

A Reimagining of History Based on the Novel *The Harmony Silk Factory* by Tash Aw

LAJIMAN JANOORY
Sultan Idris Education University
Malaysia
lajiman@fbk.upsi.edu.my

MOHAMMAD SIDIK ARIFFIN
Sultan Idris Education University
Malaysia

MAZURA@MASTURA MUHAMMAD
Sultan Idris Education University
Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the text, The Harmony Silk Factory, by Tash Aw and employs the novel to negate the idea of history as scientific and stable depiction of reality. The text specifically focuses on the central character, Johnny Lim, and utilises the character as an analogy to the act of historical writing. The article hypothesises that historical writing is an intellectual production with strong fictional elements embedded into it. The article also frames its argument based on ideas elucidated by Beverly Southgate about the fictional nature of history and the historical nature of fiction. The frame of argument presupposes that historical narration has more similarity to fictional writing than previously assumed. By analysing the central character in the novel and utilising him to symbolise our conception of history, the research strives to demystify the idea of history as scientific and objective narrative of our historical reality. The research concludes that the novel by Tash Aw can be considered as metaphorical allusions to the idea of history. The implication of the research allows us to view historical texts much more critically due to the inability of historians to write objectively and authentically about history/reality.

Keywords: history; unreliability; fictional; reality; authorial domination

INTRODUCTION

There is a fine line that separates our idea of *history* and *fiction*. Of course, we have always imagined history as actual events executed by actual people supported by actual dates and years of those events. We can, for example, say that the leader of Country A declared war on Country B and the war lasted for so and so years until one of the countries emerged victorious and the other suffered defeat and faced the consequences of the vanquish. We cannot deny that some aspects of history are factual. For example, reflecting back on Malaysian history it is historical fact that the Japanese forces invaded British Malaya in 1941 and were defeated in 1945. And we can also convincingly say that Malaya gained its independence from the British on 31 August 1957 since we have always celebrated independence day on the same date of the same month every year. They are facts that no self-respecting history scholar can deny. However, there is a blurring of narrative as far as historical point of view is concerned as, in essence, no one perspective can claim total objective viewpoint on what happened. For example, in the Second World War was Japan forced to attack the United States or was it a naturally aggressive power? Or did the British and the Allied forces make a tactical retreat from Northern Malaya to Singapore or was it a humiliating capitulation? When Tunku, followed by the euphoric crowd, shouted “Merdeka, Merdeka, Merdeka” did he declare the total independence of the country or was it merely a

symbolical gesture? As individuals, we tend to unconsciously accept these narrations of events as the truth or reality because the front page of the book reads ‘The History of So and So’. Also, our belief is enforced by the narrative structure of the text that we identify as *historical* identified by the formal tone of the narrative as well as the insertions of dates and years of events. As Popper (1974) explains, our sense perception of history “is an optical illusion”(p. 134).

Is history factual, or just another form of fiction? Are there distinct boundaries between the two? The dividing line between history and fiction is not as clearly delineated as separate. As readers, we tend to think that the idea of *history* or *historical narrative* are true accounts of events that happened in the past that were rewritten for us so that we will understand what actually happened and learn something from these *historical* events. In a sense, an act of writing *history* was assumed to be an act of writing about *facts*. A layman’s idea of history is that it is about real events that happened in so and so years and the people who participated in these events are real people (Davies 2003). All these are supposedly evidenced from traces of historical artifacts that can be in the form of structures such as buildings, roads, statues or from written accounts in some dusty books in libraries or ancient writings found on archeological sites. Based on these historians write what was assumed as an *accurate* account of the past.

Therefore, writing history is thought to be polar opposites of writing literature. Whereas history is about *facts*, literature is about fiction, history is *scientific* and literature is of the imagination. Literature is about abstractions of ideas in the mind of the author which he transforms into words for our enjoyment. On the one hand, literature is not to be taken seriously since it is merely a figment of the author’s imagination although some of the settings may be historical. On the other hand, history writing is about objectivity, about telling the truth (Southgate 2009). Historians, it is purported, are trained to write objectively, to sieve through facts and fictions and to write only what can be deduced as factual. History writing is, therefore, considered as a more scientific and sophisticated form of knowledge.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the inter-relationship between historical and fictional narratives by analysing the novel *The Harmony Silk Factory* by Tash Aw. It seeks to nullify the idea of historical writing as factual by drawing on Tash Aw’s manipulation of the narrative technique and themes in the novel. The paper hypothesises that the writing of history cannot be considered as an effort at representing reality because the interpretation of events are subjective as well as depending on the ideological bias of the historians. *The Harmony Silk Factory* draws on historical narrative conventions using fictional subject matters. The multiple narrative technique allows the writer to project personal and non-personal perspective of narrators in fiction thereby providing different interpretations of the same character and events. Since the novel is a fictional biography, the multiple narrations of the same character bring the reader to the question of historical authenticity of any text.

