discourses invoked by Chin, which were discussed earlier, these references

would not have been lost on any Malaysian past or present, for they are constitutive of their lived, often bitter, reality, justified or otherwise. The reader, although already more than aware, is reminded nonetheless of the implications of the policies in question. In government hospitals, for instance, "no order or cleanliness could be maintained" once the "soft-voiced natives" took over (Lee 24). The controversial Malay-centred national language policy did not help either, the consequences of which were also, according to the narrator, "carried into the operating theatre" where nurses trained in the Malay language could not follow the instructions of the surgeons operating in the English language, at times leading to tragic consequences: "An ex-colleague in government service once told him [Mr. K] that he had found himself cutting into the patient at one stage with the power turned off because the nurse, unable to comprehend English, "mistook his directions" (47). Despite the "bloody mess," there was no accountability since "Everyone was involved in a conspiracy of silence," the implication being that the nurse was protected on account of her race and that the passivity of others enabled it. Meanwhile, "Chinese and Indian nurses" find themselves excluded from civil service "because of the racial quota" (95). The ideology of Malay racial preeminence is additionally identified in *Flowers* as that which enabled Inspector Hashim – a "Kelantan Malay" (63) and "a staunch supporter of the Ruling party" (64) – to be "promoted to an inspector swiftly." From the narrative, the reader learns that Inspector Hashim believes and is guided by the belief that "One thing that was untouchable in this country […] was religion" (92), the implicit understanding being that religion here in effect refers solely to the Muslim faith. Regardless of whether these allusions and references were taken by the reader as expressions of prejudice or truth, the nett effect is the same – they trigger rancour in Malaysians on both sides of the ideological divide who have had to endure the fallout of the divisive discourses for decades, reminding them of the problems they know only too well, problems that persist despite all the interventionist effort that have been expended by Malaysians across fields, including authors and scholars of Malaysian literature in English.

Instances of aesthetic negativity radiating from *Flowers* are aplenty. They are highlighted here, though, not as flaws to be frowned upon, as may easily be misconstrued, but rather, counterintuitively, as evidence of the strength of the text, its *raison d'être*. *Flowers* might not be the kind of uplifting plot-driven novel that some readers have a preference for but it is certainly unique and hitherto unrecognized as an experimental early work of Malaysian literature whose negative aesthetics serves to unsettle the reader, affording him no opportunity for dispassionate

distancing from the text or for passionate identification with the values of traditional aesthetics such as beauty and goodness. An uncommon encounter in Malaysian literature in English, negative aesthetics of the type deployed by *Flowers* also primes the reader to rethink, beyond the standard concerns of critique, the functions and possibilities of modern art and the aesthetic experience. *Flowers* does not offer ready answers to the question of what these functions and possibilities might be, beyond unsettling and kindling in the reader the inquisitiveness to complete on his own the riddle of the half-said and, in doing so, assume responsibility for his wager. Given this opening, the reader is free to explore in any number of directions – for instance, by segueing the present postcritical exercise into an exploration of Theodor Adorno's aesthetics theory. Taking this path, the reader will come to see that the increasing presence of the ugly, or negative aesthetics, in modernist art is in fact a defiant response to the "encroaching ugliness" (Leach 264) of social dislocation brought on by industrial progress. In this modern context, beauty as bourgeois aesthetics of the culture industry serves only to "conceal the ugliness and contradictions of the social fabric [and to] tart up a toxic social context" (266). Given what it is confronted with, modern art thus deploys the ugly to reflect the ugliness in society that society itself seeks to hide; in doing so, the ugly becomes a "technique of resistance" (Leach 263), an instrument in the creation of "a more humanly worthy society" (Adorno 232). The ugliness of modern art that reflects the truth of society is for this reason "beautiful" and "preferable to a deceptive but abstract beauty" (Leach 266). With knowledge of the redemptive role of the ugly in Adorno's aesthetic theory, the reader may choose to take a critical turn here and read the ugly in *Flowers* in similar terms: as refusal to sanction the deceit of beauty and as mirror of the decay of modern society, and as "catalyst for political subjectivity" (274) in general rather than in the text's presumed immanent context of fraught Malaysia. In doing so, the reader comes a step closer to seeing how his negative response to *Flowers* validates Adorno's suggestion that "the more art is understood, the less it is enjoyed" (Leach 267).

Read through the lens of Adorno's negative aesthetics, *Flower*'s ability to do things with the ugly is, for me, an exercise of power and a sign that it possesses the "'something more" that Adorno refers to in somewhat oracular terms in order to distinguish a work of art from a mere 'piece of work'" (Böhme 73). That I have not been able to find any mention of *Flower*'s productive negativity in scholarly readings since the novel was first published four long decades ago is certainly curious but perhaps to be expected given that critiques of Malaysian texts tend not to

focus on aesthetic matters such as art as sensuous cognition. Also, readings of Malaysian texts tend to politely eschew mention of any apparent shortcomings of the texts under study, especially if they are premised on the reader's ugly feelings that conflict with the prevailing consensus. As well, making it more difficult for negative aesthetics to be recognized is critique's tendency to subtract the reader's affects from the interrogative and representational work that it does because said affects are often seen as either irrelevant to thought or too unruly to deal with.

Conclusion

Discovery of *Flowers*' hitherto unrecognized negative aesthetics demonstrates that postcriticism as framed and qualified earlier can indeed be put to productive use, even alongside critique in the same reading; and that it is possible to enter into a conversation about Malaysian literature in English and contribute something a little different without having to fully depend on the familial strategies of critique, or to rehearse the same worn narratives to which Malaysian literature and their readings have largely been bound. Crucially, said postcritical knowledge of *Flowers* is more than a discursive construct or an abstract representation of thought. It is more-than-representational insofar as it is produced, felt, and lived by the reader in, with, and by his body upon the understanding that "mind is body" and "consciousness is corporeal" (Carolan 409). It emerges out of the reader's "*incarnate cogito*, which places mind, body, and world in a state of perpetual co-production" (410). This embodied knowledge of *Flowers* is ultimately reparative and sustaining of wellbeing; it validates the totality of the reader and bears testament to his reconciliation with the atmospheric wall standing between him and the text.

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