

Colony, Nation, and Globalisation: Not at Home in Singaporean and Malaysian Literature

Eddie Tay

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Displacement, dislocation, and deracination are notions that one normally associates with what Homi Bhabha terms ‘unhomeliness,’ not home. This is also the motivating premise behind Eddie Tay’s book, *Colony, Nation, and Globalisation: Not at Home in Singaporean and Malaysian Literature*, which ranges across literary texts in English produced in Malaysia and Singapore from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first centuries. Tay’s intention is to map a literary history of the region through postcolonial re-iterations of “not at homeness” and, at the same time, uncover the ideological assumptions—and the contestations of those assumptions—imported into Southeast Asia as an accompaniment to empire and globalization.

Lying at the heart of Tay’s topoi of possession and dispossession, “at home” and “not at home,” is the condition of mobility, be it in the form of the processes engendered by diasporic displacements, by colonial-era travel that marked the beginning of imperial adventure (and eventual disillusionment) in Southeast Asia, or by the more recently accelerated “transnational” movements—outwards—of former colonial subjects. Such movements and mobilities are harnessed to indicate how the idea of home has been “reterritorialized” with regard to its purity and authenticity. If travel, Tay argues, has brought the “outside” in, there is no constitutive “outside” and, by implication, even “inside.” Home then is the site of the unhomely, that disquieting space of sameness and difference. Tay’s choices of primary texts spanning the hundred years and more from Frank Swettenham’s *Malay Sketches* (1895) to Tash Aw’s *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005) are precisely aimed at revealing the colonial, national, and transnational anxieties that attend to the notion of home.

Tay’s chronological treatment of the unsettled and unsettling meanings of home is sectioned into three parts. He begins the project with an exploration, in the first three chapters of the book, of the physical aspect of displacement, i.e. when one is not at home in a traditional or geographic sense. In unravelling the impact of geographical dislocation on British colonial administrators and women who wrote of Malaya in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Tay argues that such narratives are underpinned by the need to create conditions conducive to the colonial enterprise. This attempt to create—and legitimize—zones of comfort and security was essentially a response, he elaborates, to “the condition of being not-at-home” (151). More significantly, Tay shows how the narratives of colonial modernity and historiography, as projects of the European

Enlightenment which, along with colonialism, reached its apogee in the nineteenth century, sought to document the encounter between British and “Other” cultures as an integral part of the civilizing mission. Amok, a trope central to the colonialist ideology of “othering”, and explored here specifically with reference to Swettenham’s writings, is shown to work through unhomeliness by displacing the rationality and agency of indigenous subjectivity. Colonial strategies to make oneself at home, therefore, came at the expense of those who were colonized. Thus, what emerges is that the unhomely is not only a condition but also a strategy to unhome so as to justify and consolidate colonial expansion and intervention. Drawing from Fanon and Bhabha, Tay shows how the trope of amok in effect betrays the colonizer’s anxiety and paranoia over his ability to control “British Malaya.” By exceeding the binary frame of colonialist othering, amok exposes the splits and fissures within colonialist discourse. Both colonizer and colonized are caught in the Manichean frame of unhoming.

As colonialism is also a gendered phenomenon, Tay shows how the idea of home emerges as much through narratives of domestic life. Tay’s insertion of the gendered feminine domestic space into the masculine narrative of imperialism is effected through an exploration of the travel narratives of Isabella Bird, Emily Innes, and Florence Caddy. These domesticating narratives are read through the critical lens of “discourses of difference” in terms of the gender, class, marital, and other specificities arising from women’s experiences. Although bearing different voices and perspectives, these narratives serve, like Swettenham’s writings, to consolidate the colonizer’s hierarchical assumptions about Malaya. In doing so, they participate in the project of the “worlding” of Malaya where the unhoming of the “natives” is complicit with the agenda to reinforce colonial governance. Tay also reads anxiety about the authority of Englishness in the narratives of Somerset Maugham and Anthony Burgess, but unlike the earlier works of Swettenham, Bird, Innes, and Caddy, these suggest the motif of “the exhaustion of colonial romance.” A decolonizing Malaya is no longer the site of exoticism and adventure.

The book’s second part picks up on the incipient mood of nationalism that ends the preceding section. State-sponsored nationalism, like colonialism, generates its own exclusions. This tension between the state and the individual is explored in the works of Lee Kok Liang. His “return” narratives, *London Does Not Belong to Me* and “Return to Malaya,” are read as reclamations of Malaya as a homeland that resists the nationalist project in which Malay language and indigeneity are worked into the dominant narrative of identity, culture, and literature. However, as Karim Raslan’s short story “Heroes” demonstrates, in another chapter of the same section, the “Malay” subject constituted by hegemonic nationalism is not an unproblematic construct either. In terms of the Singapore project, Edwin Thumboo’s “Ulysses by the Merlion,” and the younger poet Alfian Saat’s contrapuntal response to it in “The Merlion,” reveal what Tay calls the “contrived” nature of Singaporean nationhood. Indeed,

Malaysia's nationalist narrative of "race" is countervailed by Singapore's pragmatic economic narrative of nationalism that seeks to silence dissent. The scope of the individual's engagement with and responsibility to "home" given this circumscribing nationalist discourse is explored in the novels of Philip Jeyaretnam and Gopal Baratham.

In the third and final section, Tay deploys the disjunctions and discontinuities of diaspora to cross over and unhome the more linear story of nationbuilding. He examines the literary representations of K.S. Maniam, who articulates the ambivalence of the Malaysian nation from his split—diasporic—subjectivity as a "Malaysian-Indian." The motif of global mobility in the works of Singapore-born authors Simon Tay and Hwee Hwee Tan is used to read America as a space of mediation. This part ends with Tay's close readings of literary works by Tash Aw, Vyvyane Loh, and Lau Siew Mei to demonstrate how such writings, like the "transnational" life trajectories of their "local-born" and overseas-based authors, open up the cultural memory of the nation to fresh or alternative meanings. They *unmake* to *remake* home from a location outside of it.

As we reach the book's ending, it becomes abundantly clear that for all the contestations around home, the appropriation of home also involves a transformation of identity. By tying postcolonial subjectivity to the nation, Tay reads "not at homeness" as a condition constitutive of national identity. Ultimately, then, the question of "not at home" is also the fraught question of the nation-state and its hegemonic discourses and the larger and more difficult questions of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and non-belonging. This is an ideologically important point and by now a familiar reading pose in postcolonial and diaspora studies.

As a reviewer, I feel compelled to register my reservations about the designation "Anglophone" which is used—both unselfconsciously and liberally—throughout this book to refer to writings or literature produced in the English language in Singapore and Malaysia. None of us who speak, write, and produce in English in contemporary Malaysia and Singapore would ever describe ourselves or our work as "Anglophone." Not only does it sound obsolete and inelegant, the colonial inferences embedded in the word are unmissable. The unintentional presumption of otherness and distance could easily be avoided if the semantically clearer and ideologically unobjectionable, though slightly wordier, phrase "writing in English" were adopted.

Despite this and despite its not providing new points of departure for thinking about home in conceptual or theoretical terms, this book is of significance for helping to draw attention to the ways in which identities are actively constructed, challenged, and performed in texts belonging to a small but dynamic (and still under-researched) body of literature in Southeast Asia.