

The Early Reception of Tash Aw's Narrative in Malaysia: An Ecocritical Interpretation of Harmony within Dissonance in *The Harmony Silk Factory*

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Abstract

This article is part of the current ecocritical research that is being conducted on Tash Aw's works. It attempts to analyse Tash Aw's first novel *The Harmony Silk Factory* and investigate how he customizes the concept of harmony and dissonance in relation to human beings from the perspective of the recent and growing theory of ecocriticism. Through examining Aw's novel, the manipulation of nature in the hope of illustrating the plot of a novel is studied thoroughly. In this article, the ecocritical theory is used to approach the phenomenon of harmony and dissonance in nature in the context of human-nature relationship in the chosen novel. The ecocritical theory assists in revealing with what perspectives the nature is portrayed by Aw in his first novel. The analysis of the novel reveals that there is a coherent harmony in dissonance in the bridge between human beings and their natural setting with the idea that human beings and nature are constantly influencing each other and causing different outcomes from even the slightest change. The implication of the research reveals that the human-nature relationship is indeed something that carries much weight and needs to be given much consideration to. It gives rise to the issue that human beings and nature are inextricably interconnected. By incorporating the Malaysian viewpoint and voice of Tash Aw in the current article, we have exposed how ecocriticism is instrumental in meeting its targeted scope in Malaysian literary context as a multinational area of scholarship.

Keywords: ecocriticism, harmony, dissonance, Tash Aw, Malaysia

1. Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged that there is always a harmonious interconnectedness between human beings and nature. The premise of the current article is based on the view that there are no ways human beings can live apart from nature. Therefore, this gives rise to the significance of this article which is to highlight the link between human beings and nature as embodied in the first novel of the contemporary Malaysian novelist, Tash Aw. The utilization of the ecocritical theory will undoubtedly aid the process of realizing the harmony within dissonance in various natural settings presented in this particular novel.

How did Tash Aw transpire to become a writer? "Because I enjoy it, and because I need to pay the rent" (Aw, 2005, p. 6). This was a statement written in Aw's novel, *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005), which was the very first novel he published, as he revealed what motivated him to write in the first place. This is why he started writing novels in the first place. He then put his determination into work and portrayed his insights in life in his novels.

His full name is Aw Ta-Shi. Based on an article from British Council (Aw, 2022), Aw was born in Taiwan on 4th October 1971 to Malaysian parents. He spent his childhood as well as adolescence in Kuala Lumpur. After that, he moved to England to study law at Jesus College, Cambridge and at the University of Warwick before he moved to London to begin his writing endeavour. In 2003, he completed the MA in creative writing at the University of East Anglia.

The days he spent in Malaysia and his study life abroad provide nutrition for his thoughts for his writing attempts. As a child, he was brought to a village to stay with his grandparents during his school holidays. He had the chance to spend his days there with his cousins who had different social backgrounds. Consequently, he realized how different he was from his cousins and how education could do to one's mind and life. In short, it is clear that Aw's early life had helped to shape him as a Malaysian novelist whereby he shaped the first-hand experience he gained in his novels.

But what is Aw's footing in the context of Malaysian Literature? He grew up in a countryside, and this experience made him realize how weak human beings are and how human beings are always at the mercy of the natural elements. He had written and published four novels. The novel that is studied in this article is *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005), which was his first novel. This very novel helped him win the 2005 Whitbread First Novel Award. After that, he wrote and published three different novels including *Map of the Invisible World* (2009), *Five Star Billionaire* (2013), and *We, the Survivors* (2019).

His four published novels painted him as an author who set his mind on portraying a vivid picture of Asian history as well as the changes

which happened in the society from an Asian point of view. He realized that there were not many literatures written about Asian history from an Asian point of view, let alone those that are set in his homeland, Malaysia. Therefore, he endeavoured to bridge this gap by writing and publishing Asian literature based on the first-hand experience he gained from when he was young. He also ceaselessly tried to give the often-ignored groups of the society an active voice, giving them a role in his novels. His four different books might strike out as completely different works, but they similarly depict a story of a difficult life of those invisible people in a society, who are usually suppressed in the society. Consequently, his special novels painted him as a different author who dwelled on difficult topics in his novels and showed his readers the harsh truth.

