

Remembering the Past: Images of Japan in the War Literature of Singapore and Malaysia

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Abstract

The Japanese Occupation of Singapore and Malaya, 1941–1945, was a traumatic period for the newly conquered people. More than 50 years later, writers are still returning to this period for literary inspiration. This article is a summary of more than 70 works focusing on the image of Japan during this time. Works divide into historical accounts, personal memoir, brutal images, human images and effects of the war. Several observations emerge regarding the use of history and the past in creating a national literature.

The Japanese invasion of Malaya on December 8, 1941 and their remarkable 70-day conquest of Malaya and Singapore left the local population shocked, disappointed and horrified. Even those with the most anti-British sentiments were soon yearning for the return of the rule of law so much a part of the British regime. Although the Japanese propaganda espoused a Co-Prosperity Sphere of Asia for the Asians, the reality was in fact harsher and more brutal than anyone could have imagined. The occupying army had little regard for and no intention to win the hearts and minds of the people they conquered.

The victorious Japanese 25th Army was immediately supplanted by the Kempeitai (Military Police) who imposed a reign of terror. The rape of women and young girls, the ethnic cleansing of Chinese, the public beheadings, the torture of suspected spies, the slapping and kicking of pedestrians and the arbitrary execution of justice continued for the next three and a half years and are all matters of public record. Accompanying the specifics of the Japanese Occupation were the other natural civilian consequences of war — food shortages, starvation, blackmarketeering, disease, collaboration, fear, retribution.

Singapore and Malaysian literature written in English did not begin in earnest until the mid-1960s, simultaneously paralleling the emergence of nationhood. Even in 1977, Chandran Nair

could observe that "The writer in the English language has been a comparatively recent phenomenon." (p. 2)*

With the granting of independence, the emergence of a national identity and the threat of Communist insurgency so fresh in their history, it is surprising that so many writers chose to go back 25 years or more to the Japanese Occupation as the source of their writing. The war has continued to provide fertile soil for literary inspiration, culminating in the plethora of memoirs and stories published in the 1990s, to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the Surrender of Singapore and the Occupation by the Japanese. Chuah Guat Eng, born in 1943, was not old enough to remember the Japanese, but 50 years later writes in her first novel:

"... the older I get, the more I'm convinced that we owe it to your generation to talk about our past... I'm talking about how people must tell their children the truth about what happened in their own lifetime. The purpose is not, Ai Lian, to cast blame and seek retribution, but to help the next generation to grow, reach a higher level of self-awareness..." (p.57)

This paper attempts a comprehensive survey of the war literature written in English by Singaporeans and Malaysians. Its goal is to discern the image of Japan that has emerged through the decades since the Occupation. In analyzing more than 70 works of fiction and non-fiction, the literature seems to fall into four distinct categories. The first category is the large collection of histories and memoirs. The commonality of this group of works is their recitation of direct experiences, fulfilling the need stated above to "tell their children the truth about what happened."

The second category contains works that show the brutal face of the Japanese. Although the writers of these works may not have experienced many of the atrocities described, there seems to be a basic reservoir of historical accounts that they could draw on for detail.

The third category contains works showing a more human face of the Japanese. After the first year of Occupation, things seemed to settle down. Brutalities, interrogations and insecurity continued but the oppressed majority now knew what to expect and how to navigate the maze of requirements. Also, shiploads of Japanese nationals arrived to form a civilian government, take over the running of businesses and staff Japanese language schools. Thus the

* For purposes of form, all quotations refer to works cited in Bibliography. Page numbers are given in the text.

contact many young Singaporeans had was with this non-military Japanese.

A final category are works that do not directly describe the Japanese but rather show the effects of the Occupation in personal terms. After reviewing a sampling of this corpus, there will be an attempt to analyze the variety of literary responses posed, to discern an underlying purpose in the frequent return to this traumatic past.

Factual Accounts

The first grouping of war literature contains a wide range of historical work, including reportage, biography, autobiography and memoir. All look at the same events through personal lenses and taken compositely reflect the many aspects of the Occupation. Although the subject of these works is usually the writer, the Japanese reside in the background, alive in rumor or in deed. This grouping can be divided into two sections: historical overviews and personal accounts.

It should not be surprising to note that most of the war literature that came out of Singapore and Malaya in English were written by the British POWs, harrowing tales of surviving the Death Railroad or Changi Prison. However, the British were in no position to know what was going on in the occupied land outside of their confinement. It was only the local residents who could recount and assess what was happening in occupied Singapore or the Malayan jungles during those three and a half years. Historical accounts written by natives were confounded even more by the fact that the facts and figures of daily life were kept by the occupiers themselves — in Japanese — and only reflected the official view of things. There were no source materials to consult which catalogued the hardships suffered by the residents. All this had to be collected from personal experiences and interviews of others.

The first comprehensive account of the war years was *Malaya Upside Down* by Chin Kee Onn, published in 1946. In it Chin attempts to put together the various aspects of the occupation years in a series of short chapters with titles such as: rape, looting and robbery, inflation, kaishas and kumais, Communist phobia, I. N. A., Nipponisation, etc. Although Onn spent most of his war years in Ipoh and his book has a mainland emphasis, the behavior of the Japanese and effects on the native population was virtually the same everywhere.

It wasn't until the 1970s that the second wave of historical texts was published. The first was Lim Thean Soo's *Southward Lies the Fortress (The Siege of Singapore)*, an account of the

70 days leading up to the surrender of Singapore. In his introduction, he refers to “sensitivities involved” which prevented him from writing this book sooner. But even in 1971, he suggests that, “urgent action is required to collect and collate systematically all available information on the period in question.” (p. 2)

Lim distances himself from his narrative by writing his book in fictionalized form, but attempts little literary convention. It contains day to day accounts of battle lines and opposing armies as well as long discourses on the history of European colonial competition and Japanese militarization, and contains an appendix of charts and a bibliography. But his novelization form may have been an honest means to allow for inconsistencies, where accuracy perhaps could not be known at the time or to cover some of the “sensitivities involved,” in discussing the British military incompetence.

