

Reading Japanese Occupation in Malaya in *The Rice Mother* Through the Lens of Social Memory

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Abstract

This paper examines the reconstruction of social memory as portrayed in *The Rice Mother*; a historical fiction of the 21st century which appropriates the history of Japanese Occupation in Malaya from 1941 to 1945. Social memory is defined as a unifying force that envisions the past through which cultural and communal influences are derived and handed down through generations. The studies on social memory raise questions about the transmission of the system, preservation of experience and knowledge, and alteration of culture during the historical period in which based on these premises, we emphasise on the small unit of a Ceylonese family. We discuss the process of commemorating history within individual identity and communal relations in the novel which takes on a dark history as the setting of the stories of a Ceylonese immigrant family and the generations that make Malaysia their homeland. Unlike *No Dram of Mercy*, a memoir by Sybil Kathigasu, a survivor of the occupation, Manicka's novel is based on remnants of history as creative background to a tale that runs several generations. We shall identify the ways in which the history of Japanese Occupation in Malaya is being represented through the lens of social memory to show how a contemporary Malaysian writer still remembers afresh the traumatic memory of our war in our history.

Keywords: history, literature, social memory, re-visioning

1. Introduction

The process of commemorating history and interpreting memory in fiction provide a huge area of discussion in the literary field given that scholarly literary prominence began in the earlier period during 1890s. Writers and theorists such as James Joyce, Pierre Nora and Hayden White have contributed to theories related to this creative production. Winter claimed that these generations of "memory boom" (1995:54) followed the steps of earlier cultural movements which focus on memory as the key to the formation of identity and the process of giving an alternative version to events of the past. Furthermore, history and memory are the two key features in much of the work of contemporary writers that combine memory with various global issues such as history, world politics and identity. Over the years, these works of history and memory have expanded in accordance with the current trend of mainstream culture in discussing issues and values at various social, political and economic levels including their significant contribution in the literary field. There are blurred lines and boundaries between history and memory that in the view of Ronning (2009), this seamless combination has become a determining feature in fiction. While history is used as the background in fiction, memory functions to integrate with the identity of the characters, social issues and other contributing factors which mark the influence of history in the narrative.

Our goal in this essay is to examine the reconstruction of history by addressing social memory as a tool to explore the diverse functions and values in the society during the period of occupation in *The Rice Mother*. Bearing the contention that this novel appropriated the history of Japanese Occupation in Malaya (1942-1945) as the background, we shall include in the discussion a brief review of the history itself. This is the first novel of Rani Manicka which won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2003 for South East Asia and South Pacific region. Manicka is among the contemporary Malaysian in English writers who no longer resides in Malaysia, yet she returns to the fractured memories of Malaya in her novels.

2. Literature Review

Along with the current obsession towards the issue of memory, many works of diverse fields have ventured to foreground the past through the widespread of publications, media and memorials (Whitehead, 2009). This includes the works of fiction by contemporary writers which we emphasise in this paper. From 2003 to 2012, there are about ten Malaysian in English novels which appropriated the history of Japanese Occupation in Malaya and *The Rice Mother* is one of them.

As novels which employ retrospection as a literary device, the ways in which an event is remembered, commemorated or retold, termed as a practice of re-visioning, give alternative voice, space and rights to the untold stories while maintaining the conventional features of history such as fact and knowledge of the chronology of the events. This is how history in literature is reconstructed as emphasized by White (1978:88):

Historical narratives are not only model of past events and processes, but also metaphorical statements which suggest a relation of similitude between such events and processes and the story types that we conventionally use to endow the events of our lives with culturally sanctioned meaning.

Olick and Robbins (1998) also reiterate that history is a product written by people in the present for particular reasons and purposes that the selection of sources is interpreted through narrative frame. Furthermore, to trace the history, memory studies have proven their contribution to this effort that recognize the melancholic form of emotion such as the appreciation of survival after the traumatic past or as a reconciliation of the painful histories to balance the present and to look forward to a more promising future. This can be seen in Simmons (2008) from his work based on the third generations of the Holocaust survivors in which they experience many years of prolonged trauma which affected several generations that they utilize their family and communal unit as confined gathering to grieve and mourn the painful period of the Holocaust. This unit has also developed “harbouring resentment” (2008:17) resulting in generations of the survivors that shield them from any forms of psychological distress and for them to treasure material comforts above all else.