Only the first novel is analysed and discussed in this research. "Death erases all traces, all memories of lives that once existed, completely and forever" (The Harmony Silk Factory, p. 4). There seems to be an inherent need in Aw to slide this message into his debut novel, *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005), whereby this message is repeated multiple times whether verbatim or paraphrased throughout the whole novel. It signifies how awe-inspiring death is and how fragile human lives are in the face of death. Anything human-related, including but not limited to memories, is vulnerable and easily erased when death comes knocking at the door. This is basically one of the issues raised in this novel. Several other issues are also raised in this novel which are significant to be pondered.

The main character in this novel is called Johnny Lim, who is a man who struggles vigorously and trudges up the ladder of wealth and power in a valley called Kinta Valley before the independence of Malaya in the midst of a chaotic war period. However, it is interesting to note that he is never the narrator in the novel. His voice and thoughts are not actively heard except in his conversation with the other characters and the other characters' representation as well as remembrance of him. Their representation of him differs since they have different kinds of interactions with him, and their thoughts are influenced by their perceptions in their lives. Aw divided this novel into three parts, giving three different characters, the anti-hero's son, his wife and his friend, the platform to retell his story from their viewpoints. Based on others' recollections of him, he is a textile merchant who begins his working life as a humble worker. He kills a man when his life becomes hard and he is drowned in people's criticisms of him. Consequently, he becomes a reserved and ill-humoured youth full of hatred. After that, he continues to make a living by doing various jobs at various places before he settles down in Kinta Valley where he works for a man who owns Tiger Brand Trading Company, a busy-looking place that sells expensive and exquisite merchandise. As he works hard to gain the highest position there, he subsequently marries the most beautiful woman in the valley called Snow Soong.

As the novel continues, Snow, the anti-hero's wife, fills up the second part of the novel. At that time, Japanese soldiers begin to set foot on Malaya. People have no choice but to turn to Johnny's wisdom, paying taxes just to survive. Later, both Johnny and Snow go on their honeymoon to an island along with their friends. But things become complicated when they spend a lot of time in each other's company. The demons in them and their hatred for each other begin to surface when they are constantly in each other's company. Consequently, one of their friends is found dead whose cause of death is not revealed at the moment. But it later turns out that the man is killed by one of his friends there while they are having a holiday on the island.

As this novel slowly comes to an end, Peter, who is Johnny's friend, is given a chance to retell his part of the story. This part is full of his self-recollection as he recalled what happens when he is still Johnny's friend and hangs out with him. It also describes Peter's incessant obsession with some form of natural paradise that he pictures in his mind through rose-tinted dreams. His obsession with gardens makes him an intolerable and strange man as the novel draws to an end and when he is at an old age. Others' failure in producing the paradise he envisions drives him mad sometimes. In the end, he attends Johnny's funeral where he meets Johnny's son, Jasper. However, it remains a mystery as to whether Johnny is truly Jasper's father or not since there is not much resemblance between the two of them.

In this novel, readers learn that Johnny is forced to become a member of the communist party when he is caught in a difficult life condition without any means to survive. His communist comrades offer him sleep, food and money, which are all that he ever needs at that point of his life. Hence, it is inevitable that he joins the communist party and starts to carry out little tasks for them. When he becomes the boss of Tiger Brand Trading Company, he does not cease doing his part as a communist. However, his role changes after the Japanese invasion. He acts as a go-between for the locals there when in fact, there are rumours of him betraying his people. Readers also get a glimpse of how he plots against others for his schematic gains. However, all those rumours remain rumours as there is no evidence that proves their validity or suggests otherwise. Readers are left to ponder the clues left by the author and draw their conclusions from there.

2. Literature Review

Several studies had been carried out on this particular novel. Janoory, Ariffin and Muhammad (2006) once published an article on Aw's debut novel, *The Harmony Silk Factory*, in the year 2006. They emphasis on analysing the text as if it is a historical piece of work. The research shows that historical narration resembles fictional writing more because it is almost impossible to narrate one's history objectively regardless of how a historian tries to adhere to the academic rules or a meticulous plan. This article even highlights the reality that historical production is often embedded with many fictional elements in it, rendering it an unstable reality. A historical production is a rather subjective work in the sense that it is full of people's opinions and how they choose to remember things. In this particular novel, the readers are allowed the chaos of learning the characteristics of the anti-hero, Johnny Lim, from different people, including his son, wife, and friend. This chaos makes it hard for their narrations of Johnny to be two peas in a pod since their memory is at the mercy of their ideology as well as their value system. Even the ways they choose to recall something makes it rather subjective. In short, Janoory et al. (2006) established that history is always biased.

