3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature® The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies
Vol 29(3), September 2023 http://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2023-2903-18

Rerouting The Worlding of Inter-Ethnic Estrangement Through Critical Solace: Shivani Sivagurunathan's *Yalpanam*

SHANTHINI PILLAI
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

JESLYN SHARNITA AMARASEKERA
Faculty of Social Science and Humanities
Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology, Malaysia
jeslynsa@tarc.edu.my

ANGELINE WONG WEI WEI
Malaysia Immersion and Pathways
Monash University Malaysia, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Notes of estrangement and exile, flight and peregrination are themes that are often closely threaded into the narratives of contemporary Malaysian novelists. This is especially so for those writers who live abroad but are continually drawn back across the sea of memory to draw on key episodes that have been the catalyst for the creation of the Malaysian diaspora. References to the racial riots of 1969 are foremost among these, with the Japanese Occupation a close second. We suggest that these have created an emerging empire of transnational narratives that has worlded Malaysia through the spectres of national trauma until many forget the very act of fictional worlding. In this paper, we interrogate the interior realities of home-based writings by choosing the novel Yalpanam (2021) by Shivani Sivagurunathan. We argue that the descriptive poetics of its narrative reworlds melancholy, trauma and shame through the interweaving of inter-ethnic and intergenerational perspectives. Taking centrestage is Yalpanam, the house from which the novel derives its very title that plays a significant role in rerouting the trajectory of inter-ethnic estrangement through an integration of solace and healing as part of the narrative's rhetorical strategy. This trajectory unfolds in the novel through a bricolage of the legacies of the past that form the inner sanctum of the novel, integrating the micro-narratives of letters, folk memory, family stories and formalised historical events. We suggest that these micro-narratives are collectively restorative and recuperative. It is through the commingling of these micro narratives that the novel presents what we see as a re-worlding of transnational aesthetics of estrangement that eventually engenders a sense of solidarity through intertwined ethno-memories.

Keywords: inter-ethnic engagement; solace; Malaysian literature; worlding; inter-ethnic solidarity

INTRODUCTION

Notes of estrangement and exile, flight and peregrination are themes that are often closely threaded into the narratives of many Malaysian novelists. This is especially so for those writers who live abroad but are continually drawn back across the sea of memory to draw on key episodes that have been the catalyst for the creation of the Malaysian diaspora. References to the racial riots of 1969 are foremost among these, with the Japanese Occupation a close second. One needs only to read the works of Tash Aw, Preeta Samarasan, Tan Twan Eng and Rani Manicka to be privy to such repeated hailing of the thematics of violent communal upheavals. When these writers gain global currency through the much brighter headlights of a metropolitan stage, they are subsequently celebrated as having "the greatest impact over the last two decades" (Chin & Quayum, 2021).

How does this affect writers who produce significant works of fiction that remain on lesser visible platforms? The answer lies in what Wong Phui Nam (2020) refers to as the "twofold problem" that beleaguers the world of Malaysian creative writing, or perhaps more aptly, the reception of such writing. The first, he candidly states, is the "colonial hangover" that leads to a global hierarchy of Metropolitan-based Malaysian writings over home-based writings, largely reminiscent of the racial hierarchies of colonial days of yore. The first, he candidly states, is the "colonial hangover" that leads to a global hierarchy of Metropolitan-based Malaysian writings over home-based writings, largely reminiscent of the racial hierarchies of colonial days of yore. The second problem is the inability of such writers to "give voice to the existential reality of the interior life of this country" (Wong, 2020, p. 44), which he believes is more engagingly nuanced in the writings of home-based authors.

In this paper, we use Wong Phui Nam's forthrightness as a point of departure to interrogate the interior realities of home-based writings by choosing the novel *Yalpanam* (2021) by Shivani Sivagurunathan. We seek to show how the narrative of Sivagurunathan's *Yalpanam* reroutes the trajectory of inter-ethnic estrangement, often at the heart of contemporary Malaysian writings, through the integration of solace and healing as part of the narrative's rhetorical strategy. This trajectory unfolds in the novel through a bricolage of the legacies of the past that form the inner sanctum of the novel, integrating the micro-narratives of letters, folk memory, family stories and formalised historical events. We suggest that these micro-narratives are collectively restorative and recuperative. It is through the commingling of these micro-narratives that the novel presents what we see as a re-worlding of transnational aesthetics of estrangement. Here, we draw on Spivak's conceptualisation of worlding and the creation of fictions of empire (Spivak, 1985, p. 243), except we replace the colonial empire with the empire of transnational narratives that have burgeoned over the past two decades and the worlding of Malaysia through critical trauma. If colonial worlding led to the recovery, interpretation and curricularization of "the Third World" as a signifier that allows us to forget that "worlding" (Spivak, 1985, p. 243), we suggest that the emerging empire of transnational narratives that have burgeoned over the past two decades has similarly worlded Malaysia through the spectres of national trauma until many forget the very act of fictional worlding. We thus choose to reroute this very axis through the counter-narrative of what David James (2016) conceptualises as "critical solace" and the "consolatory matrix of fiction," which, as he asserts, is centrally located in the "critical potential" of descriptive aesthetics of narrative style to animate and "metabolise sorrow with militant grace". Viewed from this context, critical solace in literary fiction denotes the capacity of narrative style to convey the complexities of emotion and affect, detailing trauma and loss while simultaneously leading to solace. Thus, critical solace is not merely the experience of catharsis or solace as a result of denouement but rather the intricate ways in which the narrative style plays a role in generating and stimulating solace, extending the range of literary aesthetics of presentation. James posits, too, that negative experiences such as trauma, shame, melancholy, and despair are often seen as important subjects deserving of deep analysis and exploration, regarded as profound and significant, commanding our attention and consideration. On the other hand, consolation, which refers to the act of providing comfort or relief, is perceived as less intellectually engaging or less worthy of critical examination (James, 2016, p. 500). Yet, he argues that "solace isn't about recouping what's left after loss, attenuating grief's duration, or covering up the material causes of psychic devastation" but is instead a deep "conduit for effect" (p. 500). Using this two-pronged framework of critical solace and the reworlding of communal estrangement, we explore the critical potential of the descriptive aesthetics of Sivagurunathan's novel within three contexts. The first involves the

