

William Tham Wai Liang, *The Last Days*. Penang: Clarity Publishing, 2020. ISBN: 978-967-17657-2-2.

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Malaysian writer William Tham's second novel, *The Last Days*, a complex investigation of two interlinked portions of Malaysian history is, in terms of genre and technique, a piece of historical fiction. In mood and tone, the novel reads like an elegy (I am using the word "elegy" here in the spirit of how Virginia Woolf used the term to describe *To the Lighthouse*, her homage to her dead parents). Written in crisp, unpretentious prose, this elegiac strain is a feat. Forays into the past are rarely nostalgic, even though the past is heavily mourned in this 195-page exploration of intersecting lives: the past and the present converge in an intricate web of connections between Lin Wei, an ageing Communist, Dain Yusof, a writer and an A-levels teacher, an elusive writer who – almost glamorously – simply goes by the letter 'H' and who together with Sylvia Gonzalez and Gordon Chang are the founders of MANGGIS, a once-influential cutting edge journal that has become, as Dain's boss at the ASEAN Review says, "a bit of a joke today" (23). The publication, however, is not enough of a joke because when the novel opens, Gordon's politically-charged speech at Dain's A-levels college, in which he references "his work with the political journal MANGGIS, confidently telling the students that they could change things" (22), is what gets him arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA). His arrest sets off a chain of events that involve the coming together of characters like Dain, Sylvia, and H to free him in a national climate of ever-growing restraints and oppressions. It is 1981. A new Prime Minister is about to step into position. Although he is never named in the novel, we know who he is, both from history and from the clever front cover of the book (a half-torn sheet with the date 15 July 1981 on the upper half of a calendar, and the lower half of Mahathir bin Mohamad's face). The atmosphere is charged both with the electricity and suppression of change, anticipating the Operation Lallang of 1987, Mahathir's crackdown on artists, writers, intellectuals, and journalists branded as seditious. Activists in the novel like Gordon and Sylvia are emblematic of the forces of the present and the future. They and their ilk and generation, are hopeful, zealous, demanding change in the relatively new postcolonial nation-state of Malaysia. But there are far too many obstacles in the way of the evolution of this young country.

This is where the second timeline of the novel becomes an astute means of not only telling a story but also of conveying what seems to be the gravitational centre of the novel: the rise and fall of an important portion of the country's history—the Malayan Communist Party's (MCP) struggles to be in power, at the forefront of the decolonisation of post-British Malaya, and the Party's eventual decline. A community of communist fighters, once before equipped with a solid ideology and vision of the future, filled also with rigour, hope and optimism, is deflated at the very start of the novel. Lin Wei, "the old Communist," is on the run. His comrade and last remaining support, Ah Kow, is dead, killed by an assassin who Lin Wei fears is after him too. His morale is low and so he attempts to "think of the Voice of the Malayan Revolution. It reported on the success of their guerrillas and jungle communes and the rise of rebellious spirit among youths" (13). But the Party has had a long journey of strife and conflict; too much has happened to even allow for its resuscitation: "Yet there was no escaping the fact that for more than thirty years they had been driven into the jungles and pushed across the border, bleeding from defections and executions, starvations and confusion. Even the half-hearted Thai Malay revolutionaries and the impoverished Chinese farm youths from Betong found them weak and irrelevant" (14).

The rest of the novel is an exercise in bringing together the pieces of a broken past and attempting to merge it with the present, much like the gluing back of Humpty Dumpty's shattered body. In fact, the novel's message about the fragmentary nature of a fading and, most importantly, poorly documented past, is reflected in the very structure of the narrative. This is a skilfully cogitated novel: form and content are laudably harmonised to bring about an *experience* of the novel's conceptual and intellectual landscape. Chapters are short, nearly bite-sized, and the flitting around of points of view, from Lin Wei to H to Dain and to the assassin, is an effective method of creating an overall atmosphere of fracture, while simultaneously generating inclusivity, another of the novel's primary themes: the past is complex, noisy with stories and the utterances of ghosts, unheard and therefore urgent.