N. I. Low continues the narrative from the Surrender through the Occupation in *When Singapore was Syonan-To*. Originally published privately in 1947 as *This Singapore*, it was reprinted in 1973 when he was 73 years old. During the Occupation, Low became part of the Japanese government service and later a headmaster of a school. His book is filled with anecdotes of his life as well as accounts of many others. He reports the *sook ching*, the roundup, selection and extermination of ethnic Chinese men. He tells about the “milking of the Chinese cow,” a euphemism for the extortion of \$50 million dollar “contribution” to the Japanese by the Chinese community. He recounts Tan Thoon Lip’s account of “Kempeitai Kindness,” his two-month long detention and torture at the hands of the military police. A neighbor of Lim Bo Seng, Low devotes two chapters in telling Lim’s story of directing the resistance movement in the jungles of Malaya.

Throughout his random and often humorous narrative, Low singles out specific Japanese with whom he had cordial relationships. Yet, as he relates:

‘Except for a tiny section made up of the beneficiaries of the Japanese regime, all Singapore was anti-Japanese.... The Nip was as inscrutable as fate and as incalculable as a thunderclap. And yet he was surprised that he was not a great success in the winning of hearts.’ (pp. 117, 122)

A counterpoint to Low’s narrative is that of Mamoru Shinozaki’s *Syonan — My Story*. Shinozaki was Press Attache in the Japanese consulate prior to the war and held in Changi Prison at the time of the Japanese invasion. During the confusion of the first few

weeks of Japanese rule, Shinozaki handed out thousands of personally signed protection passes. Later, he became part of the Singapore Tokubetsu Shi (the civilian administration) first as Director of Education, where under his supervision, schools were reopened. As Head of Social Welfare, it was his idea to create the independent settlements of Endau for Chinese and Bahau for Eurasians, self-sufficient farming communities in Malaya, free from Japanese control.

Written 30 years after the event, Shinozaki is able to provide an account of the Occupation from the inside. His pro-Chinese activities made him distrusted by the Kempeitai and he was caught in the conflict between the Military Administration and the Civilian Administration of which he was a part. In his narrative, he is able to recount the atrocities of the *sook ching* and other tortures without dismissing the unsufferable horror they caused. Although he was part of the Occupation force, he somewhat distances himself from the Military Branch responsible for the reign of terror, preferring to dwell on the positive policies enacted by the Civilian Branch to improve daily life.

Taken collectively, these four works provide the background outline of events of the invasion of Malaya, fall of Singapore and subsequent Japanese Occupation. Each has its differing perspective, its own purpose. Except for Chin's, all were published in the 1970s and represent the first wave of books to address the theme of the Japanese Occupation. They are characterized by having a historical format, attempting to portray an overview of events.

The second grouping of historical writing is far more personal. The authors have all lived through the war, yet waited 40–50 years to publish their stories. The form of this grouping is diverse, including biography, autobiography, war memoir and diary and the writers themselves are Chinese, Eurasian and Indian. Collectively they tell of diverse lives lived under the Occupation.

Sheila Allan's *Diary of a Girl in Changi* chronicles the day-to-day life in Changi Prison and Sime Road Prison. Interned with her Australian father and Malayan step-mother when she was 17, Allan had to keep her diary secret; if it were found she would have been severely punished. The events are sometimes gay and frivolous, as when describing a coffee party, Christmas pageant, lecture or Gilbert and Sullivan concert by the men; and sometimes weightier, as her recurring bouts with malaria, dysentery and beri-beri, hunger and starvation, suicides and deaths, including her father's.

The juxtaposition is sometimes profound as in this short entry from 2 August, 1944: "Mrs.

Attias died last night. Had new buns this evening sandwiched with fish paste.” We read of her infatuation with one of the nurses and her disgust when she ate a baby mouse in a fit of hunger. The same day as her 20th birthday, the first child is born in Changi Prison.

Throughout her narrative, the Japanese are in the background, yet ever ready to intrude:

“8 p. m... Nip officer and two guards appeared on the scene. He looked cross — very cross indeed.... He kicked the doors opened, pulled the curtains aside, pushed tables and chairs aside and slapped several women as he went on a rampage — like a mad bull... (19 August, 1943)

or

7:30 a. m. — while we were having our showers the Nips came around to inspect us in our naked glory! (14 October, 1943)

Surviving in such reduced and demeaning circumstances, bound to the strict control of her Japanese captors, she is nonetheless able to carry on a full schedule of social activities including parties, dancing and concerts. Her ability to withstand the strain of prison life is due to the close personal relationships she was able to form with those sharing the same fate.

Wilfred Hamilton-Shimmen was only two years old when he joined his mother in the Sime Road Prison for civilians, but he is able to reconstruct the experiences of those years in *Seasons of Darkness*, a thinly-veiled fictional autobiography. While Sheila Allen plays down the intimidation by her Japanese captors, Hamilton-Shimmen does not shy away from revealing the brutality inflicted:

But darkness brought with it terror and fear to Sime Road. Nearly every woman had been raped in the early days, and while the Imperial Japanese Army provided its off-duty soldiers its own ‘comfort girls’... these places were too far away from the Sime Road Concentration Camp and permission to leave was always withheld.... Under cover of darkness camp guards would often try to creep into sleeping women’s beds before the women had a chance to cry out... and terrify the poor woman into submission by holding a bayonet at her throat. (pp. 95–96)

For the young child, most of his day was spent foraging for food in the fields around the camp and recovering from the various bouts of malaria, beri-beri and dysentery. From 1943, all children were required to attend Japanese classes. But from March, 1945 onward, disci-

pline at the camp relaxed, as more Japanese were transferred out and their jobs taken over by local Javanese gardeners without weapons.

Although there are a host of accounts written by British inmates of both Changi and Sime Road Camps, these two accounts are written by Eurasians. Whereas Sheila Allen spent her late teen years in the camp, Hamilton-Shimmen relies on details supplied to him by his mother, who was secretary to the camp Superintendent, and hence privy to information about all camp matters. As a result, the Japanese he describes is far more intrusive and menacing.

Janet Lim's *Sold for Silver* and Sibyl Kathigasu's *No Dram of Mercy* have previously been linked for discussion (see Shirley Geok-lin Lim) as early examples of women's political consciousness in the formation of a national literary canon, where Lim is more interested in viewing these women in a political/social context of nationalist heroine and feminist autobiography. In fact, the two narratives couldn't be more dissimilar.