Nora (1989) claims that an increasing interest to the study of memory is due to the rapid movement of the present that there is so little of the historical past left for the historical continuity to persist as an ancient treasure to pass down to the future generations. History itself is a reconstruction of past events from the historians’ perspectives which White views as “events that are made into a story by the suppression of certain of them and highlighting through motific repetition” (1978:83) that it is bound to temporal continuities and it opens to criticism and analysis. Hence, memory takes place to “accommodate to those facts that suit it as well as it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus on the telescope, global or detached, particular or symbolic” (Nora, 1989:8). Previously, the study of memory was once regarded as fine art and was held at the highest status because it is an important skill of learning to understand the world. Nowadays, there are many modern systems and technologies which are designed meant to facilitate the demand to understand the mysterious knowledge of memory (Hutton, 1987).

The study of memory has spanned a number of diverse fields including history, sociology, anthropology and literature, and is influenced from various intellectual movements such as Marxism, Feminism and Postcolonialism (Ruzy Suliza Hashim & Noraini Md Yusof, 2010). From White’s (1978) perspective, history is connected to literature in a way both works consist of a process of fiction and interpretations. We give emphasis to this historical fiction acknowledging the recollections of social memory as the creative background to a tale that runs several generations of the Ceylonese community who lived before, during and after the war while maintaining and preserving its communal association.

3. Historical Review

The Japanese Occupation during World War II was one of the most important events in history which received scholarly attention in defining and analysing the period of occupation from different perspectives. Malaya at that time was under the British administration and Malayan people were divided into partitions which separated their socio-cultural ways of life and economic activities. With this system of divide and rule introduced by the British administration at that time, Malayan people including Malays as the majority number, Chinese who dominated the mining section and the Indians who monopolized the rubber estates in rural areas, lived separately and enjoyed making a living in their own confined spaces. The arrival of the Japanese without prior notice had awakened the entire land and people that Wong (2003:3) describes it as the transition period of “non-obtrusive, *laissez-faire* colonial administration to the harshness of a Japanese military dictatorship” that leaves an indelible mark on the memories of the people.

Japanese military tyranny raped the peace and trust of the entire land though they came with an aim to liberate

Asia from the Western colonization. During the occupation, many had suffered from their tortures as recorded in the memoir written by Sybil Kathigasu, one of the survivors during the occupation:

When the Japanese occupied a town, the fate of the inhabitants depended on the officer in charge. So in some cases order was restored and raping reduced to a minimum, but in other cases, when the officers were as lustful as their men, raping was general. In most of the large towns, young men and girls were rounded up and kept in certain buildings “for military use” (Sybil Kathigasu, 2006:30).

They came and controlled Malaya from 1942 to 1945 that people who lived during the occupation regarded as a period of depression. The slogan “Asian for the Asian” that they brought in to capture the hearts of the Malaya failed to convince the Malayan people resulting in civilians suffering physically and mentally due to brutality and food shortages during the occupation (Kratoska, 1998). *The Rice Mother* has incorporated this history of Malaya in 1942 to 1945 as the social and historical setting in the story. Hence, we aim to explore this appropriation of Japanese Occupation in Malaya in the novel to see ways in which the period has been re-visioned, and suggest the implications of this incursion into the past.

4. Methodology

Social memory studies are derived from the tradition and orientation of sociology; Hutton (1993), Swidler and Ardit (1994) are amongst scholars who have conceptualized this notion of memory from the sociology of knowledge and cultural sociology (Olick & Robbins, 1998). The use of the term ‘social memory’ is interchangeable with the term ‘collective memory’ where scholars have contributed to the field by expanding the use of memory for cultural continuity, preservation of knowledge and experience, and recovery of what was lost in the past to cope with constant change in the future. Many writers of memory studies have pointed out how social memory has transformed the whole nation and ages such as during the seventeenth century in England, memory was seen as an important instrument to elicit patriotic sense and produce national identity. Memory was also a key that accelerated transformation between the Middle ages and the nineteenth century that saw the change from industrialization to urbanization. Social memory has largely impacted the spread of print literacy and capital commerce as stated by Anderson (cited from Olick and Robbins, 1998:116) that “communities of fate were secured across wide territories by newspapers and novels, which produced shared culture among people who would never meet.”

