

**Masculinised (American) Eyes, Feminised (Malaysian) Dreams? A Psychoanalytic
Study of Robert Raymer's Collection of Short Stories in *Lovers and Strangers*
*Revisited.***

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My original goal in writing this story (Neighbors) and others in *Lovers and Strangers – Revisited* was to depict Malaysia not from the viewpoint of an outsider, an expat generalizing from a distance, but as a connected-through-marriage insider

(Robert Raymer, *Lovers and Strangers – Revisited*, 2005, p. 12)

Pennsylvania-born Robert Raymer moved to Malaysia more than 20 years ago (1985) and since then has written several stories by using Malaysia, especially Penang, as their major setting. Married to two Malaysians – not simultaneously (his ex-wife was a Malay and his present is a Sarawakian – from East Malaysia) -, Raymer has very impressive and ‘psychedelic’ credentials under his belt, which resonate ostensibly well with some of the stories and people he has written about. Himanshu Bhatt, for instance, opines that ‘[w]ith his keen observations and personal interactions, Raymer went on to write a collection of short stories featuring myriad Malaysian characters’.¹

This book consists of 15 short stories previously published in nine countries (such as *London Magazine* in U.K and *Northern Perspective* in Australia), which for some have gone through numerous editing and rewriting; my major interest here, however, is in scrutinizing some of the stories in this book per se, that is, I would not make any comparison between the present and the previous versions of the same stories. All of the stories deal with different issues in life, but I believe that the apparent leitmotif of the power struggle between ‘lovers and strangers’ works as a palimpsest for something else and that something else is Raymer’s penchant for self-creation, a typical characteristic of an American pursuing his American Dreams. My major concern here is in looking at

¹ ‘Lovers and Strangers Revisited’, *New Sunday Times*, 16 April 2006, p.20

the underlying ideological motifs of Raymer's work, paying particular attention to how its narratological space - his position as a 'connected-through-marriage insider' that he creates between him, his narrators and the characters - helps to illuminate its leitmotif of romantic forlornness and disillusionment. In order to 'strip bare' the writer's psyche, I will be looking at the stories from a psychoanalytical perspective. I would argue that this narratological space is self-conscious, illusory and ironic; instead of creating spatial proximity, it functions as a conduit for imposing his masculine American gaze on the vision of what [he thinks] constitutes Malaysia or Malaysians, especially on the female characters. In order to do that, Raymer has to resort to the construction of these women as the Other, that is, his antithesis that would, in my opinion, ironically, reveal his own sense of insecurity or emasculation. This kind of representation of the local women can be a metaphor for the feminization of Malaysian Dreams itself, allowing the author to put himself on a pedestal while looking down at Malaysians and Malaysia. ...

Although for me the stories contain 'universally transcendental' message - the eternal need for human contact, hence *Lovers and Strangers Revisited* -, Raymer, when he is successful, is clever in depicting local landscapes and domestic *mise-en-scenes* via his usually detached third person points of view, which in effect can sometimes carry an extra ironic freight; the objectivity of the third person narrators' accounts of the events creates a sense of complicity in the reader. In 'Neighbor', for instance, the reader is being made complicit by its almost-accidental role of an eavesdropper. In 'Sister's Room', the reader is put in a vacillating moral position, exacerbated by the story's dramatic irony, to become complicit in pedophilia and family tragedy. Nonetheless, where he is unsuccessful, like in 'The Station Hotel' and 'The Stare', the descriptions seem abysmal

and contrived: 'Standing sentinel, a row of palm trees swayed gently in the breeze' (p.89) and 'Coaxed by a breeze, the leaves of the banana trees scraped against one another' (p. 106), respectively. To a great extent, these stories are American Dreams gone awry, and local landscapes are used as a 'muse' for an American's vision of what Malaysian Dreams should look like. For women readers, likewise, this masculinist vision would remind them the first line in Daphne De Maurier's *Rebecca*, 'Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again'² - indicating a spiral journey downward.