Janet Lim's encounters with the Japanese occupy the last half of her remarkable book. Lim is a Chinese orphan, literally sold for silver when she was eight and rescued by missionary women in Singapore. She is a nursing student at the outbreak of the war and, after miraculously surviving a shipwreck, is interned in Padang in western Sumatra. The bulk of her story is spent avoiding sexual assault by the garrison soldiers, military police and visiting officers.

Because she is Chinese, she is removed from European women internees, installed in the Yamato Hotel. During this time she loses confidence:

My spirit was broken and I believed that only misery awaited me, and that sooner or later the Japanese would destroy my honour. If this were going to happen, would it not be better to end it all now rather than wait to be raped? During the next few days the thought of suicide was uppermost in my mind. (pp. 177–178)

Befriended by local Chinese, she escapes into the countryside but is captured and interrogated as a spy. After jobs as a housekeeper and seamstress, she is eventually able to work as a nurse in the medical clinic of a cement factory, where she spends the remainder of the war. Throughout her encounters with Japanese, there are several who befriend her. Counterpoised with her malicious torturer, M. P. Hashimoto, is the civilian, Hashimoto Tada. It is the latter who offers her the job in the clinic. There are others who help her, including the junior officer Susuki and Wakamatsu, the interpreter for the President of

Padang, of whom she says is "the only one with a heart." (p. 221) Toward the war's end, Wakamatsu comes to visit her at her clinic. By now the tide of war has begun to turn and he is being reassigned. He asks if he can write to her and they part as friends.

As she is about to be returned to Singapore, she reminisces,

Now I could only think with gratitude of the Malays and even of the Japanese who had helped me in my difficulties... I had experienced the bitterness and brutality of war, yet my chief memory at that moment was not of this, but of the acts of kindness and sympathy I had received from both enemies and friends. (p. 256)

Sybil Kathigasu was a midwife and nurse in Ipoh, who, on humanitarian as well as political grounds, treated guerillas who came to her clinic. Eventually, she was arrested by the military police and underwent months of torture. Her physical trial first at the local police and finally by the Kempeitai is a recitation of physical and mental abuse. Repeated beating, slapping and kicking often reduced her to unconsciousness, yet after a few days to recover, the ordeal would continue again:

Usually I was punched and slapped in the face, and beaten with sticks and heavy rattan canes.... [P]olicemen... would run needles into my finger-tips below the nail, while my hand was held firmly, flat on the table; they heated iron bars in a charcoal brazier and applied them to my legs and back; they ran a stick between the second and third fingers of both my hands, squeezing the fingers together and holding them firmly in the air while two men hung from the ends of the can... tearing the flesh between my fingers; they thrust the rough ragged ends of canes into the hollows of my knees and twisted them until I screamed with pain... But I held out against Kunichika and his henchmen and told them nothing. (pp. 140–141)

Her account of her incarceration and interrogation is one of a duel with her interrogators, first Chief Kunichika and finally Kempeitai Sergeant Yoshimura. The behavior of both captor and prisoner sinks to the level of animals. Kathigasu's beaten back is compared to raw meat; Yoshimura has become an inhuman beast. But in the end, it is Kathigasu who wins the duel. Although her offences carry the death penalty, her sentence is commuted to life imprisonment and, as a civilian, she is able to live out the remaining months of the war recuperating in the relative comfort of a hospital.

Both the Chinese Lim and the Eurasian Kathigasu were devout Christians, whose faith and

prayers brought them comfort during their trials. But whereas Lim spent her time eluding her would-be violators, Kathigasu endured the most severe of tortures for months. As Shirley Lim points out, Kathigasu is problematic as a symbol of Malaysian nationalism because of her strong Christian faith as well as her staunch defense of the British:

I reminded the guard of what Malaya owed to Britain, and of the amount of talent, labour, money and material which had gone to make Malaya the happiest and most advanced country in the East.... (p. 162)

After the war, her liberators are in fact the very guerillas she treated. She is decorated by the British for her bravery but unfortunately died two years after the war of complications from her injuries. Sergeant Yoshimura was tried as a war criminal and was executed for his inhumane treatment of civilians, including Sybil Kathigasu.

Zhou Mei's biography, *Elizabeth Choy: More Than a War Heroine* contains another account of a woman held and tortured by the Kempeitai. Born into a middle-class Chinese family, she and her husband ran the canteen at first Miyako and then Tan Tock Seng Hospital during the war. It was from there that they were able to pass money, food, messages and radio parts to the British POWs in Changi. After the Double Ten (October 10, 1943) raid on Japanese ships in Singapore Harbour by Australian commandos, the camps were thoroughly searched, radios found and the Choy's implicated and arrested by the Kempeitai.

Elizabeth Choy was put into a 3 × 4 meter cell along with 20 others; she was the only female. She was to remain in prison more than six months, with no soap, comb or change of clothes. Although never charged with a specific crime, the Kempeitai maintained she was a spy and continued their torture to get information from her she did not have.

Like Sybil Kathigasu, she was subjected to the worst physical punishment. There were occasions when she was stripped to the waist, forced to kneel on a sharp-edged plank, immobilised by being tied to a wooden rack and then given the electric shock treatment. (p. 77) When physical torture did not get the results they wanted, the officers used psychological tactics. The first time in six weeks Elizabeth Choy saw her husband was when they were brought into the same room and faced physical torture together, including shock treatment. "The electric shock torture lasted some fifteen minutes; the intense pain caused Mrs Choy to yell uncontrollably. But at the end of it, she still refused to 'confess.'" (p. 78)

Both Choy's were later released and after the Surrender, Elizabeth Choy became a local

celebrity. She was a guest of Lord Montbatten at the victory ceremony and was invited to Buckingham Palace to meet Queen Elizabeth. She was in England during the war crimes trials but derived no satisfaction that her torturer was sentenced to die. Like Janet Lim and Sybil Kathigasu, Elizabeth Choy was a devout Christian and it may be because of that that she was able to forgive her tormentors after the war, "The soldiers had to serve their country, to carry out their duty. I shall not forget; but I shall forgive." (p. 75)