However, in this paper, we focus on the reconstruction of social memory in a small communal unit of a Ceylonese family which Manicka has appropriated to re-imagine the traumatic past of Japanese Occupation which has changed their values and observations about life such as economic, physical and moral experience as a means of consolation, escapism and spiritual drive. The methodology that we use to analyse the text is illustrated in the table below:

Table 1. Reconstruction of social memory

Individual identity	Economic Experience	Physical Experience	Moral Experience
Communal association			

We analyse by pointing to two important areas in social memory studies consisting of individual identity and communal association. As Olick and Robbins (1998) reiterate, both identity and memory are important components in the ways in which they make sense of their pasts and this individual identity is a unit in the communal institution which demands contribution, expectation and responsibility to preserve the memory of the past. Identity is also viewed as a “relatively stable sense of self that an individual or group maintains over time” (Bell, 2006:5). From these two units, we divide economic, bodily and moral experience during the Occupation to represent the knowledge of the re-visioned past as these are the elements of traumatic experience that victims of survivors of the war were bound to articulate. These are the occluded stories from inside which provide another version of a more holistic interpretation of history rather from the perspectives of the historians (Leichter, 2011).

5. Findings and Discussion

In *The Rice Mother*, there are sixteen major characters who are directly or indirectly come in contact with Japanese Occupation. Through analysis of their characters, we can elicit their individual identity and learn of the ways they succumb or resist the communal expectation within the three major transition periods in the history of Malaya. This is explained in the diagram below which Manicka has provided to guide the reader in her novel:

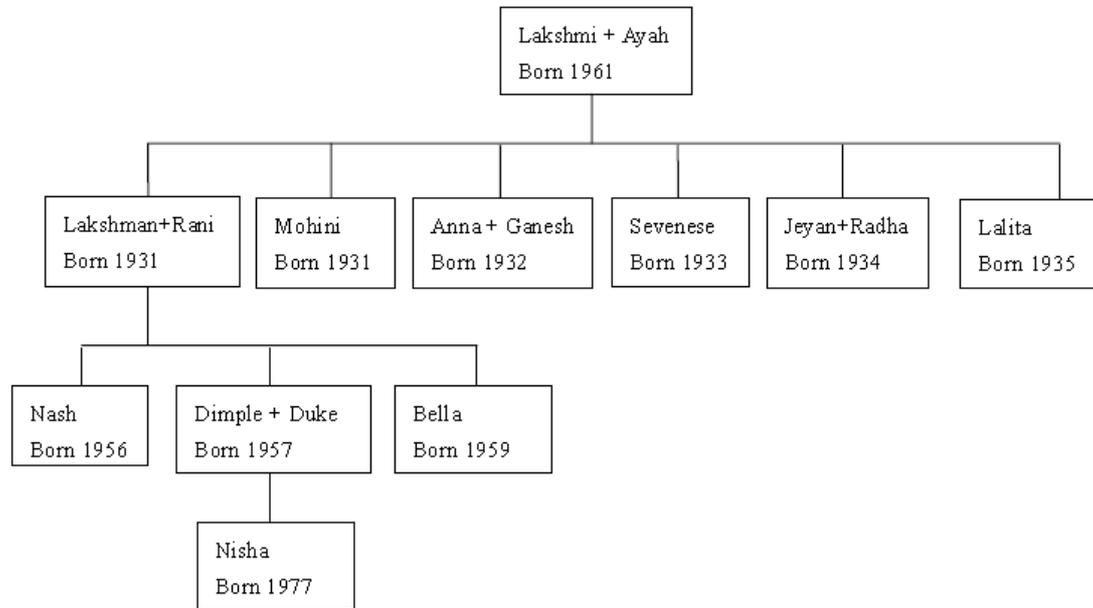


Figure 1. Family tree in *The Rice Mother*

Source: *The Rice Mother*

There are three main transition periods consisting of the first part of the novel: during the pre-war period when immigrants from India, Ceylon and China migrated to Malaya which dates back over eleven years before the war. They sailed to Malaya seeking for wealth and fortune to build better lives. The second transition was the invasion of Malaya by Japanese military dictatorship and the third part was the period after the war. Our focus is clearly on the period during the Japanese Occupation.