central image of the quintessential diasporic motif of the physical house and its rerouting of established signifiers of home and belonging towards the construction of what can be viewed as an ascetic house of healing or *ashram*. The second context is that of the intricate interweaving of a host of voices across inter-ethnic and inter-generational boundaries and their resonance in expanding the threshold of communal healing. The final and perhaps most significant context is the way in which the collective voices that gather momentum within the walls of the house lead to the consolidation of alternate annals of ethno-memories that ultimately generate new routes of inter-ethnic solidarity.

The conduits for these three emblems of critical solace and the rerouting of ethno-trauma emerge primarily from the central focus of the novel, which highlights two main characters, Pushpanayagi Rasalingam and Maxim Cheah, from two different generations and two different ethnic backgrounds. Pushpanayagi, an elderly Malaysian Indian woman, owns Yalpanam, the name of the house from which the novel derives its title. Maxim, a much younger Malaysian Chinese woman, lives in the house next door to Yalpanam. Their families, in turn, share an intertwined history wherein Maxim's grandfather, who was badly injured in the jungle, was assisted by Pushpanayagi and her sister, Savitri. Maxim's grandfather eventually died in Yalpanam, and the memory of the unfortunate incident left a lasting mark in the sisters' hearts. Interestingly, Maxim's family are in the dark about the grandfather's death, though the past unravels itself for Maxim through chronotopic engagements with interspersed memories. In the interweaving of the narratives from family members of both women, an interconnected web of ethno-memories emerges that consequently reworlds melancholy, trauma and shame. The ultimate objective of utilising this framework is to shed light on how Malaysian novels, such as those written in the style of Sivagurunathan's descriptive poetics, can act as a conduit for effect and consequently reconfigure the oft-repeated transnational worlding of inter-ethnic estrangement on the Malaysian frontier through the aesthetics of collective literary memory and critical solace. In this way, our article attempts to interject into the collective thoughts on trauma and Malaysian socio-historical orientations as they have unfurled in literary scholarship.

TRAUMA AND MALAYSIAN COMMUNAL MEMORY

The existing body of literature that exists within the Malaysian corpus consists of writings that draw from the memories of the lived past. These memories are especially significant as they not only serve as a reminder of the past but as a pathway towards reconciliation. As Vijay Agnew (2005) notes:

> Memories…enable us to vividly recreate our recollections of home as a haven filled with nostalgia, longing, and desire, or they compel us, as witnesses and co-witnesses, to construct home as a site and space of vulnerability, danger, and violent trauma. Memories can be nostalgically evocative of imaginary homelands and places of birth and origins, as well as an antidote to the struggles of the present.
>
> (Agnew, 2005, p. 10)

Similarly, the writings of Malaysian writers often depict the manner in which memories are "nostalgically evocative" as well as "witnesses…of violent trauma". Philip Holden (2009) has written at length on the underlying trauma resonant in the works of pioneer Malaysian writers Lloyd Fernando and K.S. Maniam that delineate the after-effects of colonialism and indentured labour, especially in terms of their emphasis on human relationships with the land they resided in. Holden also notes that the works of contemporary diasporic writers who have found popularity

outside Malaysia, such as Vyvyanne Loh, Tash Aw and Tan Twan Eng, "centre not on contemporary Malaysia but rather an earlier time of national trauma – events before and during the Japanese occupation of Malaya from late 1941 to 1945" (Holden, 2009, p. 64).

Holden's thoughts also resonate with Carol Leon and Galdys Koh's findings which explore how the writings of Tan Twan Eng deal with the lost histories of the past (2020, p. 233). They reiterate that characters within his novels have, in one way or another, faced the traumas of the past and continue to jostle between the vulnerabilities of the past and present. The characters in Tan's *The Gift of Rain* and *The Garden of Evening Mists* recollect their past traumas endured during the Japanese Occupation in Malaya, thus witnessing their homes uprooted from serving as havens to being distorted as sites for trauma. Nevertheless, the characters in both novels, despite their struggle, are ultimately able to come to terms with their past and accept the present Malaysia as a site of therapeutic healing (Leon & Koh, 2020, p. 247).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that most works often dwell on the presentation of trauma as well as the emphasis on trauma brought upon by the character's circumstances within the Malaysian context. Kuek (2020) asserts that writings produced by Malaysians from 1969 to 2019 place strong emphasis on the trauma endured by both Malay and Chinese characters as they cope with various changes that affect both individuals and nation. Ying Xin Show (2021) also discusses the ways in which three Malaysian female writers, namely Li Zishu, Preeta Samarasan and Hanna Alkaf, emphasise the traumatic past of their characters as they are engulfed by the racial riots of 1969. The findings delve into the ways in which the authors depict the trauma endured, thus "in a different tone, urges[urging] us to acknowledge the painful feelings of 13 May as lived, not forcing them to be cured in the optimism for reconciliation" (Ying Xin Show, 2021, p,229). Again, it is important to note that most works of the past have revealed an emphasis on trauma and the need to address it rather than placing more significance on the character's search for solace.