In stark contrast to the previous memoirs of women imprisoned and abused, Aisha Akbar's *Aishabee at War* tells the story of a young Indian girl whose family was spared personal persecution. One day Aisha meets a Japanese captain outside her home:

The Japanese officer stood up, bowed very formally to both my parents, and apologised for intruding. He introduced himself as Captain Sato. Father was surprised to meet a refined Japanese for a change... (p. 102)

Captain Sato offers the Akbar home a safe pass, to be nailed to the door proclaiming its inhabitants friends of the Japanese. This is to be the Akbar Family's talisman throughout the war years. Young Aisha has by now picked up some Japanese and is also a talented piano student. Her narrative tells of the many Japanese she met, mostly soldiers:

They were all homesick; and as we had been told by the authorities to make Japanese soldiers welcome in our home, we always let them in. I...could speak the language, and besides, I enjoyed talking, and playing the piano for them. They often sang songs for us and I soon learnt them too. They could hardly wait to show us pictures of their loved ones and would tell us in great detail about each member of their family. My mother, when she sometimes met them, was treated with special honour. (p. 151)

But there were also Japanese civilians — her radio chorus conductor, Namishima-san, a kept woman of a company executive, friends of her sister's teachers college and later her bosses in a chemical plant. One story is insightful. Aisha had a very high level of Japanese language ability but was made by her boss to sit for the Japanese test that determined higher salaries:

The reason for this soon became quite plain. [Boss No. 2] seemed oblivious to the blatant cheating that was going on or maybe it was his intention that everyone should have a chance to pass by cheating from me. Encouraged by this, I passed the answers

round for everyone to copy. Before long, nearly every single person in the department was on the highest scale. (p. 182)

Young Aisha is able to see the more human face of the Japanese. Besides the homesick soldiers, her life is mingled with the civilian Japanese. For example, her teacher:

Takeda Sensei was always immaculately turned out and smiled most of the time. She taught us more about Japanese culture through her graciousness than the many propaganda cultural shows feed to us regularly.” (p. 168)

Akbar was 12–15 year old during the war, young, vivacious and precocious enough to be a kind of mascot to the Japanese. For her, the war years was a fast coming of age:

I could never forget, nor would I wish to forget, what happened during those three and a half years. I remember Syonan, and when all is said and done, I know my life has been richer for it. (p. 230)

The final memoir is Tan Chong Tee's *Force 136: Story of a WWII Resistance Fighter*. Tan is a young Chinese student who goes to Chungking to volunteer to work for the Chinese against the Japanese. There he meets Lim Bo Seng, who is recruiting for a resistance team to operate inside of Malaya. Tan and his colleagues infiltrate into Malaya by submarine in June, 1943, and establish phony businesses in order to carry out their surveillance of Japanese troop movements. During this time, they are in contact with the resistance troops living in the jungle. Yet, Tan does not have much direct contact with his Japanese enemies. They are the background force against whom he must watch and maintain his many disguises.

Tan's story is an excellent first-person account of the inner workings of Force 136. Not only did they have to contend with the Japanese but also internal bickering between the Chinese staff and their British commanders, between their team and the other anti-Japanese organizations, including the MPAJA (Malaya People's Anti-Japanese Army), and finally among themselves.

The real nemesis, however, is the Onishi-Tai, a special unit of the Kempeitai of Singapore brought to Malaya to conduct counter-espionage and root out the resistance forces:

The Onishi-Tai was an extremely brutal force that would not hesitate to take innocent lives... Instead of succeeding in wiping out the resistance movement, their tyranny

only served to instil deeper anti-Japanese sentiments among the people. (p. 208)

A year after it began, the spy cell is broken and most of them are captured. From his prison cell, Tan could see across the courtyard to Lim Bo Seng's cell, and was one of the first to know of his death:

I broke down in tears. I mourned the passing of the great Lim Bo Seng and prayed that his soul would help the Allied Forces achieve ultimate victory. I vowed that if I could get out of this prison alive... I would also tell the world about Bo Seng's great love for his country and his willingness to die for justice. (p. 249)

Through the previously cited first-person accounts, we can begin to construct a image of the wartime Japanese. In these stories we see the the stereotypical brutal Japanese, ruthlessly exerting torture or rapacious in their desires. In the examples of Sybil Kathigasu, Janet Lim and Elizabeth Choy, their persecutors have real faces and real names and some were executed after the war for the crimes inflicted on these survivors. Yet no matter how brutal their experiences were, there is the further horror of knowing that these were survivors, and that even more brutal terror occurred to those not fortunate enough to live to tell their tales.

Yet not all the Japanese in these memoirs were bad or evil. Hamilton-Shimmen, Aisha Akbar and Janet Lim herself, could also show a more human face of the Japanese, seen as a normal, lonely, obedient soldier, doing his duty as he was commanded. Perhaps because of her Christian background or perhaps because of the delight of surviving, even Elizabeth Choy could look back without rancor on her experiences, refusing to single out anyone in particular for war crimes retribution:

They are just ordinary people like you and I. They have families and they care for their families, for their children. They behaved like that because of war. I'm not against those who tortured me. I am against war.... During peacetime, these soldiers wouldn't have behaved like that...." (*The Bamboo Fortress*, p. 137)

The Brutal Face

Turning from the first-person account, this survey will now focus on the two faces of the

Japanese as portrayed in fiction. As with the memoirs, there are representations of both the brutal Japanese and the more human. The first grouping is of the former. In fiction, these writers are able to recount the brutalities more dispassionately, if no less vividly. The history of those first few weeks of absolute Japanese repression is repeated in detail. In these works we see the Japanese at work themselves as well as the effects of their rule on the individual. The following represents a partial listing of the brutalities, described in fictional form.