The Harmony Silk Factory is Tash Aw’s debut novel. It was well received and listed for many prestigious literary awards such as Man Booker Prize and won the Whitbread Book Award in 2005. As a category, the novel falls under the subgenre of historical novel. The setting of the fiction straddles the historical period of British colonial Malaya and the Japanese Occupation during the Second World War. The historical fiction author can use and manipulate *history* to suit his narrative plot. Some historical novels, for example, move to and fro in timeframe, never actually following the neat historical timeline evident in any historical chronicles. However, the reader will still discern that as one of the conventions of fiction writing. However, for historical fictions to be valid some aspects of history must concur with mainstream understanding of past events. While the novel is postcolonial in context Aw refuses to be drawn into the stereotypical characterisations of white and Asian characters as portrayed by writers such as Somerset Maugham and Anthony Burgess. The

characters of various backgrounds and ethnicities intermingle albeit in an uneasy relationship of love, jealousy, mistrust and racism in colonial Malaya not dissimilar to the way the main character changes his Asian name of Lim Seng Chin to a more westernised Johnny Lim, after Johnny Weissmuller, a Hollywood movie star. Gabriel (2103) analyses *The Harmony Silk Factory* in light of the definitions of ethnicity and national identity in multi-cultural Malaya. She sees the novel as a narration of Chinese history and experiences “rooted in Malaysian soil” (p. 8) amidst an official version of national identity that marginalises minorities in Malaysia. Thus, the novel is seen as an attempt at rewriting/reclaiming Chinese history/identity. However, Gabriel also discusses the nature of perspectives in history and how the three narrators describe Johnny Lim. As Gabriel asserts, “[by] leaving us with no certain answers and an awareness of the distorting power of memory, the novel subverts the notion of authenticity.” She further declares, “[i]t asks us to recognise ‘truth’ as a subjective construct”. (p. 10)

RESEARCH METHOD

History has always been inseparable from fiction. Historical fiction, for example, is a common genre of literary writing. The genre appeals to the reader as it allows for a greater understanding of history via fiction. The English novel *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905) by Emma Orczy, for instance, dramatises the terror of the French Revolution. Similarly *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) by the American writer Stephen Crane portrays realistic depictions of battles during the American Civil War. Likewise, *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F.Scott Fitzgerald has been described by George Lukacs (in Carnes 2001) as a source of American social history of the early 1920s. Closer to home, the writer Keris Mas, in *Rimba Harapan* (1985), attempts to portray the fear and worries of the Malays in the face of economic threats from the colonising British and other immigrants who flocked to Malaya to make a living. This fictional representation of Malaya during a specific historical period can be assumed to be a repository of historical documentation. It is a fictional construct of socio-historical significance if we are to understand the apprehensive mood of the Malays of the period. Lloyd Fernando, another Malaysian writer, fictionalises the angst and apprehension of a newly formed nation about to be fragmented by racial divisions in his novel *The Scorpion Orchid* (1976). Therefore, although all these texts are considered as fictional, they do provide insights into history in which any historian would find it hard to dismiss as wholly imaginative. Similarly, the understanding of history may vary depending on the different viewpoints of the authors. For example, Manqoush, Noraini & Ruzy (2011) discuss how two authors from different cultural and political backgrounds fictionalized events surrounding the 911 attack on the Twin Towers in New York. While both are works of fictions their contextualisation of that particular historical events offer two different and contesting versions of historical cause and effect. Another example of the malleable nature of history and fiction is discussed by Al-Aghberi (2015) in relation to the discourse surrounding the Holocaust between the Jewish-American and Arab-American writers. While the former strive to assert the centrality of the Holocaust in order to define the history of the Jews, the latter tend to use the trope of silence as a mode of resistance. The examples given provide us with the idea that the boundaries between history and fiction are not as rigid as we thought as there is fluidity in narrative and factual significance that courses through and between them.

History and fiction have more in common than we imagine. Although we tend to think of history and fiction as disciplines that are different from each other, the fact is they are closely related. What is difficult is to find the balance between what is acceptable as history and what is considered as fiction. Notwithstanding, historians have always claimed

that theirs are works that are factual and not fictional. On the other hand, literary writers have always stated otherwise- that their works are fictions and should be treated as products of the imagination (Southgate 2009). In reality, the matter is not as clear cut as what is claimed by both sides. More often than not, fictions reflect parts of history in some ways. We may use the defining European historical event of the French Revolution as an example of this. While historians provide the grand narrative of the revolution produced and signified as scientific facts, authors such as Charles Dickens conjure the environment of fear and savage vengeance of characters in his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*.

