

Illustrating Childhood: Lat's *Kampung Boy* as a Malaysian Bildungsroman

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Datuk Mohammad Nor Khalid, or rather, Lat, is a well-acclaimed¹ Malaysian cartoonist with 26 volumes of work currently published. His *Kampung Boy* has been turned into a television cartoon series which has been shown on Astro Ria in Malaysia.² Lat began his career as a cartoonist early – he was already publishing cartoons at the tender age of 13. He eventually went on to become an editorial cartoonist for one of the major English newspapers in Malaysia, the *New Straits Times*, and his career flourished from there on. The three volumes of Lat's cartoons selected for study in this chapter were published within a space of about 15 years, with the earliest, *The Kampung Boy* debuting in 1979 and *Kampung Boy: Yesterday and Today* making its appearance in 1993. Together these three volumes focus on the process of growth and maturity of the protagonist, Mat, (a thinly veiled representation of the author himself) from birth to his early adulthood. The first volume to be examined here, *Lat's Kampung Boy*, details the story of Mat's birth and his experience growing up in a small village in Perak near a mining site. The graphic narrative details the significant markers of Mat's life as well as provides visual insight into the nuances of living in a small Malay village back in the 1950s and 1960s. *Town Boy* charts Mat's family's move to Ipoh, a larger town, his teenage years as well as the cultural encounters he experienced which helped shape his identity. *Kampung Boy Yesterday and Today* is the most nostalgic of the three volumes of work – in it Mat's protagonist, now an adult with children of his own, looks back

¹ Lat was awarded his Datukship in 1994 and since then has gone on to win the Fukuoka Asia Culture Prize (2002) as well as the Special Jury Award from the Malaysian Press Institute (2004).

² It must be noted that the televised cartoon version of *Kampung Boy* is set not in the original time frame of the books but rather in so-called contemporary Malaysia. The characters, although drawn in Lat's inimical style, tend to resemble American cartoon character stereotypes. Mat's father, for example, follows the stereotype of the "white working class man," with a couple of Homer Simpson overtones.

from the 90s to the simpler, less complicated life of his childhood in comparison to the kind of modernized, generic, commercialized and isolationist (as in living in one's own electronic cocoon) lives that his children lead.

The graphic narrative is an accessible medium through which children can be introduced to literary works. As John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* comments, "[s]eeing comes before words." He continues, "[t]he child looks and recognizes before it can speak" (7). This pull towards the visual, the ability of the eye to non-verbally identify and decode the connotative meaning of images and the visceral connection between the eye which sees and the "I" who decodes the images, then, is what makes the graphic narrative a popular medium for encouraging children to read. We live in an image saturated and dependent world. Images come at us at high volume and speed. Cultural/media theorist, Sut Jhally in "Image-Based Culture: Advertising and Popular Culture" points out that we are exposed to thousands of images a day, through the media in the form of advertisements, billboards, publicity, infomercials etc in print and electronic media – we have learned to efficiently decode these images, and in many cases to prefer them to words.

Images, as Berger reminds us, are not unmediated – he comments, "[e]very image embodies a way of seeing...The photographer's way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject. The painter's way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas or paper. Yet, although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception and appreciation of an image depends also on our own way of seeing" (10). Every image, thus, is not a transparent window conveying information but is always, already mediated, shaped and framed by the eye of the artist/author and also the eye of the receiver/reader. It is, in essence, always already a re-presentation – a semiotic encoding and decoding that produces meaning. Both the artist's "way of seeing" and the reader's "way of seeing" engage to produce meaning in the image. This aspect of our engagement with the image is important, especially in

our production of meaning when we read imagistic texts like the graphic narrative, where a significant part of the story is told in the graphics. The process of reading a graphic narrative is then, not passive – a mere looking at pictures – but an active “seeing” or perceiving of the nuances of the story through the image. The image often offers a richness and depth of detail that efficiently transcends words. The image does not merely tell a story, or even many stories, but is also open to the discovery of details that provoke curiosity and captivate the attention.

In considering the nature of graphic narratives, Charles Hatfield in “Comic Art, Children’s Literature and the New Comic Studies” comments that early academic studies of graphic narratives (comics and cartoons) considered “that comics at best play a developmental role in the reading life of children, that they are by nature “easy” reading, and that the images in comics function either as crutches or distractions to the novice reader and are of little value in themselves” (364). Hatfield takes umbrage with this view as he considers that “comics can make for dense, complex reading” (364). This complexity of reading arises from the multi-modal nature of graphic narrative. Gayle Whitlock and Anna Poletti in “Self-Regarding Art” point to the levels of density inherent in the act of reading graphic narratives: what needs to be read are “[a]ll elements of line and white space, the plan of gutters and panels, changing perspectives and the strategic use of closeup” (xi) among others. Within the graphic narrative, Whitlock and Poletti claim, “[l]inguistic, audio, visual, gestural and spatial design elements interconnect in ‘co-presence’” (xi). These elements – the visual-literary/image-word are not melted together into one representation but are instead read in tension with each other. Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven in “Graphic Narrative” comment, “graphic narrative offers an intricately layered narrative language—the language of comics—that comprises the verbal, the visual, and the way these two representational modes interact on a page” (767). They continue,