1. **Rape and murder** Chin Kee Onn in his non-fiction work previously cited remarks, "Rape is a touchy subject, but war without rape is as impossible as fire without smoke. It would be sheer prudery to avoid it." (p. 11) In *Ma-Rai-Ee*, his fictional account of resistance fighters in Malaya he has his protagonists describe the behavior of Japanese troops in a village. After machine gunning the men they turn to the women:

Suddenly there was a shameless scramble for the remaining women and girls. They raped them in the trenches and in the bushes. For an hour we heard nothing else but the shrieks of women and the yells of the brutes.... We were never more shocked to see the condition of the victims. They all bore marks of brutal mutilation. Even kids had been raped and bayoneted. Not one of them was alive, thank God.... Such was our first introduction to Japanese savagery, such our initiation in the New Order. (pp. 64-65)

Lim Thean Soo also describes rape on the outskirts of Singapore:

The soldier who reached her first began to rip her dress while the next pulled away her trousers. They then dragged her to the grass verge, pinned her down and took turns to rape her. The hapless Sim Mei could only scream. The ravenous soldiers seemed to take great pleasure in her screaming and made no attempt to cover her mouth. When they had finished with her, she was already dead. (*Towkay*, p. 298)

and murder in a village:

The Japanese sergeant had just beheaded a labourer who earlier had cringingly pleaded for his life: he was now wiping the blade. The disjoined head, lying in a bloody mess, protested with its protruding eyes and the rusty smell of blood made me feel like vomiting. There came a spine-tingling scream when a captor in uniform drove his

bayonet into another victim. ("Major Arigato," p. 24)

2. **Massacre at Alexander Hospital.** When the Japanese first entered Singapore, they had need of hospital beds for their wounded. Their initial response was to vacate the beds in the most expeditious manner, as witnessed by this character present at Alexander Hospital:

"You can never imagine how inhuman they were. They behaved as if they were mad. Can you believe it? They were bayoneting all the patients. Even some doctors and nurses were not spared. They were like a bunch of wild dogs. You wouldn't think they were human beings!... It was really hell!" (*Broken Blossoms*, p. 91)

3. **Looters** In the early days after the fall of Singapore, the 25th Army under General Yamashita turned over administration to the military police, who lost no time in establishing order. Anyone found looting the abandoned shops was summarily executed:

The Japanese Military Police, the dreaded Kempeitai, had caught a few looters and were preparing to behead them on the spot to make an example of them... One of the M.P.s took out his sword and held it upright in front of his face. He closed his eyes and muttered a few words as if in prayer. It must be part of the ritual of an execution. Then without any warning, he brought down the sword with both hands and with all his might, he landed it on the neck of his crouched victim." (*Of Comb, Powder & Rouge*, p. 116)

Or the scene of:

...a group of Japanese soldiers, who were busily executing looters — samurai style. One slash, and a head was gone!... [T]hey saw many heads on display, from some of which blood was still dripping. The decapitated heads were meant as a deterrent, a warning to would-be looters. (*Broken Blossoms*, p. 93)

4. **Sook Ching** A week after taking control of Singapore, the Kempeitai rounded up the male Chinese population, aged 18–50, in five concentration camps. The purpose was Operation Cleanup, to weed out the undesirable Chinese.

Informants were usually hooded to protect their identities, often local Formosans, generally felt to be sympathetic to the Japanese. Yet the weeding was poorly coordinated and haphazard. One camp lasted several hours, another several days; one detained a thousand

men, another none; at one the process was thorough, at another arbitrary. Those detained were taken away and massacred. At the time, the total was estimated at 5,000. By the end of the war, the Japanese conceded perhaps 7,000, while the Chinese community claimed up to 60,000.

Lim Thean Soo in "The Hooded Terror" recounts the terror of the selection process:

... three men, hooded to the shoulder, [were] going round the camp escorted by the Kempeitai to pick out undesirable elements to be taken away by awaiting trucks. One nod from each of them sealed the fate of their terrified victims. But not enough persons were selected and so the Kempeitai made everyone file past the three hooded men for a wider selection. After that it was a matter of misfortune if any inmate was given the nod.... People were already talking that male youths taken away by the Japanese from the camps would be ruthlessly killed. ("The Hooded Terror," pp. 20–22)

Rex Shelley, in *Island in the Centre*, gives a more dispassionate and jaundiced view of the roundup:

...the Japs had started their brutal massacres of tens of thousands of Chinese, believing their completely arbitrary selection was sorting out the Communist goats from the unpolitical sheep. Or was it just a massive inhumane statement of their new power and authority? (p. 200)

5. **Kempeitai torture** A regular feature of the new landscape of occupied Singapore was the transformed YMCA Building in the middle of the city into the Kempeitai Headquarters. At any time during the day, a passerby could hear the screams of detainees emanating from that building. Inside, the most horrific of tortures were routinely being inflicted:

Even before they reached the Kempeitai centre, they could hear loud screams emerging from within its walls... [Inside] the sight that greeted her made her nauseous. Men were tied to wooden poles with barbed wire, and soldiers were burning rods of steel over fires to sere the prisoners. Other bodies which had been laid bare were lying on the floor, blindfolded, while hot water scalded their bodies, causing hideous blisters. Flogging was taking place in a far corner. Sounds of writhing and groaning were all around her... (*Broken Blossoms*, pp. 99–100)

In "Japanese Girl," Gopal Baratham describes the murder of a Chinese doctor, who harbored other wanted Chinese in his nursing home:

"He was covered ...in his own excretions...Now his nails were gone and the tips of his fingers were just smudges of dried blood... They made him dig his grave.... He was so weak it took him more than an hour to finish. Several times he fell and the commandant kicked him in the face and yanked him to his feet. Finally a shallow trench had been fashioned. They made him kneel at one end of this and shot him in the back of his head." (pp. 24-25)

At the root of the description of the actions perpetrated by the Japanese is a more fundamental view of who they were, physically and mentally. Physically, they are often derisively described as having a "short, stocky frame," "beady eyes" wearing a military sword "a little too big for his short frame." ("Game of Chance", pp. 32, 39) or toothbrush-like moustaches. But mentally, their rule was characterised by inconsistency, obsessiveness to form, isolation and distrust. Although the conquered population had a grudging admiration of their samurai spirit and their blind allegiance to their Emperor, they also found it inaccessible and fanatical:

..the captain believed that the present time was witnessing the revival of samurai heroes who brought glory to their country. His country would win the war, if she had more of them. Japan required more reincarnations of Yoshitune, Masahige and Hideyoshi. His country could do more with heroes of that calibre. Modern living had exerted a softening influence; so the *bushido* spirit had to firmly ingrain in the youths of the nations. They should not hesitate to commit *seppuku*, if they ever disgraced their country. To serve their nation nobly should be their most important pursuit. (*Towkay*, p. 317)