In her text, *History Meets Fiction*, Southgate (2009) clarifies the ambivalent nature of historical writing and its sometimes paradoxical relationship with fiction. She explains that historians have always defined their subject by reference to its absolute distinction from fiction: history is history precisely because it is not fiction. On the other hand, writers of fiction may make use of historical backgrounds for their imaginative creations, but they remain outside of the discipline of history. Southgate also explains that recent trends have challenged the truth behind this assumption as fact and fiction have become inextricably intertwined in genres such as docudramas, historical fiction, non-fiction novels and novelised biographies. She asserts that

...historians, no less than novelists, rely on questionable evidence; so that the public must once for all be warned that the author's individual fancy very likely supplies much of the narratives; and that he forms it as best he may, out of stray papers, conversations reported to him, and his knowledge, right or wrong, of the characters of the persons engaged.
(Southgate 2009, p. 27)

As we look deeper we will realise that history is partly facts spiced up with fictions and fictions may sometimes depict factual circumstances. As Voltaire states "History is the recital of facts represented as true. Fable, on the other hand, is recital of facts represented as fictions" (Southgate 2009, p. 2).

History, as a discipline, draws its ideas and beliefs based on the theory of empiricism. Empiricism argues that our understanding of history is derived from observation or experience (Davies 2003). This experience can be from that of the historian or it can be from a secondary source who had gone through the experience. However, this notion about history as facts was dashed when postmodern thinkers came into the cultural and intellectual scenes affecting various disciplines, history not excluding. Thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida and Lyotard celebrated a philosophy so different from modernism that precedes it. Postmodernists are very critical of traditional culture, theory and politics. They claimed that we are undergoing profound changes as technologies such as the internet and new media, new forms of knowledge and changes in socio-economic systems produce new ways and perspectives of looking at our society. As Best and Kellner (1991) assert, "[t]hese processes are also producing increased cultural fragmentation, changes in the experience of space and time, and new modes of experience, subjectivity and culture"(p. 3). One of the most important principles of postmodern thinking is the validity of the varying perspectives of any discourse. The writing of history, therefore, has now become contestable because a particular event can be viewed differently by different historians. As stated by Fulbrook (2002), history is "essentially fictions written in realist mode" (p. 3). If that is the case, the most fundamental question that we need to ask, then, is *Is history factual?* Or as Carr (2001) asks "[w]hat is a historical fact?"(p. 4). This is a very important question that we need to address before embarking on an analysis of the literary text later in this study.

If historians have always reasserted that their discipline is scientific and depicts reality as it is so do fiction writers. In fact, most literary writers write about subject matters and themes related to their society. Undeniably, the issues and problems raised in literary

texts that beset a society are a form of reality. For example, the Malaysian writer K.S. Maniam writes his fiction based on problems beset by the Indian community in Malaysia and the poet Muhammad Haji Salleh's poetic materials are reflections of Malay cultural, social and moral values. We have to admit that that the issues highlighted are real, therefore, factual. The only difference is that these issues are written imaginatively and not factually with supports from graphs, figures and diagrams. Additionally, some writers of fiction have always based their stories on historical settings or real events although there is embellishment and imagination involved. As Miller (1974) states that in the novels there "is almost always some "representational" form rooted in history and in the direct report of "real" human experience" (p. 456). Some of Shakespeare's plays have been categorised as historical plays especially in relations to English kings such as the Henrys and the Richards. Sir Walter Scott, who is regarded as the father of historical novel, produced works that depict the historical circumstance of specific era as well as the perspectives of fictional characters who lived in that era (Jenkins, Morgan & Munslow 2007). The fictional characters conjured in historical novels are attempts by the writers of fiction to provide historical perspectives through fictional narratives. As Southgate (2009) affirms, "[t]he author is concerned to retrieve and represent the 'inner lives' of such characters... and that involves the inclusion of material that had often been previously neglected in conventional histories" (p. 5). It is these inner lives of the characters that can provide alternative interpretation to specific history and demystify the notion that history is singular in perception and worldview. To Southgate, it is difficult to draw distinctions between the factual claims of history and the imaginative input of fiction. And in relation to personal identity, Southgate (2009) explains that there are no fixed essences that can allow us to portray an individual character as having fixed personalities but rather the character is subject to provisional constructions. In other words, a character is understood and constructed by an observer subject to his own biases, ideology and sense of morality. Therefore, history is revealed as

subjectively constructed and incorporated within a narrative, in a language which has a questionable relation to the external world and must always be less 'perfect', and in a form that is inevitably subject to cultural constraints and limitations.