5.1 Individual Identities

Individual identities that we foreground in this analysis are based on the voices of the characters during the period of occupation. This includes the first generation of Ceylonese immigrants namely Lakshmi and Ayah, and the generation of children during the distraught years of war. Anna's memories during the occupation brought her back to the day of her mother's endless efforts to make a living out of misery under the Japanese military rule. She saw that the war made an abrupt change to the financial situation in the family that her mother has become a driving force to generate income and make some savings from little that is left:

When we return to our empty, looted home after the Japanese invasion, Mother had to use more than half of her savings to replace everything that had been stolen. To her credit she took the disaster in her stride... The Japanese made us all very resourceful, but mother was an undefeatable force...The advent of the Japanese made Mother and entrepreneur, and she had quite a knack for it too (p. 88).

Sevenese also finds out that their mother has taken this opportunity during the occupation to take into possession European belongings that have been burnt to fire when the Japanese rummaged their houses as she considers this turn of events as a "blessing in disguise" (p. 127). War for their mother is an opportunity, a soothing treatment to heal from the traumatic experience, and an escapism to resist and find ways to survive. Thus, she has taught her children to face the difficulties by making profits and opportunities out of the wretchedness of war.

The memory about the Japanese occupation in nine-year old Anna is mostly about the survival of the family to sustain the food production and storage saying that, "strangely enough, when I think of the Japanese occupation, I think of our cows - the way they came into our lives with the start of the occupation and were all sold when the Japanese left" (p. 89). The dreadful atmosphere of the war has taken its toll in Anna's memory when she first sees the Japanese inhuman treatment to the Malayan people at that time:

Most of all I equate the Japanese occupation with fear, the acute fear that has a taste and a smell all of its own, metallic and oddly sweet. Lakshman and I saw our first decapitated head on our way to the market. The head was spiked on a stick by the roadside, attached to it a page torn from a school exercise book with the message "Traitor"... A few yards in front not just head but a whole body had been skewered onto a stick and spiked into the ground (p. 89).

From these three characters, we can draw some conclusions that fear is associated with their memory of the occupation. Yet, it is also a time for them to be resilient and resourceful. Although overcome by terror, the period has brought out the best in their mother, who learns to cope, and in turn, teaches her children some useful skills for survival. It is this survival dexterity that facilitates the family's existence over several generations. From a family of meager beginnings, although they sporadically suffer tribulations along the way, the future generations show promise and potential in their new hostland.

5.2 Communal Associations

Young and pretty women during the war were taken as the Japanese comfort women. Regardless of race and background, the Japanese army was shown to be totally unethical to their subjects, and raping of women was a practice. Anna describes this memory as she sees how her mother and the neighbours comprising of Malay, Indian and Chinese origin find ways to keep their daughters away from the evil eyes of the Japanese. Mui Tsai, the Chinese servant of the Old Soong's house is the perfect 'comfort woman' for the Japanese in the neighbourhood:

They found their comfort woman in our little neighbourhood. How they used her! They lined up. One by one they took her on the kitchen floor, in the master's bed, on the rosewood dining table where the master and mistress ate every day. Every time they came, they expected to have their food on the table and their sex wherever they happened to be standing. Our Mohini and Ah Moi next door owed their virginity to her ... Because they had Mui Tsai, they didn't bother to look too hard for the other carefully hidden daughters (p. 90).

Young girls will be kept hidden in the house and their existence remains a secret. While in school, as a way of protecting them from the Japanese teachers, their hair is cut short and they are dressed like a boy:

Things in our neighbourhood changed drastically with the Japanese occupation. Girls turned into boys overnight, and girls of a certain age vanished into thin air (p. 127).

This fear of becoming comfort women shows an instance when the three communities are caught between friendship and survival. Therefore, Manicka highlights the ambivalent relationship between communities who would otherwise remain ignorant of the existence of a community not their own.