"You know our sacred code was forged by our samurais. You must respect it. To follow it is the height of virtue.... You should show the greatest loyalty to His Imperial Highness and serve him with all your heart and soul." (*Destination Singapore*, p. 77)

At the same time, historically this spirit had a more negative side, an arrogance and pride of power:

Life was inconsequential and cheap in a situation where the use of force was supreme and the samurai sword the symbol of absolute power. The Major seemed to enjoy it

all, as did the swaggering samurais of yore when they bullied the peasantry. (*Destination Singapore*, p. 30)

In these works, the view of Japan disseminated through the literature is singularly horrific. Drawing on the historical facts, the actual literary renderings permit more graphic detail and subjective caricature. There was a vast gulf between the Japanese and their captives, which prevented the Japanese from winning the hearts and minds of their subjects:

“The Japanese brought nothing to Singapore but guns. They despised the Malays, although they treated them best of all. The Chinese — how they hated the Chinese — for everything that a Japanese person thinks makes him special, better than the rest of the world, comes from China. That sense of inferiority made them especially brutal toward the Chinese. As for Indians, they wanted to use us against the British.... But they did have a horror of our skin colour.” (*Abraham’s Promise*, pp. 49–50)

It was only later, after great trauma had occurred and mistrust built up, that a different image of the Japanese began to emerge.

The Human Face

Fortunately, the brutality of the first year of the Occupation gave way to a stability based on civilian rule. The “‘educated’ class of Japanese... were sent out from Japan to restore law and order: the civil servants, the educationalists, administrators and cultural officers.” (*Aishabee*, p. 121) During this time, many of the present writers were teenagers, idealistic and impressionable. For the bright ones, attending Japanese school was a step toward economic advantage and a job in a Japanese company. Among them was Goh Sin Tub, whose “Sayonara Sensei” captures the excitement of youth caught up in the Japanese spirit:

We were entranced with this world. With its new power sources. *Yamato-damashi*, *Nippon-no seishin*: the spirit of Japan. The way of the samurai: Bushido... And the songs moved our tender hearts. We were filled with this new spirit of endurance and self-sacrifice. This spirit of absolute dedication. This same spirit that brought forth the Kamikaze: the wind of the gods. This Bushido. (p. 106)

Like Takeda Sensei in Aisha Akbar's school, Goh's fictional teacher has that same impressive effect:

Hayashi-Sensei was one of these admirable teacher-heroes... He was genuinely kind and considerate where all around there was crude and often violent Japanese. He listened where his compatriots would only direct and yell. He always tried to understand and to explain. He had compassion. (p. 107-108)

This hero-worship of Hayashi-Sensei comes to an abrupt halt when the young student Wong finds him in a "lecherous embrace" with one of the other male students. Although Hayashi tries to explain the stress that makes people do unnatural things, Wong finds him repellent and walks out on him. Forty years later, Hayashi returns to Singapore and seeks out his former student, to attempt another explanation. He wants to resolve the rupture in their relationship and rescue the values he once taught from being dismissed by his aberrant behavior. This time, a more worldly-wise Wong understands and forgives:

Hayashi-Sensei's hand instinctively moved to reach out to touch Wong's arm. But in that very act he wavered and his hand dropped down and rested again on the table. Wong's keen eyes saw the aborted gesture. At once, he own hand reached out and firmly grasped his former teacher's hand — no long a leper's hand. (p. 122)

Another youthful infatuation and friendship with a Japanese is recounted in Syed Adam Aljafri's "The Matsumoto Light Horse Artillery." A 12-year-old boy is given permission to ride an unused horse and spends most of his days in the army barracks among the soldiers, especially Captain Matsumoto. One day, Matsumoto shows him a photograph of his family and "For the first time he saw many human beings behind all the soldiers, thousands of miles away, waiting, hoping, wondering." (p. 17) Years after the war, the grown man intuitively knows that Matsumoto has died in battle. He finds Matsumoto's address and plans to write his wife and children to tell:

what a fine soldier and kind man Matsumoto had been, how he had shown consideration to a young boy in a faraway land amidst the tremors of war, and, somehow, had taught him that men everywhere are innately good whatever they had to do, all men were the same.... (p. 25)

Gopal Baratham, too, was a young teenager during the Occupation years, and perhaps as a result, like Akbar, Goh and Aljafri, takes a more sympathetic view in his writing. “Japanese Girl” takes place in the 1980s when the young nearly-engaged protagonist falls in love with a young Japanese girl he meets at a party. He is torn by his past associations, “I knew I should hate this girl. She was a Jap; one of those who had murdered Dad.” (p. 27) But slowly he is drawn by the charm of Kaori to an appreciation of Japanese culture, ‘inhaling the sweetness of her breath, hearing bells in her voice, seeing dancing butterflies in her hands.’ (p. 29)

In another story, “The Interview”, Baratham shows the healing that can occur even to a former POW. Brigadier Mason returns to Singapore and is interviewed by a young reporter hoping for a juicy story of how he “withstood the ‘unmentionable atrocities’ of the Japanese” (p. 67). Instead, he is thwarted at every attempt to find malice or hatred. As Mason states:

“*Atrocities* is not a word I would choose. It’s a shade too suggestive and damning. By their own rules the Japanese treated us justly. But quite simply, their methods differed from ours... Neither Hiro nor I had wished this upon ourselves. I think we both found the whole episode extremely distasteful. He was doing his duty, unpleasant as he found it, just as he knew I would have done mine.... War is, at best, a rather unpleasant business....” (p. 69, 72, 73)

This begrudging admiration for his tormentor is different than Sybil Kathigasu would admit to, although they both acknowledge the bond that formed between torturer and victim.