The collection starts with 'On Fridays', which according to Raymer, is 'a metaphor for multiracial Malaysia, where people from various races can live and work in close proximity and in relative harmony' (p.16). How this metaphor comes about is beyond me: a male Malay driver, a male Sikh as the passenger in the front, a bathetic Western 'gazer', a Malay 'damsel in distress' with the mandatory *Mat Salleh's* myopic exoticism that tantamount to eroticism, and her antithesis – a heavysset Indian woman, hardly constitute Malaysia's multiracialism, at least not the one I know of. What the taxi provides is a platform for staging the Western observer's (or the writer's own) sexual sojourn or even '*coitus prolongatus*, in which male orgasm is delayed'.³

The story is laden with male 'sexual imageries' that belittle women, and these are hard to ignore. But like any negative representation of a female character, the 'silver lining' lies in the idea that that kind of representation ironically mirrors the male observer's (sexual) insecurity, struggling with his own sense of alienation and (sexual) urge: '*Oh, why doesn't she just reach out and touch me!*' and 'After struggling to close my umbrella (a phallic symbol), I finally shut the door' – symbolic of his struggle to hide his hard-on

² 1976 (1938), p. 5

³ Charles Rycroft, *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, 1995, p.23

inside his pants! The taxi is gradually modulated into a place brimming with sexual imageries: 'a fan that makes a humming noise as it oscillates back and forth [...] the fog [...] [on] the front shield' (a scene taken straight from a 'literally' steamy sexual scene in a Hollywood soft-porn movie), 'inching closer and closer to the Malay woman', a 'dripping umbrella [...] pressed against my left leg' (again an ubiquitous phallic symbol that keeps reappearing throughout this story), and 'I'm practically sitting on top of her', 'twice the woman and I bump into each other', and so on and so forth.⁴ At the end of the story, the Malay woman 'dominates my painting [...], a way of framing this Malay woman who could have been [his]' (p.24), confirming her status as ultimately the narrator's White male voyeuristic object.

The idea of placing this story as the first in the collection may be personal, but I think the publisher must have picked up the kind of imageries that I saw and immediately took the 'sex sells' marketing strategy for this book. And I don't see anything wrong with that if money is the major driving force for his revisiting these stories. But if this is true, I do believe that this is a very sad strategy as the collection has the potential to offer something substantially bigger and profounder than that.

In the second story in the collection, 'The Future Barrister', for example, Raymer mendaciously positions the narrator as an emotionally detached observer who epitomizes a stranger's romantic forlornness. This strategy, in psychoanalytic sense, I believe, is used by Raymer to avoid any association between him and the main characters, especially the Western narrator. Yet, the narrative technique has backfired. Through the male Indian character, of whom the narrator conveniently named Clark Gable, the story gradually unravels the writer's longing for romantic and human contacts. The subconscious use of a

⁴ Taken throughout the story from pp 19-24.

doppelganger narrative creates a parallelism that allows the Indian lad to be the physical or literal manifestation of the narrator's own romantic disillusionment, that is, not only the longing for his ex-wife, but also the acceptance by local people. Maybe, the Indian character is his evil reincarnated; wishing he should have done to his wife what Clark Gable has done to Sara, i.e. murdering her. This narrative technique, moreover, is the key to the understanding of the characters' psyche - both characters drink to fill up the emptiness in them: 'It was empty, and so was mine' (p.32). There is something fundamentally existential here, which harks back to the stranger's romantic forlornness, his wanting to find meaning in humanity amidst people's desire for money and sex. The conclusion offered is splenetic in tone, revealing the standard 'American romance', which is described by Leslie Fiedler as 'a masculine individualism, living by its wits and avoiding social, economic, and sexual entanglements'.⁵

'Teh-0 in KL', which is the ninth story in the collection, picks up this narrative doubling and the theme of 'American romance'. This time, Raymer is more blatant in his attempt to reinsert his white Americanized masculinity. The story begins with the narrator's description of the female character, Jeya:

Call it a black and white thing, though Jeya isn't black. Not African black. She's Ceylonese, born in Malaysia. Yet her skin is blacker than the night. And she looks beautiful to me.