Zainal and Yahya (2009) attempted to analyse how Aw addressed and suggested the relationship between nature and humanity. Subsequently, they found that Aw had represented the characters in the novel literally and symbolically by associating the characters with different natural symbols. In addition, they also realized the use of natural elements in highlighting the values in the novel. In short, the researchers concluded that nature has been given much weight in this particular novel.

Besides that, Hsiung (2015) discussed a core theme found in this novel and the idea of postmemory. The core theme is the trauma left among Malaysians, especially the Chinese people, because of Japanese Occupation in Malaya (Hsiung, 2015). The constant torture and struggles rendered Malaysians helpless and traumatic even after the Japanese had left. On the contrary, the idea of postmemory is also raised in this article whereby Hsiung (2015) suggested the conflict of the memory of the anti-hero's son with the transference of that memory. People may choose to remember and recall things differently. This idea is similar to the work done by Jannory et. al (2006) as mentioned above. The idea that one's memory is fluid and unpredictable is the key element here. Consequently, Hsiung (2015) concluded that there is a gap between how one narrates an incident and how the incident is revealed at the end.

In addition, Chang (2016) highlighted the connection between the past and future, raising the idea that the things one is born with are directly linked to the kinds of decisions one makes in life. It suggested that one's ethnicity and culture will have an impact on the decisions or choices one take in life. The emphasis on the link between the past, present, and future is argued here. One's personal story will undeniably create a link to become a part of history. Somehow, it resembles the research carried out by Jannory et. al (2006) whereby one's history is said to be flexible. At the same time, one's memory is unfixed, rendering the existence of conflicting accounts (Chang, 2016).

Hsiung (2018) further performed another research on this very novel. The idea of the absent father is raised in this study whereby the father here is the anti-hero, Johnny Lim, in this novel. His constant absence because of his business and schemes makes him an absent father. The metaphor of an absent father is also linked to the fact that the voices of the Malaysian communists are often suppressed as well as the uncertainty of the identity of Jasper's biological father (Hsiung, 2018). These metaphors raise the issue of how the absence of father affects the outcomes of things. Without the presence of his father, Jasper's recollections of his father's character seem slightly unreliable in the sense that his memory may not be true even. He even left home after he turned eighteen and only came home after his father died, rendering his recollection much more unstable and fluid. The muffled voices of the Malaysian communists and the ambiguity of the identity of Jasper's biological father also highlight the truthfulness and unreliability of one's historical recollections.

Moreover, Saxena (2020) studied Aw's novel from a carnivalesque standpoint. This research views this novel as a memoryscape of multiculturalism (Saxena, 2020). This novel does indeed shows the interaction among a variety of races from different countries in a multicultural society. These people are seen interacting and communicating with each other, trying to grasp an understanding of others' lives and cultures. By only focusing on this particular novel, Saxena (2020) explored the multiple chronotopes that exist in the narratives of historical events in this novel. Besides, this novel is a historical account of Johnny, and he is viewed and remembered by different people in vastly different manners. Consequently, this shows how history is ever-changing. She even concluded that contemporary historical fiction can be studied by reconstructing the historiographic customs and traditions of the indigenous group of people, linking history and memory in one's recollections.

Based on the aforementioned critical studies on Aw's debut novel, it is clear that none of the researchers had tried to regard this particular novel from an ecocritical point of view though the element of nature is constantly brought up and analysed in those critical studies. Hence, the current article is intended to bridge this gap in the academic world, approaching this novel from an ecocritical standpoint.

3. Ecocriticism as a Lens

How did ecocriticism transpire? Banerjee (2020) gave a brief history of ecocriticism. He claimed that William Rueckert was the first to coin the word, "ecocriticism" in the year 1978. This word arose when people tried to shorten the phrase, "ecological literary criticism" and they began to be aware of it in the late twentieth century (Banerjee, 2020). Hence, it is safe to reason that ecocriticism is given much emphasis when people begin to be more aware of ecological wisdom and the importance of the link between human beings and nature. In a deeper sense, ecocritics advocates the notion of applying ecology and ecological concepts in doing research about literature as pointed out by William Rueckert in his essay. "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" that was published in the year 1978 (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996).

Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) reasoned that "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment" (p. xviii). This approach is concerned about the link between human beings and nature in literature. It takes on an earth-centred approach in the study of literature (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996). Under the scope of ecocriticism, ecocritics are always concerned about the idea of the representation of nature in literature as well as the manipulation of physical settings in a certain kind of role in the literature itself. For instance, the use of a particular physical setting in a novel is significant in shaping the theme of the novel itself. This is why ecocritics are always focused on the natural elements, however small or insignificant they may seem, in literature.

In addition, Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) also argued about the fact that "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and be affected by it" (p. xix). It is highlighted that human culture is seen as an entity directly linked to the physical environment, and they are mutually influenced by one another. The word, interconnection, is also used in explaining this phenomenon. It is suggested that the core of ecocriticism is the interconnections that exist between nature and human culture, especially the cultural elements embedded in our language and literature (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996). Hence, one can understand ecocriticism as having one foot in literature while the

other in the physical environment with its theoretical stance in negotiating between humans and nonhumans (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996). Furthermore, it is argued that nature is not merely a stage to showcase human story but rather an active participant in the drama itself (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996). Nature is no longer seen as a passive recipient of human history but it is now an actor that will directly or indirectly influences human beings. A slight change in a particular physical setting, however trivial and insignificant it may seem, will affect human beings. This is the idea of ecocriticism and how nature plays a great role in human lives as opposed to what researchers previously thought. It is strikingly congruent with "The First Law of Ecology" proposed by Barry Commoner in the year 1971. Commoner (1971) suggested that "everything is connected to everything else" (p. 16). It is an encompassing theory whereby all things that exist in nature live in an intricate web of interrelationships and no single entity is of free standing. All the individual participants of the universe act on one another, subsequently producing different effects as a result of their influences on each other. This is why the fact that nature plays an active role in human beings' lives falls in a more logical sense and is discussed in this article.

Ecocriticism focuses on the study of literature and the natural element within it. According to Das (2020), in general, ecocriticism helps us to highlight the relationship between society and environment by looking into the cause of ecological crisis. The analysis of the interconnectedness between nature and human beings helps to identify the issues related to the ecological crises. It somehow made human beings an intricate part of the environment and vice versa. This realization also brings into mind the idea of ecological wisdom as to how human beings handle their relationships with the physical environment.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The idea of harmony within dissonance is predominant in this novel. Aw did indeed manipulate nature in various ways to help him achieve the mission he wanted with this novel in the first place. The first instance describes the harsh lives of the poor villagers as recounted by Jasper in the first part of the novel:

So rural children became hardened early on. They had no proper toilets, indoor or outdoor. Poor villagers would eat any kind of meat. Protein was scarce. Most children were malnourished. Scurvy, rickets, polio - all very common in children. Of course, typhoid, malaria, dengue fever and cholera too. (p. 12)

Later, Jasper recounts:

In 1933, two things happened. The price of rubber fell to four cents per pound and Johnny killed a man... The price of rubber was now so low that many plantation owners - even English and French ones - were forced out of business... There was no more work to be found in the plantations. So the young people began to drift further and further away from their villages in search of work, and most of them ended up in the mines. (p. 22)

These two aforementioned extracts are chosen to discuss the cruelty of lives as portrayed in this novel. Readers are given a chance to see the harshness of the lives of the poor children in the time and place setting set by Aw. Even in such a harsh physical setting, the poor children managed to find the harmony in dissonance by scraping by and eating any kind of meat they could get their hands on, especially monitor lizards, where they trapped those animals to sell them for their meat and skin. When the poor children grew up, they were again faced with the harsh reality. When there was no more job around, they were forced to move to someplace else where there would be promising jobs. This is very much congruent with the notion of harmony in dissonance. People are seen as always seeking to create a balance in life to survive when nature produces hardships in their lives. They try to strive for a better living in the face of the adverse physical environment. Here the interconnectedness between human beings and nature is clearly portrayed.

Besides, the extract above also shows that the anti-hero, Johnny, killed someone in his life. It is illustrated in the novel that the difficulties in life, including but not limited to people's physical and verbal abuses toward him at his workplace, made him retaliate in life. When he was suppressed by others and under the work pressure, he chose a way out.