Another similar research by Xia Hou et al. (2022) further explores, through their study of narratology and trauma, the role of narratives in healing past trauma endured by the characters in Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory.* Xia Hou et al. add that vivid narratives "may heal trauma and may reconstruct linear time order by contact, conversation, reading, listening and telling out of the traumatic experiences" (2022, p.22). Their findings emphasise the role of the temporal in drawing out healing and solace of traumatic experiences endured by the characters.

We must also pause for a moment on the nuances of the Malayan emergency and its impact on Malaysian communal consciousness, for as noted above, the event plays a significant role in the narrative of *Yalpanam.* The state of emergency is generally traced to the years between 1948 and 1960, which is a slightly over a decade. Its catalyst was the Japanese Occupation and its attendant consequences, especially in terms of a greater awareness of the fallibility of the British as a colonial force and a rising Asian-centred acumen. As much as the locus of this historical event is steeped in anti-colonial consciousness, strategic colonialist pitting of ethnic communities (mainly Malays and Chinese) against each other in the bid to suppress its ascent warped its very centre and led instead to its macabre historicity.

Scholars have interrogated the nuances of the Emergency form various dimensions and as Stockwell (1993, p. 66-67) rightly avers, perceptions are contingent on the angle of observation, "from the metropolitan or peripheral perspective", and the attendant perception as either "a response to crime and lawlessness, as a crisis in colonial government, as an avoidable tragedy, as a Malayan civil war, as a war of national liberation, as an episode in Asia's Cold War, as a catalyst in the process of decolonisation, or as the proving ground of counter-insurgency techniques".

Yet what is interesting, especially in the context of our paper, is that the origins of the Emergency are closely tied to British colonialist collaboration with European capitalists, mainly planters, and the collective aim of suppressing the rising social aspirations of the Asian community, particularly of the working class (Nonini, 2015; White, 1998). These intersections are influential in the narrative of *Yalpanam*. The house that the main character, Pushpanayagi, owns was bequeathed to her by a colonial planter who had fallen in love with her. Years later, during the Emergency, Pushapanayagi and her sister rescue a wounded person of Chinese ethnicity, who we later learn is Maxim's grandfather. Maxim's grandfather is important for he represents those unsung heroes of the Emergency, a freedom fighter, part of "the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of MCP guerrillas who were killed, executed as "terrorists," died in the jungle from hunger, wounds, and disease … ordinary people swept up in the (colonial) government's campaign" (Nonini, 2015, p. 432). What role do these characters play in the reworlding of the historical trauma of the Malayan Emergency, and what are the attendant literary aesthetics of critical healing and solace that are threaded into this narrative reworlding? In the following discussion, we begin first with the critical literary aesthetics that surround the central image of the house, Yalpanam, which we see as a symbolic House of Healing, ushering away historical trauma and bringing in waves of solace. We then proceed with the issue of reworlding through inter-ethnic engagement that leads to cathartic healing of estrangement across time and space that eventually engenders a sense of solidarity through intertwined ethno-memories.

REWORLDING TRAUMA THROUGH THE AESTHETICS OF CRITICAL SOLACE

YALPANAM AS A HOUSE OF HEALING

When faced with the opening lines of the novel, one might be given the impression that this novel, too, may very well lead us down the path of estrangement and exile. We are told that Yalpanam is "an old colonial affair" that "sits on the hill and sighs quietly within its walls, standing aloof, a vague member of a neighbourhood named after angels rumoured to have fled following years of neglect." (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 1). However, it is the subsequent sentence that foreshadows the different trajectory of Sivagurunathan's narrative progression, as it overtly emphasises the aspect of memory, the obstructions that lie in its path through geospatial metaphors and most importantly, the yearning to seek the view of the sea that lies behind. The sea "is mere memory", for it "remains unseen, unheard by her, permanently blocked by mustard yellow, lime-green, turmeric-orange, whitewashed square blocks, plaster of Paris Roman pillars" of the residential development of "concrete, middle-class bungalows" (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 1).

The house stands as a character on its own, a protector of sorts, armed with sighs that “rise and fall like waves soaring” (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 1). It emerges as a personified body that listens to its inhabitants, silently and patiently, sighing with them as they lament about their circumstances as the locality goes through historic and modern changes. Even when the island's lush greenery is replaced with "concrete middle-class bungalows" and "mustard yellow, lime-green, turmeric-orange, whitewashed square blocks plaster of Paris Roman pillars” (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p.1), and as the view of the sea is permanently blocked, the house remained, steadfast in its sentinel duty on top of the hill.

The house was first built by a British planter, Richard Miller, who "longed for the dark silence of cathedrals, found also in his parish church back home" (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 3),

similar to many colonialists who longed to have the semblance of their own home in a foreign land. Over time, he christens the house as "Eden's Eden":

> The Eden within Eden, he thought. An ultimate Eden, paradise regained, and secured in a protective Edenic layer against tropical turmoil and the hotchpotch of island elements- human and otherwise…any neutral observer would say that the house became a microcosm of the island's multifariousness.
>
> (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 4)

The house thus becomes a protective haven, one brimming with the wonders of an idyllic garden and able to offer refuge against the harsh tropical environment. The notion of the house serving as a place of solace is further expanded even as the house is reincarnated into "Yalpanam", as depicted through the protagonist, Pushpanayagi and her everyday experiences. The house is then shown as becoming "as silent as an empty cathedral but without the romance of divine darkness" (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 5). The association with the cathedral emphasises both the sense of the immense significance of the house, given that cathedrals are the seats of bishops of a diocese, as much as it also reiterates the trope of solace, as a cathedral would serve as a sanctuary for those who seek refuge in her confinements.