(Southgate 2009, p.45)

It is very difficult to find a fiction whose subject matter is not related to anything. Some might argue that genres such as magic-realism do not portray reality as the plot normally goes beyond what is natural into the realm of the supernatural and mystical. However, we must also bear in mind that literary writers have the license and conventions to play with the imagination but he still has to relate his text to the reality on the social landscape in order for the stories to make sense. Stories such as *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and *Animal Farm* by George Orwell are both fantastical tales of an old man with broken wings who crashes into the ground and of the world of animals respectively. However, the themes are still grounded on issues that affect the particular authors' worldviews in general.

The discussion above looks at the wider relationship between history and fiction. It leads us to the idea that that there is a lack of fundamental distinction between the two disciplines as previously claimed. While historians wish to claim history as scientific and evidence-based, there are still questions that linger on those claims. To what extent can *facts* be relied upon to serve as a firm basis for historical knowledge? Furthermore, should these *facts* be interpreted from different perspectives? The answer to it lies in the statement by a renowned history scholar Hayden White who asserts that "Anyone who writes a narrative is fictionalising" (Jenkins 1999, p. 120). The discussion also helps in defining the context of analysis of *The Harmony Silk Factory*. The analysis focuses on pseudo-historical elements of

the novel and elaborates that these elements are emblematic of the problematic nature and definition of history itself.

HISTORY REIMAGINED IN TASH AW'S *HARMONY SILK FACTORY*

There is no story there to be gotten straight; any story must arise from the act of contemplation. To understand history in this way is not to reject those works which make claims to realistic representation based upon the authenticity of documentary sources; it is rather to read them in a way that their authenticity is a creation affected with other sources, essentially rhetorical in character.

(Kellner 1989, p. 21)

What Kellner alludes to in the excerpt is the fact that history is made of story and story is what the historian contemplates what happens. Moreover, his contemplation is further based on other sources which are, in essence, contemplations. In the end the act of writing history is nothing more than the historian's *story* of history.

History, as has been explained above, is fluid in nature. Although historians attempt to assert that history is scientific and factual, the truth of the matter is that the discipline is also subjected to the historian's personal biases and prejudices when he put pen to papers. Therefore, what is the true nature of *history*? Tash Aw's fiction *The Harmony Silk Factory* is a perfect literary example of understanding the very nature of history. At interpretative level, the novel cuts through the many layers of historical perspectives and points of view. More importantly, it demystifies the idea of historical objectivity or authenticity. Instead history can be viewed as a pattern of narrative rationality that is partly mediated by the historian's imagination.

The novel revolves around an anti-hero called Johnny Lim whose life is narrated by three different people close to him providing the reader with three different, contradictory perspectives. The narratives are by his son Jasper, his wife Snow Soong and his best white friend, Peter Wormwood. In a way, the three narratives encompass the whole life of Johnny Lim by providing the reader with the three stages of Johnny Lim's life: the son narrates his father's life from his humble beginning to becoming a powerful and wealthy tycoon in the Kinta Valley, the wife reflects on the young Johnny Lim and their wooing and marriage and the white friend recounts his friendship with Johnny Lim after the marriage and the turbulence within the unhappy marriage until his death. However, for the purpose of this article, it will only analyse the narrative of Jasper and Snow Soong. This is due to the fact that Peter's narrative is somewhat similar to that of Snow's account of Johnny Lim in his sympathetic and considerate portrayal of his friend unlike the more antagonistic and hostile narrative of Jasper the son.

Summarily, Jasper's biography traces the life of Johnny Lim who started out with working for a British mining company as a collie and, later, a mechanic working the dredger. His fame amongst the Chinese population in the Kinta Valley began when Johnny stabbed the English mine owner in response to violence perpetrated against him. Johnny then works for an elderly textile merchant called Tiger Tan. Eventually, Tiger Tan takes a liking for Johnny Lim for his acute business acumen and gives him full trust in managing Tiger Tan's business while he focuses on resisting the Japanese Occupation by leading and supporting a group of communist guerillas in the mountains. Johnny Lim eventually betrays the old man to the Japanese, and becomes richer and more powerful as he gets older, some through legitimate businesses and others through illegal dealings and scheming.

The second part of the novel is the perspective given by Johnny Lim's wife, Snow Soong. It is a narration based on a diary she wrote until her untimely death. The account is much more sympathetic of Johnny Lim, a contradiction to the monster-image given by his

son. It reveals Johnny as a husband whose relationship with his wife is of a fragile nature. The journal also reveals Snow's feelings for the scholarly and athletic Japanese police chief, Kunichika especially during a bizarre honeymoon to the mysterious Seven Maiden Islands. The final part of the novel is the perspective given by Johnny's English friend, Peter Wormwood whose friendship and love for Johnny Lim borders on homoerotic passion. In Peter's point of view Johnny is seen as the sensitive and insecure husband and friend.