(p. 83)

The narrator's conversation with Jeya whom he met 'on the first day of a two-day writer's workshop' (p.84), is yoked by their common interest in the opposite color spouses, with Jeya marrying a white English guy and the narrator with a colored Malay wife, and prompted by two scantily dressed white female backpackers entering the

⁵ in *More Than Night*, 1998, p.52

restaurant. The two white women immediately become the focus of the narrator's attention, interweaving his desire for them with his sexually-laden conversation with Jeya. The issue of race and sexual appetite is foregrounded, only to function as a façade for the narrator's male anxiety towards his own physical castration or to a certain extent his heterosexuality. This is the result of him being asked by 'a female Chinese acquaintance': 'Are you circumcised?'(ibid.) His taciturnity in providing the answer to the question is a sign of his refusal to admit his emasculation. The idea that the 'Other' (a woman, colored, Oriental) itself that evokes this castration anxiety extenuates his virility even further. So, the job of the subsequent narrative is to undermine and invalidate the Other's authority and existence, allowing the narrator to in turn feel validated as a white American man. This is achieved in two ways. First, Raymer's strategy is to gradually eliminate Jeya's Otherness. Jeya is made the narrator's sexual object by the occasional punctuating of her exotic hence castrated look throughout the narrative; therefore, she becomes what Lacan suggests as 'the site of jouissance'.⁶ In order to etiolate Jeya's double Otherness (being a woman and colored), Raymer's juxtaposes Jeya's appearance with that of a white girl he used to date back in college: 'Although the woman was white, Jeya looks exactly like her. A twin sister in black skin' (p. 86). This kind of twinning let forth the idea that the narrator is not doubly castrated since the castrating figure is now a 'white' woman. Second, Raymer's subsequent strategy, having undermined and invalidated the Other's authority, is to jettison the female characters, including Jeya, altogether. At the end of the novel, Jeya is no longer insignificant to the narrator and narrative: 'Jeya is saying something, but I am no longer listening' (p.87). The idea of women as invisible is nothing new especially in the theorization of the Other, which has

⁶ Elizabeth Wright, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*, 1992, p.184

to be 'cast as the antithesis'⁷ of a masculine self. This is what Raymer does to Jeya, to position her as antithetical to the narrator, and her repudiation at the end of the story is compulsory and ideologically driven.

The 'Othering' of female characters in Raymer's short stories is very prominent and ubiquitously represented by one single image, in this case, a cockroach. The image of a cockroach appears in three of his stories: 'Symmetry', 'The Station Hotel', and 'Sister's Room'. In 'Symmetry', a little girl's interest in a dead cockroach is symbolic of the author's own voyeuristic obsession with the female body. In my opinion, Raymer consciously aligns his gaze with that of the little girl; therefore, concatenating the girl's inspection of the body of the cockroach with her growing awareness of her own female body and sexuality. Primitive and dead, the cockroach evokes what Julia Kristeva calls 'abjection', which in this case refers to Kristeva's discussion of the human body in relation to her notion of 'the feminine body'.⁸ In the context of the story, 'the feminine body' is therefore seen as 'decayed' and 'contaminated', hence having the effect of a pollutant. Conterminous with that, what Raymer is saying is that 'the [dead] cockroach looks no different from the live cockroaches' (p.65), highlighting the idea that a female body, in effect, is an abject essence. The idea that her brother 'poked her ribs – points and laughs at her' (ibid.) at the end of the story reinforces the idea that the female body is there to be penetrated and poked fun at.

The idea that the feminine body is decayed and contaminated continues in 'The Station Hotel' and 'Sister's Room'. 'The Station Hotel' is a story about a rendezvous of secret lovers, Michele and Lee, at the said hotel. Michele is married but living apart from her

⁷ Helen Haste, *The Sexual Metaphor*, 1993, p.6

⁸ in Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 1994, p.8

husband. Lee is married to a part-time Eurasian model wife, Yolanda, and is having a marital problem. The choice of the place for their rendezvous is jokingly made by Michele as it is the place where her husband and her stayed before their honeymoon to Hong Kong. It is during Michele and Lee's meeting at the hotel that both realize that they are no longer happy to be together. After a hostile day out and dinner, Michele is 'startled by what she thought was a cockroach', and '[a]ll at once she felt exhausted' (p.97). This experience of 'seeing' a cockroach is symptomatic of her awareness of her 'polluted' female body and self, which Lee has realized before she does; consequently 'vetoed her suggestion of taking a bath together' (ibid). Her response upon seeing the cockroach, in my opinion, is indicative of Raymer's vision of female sexuality, in this case of an oriental Other, as causing both mental and physical exhaustions.