This acceptance of the Japanese finds its most explicit expression in two novels by Rex Shelley, *People of the Pear Tree* and *Island in the Centre*. Leong Liew Geok has written of Shelley’s “revisionist narratives,” in which:

by taking his Japanese characters more seriously in a psychological and cultural sense, Shelley has given them a hitherto unprecedented fictive three-dimensionality, which recasts narrative stereotypes as oppressor, torturer, brute... (p. 177)

These two novels are a reversed sequel, where the events in the latter pre-date the events in the former. Both present Japanese men as main characters and in so doing have their Eurasian lovers come to understand the Japanese “mystique.” After months of agonizing, Takanashi Junichiro comes to call on Anna Perera. The humanization process begins from the outset, “Please do not think of me as a Japanese officer today. I am Takanashi Junichiro. I would like to be a friend of yours and your family.” (*Pear Tree*, p. 50) As the

relationship develops, Takanashi proves his friendship by clandestinely giving them quinine and other food during their stay in the Eurasian settlement of Bahau. During their chaperoned dates in the living room, he tells Anna about Japan, the customs, the food:

about their New Year's Day with the special noodles, the rice porridge, the tiers of trays of delicacies, the pinetree trunks outside the doors, and all the trappings of their festival of the year, their New Year, their Christmas. (p. 180)

Her brother Joe, too, is won over by his decency and was "convinced that the Jap was a jolly good fellow. Perfect gentleman, he would have said, if the bugger wasn't a Jap." (p. 181)

But this story takes place during the war, where Bahau is a buffer between the guerillas and the Japanese. In the final scene, as the British Force 136 member and Takanashi are fighting for control of a gun, Anna holds the outcome in her hands. She has to choose whom to help. She moves in and as the gunshot goes off and she cries, "Oh God. Oh my God! He's killed him." The reader must wait until the epilogue, 20 years later, to find out which side she took, when we learn that Anna "married a Jap, a real decent sor..." (p. 230) As Leong has pointed out, this is probably the "only novel to end in a marriage between official enemies," (p. 182) and represents for her a crossing over of sensitivities toward the Japanese.

This crossing over continues in *Island in the Centre*, where the main character is a Japanese electrician, Tomio "Tommy" Nakajima. Nakajima has come to Singapore in 1923 as a ship's electrician and finds a job in a rubber estate upcountry. He marries a young Japanese girl, brought over from Nagasaki as a prostitute, yet also falls in love with the Eurasian Vicky Viera. Throughout, Nakajima is portrayed as earnest and hardworking. As Vicky observes, "He was so meticulous. So definite when he made up his mind. He had so much concentration and hidden drive." (p. 186) Yet he also has a softer side, "Tomio was so considerate. A man one could live with happily ever after? Yah... that's why I love him." (p. 187)

Their relationship lasts eight years. During that time, he is recruited by the embassy to join Yamato Electrical Appliances as a salesman and spy. Prior to the Japanese invasion of Malaya, he has to choose between his two loyalties, his adopted country or his home country. He confides to his journal in 1940, "... if I decide to do my duty to Japan, I will devote my entire life to the task" (p. 151) and later in September, 1941, he has realized that de-

spite his love for Vicky, "I am Japanese. And I have a duty our Emperor and my homeland." (p. 156) Vicky, too, realizes this, "If it comes to the crunch, you will give your life for Japan." (p. 158)

As in *People of the Pear Tree*, the final scene comes down to the heroine choosing sides, in this case between her Japanese lover and her old lover, now a communist guerilla out for vengeance. As the two men struggle, Vicky shoots Nakajima, as much to save him from certain torture as for her own calculating ingratiation back with Ah Keh.

It may seem that with Nakajima's death, Shelley is balancing his loyalties, but the final scene of *Island* takes place in Nagasaki, where Nakajima's wife Hanako is staying with a friend. She has just received her dead husband's diary's but, being unable to read them relies on her friend to tell her their contents. Just as she is about to speak the sky goes white with the detonation of the second atomic bomb, sending his journals, "high, high into the mushrooming cloud above the city and upward into the heavens, finally settling, to rest forever and ever on the soil of Japan." (p. 229)

50 years after the war, Shelley steps into new territory by introducing human Japanese main characters and acknowledging the finality rendered by the bombs. This futility is also poignantly shown in Aljafri's "The Matsumoto Light Horse Artillery" where the young protagonist gives up writing to Matsumoto's wife, when he realizes that her wartime address was "Hiroshima." This newer assessment of Japan is given more direct expression in Baratham's "The Interview." Responding to a question about the cruelty of war, Brig. Mason elusively refuses to condemn his captors and balances his own torture as a Japanese POW with his broader view of history:

"... it is hard to match the sheer callousness of our side who dropped, not just one but two atomic bombs on the civilian population of a nation that was already defeated." (p. 73)

Though none of these writers avoids describing or offers excuses for the atrocities caused by the Japanese, the passage of time has allowed for descriptions of a wider variety of Japanese characters in a wider variety of settings involving a wider variety of relationships.

Effects of the War

Finally, a discussion of Singapore and Malaysia war literature would not be complete without acknowledging the effects of the war. Whereas the previous works referred directly to the Japanese, two writers stand out for their stories which show the human effects of living in the wartime occupation.

A. Samad Said's *Lazy River* introduces a host of characters, residents of a slum *kampung* at the edge of a river. Across the river is a Japanese warehouse containing food stores, but in the *kampung*, everyone is starving and doing what they must to survive. For the young boys, it means swimming in the dirty river to scavenge scraps of garbage. For some of the women it means selling themselves in return for food. For the young men, it means a fatal attempt to raid the storehouse.

The *kampung* is populated with Chinese, Muslims, Malays and Indians, brought together as a huddling mass in their air raid shelter during the long hours of the allied bombing. The Japanese characters are mostly seen at a distance, patrolling the warehouse from a sentry post, shooting anyone who strays too close. The allied bombing that destroys the *kampung* as well as the storehouse brings no satisfaction, only destruction of everyone and everything.

Lim Thean Soo was one of Singapore's most prolific writers, publishing five novels and more than 100 short stories during a 20-year period. For Lim, the war was the reservoir he repeatedly returned to for storyline and theme. Writing decades after the war, Lim is able to look back more dispassionately to describe some of the moral issues ordinary people had to face. A summary of some of his stories will reveal his broad focus.