Both Jasper's and Snow's narratives have their own writing styles. This technique allows the reader to understand that the voice is not of the author but the respective narrators. The first narrator's writing style that of Jasper's, is closest to that of a biography. Even the first sentence itself denotes the historical nature of his narrative:

The Harmony Silk Factory is the name of the shophouse my father bought in 1942 as a front for his illegal businesses. To look at, the building is unremarkable. Built in the early thirties by itinerant Chinese coolies (of the type from whom I am most probably descended), is the largest structure on the main street which runs through town. (p. 3)

By analysing the excerpt above, the reader understands that the information is partly fictional and partly factual. The factory is fictional and so does the year it was bought by Johnny Lim. Even the name of the factory serves to show the dubious nature of Johnny Lim's character and his businesses as seen from his son's eyes. *Harmony* and *silk* exude an aura of positivity. However, the inside harbours many illegal activities. What can be considered as factual is the historical context as during these years there were many Chinese immigrants journeying to Malaya in search of better lives. Many of them became successful and wealthy due to hard work and sacrifice. Johnny Lim exemplifies this section of the Chinese migrants who are examples of the rags- to- riches success stories. Although most of them became rich through strong business acumen some gained their wealth through illegal activities such as exploiting other migrants, extortions and smuggling.

Later in the same page, Jasper mentions Hang Jebat "the legendary warrior who, *as we all know*, fought against the Portuguese colonisers in the sixteenth century" (p. 3). The author intentionally mentions Jebat as a factual historical figure during the Malacca sultanate. His history was mostly part of stories written by royal scribes. His existence is, therefore, subject to contestation. As Davies (2010) states, "History is illusory because of the unreliability of historical evidence and the inadequacy of the historiography based on it" (p. 7). In relation to the story of Jebat, some historians doubt the veracity of the Hikayats because they are not written in the Western scientific and methodical manner of history writing as, for example "facts and myths intertwine to produce artistic versions of history of Malay kingship" (Ruzy Suliza Hashim 2003, p. 40). This argument brings to bear the idea of history as something factual and definite. The author playfully states, *as we all know* hinting that Jebat was historically accepted as a real figure of the historical past when opinions are divided over such claims. The idea of history in this instance becomes ambiguous as it can be viewed differently. In the next page, Jasper repeatedly utters the word "truth":

There is another reason why I now feel particularly well placed to relate the truth of my father's life. An observant reader may sense forthwith that it is because the revelation of this truth has, in some strange way, brought me a measure of calm. I am not ashamed to admit that I have searched for this all my life. Now, at last, I know the truth and I am no longer angry. In fact, I am at peace. (p. 6)

Later, Jasper mentions:

As far as it is possible, I have constructed a clear and complete picture of the events surrounding my father's terrible past. I say 'as far as it is possible' because we all know that the retelling of history can never be perfect, especially when the piecing together of

the story has been done by a person with as modest an intellect as myself. I am ready to give you this, The True Story of the Infamous Chinaman Called Johnny” (p. 6)

We have categorically chosen these two paragraphs to highlight the problem surrounding the discourse of history. In these two paragraphs Jaspers mentions the word *truth* four times as if mentioning the word repeatedly would make what is narrated worth believing and suddenly becomes factual. Ironically, in the second paragraph, Jasper unintentionally reveals that there is no objectivity, neutrality or totality in the construction of history as he admits that “the retelling of history can never be perfect”. As Jasper himself finds it problematic to reveal the whole story about his father, thus, his narrative which he claims as historical can be put into question as to its objectivity, neutrality and totality.

Jasper’s objectivity and neutrality in narrating about the life of his father is also suspect. Even at the beginning of the novel the reader is revealed to the son’s revulsion against the father. Jasper titles his biography “The *True* Story of the Infamous Chinaman Called Johnny” (p. 6) indicating his actual feeling towards his father. To Jasper, Johnny is *infamous*, thus criminal. He is also “a liar, a cheat, a traitor and a skirt-chaser” (p. 4). His father is an immoral who deserves to be placed in the annals of history reserved for the criminally inclined. Under such emotional condition, it is very difficult to make unbiased judgment since Jasper’s emotion and feelings will cloud his portrayal of his father. This example also implies that intention is part of the act of narrating historical discourse. As Karlsson (2003) indicates, history can be manipulated to serve “various interests and needs” (p. 11). What is intended as history is merely an inference of what actually happens, sometimes clouded by the historian’s biases that could be ideological, cultural or even personal. In general, the historian merely makes plausible conjectures in correspondence to historical evidences available to him. Therefore, history in this sense is authorial consciousness and intention of the chronicler. And like Jasper, he can only tell a part of the story; never a whole and even that part which he narrates is suspect as to its objectivity and truthfulness.