For Pushpanayagi, her everyday experiences in Yalpanam include solitary silence on a mat in the hall or in the garden with fertile plants surrounding her. It is in the house that she is able to carry on her quiet life, unaffected by what takes place beyond the walls of the colonial house. The comfort she finds in the house is further exemplified at the end of each day as she makes her way back in after her time in the garden, as "the house stops sighing and expands its walls, warms the air, welcomes the last rays of the orange sun into its courtyard" (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 8). The house is able to not only offer her shelter but also the warm human embrace that provides Pushpanayagi comfort in her long life. This is also evident as Pushpanayagi remains comfortable and "attached to the house like an oyster to its shell" until her dying days (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 36).

The house not only serves as a symbol of eternal comfort for Pushpanayagi but also for the residents of Coal Island itself. Maxim Cheah, a young resident of Coal Island, is able to identify with the familiar image of the house serving as a comforting reminder of the island as her watchful guard:

> "Yalpanam had always been there, would always be there, day after day, a perennial building with murky, drooping eyes that watched her life move in meandering snail steps."
>
> (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p.12)

For Maxim, Yalpanam represents the house that has "always been there"; an image that represents her past, present and future – the reminder that while those around her may be oblivious to what takes place in her life, Yalpanam will always be steadfast in her observance.

Even as the nation and island had been engulfed in their own battles, Yalpanam remained as the "perennial building" tucked away from all the danger, serving as a refuge to its residents.

> Yalpanam remains safe on its hill, away from the muddle of war, but close enough for those in the house to feel something in their chests as bombs go off, close enough to feel gloom upon hearing stories of bodies bursting open from Japanese 'water torture', of decapitations in broad daylight and girls raped in front of their families…"
>
> (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 200)

The house remained unharmed and unaffected throughout the times, be it during the Japanese Occupation or the rapid progress that swept across the island in the form of hideous concrete buildings that screamed modernity. Yet, despite offering the safety and comfort of a home for those within, for those like Maxim, Yalpanam continues to serve as a vivid reminder of the past that lingers in their distant memories.

The idea of home and locality often draw upon both the imagined as well as the reality (Amarasekera & Pillai, 2018, p.19). In this sense, home becomes a site that is designed based on the memories of the past, along with the lived experiences of the present. The physical place becomes a significant site "in which the memories, experiences and emotions remain forever etched" (Amarasekera & Pillai, 2018, p.20). For Pushpanayagi, in particular, Yalpanam not only serves as the real haven she resides in but also the imagined land of her past that she dreams of. Even in her thoughts and prayers, Yalpanam is remembered as "Yalpanam, old warm land of Mother, Yalpanam, dark sea of Shakti's womb" (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 17). Pushpanayagi is reminded of her old land and sea, which she left behind for a new land and sea. These symbols of her motherland and sea are especially significant as she leaves her old island (Ceylon) for Coal Island. The sea that surrounds an island often becomes "one of the strongest elements in the memory…as the sea serves as a constant companion" (Amarasekera & Pillai, 2006, p. 23). Similarly, Pushpanayagi is able to draw from the mythical past of her homeland and similar experiences in her new land and sea. Pushpanayagi also relives her imagined homeland by renaming Eden's Eden as Yalpanam. The post-colonial renaming of the home serves as a palimpsest of the homeland she left as a child, as the former "'inscriptions' are erased and overwritten, yet remain as traces within present consciousness" (Ashcroft et al., 2007, p. 160). By renaming the house *Yalpanam*, Pushpanayagi is able to hold on to the memory of her imagined homeland, one that she was forced to leave at a tender age. The distant homeland in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, is kept alive in her imagination as the house becomes the land from which she seeks comfort. This is seen when Pushapanayagi recalls her imagined homeland and the significance of the name. She explains that the name "Yalpanam" is derived from the old folktale from her past:

> "The Yal is a lute. In ancient times, a blind Panan lute player visited a king in Ceylon...Soon, the lute player filled this new land with people from his homeland in India. This new settlement was called Yalpanam, land of the blind minstrel. 'Jaffna' is a corruption of the Tamil word 'Yalpanam'."
>
> (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 120)

Pushpanayagi's tale leads Maxim on her Internet search for the story of Yalpanam, reminding Pushpanayagi of the homeland she had left, "I suppose you can say the Yal player's music is in my blood" (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 120). Despite forgetting the story as time goes by, Pushpanayagi is able to retain her ties with her homeland as a space of reconciliation with her past. Acknowledging the story of her ancestral homeland and admitting her blood ties to the land reiterates the fact that Pushpanayagi may have left Yalpanam in Ceylon, but Yalpanam remains a pivotal symbol in her life, a symbol that represents comfort and solace. Her estranged home in Ceylon is now reimagined in the form of the welcoming house on Coal Island. The mud huts in Ceylon are now replaced with something more solid: a concrete Yalpanam on Coal Island.

It serves as a place of solace, one that enables her to heal from the past, leading her from "the gates of the house…and stretched all through the island…and up the length of Sri Lanka, until it finally ended in the original Yalpanam, land of her ancestors, Jaffna" (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 231). The symbolic route that starts from the gates of Yalpanam to the land of her ancestors is a

reconciliatory path that translates into Pushpanayagi's acceptance of her traumatic past and how it has led her to her place of solace here in Malaysia.