Alfred Sinar of "Mr. Sinar" is a Eurasian left psychologically damaged, looking for spies and fifth columnists years after the war. "Blackmarketeer" describes the rivalry of two black market merchants and the acrimony that lasts well after the war and their legitimacy. "The Parting Gift" tells of the bond between the hastily departing Tuan and his faithful servant, a symbolic story of the bond between the British themselves and their subjects. "The School Tie" also describes the legacy of the British in the form of the elite school that offered locals a chance to advance into the colonial hierarchy.

Moral dilemmas are dramatized in several stories. In "Sail Boat" a young librarian is forced to go against his natural passivity to get involved in securing medicine for some

guerillas. “The Hooded Terror” tells of the barter sacrifice of one’s brother to pay for the safety of the rest of the family. The wealthy Benny in *Singaporama* wants to know how the war changed people’s lives and through conversations with relatives and friends, he learns of the role of survival in forging the emerging national character.

Epiphanies are experienced by several characters where the war provides the vehicle for coming to terms with their pasts. The Towkay in *The Towkay of Produce Street*, his wealth gone and beaten by the kempeitai, spends months looking for one of his business rivals to apologize to and as a result finds an eternal moment of peace. “Major Arigato” is the name given to the former Capt. Abe, who ordered the massacre of a Malayan village. He spends his remaining war years as well-loved school superintendent and writing haiku on the theme of redemption. In “A Tale of Retribution” a poor cake-seller, once a swindling businessman, sacrifices his life to save a spy attempting to escape. And in “The Expatriate” a British POW returns to Changi to make peace with his past.

In all these works and others, Japanese characters are seen only on the periphery. We hear about the beatings, massacres, tortures, but they are rarely described. These stories are about the survivors and how they reacted to the stress of war.

Conclusions

This study has attempted to survey literary responses to Japan by Singapore and Malaysian writers. It has looked at factual accounts as well as fictional. In looking at such a large number of works, there are several trends that can be discerned but also a series of questions they raise.

First, with the passing of time, one would expect to find a softening of the brutal image of the fierce Japanese warrior, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. Many of the memoirs, novels and short stories of the 1990s contain those familiar horrific stereotypical images. Yet, all along, as noted, there has been a kind of sympathetic portrayal, which shows a more human side of the soldier as well as the benevolence of many of the civilians. Many of the present writers were teenagers during the Occupation, attended Japanese schools, worked in Japanese offices and felt the idealism of their Japanese teachers and bosses. Years later, this admiration can find its voice in the sympathetic characters described.

Yet even second-generation writers can see both the good and the bad. A good example of

this is David Ng's 1995 novel, *The Two Faces of Zen*, where the "ruthless enemy" Col. Saito is pitted against the "gentleman soldier" Major Koji. In the climatic struggle, Major Koji sacrifices his life to eliminate the evil Col. Saito, thus proving his noble nature and taking his place on the stage of admirable Japanese literary characters.

A second observation is that, of the totality of literary images of Japan, so many are the war-time image. One would certainly expect that the trauma of the Occupation to be part of the collective literary consciousness, but the dearth of post-war Japanese in Singapore and Malaysian literature is a striking omission. In Philippine literature, for example, there is a broader range of Japanese characters throughout the post-war decades. The fact that most Singapore and Malaysian fiction was written 25–55 years after the Occupation perhaps speaks to the depth of the trauma and the need of writers to expunge their own feelings. For it is not the Japanese who are the subjects of the writing, but the local characters and their responses to hardships that drive the storylines. Perhaps because Singapore and Malaysia are small enough countries where everyone shared the common experience of the Occupation, writers are able to tap into a collective memory.

Third, with the plethora of wartime experiences recounted, one must wonder about the line between fact and fiction. In the works cited, there were several attempts by the writers to describe the facts, as they were known at the time (Chin, Tan, Low, Shinozaki). Other accounts of history are veiled in fictional form (Lim T. S., Hamilton-Shimmen, Ng). Others are memoirs, journals and biography (Akbar, Allen, Choy, Kathigas, J. Lim, S. Lim). All are included in this study because the images of the factual accounts and the images of the fictional sometimes agree and sometimes do not. All writing is selective recall and the conversations in *Sold for Silver* or *No Dram of Mercy* are probably more reconstructed than actual, in the same way that the conversations in *Ma-Rai-Ee* are fictional but based on reality. One can only wonder about the completeness of Janet Lim, Elizabeth Choy or Sybil Kathigas's descriptions of their experiences and the traumatic experiences they chose not to disclose. Another example of selective description is the scarcity of mention of the Formosan and Korean soldiers used as prison guards. Surely many of the excesses attributed to the Japanese were in fact committed by local bandits, Communist guerillas, Korean, Formosan and Indian soldiers, corrupt Malay policemen and enthusiastic Heiho youths. Wartime occupation breeds distrust and informers and collaborators were probably more widespread than portrayed in the literature.

Finally, there is a conscious connection in these writings with their relationship to memory and the past. In the introduction to *Bits of Paper*, in 1980, Lim Thean Soo writes:

There is an abundance of material in our history for the storyline, and the hankering after the past to find our roots is bound to result in the publication of stories with irresistible appeal.

The fact that so many of Lim's stories begin in the present and have the narrator go back in time to recall a particular episode is demonstration of the way that the older generation must go back to retell their stories. Although the colonial history of the region goes back 450 years, the literature of Singapore and Malaysia tends to go back only as far as the memories of their writers will take them. And it is the Occupation years, more often than the later drama of independence and near-civil war, that writers come back to for storyline and inspiration.

Benny Weng the wealthy businessman in *Singaporama* is searching for the key to meaning in his life. He realizes, "... if I am unable to pass on the experience of my forebears to my children, life would be meaningless, bleak, without continuity." (p. 52) What he discovers from his inquiry of the older generation is "the importance in exceptional circumstances like a war for people to be adaptable, tough, shrewd and self-disciplined in order to survive." (p. 59) Although no one would have wished for the Japanese Occupation and the horrors and suffering it caused, the tactics of survival and the character it produced were the very qualities that were called upon again in the forging of a national identity twenty years later. And it may be those stories, told in the myriad voices of the myriad personalities that lived through them, that carry the key to understanding the modern Singapore and Malaysia, the key linking the present and the past, the people and their history.

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