In much the same way of a problem faced by a typical historian Jasper also faces the great issue of lack of information when he begins writing Johnny Lim’s biography. Information, or evidence, is essential for a historian in order to write closer to the truth of events. Evidence points to and guides a historian as to what happens and how it happens. Without evidence the historian is merely groping in the dark hoping to somehow write about something that might be the truth. A case in point in the novel is when Jasper tries to make sense of the early life of his father and the era that he lived in. Jasper admits that “there is not much recorded information relating specifically to my father. What exists, exists only as local hearsay and it is to be treated with some caution” (p. 10). To supplement this lack of information Jasper relies on a textbook written by a British colonial official R. St J. Unwin called *Rural Villages of Lowland Malaya* written 1954. This textbook relates Mr Unwin’s observations about how the natives of the lowland lived their lives. Based on this textbook, Jasper attempts to make sense of the life of his father. Thus, Jasper’s evidence is gleaned from another source and based on that he endeavours to reconstruct the biography of Johnny Lim. As such, what Jasper has accomplished is creating a history for his father, and not about him. As Davies (2010) states, “history historicises the world” (p. 177) indicating that it is a historian who creates, and not represents, reality. Needless to say, the production will be partly based on facts and partly the result of Jasper’s own active imagination.

The historical perspective of Jasper, the son of Johnny Lim, is merely a part of how the story about Johnny’s life and death is understood and narrated. To Jasper, who hates his father believing that he caused the death of his mother, Johnny is an emotionless monster who manipulated and exploited people and systems for his own selfish interests. While some part of this narration might be true there are many instances and indications that the

biography has many lacunas to be seriously considered as scientific, objective and authentic. In the next discussion, the researchers will analyse the second but more sympathetic perspective of Johnny Lim. This perspective is by his wife, Snow Soong, who constructs the character of Johnny Lim through her diary. In terms of historicity a diary can be considered part of personal history within the larger social history.

A diary normally relates to events that happen to the owner and most of the time they are a reflection of how she feels about those events. It often provides a sketch of the author's innermost feelings and thoughts. In terms of its usefulness as historical materials, diaries can be considered as possessing materials closer to the truth compared to an autobiography. An autobiography is written by the author for the general readership. Diaries, on the other hand, contain personal recollections of the writer, presumably for her own personal reading (Davies 2010). Thus, the content of a diary is presumably more honest, thus, trustworthy. However, the reader has to consider the personal biases of the writer as she would write her diary based on her perspective only and, therefore, would not make an effort to conduct a more vigorous act of self criticism.

As mentioned earlier the second perspective is given by Snow Soong seen through her personal diary. As has been explained above, her accounts of Johnny Lim can be considered as more trustworthy than that of Jasper's. However, even Snow's diary will not be able to tell the whole aspects of Johnny Lim's life. In terms of perspective, she is still looking at him from a position of power, from that of an educated and rich wife narrating and describing a husband who hails from an inferior status. However, the author's use of the diary for the second narrator allows the reader the many aspects of Johnny Lim's personality. Jasper's account is deliberate and purposeful. It is meant to be read and to ask the reader to make judgment of his father. Snow's account is more private, or meant to be private. It describes, sometimes unflatteringly, the people close to her especially on their trip to the Seven Maiden Islands. Had it meant for the general readership it would have caused scandals and brought shame to her and also her family. Therefore, for the author to allow the reader privy to Snow's diary is his way of creating the sense of reality surrounding our central figure-Johnny Lim.

At this stage a summary of the second narrator is necessary. Snow Soong is Johnny Lim's only wife who died giving birth to Jasper. Obviously, Jasper dearly loves his mother although he never had the opportunity to meet or receive her love. His love for her, thus, is merely based on the love instinct of a son who has not been raised by his natural mother. Thus the son's mental projection of the mother, under such circumstance, is of an ideal mother of love and sacrifice. Of his mother he has only praises for her:

My mother, Snow Soong, was the most beautiful woman in the valley. Indeed, she was one of the most widely admired women in the country, capable of outshining any in Singapore or Penang or Kuala Lumpur. When she was born the midwives were astonished by the quality of her skin, the clarity and delicate translucence of it. (p. 66)

The exaggeration of her mother's beauty is symptomatic of the image of an ideal mother that the son has constructed. However, a description of Snow Soong by Peter Wormwood, Johnny Lim's friend, is not as flattering. Peter, in his first meeting with Snow describes her much less favourably:

I know she is a woman, but her body has the straight lines of an adolescent boy, flat-chested and slim. She is taller than any woman I have seen in the Orient; her face is almost level with my collarbone. (p. 263)

In these descriptions the reader is provided with contrasting images of the same woman. As a reader which should we believe? How would we know which is closer to the truth? Can we

ever know the truth? Can there be different descriptions by other observers? Analogically, these are the questions relevant to our understanding of history and historical perspectives. History, seen here, is dependent on individual historian's ideology, values and motivation. Therefore, we can never know the authentic and objective view of history as there is none. History will always be referential and perspective-based. The narration of history is always guided by the individual historian's motivation, experience and overall understanding of his own belief and value systems and his interpretations of the evidence before him.