SHADES OF SOLACE: THE TROPE OF THE BANYAN TREE

In a similar manner of reimagining Yalpanam as a safe haven, Sivagurunathan also illustrates another symbol of solace, namely through the portrayal of the banyan tree standing tall outside the gates of Yalpanam. The banyan tree is often depicted as a symbolic entity of cultural significance in Asian culture. Within the context of religion, it is perceived to be a site of solace and salvation as it is where Lord Krishna resides in Hindu mythology. Similarly, the sacred Bodhi tree, the variation of the banyan tree, though not entirely alike in appearance, plays a pivotal role in Buddhism as it is the tree under which Siddhartha Gautama Buddha had sought refuge and attained enlightenment. The tree is also further seen as "a symbol of unity through diversity, inclusiveness, and charity," bringing people of varying faiths together (Beck & Beck, 2018, p. 17). This notion of unity is notably relevant within the Southeast Asian region where the tree is found, given the diversity of cultures and ethnicities found here. The arboreal symbol is omnipresent in Vietnamese folklore as a sacred tree celebrated during the mid-autumn festival as well as a tree inhabited by deities and spirits in folklore found in the Philippines (Guzman, 2022; Tran Thi Thu Ha, 2021). In this sense, the banyan tree and its varying symbolism, as seen in Southeast Asian folklore, serve to unify the people in their plethora of beliefs. The banyan tree is also consequential in nation-building as reflected in the Indonesian Pancasila, in which the symbol of the tree is used to depict the third Pancasila principle: the unity of Indonesian people (Sekretariat Negara Republik Indonesia, 2012). Extending this idea of unity, in the novel, Pushapanayagi is sometimes referred to as the Banyan Woman, the one who is able to offer comfort and solace to those who come to seek her advice (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 6). The tree in the novel becomes the meeting point for those who seek Pushpanayagi's therapeutic company as she is able to listen to their confessions and sorrows, "each day, under the banyan tree, men appeared, told their stories, paid her a few shillings, and left" (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p.185). The banyan tree in the novel serves as a symbolic representation of solace as it becomes the place where the lost seek refuge. Under the comforting shade of the tree, The Banyan Woman and her "healing powers" are able to absolve those who confess their sins. In this sense, it can be said that the banyan tree also manages to serve as a unifying site of solace for those who reside on Coal Island.

On this subject of unifying sites, we now proceed with what we see as one of the most significant roles that Pushpanayagi plays, that of a high priestess who engenders healing of estranged ethno-memories of the past through the encounter and subsequent engagement with the younger Malaysian Chinese character, Maxim. We use the term ethno-memories to refer to specific collective memories within a nation that have strong ties to a particular ethnic group and that have been worlded in a particular way that has subsumed the presence of other micro-narratives that can lead to new ways of reading the past. In the context of *Yalpanam,* the ethnic group in question is that of the Malaysian Chinese community and the attendant narrative, that of the Emergency and all its accompanying notes of national discord as commonly and communally understood. Yet we argue that the exchanges between Pushpanayagi and Maxim lead to a reworlding of these set ethno-memories. Here, we choose to extend Arjun Appadurai's concept of ethno-scapes by integrating the aspect of memory into the fold. As Pillai (2021, p. 115) has argued, Appadurai's concept of ethnoscapes, with its emphasis on the aspect of "perspectival constructs", those varying inflexions of "historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors" (Appadurai, 1996,

p. 33) is especially useful when dealing with suppressed communal stories. As Pillai (2021, p. 115) stresses, in her work on obscured Malaysian Indian narratives of the past, "the medium of communal memory" is extremely significant in allowing one to access multiple perspectives of the past and, more importantly, "enables one to imagine" the different branches that can co-exist alongside authoritatively defined national narratives of the past.

In the following discussion, we show how this bifurcated imagination unfolds as Pushpanayagi engages with Maxim, lifting the heavy curtains that have shielded the latter's access to a deeply estranged part of her family history. Additionally, given that the socio-historical setting of the narrative in question is that of the Malayan Emergency, we argue that this enables a reworlding of the national memory of the same.

REWORLDING THE NATIONAL NARRATIVE OF INTER-ETHNIC ESTRANGEMENT

INTERTWINED ETHNO-MEMORIES

A brief introduction to the character of Maxim Cheah will provide useful details on how she is a significant figure in the story of her friendship with Pushpanayagi. Maxim is a feisty 18-year-old Malaysian Chinese who lives next door to Pushpanayagi. Maxim's first encounter with Pushpanayagi was when she went over to *Yalpanam* to help the 185-year-old lady who fell ill. As Maxim develops her familiarity and affection for Pushpanayagi and Yalpanam, she reconnects with her identity, family history and attachment to the motherland. In her journey of engagement with Pushpanayagi, Maxim reconciles with her past and crosses the threshold of self-determination towards realising her aspirations for the multi-ethnic country. Sivagurunathan reworlds stereotypes of Malaysian Chinese by dismantling and reconstructing representations of different Chinese communal identities through the novel. The analysis of the Malaysian Chinese characters of different generations begins with the characters of Maxim's grandfather and her father.