In 'Sister's Room', Raymer creates dramatic irony by using a naïve and innocent little girl. 'Sister's Room', as the title suggests, is about a little Indian girl's obsession with her sister's room, without realizing that her sister, the sole breadwinner of the family, gets a special treatment from her almost destitute family so that she can entertain her male customers there. The room, for the little girl, is a place where the family 'treasures [are] hidden' (p.53). In the context of the story, the room is a metaphor for hidden and forbidden female sexuality, and Raymer explores this by equating it with a brothel-like space, signaling his view of female sexuality as something dirty and disgusting. The image of a cockroach that 'seeks refuge beneath the closed door of Sister's room' (p.55) reinforces this very idea. Moreover, the idea that the sister's room is the little girl's obsession evokes the image of female sexuality not only as corrupt and polluted but also predetermined and destined, making this a very dark story. This sense of determinism is

proven, which upon the tragic death of her sister, her father and uncle-cum-pimp 'turn and look at me. They are looking real hard, as if boring a hole through my head' (p. 62).

The leitmotifs of romantic disillusionment and forlornness are directly linked to the notion of emasculation. In the last two stories in the book, 'Dark Blue Thread' and 'Miss Valerie', the narrator's virility is constantly challenged by independent local women. In 'Dark Blue Thread', the narrator, an American, is married to a Malaysian, Salina, and moved to Malaysia. His wife is the sole breadwinner while he is a struggling writer, relying on his wife to provide him with pocket money. At one point of the story, the narrator feels 'like a trophy husband used to impress' (p. 130); and this emasculation consequently results in him feeling suicidal: 'the same knife he had considered slashing his wrists two weeks ago' (p. 133). Raymer employs a certain narrative strategy here in which he constructs his emasculation by deconstructing Salina's femininity. In so doing, Salina is constructed as a *femme fatale* with both excessive femininity and phallic association, creating a clash of images: 'Salina slipped on her black high heels and grabbed an umbrella to ward off the sun' (p. 132). This clash in turns creates a fragmented and destabilized subject, hence her dangerous sexuality and duende.

The same narrative technique is used in 'Miss Valerie', but in this case, the female character is not only the *femme fatale*, but she is also associated with madness. In psychoanalytic sense, the notion madness always refers to the dichotomy of male=normal/female=abnormal schism. This story sets in Singapore where the female character, Valerie, a pan-Asian married woman from Penang, meets up with Glasgow, an American writer. Glasgow is astonished by the uncanny physical resemblance between Valerie and Rebecca, the lady whom he had an affair with and committed suicide, which

according to the narrator, due to his suggestion. Raymer constructs the character of Rebecca as a *femme fatale*, a woman who, even in her death, speaks trouble and fatality. Valerie is then constructed as Rebecca's double, possessing the kind of fatality that Rebecca has. Nonetheless, Raymer is clever in the construction of this narrative doubling, which instead of consigning Valerie to the role of a *femme fatale*, she is made a redeeming figure. Raymer has to resort to this kind of narrative strategy as a way of reclaiming his masculinity, which upon the suicide death of Valerie and the news that she had his baby before her suicide, '[h]is life finally seemed more complete' (p. 156). The two female characters' death is then seen as ideologically driven, hence very necessary for the narrator to claim his masculinity.

The leitmotifs of romantic disillusionment and forlornness run deep in many of the stories in the collection, making this an interestingly dark and bizarrely readable collection (I had goose-bumps while reading the ending of 'Smooth Stones'). Stories like the satirical 'Neighbors', the mystical 'Smooth Stones', the comically dark 'Sister's Room', and to a certain extent, the narcissistic 'Mat Salleh', offer an equally disturbingly honest portrayal of human's obsession with monetary/material belongings. The protean and disparate stories united by two common themes above, which are the strong points of the book, represent Raymer's versatility as a short story writer. His prose is generally simple and direct, giving an almost Orwellian feel to it. What this Orwellian connection also means is that if you are on anti-depressants, you are better off staying away from this collection.

It is within the American mythos that the journey West symbolizes the promised frontier of hopes and dreams, Raymer's journey East is filled with nightmares and

xenophobia, thus undermining the validity of his claim of 'a connected-through-marriage insider'. Raymer aptly quoted Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in the book's preface: 'We live, as we dream – alone,' evoking his existential bitterness, his romantic forlornness and disillusionment. I hope Raymer would one day discover that what happens between lovers and strangers need not have to be bleak and gloomy all the time, i.e. if he cares to remember that the sun, though sets in the West, rises from the East.

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