A history is as much the historian's accounts of what he knows and what he wants to write. Seen in this light, the life of Johnny Lim depends on who tells the story and how he wants the story to be told. And Snow's account of Johnny Lim is in total contrast to that of their son. While Jasper's account is one of detestation and disgust Snow's is much more sympathetic, although condescending. From her account, their marriage was not received well by Snow's parents due to the difference in their status. Johnny is from the lower class. As Lemon, Snow's friend explains, "he is strong, healthy, laboring man, totally uneducated and wild... He's almost savage" (p. 132) Snow's family, on the other hand, is from the upper class, part of the Chinese elites of the valley.

From Snow's perspective their marriage faces hardships even from the start. Snow's parents' rejection of Johnny, the elites' frowning upon the couple and Snow's own lessening of feeling of love for her husband are some of the problems the couple faces. Barely a year after their marriage she feels that those moments are "from a distant past" (p. 127) underlying the fact that she no longer finds her husband attractive. The feeling is exacerbated by the presence of a handsome Japanese scholar, Mamoru Kunichika into her life.

The important part of the diary that takes a large amount of space is Snow's account of her and the four other characters' trip to the mysterious Seven Maiden Islands. The trip members itself consist of a motley crew of unlikely individuals. Besides Snow and her husband Johnny there are Kunichika who is a Japanese professor who turns out to be a spy, Honey the British administrator in Malaya and Peter Wormwood who is Johnny's best friend. Needless to say, the trip causes and reveals the frictions within the group. The diary is a narration over a two month period. The trip reveals so many aspects of the characters and the frail relationships between them. One of the causes for friction is Snow's feelings for Kunichika and her attempt to leave her husband for him despite the fact the Kunichika is Japanese and her knowledge about the atrocities the Japanese army inflicted on Chinese population in China. Snow's love for Kunichika is due to his scholarly and gentlemanly manner. These attributes are so different from the coarser personality of her low-class husband. Another crisis within the group is the mutual hatred of the two Europeans Peter and Honey. Peter finds Honey unbearable while Honey, on the other hand, finds Peter vulgar and fligid.

The trip also is by itself interestingly mysterious. First, they need to know and find the mysterious islands without any guide although the only one person who knows best is Kunichika. Kunichika's knowledge of the topographical area leads to the other travelers, especially Honey, to suspect that Kunichika is actually a Japanese spy, the suspicion that turns out to be true. Also the boat suffers a break down midway to the islands. Later, a storm leads to the death of Honey. The only positive side of the trip is Peter's organizing a dinner party celebrated by the remaining members. At the party Peter sings a song by Don Giovanni about a young bride who is stolen from her husband. Understandably, it is an allusion to the fact that Kunichika is slowly stealing Snow away from Johnny.

What is interesting about the content of Snow's diary is the many contradictions it reveals about the characters when compared with Jasper's biography. First is Johnny. Comparing Jasper's account of his father to that of Snow the wife reveals some contradictory aspects of Johnny. Johnny has been accused by Jasper of collaborating with the Japanese

during the Occupation by betraying to the Japanese the leader of the communist movements. However, Snow's account reveals that there is strong reason for Johnny for not cooperating with the Japanese in the fact that his wife's heart is stolen by a Japanese. He also realizes that had she not died during child labor she would have left him (not to mention that Jasper might be Kunichika's son as he little resembles Johnny). Another contradiction is Jasper's unflattering portrayal of his father who he regards as a traitor and selfish individual. Snow, however, portrays Johnny as a timid husband who fails to take any firm action despite knowing of the love affair between his wife and Kunichika. Another unusual relationship, and in a way a contradiction, is actually between Snow and Kunichika itself. Historically, the Chinese suffered greatly under the Japanese both in China as well as in Malaya before and during the Second World War. Under a normal circumstance both races would be hostile towards each other and a love that blossoms between individuals from both races will be viewed as improper. Therefore, to fictionalise Snow having an affair with a Japanese military chief and spy is out of the ordinary. However, this affair can be understood from an interpretative point of view. Snow's relationship with Kunichika serves the narrative purpose of the author in highlighting the problem of historical interpretation.