RECONSTRUCTING SINO-MALAYSIAN AFFILIATION TO THE HOMELAND

The sense of attachment to the homeland is variedly experienced by the characters of Maxim's grandfather and father - the former is portrayed as one who champions the interest of his community, while the latter is known to be a capitalist in the guise of a politician who prioritises his self-interests. In the novel, the grandfather, a communist who eventually died from being injured by an animal during a guerrilla mission in the jungle, is known as "Cheah Soon Bee, hero of Malaya, hero who died fighting for a cause (not like the son)…(who is) selfless, always thinking about the community, society, always outside himself, always thinking about other people (not like the son)" (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 196). Adversely, Maxim's father, Cheah Lee Kong, is regarded as one who is "too ready to follow people. No cause. No principles." (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p.196). Being the antithesis of his heroic and self-sacrificial father, who demonstrates a distinctly stronger sense of attachment to the homeland, Lee Kong feels estranged from the country's socio-political situation and even questions his father's passion and dedication to the nation, as he tells Maxim:

> "What happened to his country? Adopted country ... but some of these Chinese never saw it like that, you know, they loved it like it was their own… I don't think he will be happy here now ... not with me, not with how we do things ... I don't know how he believed like that, where the passion came from.
>
> (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p.240)

In this excerpt, Soon Bee regards Malaya as his own country, while his son, Lee Kong, perceives Malaysia as an adopted country.

The notion of Chinese loyalty to Malaya(sia) and the identity of Malay(sian) Chinese has been a perennial question and a source of dispute from colonial to postcolonial days. Hirschman (1986) states that Malayan Chinese during the Malayan Emergency was generally perceived with much suspicion by the Malays in terms of their allegiance to the country, partly due to the lack of support given by the British administration in publicly acknowledging Malayan-born Chinese as Malayans:

> Given the hostility toward the Chinese expressed by many colonial officials and the lack of physical and social integration, it is not surprising that most Malays formed the opinion that the Chinese were only transients in Malaya with no real attachments to the country.
>
> (Hirschman, 1986, p. 354)

In the novel, the sense of suspicion and hostility towards Malayan Chinese is shown by Abu, a servant of Charles Tanner, a British lepidopterist who lives in *Yalpanam*. Abu disapproves of Pushpanayagi and Savitri's decision to help a dying Chinese communist:

> "You bring communist into our house?"
> Charles grunts. 'In this house, any enemy of the Japs is a friend to us.'
> 'You think so, Tuan, Japanese don't want freedom for us? They good-'
>
> (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 76)

Abu's prejudice towards the Chinese communists and his perceived affiliation with the Japanese reflect the general anti-communist sentiments, as well as Japanese loyalty among some of the Malays during the Japanese Occupation.

More critically, the novel seems to reworld the authoritative fiction of colonial-defined categorisations through the depiction of Pushpanayagi as a complex and amorphous character with the ethnic and Western names that she carries. The sense of fluid representation is also seen in Yalpanam, in which its multifarious inhabitants consist of what the "colonial society on the island" would consider as "bizarre assemblies or camaraderie of any kind, be it servant-master intimacy, Malay-Chinese riverside banter while poaching fish, or mongrel families that sometimes formed, quite spontaneously, across the island, all defying classification" (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 59). Such instances of border crossings deconstruct notions of rigidly defined categories and resonate with the sense of fluidity in Malay-Chinese collaborations in the tin mining areas of the West Coast states "in spite of wide cultural and linguistic differences" (Hirschman, 1986, p. 339) during the colonial system of divide-and-rule.

Looking into Sino-Malaysian affiliation to the homeland, Sivagurunathan presents a different communist representation through the character of Cheah Soon Bee, a communist who fought the Japanese in the 1940s. Soon, Bee's self-sacrificial devotion to protecting the nation is seen as a counter-narrative to Purcell's (1965) statement about the perceived lack of affiliation to Malaya among the Malaysian Chinese (cited in Hirschman, 1986, p. 339). In the novel, the dying Soon Bee pleads with Pushpanayagi to inform his family that he died a fighter for the nation - "I fought ... I fought too hard to go like this. Can't die with this, this shame. Tell them ... I died fighting ... the Japs came too close ... tell them that" (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 226). Even though Soon Bee was bitten by a leopard, he yearns to be known for his sacrifices and strong affiliation with Malaya. Yet, the truth of not having died in defending the country results in a traumatic sense of agony and shame for Soon Bee.

As Soon Bee experiences trauma in protecting the nation, he finds solace in Savitri and Pushpanayagi's offering of comfort and assistance at the healing site of Yalpanam. The vivid and haunting memories of the encounter with Soon Bee and his eventual death resurface in Pushpanayagi's mind. In one of her recollections, she and Savitri healed his wound and soothed his pain and agony in his dying moment:

> Savitri places the medicine box by her feet, opens it, removes a small metal bowl and rests it on the floor. Then, she begins unwrapping the blood-soaked gauze. As the strips of gauze come apart, she drops them into the metal bowl… 'Do what you do, Pushpa. Soothe him.'
>
> (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 208)

Beyond their act of humanity, Savitri and Pushpanayagi's empathy towards Soon Bee offers a shared sense of healing and solace through the moment of inter-ethnic solidarity at a time of the nation's turmoil.

On a different level, Maxim's father, Cheah Lee Kong, is considered the opposite of his father's heroic figure. In spite of being a political leader, he is cognizant of his own weaknesses - "I could never be a fighter like my father. I don't have his courage. I couldn't die fighting for something I believed in. I just ... don't have it in me . .. his spirit" (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 230). Lee Kong's lack of affiliation to his homeland could be critically perceived as stemming from the sense of disillusionment as a Chinese capitalist in the post-NEP (New Economic Policy) era. Issues like alienation and discontentment are among the common tropes in post-NEP Malaysian writings, as noted at the outset. The feeling of displacement from one's home country is among the sentiments of many Malaysian Chinese due to their sense of hostility towards the pro-bumiputra national narrative. Hence, there exists the fear of seeing no future in a country that does not love them in return.