As Lin Wei, now a fugitive, makes his way through Kuala Lumpur, he befriends H at her grandfather's memorial. Estranged from her extended family, H is largely clueless about her family history, something she suspects Lin Wei is knowledgeable about. Of Lin Wei, H tells her love-interest Dain, "It's strange. It's like he's the key to understanding my past" (127). H's and Lin Wei's connection is founded on untold stories and the mysteries of the past, both personal and public. On the one hand, H is attempting to uncover her familial past in order to locate her belonging and sense of self (it is fitting, then, that a floating, rootless character like her should prefer to go by a single letter for a name); on the other hand, Lin Wei is desperate for his story and the story of the revolution to be recorded, which H attempts to do.

H's attempts often transport the novel's central narrative to a point of mourning, to that elegiac quality I mentioned at the start, to the recognition that "Lin Wei was a representative of an obscure species facing extinction" (124). Here, then, is the motivating force that mobilises the narrative: Tham's characters subsist in a Malaysia whose stories have been twisted, controlled, unheard, and each character, in their own way, strives to document some portion of history, whether familial or national, in order to move on. The vagueness and incomplete rendition of the past gives birth to a flimsy, unstable present: the culture of fear and suppression that we are exposed to in the contemporary 1980s timeline of the novel is expertly paralleled – *conjoined*, I would argue – with the timeline of the Malayan Emergency in order to expose the inseparability of the past from the present.

Like Hayden White's constructivist ideas of history, where he proposes that narratives of history are constructed in similar ways to the creation of fictional stories, the novel too presents a notion of history as the building of narratives and, therefore, the manner in which these histories are formed is crucial. In other words, *how* the events and characters of history are presented determines the way we relate to the past which then determines the birthing of the future. Writing, inevitably, is an important element in this project, and in the meaning-making landscape of Tham's novel.

It is no accident then that the novel is populated with journalists and writers, endeavouring and failing to speak truths in a climate of media suppression. Tham presents a partially hopeful future for the nation and his characters. In the end, the ASEAN Review edition that features Dain's article on Gordon's plight is released and manages to create enough of an "uproar over Gordon's incarceration" (175) to free him. Dain's interfering uncle in the police force, Iqbal, resigns and all charges against Dain's boss at the Review, Krishnan, are dropped. Although H and Dain do not get together (perhaps to the romance-inclined reader's disappointment), Dain's departure from Malaysia and his arrival in Vancouver marks a significant point in the trajectory of the novel's story. The distance allows him the space to reflect and concretise his thoughts. It is while he is a student in Canada, writing his dissertation on "the hidden histories of Malaysia" (179) and coming across the works of writers like Syed Hussein Alatas and Spencer Chapman, that he realises those books "contain stories that we are in the process of forgetting. They define who we are and remind us where we are going" (180). These realisations could very well be the philosophical foundation of the novel.

In many formal ways, *The Last Days* is reminiscent of a modernist novel, particularly with regards to the fragmentariness of the narrative and the lamentations for a past that continuously slips away. In its modernist

mode and in its interest in how narratives, including histories, are constructed, the novel's literary ancestor could easily be a text like Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid*. Unlike Fernando's text which, arguably, does not end on a hopeful note, Tham's novel does. "The past," Dain writes in a letter to H, "can always be rewritten" (182). And because it can, it must. Hence, H persists in attempting to get Lin Wei's story out "so that in some way the past would be preserved, no matter how much its interpretation changed with time" (195). In this novel, the telling of stories is not only invaluable and vital for the health of individuals, families, nations, it is also powerful and capable of altering lives.

Works Cited

Fernando, Lloyd. *Scorpion Orchid*. Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), 1976.

White, Hayden. *The Practical Past*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014