As Jasper continues to describe his father's life, he says:

It was many years before he could find work easily... For a long time, Johnny moved from town to town, village to village, plantation to plantation, never knowing how long he would stay or what he would do next... It was during this period of his life that he experienced his first real contact with communists. It was inevitable. (p. 35)

In the above instance, Johnny turned to the comfort of sleep, food, and money which the communists brought him. That was really all he ever needed at that time of his life. Hence, he became a communist under the pressures posed by the harsh physical environment. He was forced to bow down to the cruelty of nature when his basic needs were not met. Here the instance of establishing harmony in dissonance is clearly highlighted by Aw.

There is also another incident whereby nature is greatly interconnected with human beings as showcased in Tiger's action, who was the original owner of the Tiger Brand Trading Company.

It is as if the work I put into looking after my plants makes me a better man. It makes me feel that I am a good person... and for those few hours that I am in the garden, none of the bad things I have done in my life matter very much; they do not exist in my garden. (p. 52)

The above extract is taken from the conversation between Tiger and Johnny. Tiger somehow interlinked his life with nature. He reasoned that tending to his garden had helped him find peace in his life. This is very much a perfect example of seeking harmony in dissonance.

This kind of instance is also shown in another character in the novel, Peter, who was Johnny's friend. Peter says:

I have put as much detail as possible into the sketch, indicating the approximate sizes of the borders and writing the names of the plants in their respective positions... The creation of paradise is not something I take lightly. (p. 246)

The argument to find and build a paradise, as in a garden, drove him to act strangely. He links his idea of the garden to that of a poem, claiming that both of which "contain a tiny world of beauty, a joyous compression of life" (The Harmony Silk Factory, 2005, p. 246). It is as if the very idea of a perfect garden gave him a perfect sense of bliss whereby his happiness solely relied on the establishment of that garden. This is very much a concrete example of the interconnectedness between human beings and nature. Peter's endeavours continued as he says:

Why don't you people just accept the workings of nature? Some things die, other things live. Predators and prey - it's a long-standing arrangement. Man needs to establish a rapprochement with Mother Nature. (p. 296)

Peter's perseverance and firm belief in his garden were the things that gave him passion as he lived to old age. The opinion that he held onto as outlined above is a very clear example that nature is indeed an active participant in humans' lives as pointed out by Glotfelty and Fromm (1996). Moreover, it is raised in this novel that nature does have an impact on everything, even the tiniest bit of affairs.

Johnny wondered if the weather would affect his plans. He worried that all the little fuses and wires he had prepared might have become damp during the night. Who could have thought of rain at this time of the year? (p. 97)

At this part of the novel, Johnny's scheme of setting the shop on fire was very much dependent on the weather. If the rain ruined the little intricate things that he had set up in the shop, there might not be an explosion or fire. The interdependence between human beings and nature seems indispensable and well-founded.

The monsoons will soon be upon us, and the Japanese will make little progress through Siam in such weather. (p. 137)

The above extract also revealed how nature affects everything humans intend to do. It is suggested that human beings and other living things on earth are always at the mercy of Mother Earth.

Local fishermen do not travel great distances. Their fishing patterns are seasonal and easily affected by weather conditions. They would not venture far from home. (p. 181)

This is yet another example of how humans' lives are inextricably interconnected with nature, especially the physical environment and weather. Everything seems to be affected by nature in one way or another.

Besides, nature also somehow affects one's emotions.

This place is the end... I gasp every time I look at this abomination of nature; even thinking about it makes me shudder... I look out at this barren waste and I weep. (p. 235)

Peter's emotion was greatly affected by the poor garden. Hence, he strove to modify it and build a perfect paradise in his mind. It somehow raises the issue that what one sees in nature will directly or indirectly produce an impact on one's emotions regardless if it is positive or negative. Similarly, one feels happier when they see nice scenery and vice versa.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of Aw's selected novel in the current study has displayed the view that nothing is fixed and orderly. Everything is constantly changing under the works of environment in the midst of chaos. Hence, everyone is bound to spend their lives searching for harmony within dissonance. The main findings of the analysis of the novel reveal that nature does have a close interconnectedness with human beings whereas both entities are mutually affecting each other. The implication of the current study suggests that nature should never be ignored in human history. It is in every way an active actor in humans' lives. The current study also provides some insights into the reading of man's connection to nature. In short, this article only centres around a novel by Aw, marking it the limitation of this study. It is suggested that further studies can be carried out on Aw's three other novels using similar or different approaches.

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