The loss of one's connection to the national narrative often leads to survival mode and pragmatic mindsets. Lee Kong's strong sense of hostility towards his homeland indefinitely leads to his plan of sending Maxim overseas for her studies. Due to his concerns for Maxim's future prospects in Malaysia, he intends for Maxim to uproot herself for greener pastures in Australia. He believes that his decision is made "out of love" for Maxim so that she leaves the "mess" in the country that "is standing on quicksand" (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 28). Lee Kong further explains his reasons to Maxim:

> 'If you want to develop, go to a developed country. The situation here is getting from bad to worse. This country is so backward; I cannot tell you how much I feel like we're all drowning in so much rubbish… Behind the scenes, girl, the story is different.
>
> (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 28)

For Lee Kong, Maxim would flourish in a 'developed' country, as he believes that Malaysia is heading to deterioration for non-*Bumiputras*. Ironically, his role as a politician contributes to the perceived detrimental state of the nation - "getting dirty money from dirty land deals" (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 230), leading to the cycle of indulging in money politics and harbouring resentment towards the country's backwardness. His sense of disillusionment is ultimately translated into the action of ensuring that her daughter would not experience the same sense of displacement and trauma that he has experienced in Malaysia.

Conversely, Maxim's perspective stands in contrast to her father's. After hearing her father's plans for her, she is deeply troubled - "her tongue dry, her chest hot, she felt sick" (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 28). Her sense of rootedness in her homeland is shown in her dream of

pursuing an environmental science degree programme at Universiti Malaya and her appreciation of her citizenship birthright (Sivagurunathan, 2021, pp. 12-13). As a privileged and well-travelled individual, Maxim seems reluctant to leave Malaysia as she yearns to find solace in reconnecting with her own identity, her family, and her country.

NEW ROUTES OF INTER-ETHNIC SOLIDARITY

Even though Cheah Soon Bee eventually dies in Yalpanam, the story of Chinese engagement with the nation is rejuvenated in Maxim, his granddaughter. Pushpanayagi sutures the torn family parchment as she fills the gaps in the reason for the grandfather's attachment to the land, which then is continued through Maxim. In contrast to her father's lack of nationalistic attachment, Maxim demonstrates a sense of rootedness in her country. Her sense of belonging is portrayed through her strong attachment to Pushpanayagi, Yalpanam and her own home country as she finds comfort and solace in not leaving them and carrying on the legacy of Yalpanam as a space for border crossings by contributing her part in inculcating the love for local cultures in the younger generation.

The route of solidarity between Maxim and Pushpanayagi begins with Maxim's familiarity with the presence of Yalpanam since her childhood days - "But at eight every night, when she shut the blinds of her bedroom windows, she saw the light go off at Yalpanam; every night for twelve years, it was the same" (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p.15). Maxim finds comfort in her routine of witnessing the same sight over the years but becomes restless and anxious one night - "Her eyes were hot, her sight fuzzy…Heat rose through her neck and cheeks" (Sivagurunathan, 2021, pp. 23-24) when the light at Yalpanam was not turned off after 8 p.m. Such was the extent to which Maxim was worried about the well-being of a neighbour she had not met - Pushpanayagi, who lived alone in Yalpanam.

From the sense of familiarity, Maxim's friendship with Pushpanayagi is established after she courageously walks up the dirt path that leads to Yalpanam and helps the sickly old lady who lies semi-conscious on the floor. Maxim's empathy towards Pushpanayagi is immense as she stayed on in Yalpanam to assist and nurse Pushpanayagi back to health. This act of Maxim mirrors the same deed committed across time and space during the Malayan Emergency when Pushpanayagi and Savitri nursed Maxim's injured grandfather in Yalpanam. Parallelism of these interrelated incidents of the past and present shows the reworlding of ethno-memories through chronotopic representations of solace offered by Pushpanayagi and Savitri to Maxim's grandfather in the 1940s and healing for Pushpanayagi offered by Maxim.

Other events of cultural intersections and engagements took place in the healing site of Yalpanam, specifically between Pushpanayagi and the young characters, Maxim and Hadi, the Malay vegetable seller who faithfully visits and helps Pushpanayagi around the house. The three of them enjoy moments of laughter and sharing of information about the internet. Pushpanayagi is well-cared for by Maxim and Hadi when she is unwell (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 126), and in return, Pushpanayagi imparts her intricate vegetable cultivation skills to Maxim and Hadi. A significant point of cultural integration is seen in the symbolic 'baptism' of Maxim on page 81, a foreshadowing of her hybrid cultural identity as the future owner of Yalpanam.

As the new owner of Yalpanam, Maxim is also able to contribute to her local community by rerouting Yalpanam as a site for convergence where the past, present and future are able to meet together. Yalpanam is cherished, not as a relic of the past, but as a site where interethnic

commingling takes place, where "Islanders drive their cars up the hill not to commune with them, but to feast their eyes on the paintings and the handicrafts created by local youth" (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 252). By turning Yalpanam into an art gallery, Maxim not only strengthens her ties with her locality but also manages to bring together the residents of the island. The local islanders are "touched" as they feast their eyes upon the local art created by the children of the island, for instance, "a tiny kampong house made of matchsticks" by a young Malay school girl, Aishah Mahmud and the depiction of a "Market Square bustling with life" by a young Malaysian Indian school girl, as well as the portrait of "old Malay man standing beneath the clock tower in town" (Sivagurunathan, 2021, p. 252). Through such visual amalgamations, Maxim reiterates her rootedness on Coal Island by solidifying Yalpanam as a House of Healing and solace as she manages to convey the visions of the multi-ethnic younger/future generation and how they perceive their local culture and identity. The present generation is given vivid insights into how life on the island is visualised by these children. Yalpanam becomes a place that not only brings everyone together but serves as a pivotal reminder of how significant Coal Island is to her people. In doing so, Sivagurunathan manages to depict a hopeful future for the future generation of Coal Island and, ultimately, Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