Japanese men, in the memory of the Malayan people, are objectified to an extent that they were called "Asian dwarfs", unattractive and uncouth soldiers in ill-fitting clothes. Sevenese and his friends of Malay and Chinese bloods extend their comments about the Japanese negatively:

He had a yellow peasant face, wore a cheap, peaked cloth cap with flaps hanging over his neck, and had a flask and a tin container of rice, salt fish and soya beans secured to his belt. At the end of his short legs he wore rubber-soled canvas boots, split-toed so the big toe was in a separate section from the other toes, and into this cleverly adapted footwear the bottoms of his trousers were pushed. Thus ready for the muddy horror of tropical conditions, he stood as the conquering hero. In our foolish, romantic youth we credited his one and only redeeming feature as his rifle and long bayonet (p. 125).

This unbecoming image reflects the soldier's uncivilized behaviour. How does an unseemingly person of little character and deportment aspire to rule such vast lands seems perplexing. Manicka brings to light this image to remind us how Malaysians-Chinese, Malays and Indians-share the same perception of the Japanese colonizers.

The cruelty of Japanese occupation that lasted for about three and a half years extended into the economics, politics and even to the education of the Malayan people. They brought in their culture, morality and their foreign method of living (p. 127). Though the Malayan people at that time bowed and succumbed to their fate under Japanese rule, hatred, deep within as articulated by Lakshmi prevails:

They were arrogant, uncouth, cruel and unforgivable and as long as I live I shall hate them with a mother's wrath. I spit in their ugly faces. My hate is such that I will not forget, even in my next life. I will remember what they have done to my family, and I will curse them again and again so that they will one day taste the bitterness of my pain (Lakshmi, p. 149).

Memories of the Japanese occupation are shown to be protracted and extended its bitter and sweet that one would perpetually remember. In the novel, women are shown as strategists in order to save their families. Lakshmi is willing to sacrifice her life to protect her daughters and family while selfishly giving away all the connections with the entire world including friends and neighbours. To protect Mohini from being taken away by the Japanese after she fails to hide herself, Lakshmi reveals the secret of the Chinese family next door:

I shuddered with fear and knew instantly that I had sacrificed poor Ah Moi in vain (p. 161).

While Lakshmi loses her precious daughter Mohini, and sacrifices another girl from a Chinese family, Minah on the other hand, has to give in herself to the Japanese after she loses her husband as a way to protect her five children from Japanese cruelty:

The Japanese man with the jeep began to stay overnight. A few weeks later he moved in. I stopped visiting her, and she stopped talking to us. Perhaps she was ashamed to be the kept woman of a Japanese official (p. 152).

When Malaya is in chaos due to the brutality and inhuman tortures, a small unit of a family could rise above such difficult living conditions and survive to make a living out of the misery. The Japanese army in this fiction might have forced the Malayan people at that time to bow for fear of their power and Emperor, but they could never receive respect from the people whom they have tortured and ill-treated. This social memory has transformed a small unit of a community to act bravely and remain resilient despite physical and emotional trauma which could drive those with less robustness into disintegration.

These individual recollections of a Ceylonese family and the collective memory of a small neighbourhood consisting of Ceylonese, Chinese and Malay during the Japanese Occupation in Malaya, as claimed by Schudson (1995), project a social construction of the past located in a wide range of cultural routines. While it is the individuals of Manicka's characters who remember the experience during the occupation, it should be noted that this memory exists and is shaped by their relationships with others in the community.

6. Conclusion

Reading historical fiction through the lens of social memory has provided an alternative and holistic view that a small unit of community is as important as the whole nation. Manicka, in her fiction, has ventured into storying the memory of Japanese Occupation in Malaya that she has foregrounded this small unit in a community which changed the traumatic memory of war in our history to the survival of love within a family. We bring into the discussion of social memory based on the recollections of individuals through the characters that have a direct contact with the Occupation and communal memories consisting of Ceylonese, Chinese and Malay through their economic, physical and moral experiences. The re-visioning of Japanese Occupation in Malaya in Manicka's fiction is being represented through the lens of social memory, thus it depicts that this contemporary Malaysian writer still remembers afresh the traumatic memory of war in our history.

It is interesting to view history from the contemporary perspectives that we can read, understand and dwell into the historical narrative independently far from the historians' projections and interpretations of history. While historical documents provide the bare facts of brutality, Manicka's novel embellishes and colours the historical realities that jolt our recollection of this dark period. In this process, she illuminates not just the trauma but the resilience and enduring love of an immigrant family to persevere and outlive the colonizers' stay in Malaya.

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