History is as much elusive as our interpretation of characters. As the research has frequently stated above, there is no single account of history. History is analogous to the seven blind men who hold and feel different parts of an elephant. Each of them describes what he feels and although each of them gives different accounts of the elephants neither of them are, in fact, right or wrong. The parable reveals that one's subjective experience can be true. However, each individual experience is limited by its failure to account for other truths or a totality of truth. This is how history is. It is analogous to the blind men attempting to write history based on their experiences and understandings. Suffice to say, to understand the whole truth of history, to know its totality, is simply impossible.

What the two perspectives achieve at the end of the novel is more confusion and ambiguity to the whole idea of truth/reality. The more the novel unfolds the more the questions about Johnny arise. The theme of surface manifestation that belies the deeper reality is persistently explored in the novel but it only discloses the many possible facets of truth/reality. Also, Tash Aw reveals the limitations of individual perspective as Jasper and Snow forces a re-evaluation of Johnny's character. The novel ends with many lacunae that the readers themselves must fill up. Thus, the analysis of the novel *The Harmony Silk Factory* reveals to the reader about the ambiguity of supposed facts in historical narrativity. Historical writing, in essence, has elements of fiction embedded into it because a historian is unable, however much he claims, to be truly objective and neutral.

CONCLUSION

History is never neutral. Behind each word written by a historian there is always an ideology that encourages interpretation and meaning to be understood in certain ways. Whether some of the meanings are consciously or unconsciously intended by the historian is irrelevant since it is the historian's ideology that shapes the sentences, paragraphs and the text into a cohesive whole. This holds true of the narratives that we have analysed above. In our research we have brought to bear the nature of history and historical narrative as we compare these exercises with fiction writing. As Althusser (1990) mentions, each and every one of us forms our value system and ideology based on our experience and our experience comes from the environment around us; our parents, the school that we go to, the laws that guide how we should behave and the justice system that punish should we misbehave. When a historian starts to put pen to paper and informs us that he will be as scientific and objective as possible,

he is only deluding himself and his readers since it is impossible to be objective. The historian will always be swayed by his value system when he makes judgments and these value systems are in turn based on his personal moral values, his culture and the society of which he is a part of. As the saying goes, half the truth is often a whole lie.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported by the Research Fund provided by Research Management and Innovation Centre (RMIC), Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia.

REFERENCES

- Al-Aghberi, M.A. (2015). Telling the untellable: Dialectic of silence in Jewish-American and Arab-American holocaust discourse. *3L: Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*. Vol. 21(1), 61-69.
- Althusser, L.(1990). Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. In Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Eds.), *Critical Theory Since 1965*. Tallahassee: Florida State University Press.
- Best, S & Kellner, D. (1991). *Postmodern theory-critical interrogations*. Macmillan: London.
- Carnes, M.C. (Ed). (2001). *Novel History: Historians and Novelists Confront America's Past (And Each Other)*. London: Simon & Schuster.
- Carr, E.H. (2001). *What is History?* Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, Hampshire.
- Davies, M.L. (2010). *Imprisoned by History*. Routledge: New York & London.
- Davies, S. (2003). *Empiricism and History*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Fulbrook, M. (2002). *Historical Theory*. Routledge: New York & London.
- Gabriel, S.P. (2013). *After the Break: Re-conceptualising Ethnicity, National Identity and 'Malaysian-Chinese' Identities*. Ethnic and Racial Studies. Routledge: New York & London.
- Jenkins, K. (1999). *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity*. London: Routledge.
- Jenkins, K., Morgan, S & Munslow, A. (Eds). (2007). *Manifestos for History*. Routledge: London.
- Karlsson, K.G. (2003). *The Holocaust as a problem of historical culture. Theoretical and analytical challenges, in echoes of the holocaust*.In K.G, Karlsson & U. Zander (Eds.). *Historical cultures in contemporary Europe* (pp. 9-57). Lund: Nordic Academic Press.
- Kellner, H. (1989). *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked*. Madison:WI.
- Manquosh, R.,Noraini, M.Y & Ruzy, S.H. (2011). The use of historical allusion in recent American and Arab fiction. *GEMA Online. Journal of Language Studies*. Vol. 11(1), 57-68.
- Miller, J.H. (1974). Narrative and history. *ELH*. Vol. 41(3), 455-473.
- Popper, K. (1974). *The Poverty of Historicism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Ruzy, S, H. (2003). *Out of the Shadows: Women in Malay Court Narratives*. Bangi: Penerbit UKM.
- Southgate, B. (2009). *History Meets Fiction*. Pearson: London and New York.
- Tash Aw. (2006). *The Harmony Silk Factory*. London: Harper Perennial.