Through our discussion, we have attempted to highlight the various ways that Sivagurunathan engenders a reworlding of inter-ethnic estrangement as she prompts us to follow the routes of solace and solidarity instead. These routes lead us to pause and reflect on the prism of national as well as transnational memories of key historical events. When these memories are left stagnant within authority-defined receptacles or viewed from only the pane tinged with hues of disillusionment and deep ethno-hostility, the tendency might very well be to forget that there are many dimensions to the prism. The various tropes of critical solace that we have traced in Sivagurunathan's novel accentuate such multidimensionality. As the house heaves and sighs, Maxim and Pushpanayagi follow in unison, and with each exhalation, gradual enlightenment leads to closure. These engagements are particularly significant as the troubadour of the iconic historical event of the Emergency is Malaysian Indian in her ethno-racial affiliation, often a side character in the main historical stage that has magnified Malay-Chinese ethno-conflicts. In this way, Sivagurunathan draws our attention to the everyday acts of facilitations that grew spontaneously within the core of episodic trauma and aggression and the other worldings that can exist of these events. The accompanying literary aesthetics of critical healing and solace remind us, too, that true artistic rendition of tragedy must lead to catharsis in both the writer and reader.

REFERENCES

Agnew, V. (2005). *Diaspora, memory, and identity: a search for home*. University of Toronto Press.

Amarasekera, J. S., & Pillai, S. (2006). Bound by the sea: Transnational Sri Lankan writings and reconciliation with the homeland. *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature®, 22*(1), 19-27.

Amarasekera, J. S., & Pillai, S. (2018). *Sinhalese perspectives in transnational Sri Lankan literature.* UKM Press.

Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalisation*. University of Minnesota Press.

Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (Eds.). (2007). *Postcolonial studies: The key concepts.* Routledge.

Beck, R. J., & Beck, J. (2018). The Banyan Tree spirits: Using photography to commune with the natural world. *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society, 8*(1), 13-29. doi:10.18848/2154-8633/CGP/v08i01/13-2

Chin, G. V., & Quayum, M. A. (2021). The postcolonial millennium: New directions in Malaysian literature in English. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *57*(5), 583-592.

Guzman, D. D. (2022). Down the roots of mystical and sacred trees in Philippine Lore. *THE ASWANG PROJECT*. Retrieved from https://www.aswangproject.com/mystical-sacred-trees-philippines/.

Hirschman, C. (1986). The making of race in colonial Malaya: Political economy and racial ideology. *Sociological Forum*, *1*(330–360). https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01115742

Holden, P. (2009). Communities and conceptual limits: Exploring Malaysian Literature in English. *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature, 3*(2), 54-68. Retrieved from https://journals.iium.edu.my/asiatic/index.php/ajell/article/view/421

Hou, X., Omar, N., Kaur, H., Bahar, I. B., & Fan, Y. (2022). Transcending time and space: Trauma narration in *The Harmony Silk Factory*. *Journal of Language and Communication*, *9*(1), 11–24. https://doi.org/10.47836/jlc.9.1.02.

James, D. (2016). Critical Solace. *New Literary History*, *47*(4), 481-504.

Kuek, F. (2020). Post-Trauma: A Comparison of the Malay and Chinese Psyches in Response to the May 13 Tragedy in Their Literary Works from 1969 to 2019. *Sun Yat-sen Journal of Humanities 49*(7), 43-60.

Leon, C., & Koh, G. (2020). Retrieving lost histories: Spaces of healing, spaces of liberation. In M.A. Quayum (Ed.), *Malaysian Literature in English: A critical companion* (pp. 232-249). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Nonini, D. M. (2015). "At that time we were intimidated on all sides": Residues of the Malayan Emergency as a conjunctural episode of dispossession. *Critical Asian Studies*, 47(3), 337-358.

Pillai, S. (2021). Paths less trodden: Representations of Indian women outside the plantation frontier in Colonial Malaya in KS Maniam's fiction. In M.A. Quayum (Ed.),*Reading Malaysian Literature in English: Ethnicity, gender, diaspora, and nationalism* (pp. 113-126). Singapore: Springer Singapore.

Sekretariat Negara Republik Indonesia. (2012). State Emblem. Retrieved from http://indonesia.go.id/en/indonesia-glance/symbol-and-the-state/state-emblem.html

Sivagurunathan, S. (2021). *Yalpanam*. Penguin Random House.

Spivak, G. C. (1985). Three women's texts and a critique of imperialism. *Critical inquiry*, 12(1), 243-261.

Stockwell, A. J. (1993). 'A widespread and long-concocted plot to overthrow government in Malaya'? the origins of the Malayan emergency. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 21(3), 66-88.

Tran Thi Thu Ha. (2021). Cultural values of spiritual characters in Vietnamese fairy tales. *Science, Technology and Education*, *78*(3), pp. 32-39. DOI: 10.24411/2312-8267-2021-10302

White, N. J. (1998). Capitalism and counter-insurgency? Business and government in the Malayan Emergency, 1948-57. *Modern Asian Studies, 32*(1), 149-177.

Wong, P. N. (2020). A Tribute to K.S.Maniam. *Men Matters Online Journal. 1*, 42-45. https://menmattersonlinejournal.com/special-feature/

Ying Xin Show. (2021). Narrating the racial riots of 13 May 1969: gender and postmemory in Malaysian literature, *South East Asia Research*, 29(2), 214-230. DOI: 10.1080/0967828X.2021.1914515