We further understand graphic narrative as hybrid in the following sense: comics is a mass

cultural art form drawing on both high and low art indexes and references; comics is multigeneric, composed, often ingeniously, from widely different genres and subgenres; and, most importantly, comics is constituted in verbal and visual narratives that do not merely synthesize. In comics, the images are not illustrative of the text, but comprise a separate narrative thread that moves forward in time in a different way than the prose text, which also moves the reader forward in time. The medium of comics is cross-discursive because it is composed of verbal and visual narratives that do not simply blend together, creating a unified whole, but rather remain distinct. (769)

Chute and DeKoven make an interesting and important point – the graphics in a graphic narrative “tell” their own story (or even stories) – one that may or may not coincide with the words on the page. The images, read semiotically (and symbolically) are open to multiple non-verbal interpretations both in tandem with and without the text on the page. This idea dispels notions of graphic narrative (or rather comics) as a merging together of literary word and the image. The graphic narrative, as Whitlock insists “[is] not a mere hybrid of graphic arts and prose fiction, but a unique interpretation that transcends both” (968). A valuable manner of thinking about the nature of the graphic novel is presented by Marianne Hirsch – she uses the word “binocularly” to define the process of reading a graphic narrative as it “[asks] us to read back and forth between images and words...[revealing] the visuality and thus the materiality of words and the discursivity and narrativity of images” (qtd in Whitlock “Autographics” 966). This shuttling between image and text makes, as Whitlock points out, “an extraordinary demand on the reader to produce closure” (968) which is intended to “[draw] the passive ‘looker’ into the engagement (and demands) of reading.” The reader becomes, in essence, “a collaborator engaging in an active process of working through (970) what Whitlock calls “the semiotics of sequential art” (970). Reading the graphic narrative, thus, requires active seeing and engagement on the part of the reader to produce meaning, rather than mere passive looking, something that critics of the genre, especially for children,

as indicated earlier, have accused to medium of perpetuating.³ An example of this can clearly be seen in Lat's *Kampung Boy* series.

The visual elements of the *Kampung Boy* graphic narratives convey, with vivid detail the immediacy of the experiences that Lat's protagonist undergoes. The drawings focus attention on all the minutiae that flesh out the story much as description creates and fleshes out the world within a novel. While it is undoubted that the background and universe of the novel can be evocatively created through words, the drawings in the graphic narrative provide a precise and vivid visual impression of the world of the narrative and as such provide the reader with an immediate connection to the world/universe of the narrative. Visual details, lines, shading, gutters, frames and white spaces, fonts and font size provide opportunities for semiotic interpretations can be unpacked and which convey with visceral immediacy the impact of the scene.

A good example that illustrates this point can be found in Mat's recounting of his head-shaving ceremony in *Kampung Boy*. The scene is set within the village/kampung, specifically in front of Mat's father's house. The men and women in attendance are located on separate sides in the picture and the number of men outstrips that of the women. We are given the impression that the head-shaving ceremony is primarily a male function largely due to the much smaller number of women in attendance. Furthermore, the men are depicted as singing both happily and ceremoniously. We are shown both men and women wearing "sarongs" as their primary article of clothing. The drawings clearly indicate both how the sarongs are tied for each gender as well as the patterns associated with these genders - squares and stripes for men and florals, diagonals and other patterns for women. Furthermore, the traditional type of cradle used for babies in the village is also depicted in this drawing - a sarong suspended from the ceiling into which the child is placed and rocked. The placement of the child in this cloth cradle is

³ See Charles Hatfield's article, "Comic Art, Children's Literature and the New Comics Studies."

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also indicated. Also, we see the details of the kampung house which is made of wood and built on stilts. We are also given a clear idea of the architectural structure of the house and the way the windows with wooden shutters are placed over gracefully carved wooden banisters with a very short fringe of a curtain at the top of the each window. We are also given an idea of the height of the house from the ground by Lat's illustration of people leaning against the house's supporting poles and the size of the household items that are stored under the house. A page later the illustration of the communal meal shared by the people who have come to attend the head-shaving ceremony suggests not only the gendered nature of communal interaction but also a tacit separation of the sexes during "public" functions. At the meal, which is served on a mat on the floor around which people sit to eat, only the men are depicted in the drawing, suggesting that are particular customs that govern male-female interactions.

The atmosphere and backdrop of the events transpiring are completely and concisely conveyed through the illustrations. We are brought into the world of the pre-Independence Malay kampung with its strong sense of community and connection with nature. The ambiance and setting with its sense of communal intimacy or "muhibbah," and the sense of liveliness and joy are clearly visually evoked in the graphic drawings. With the graphics/drawings the details can be vividly displayed on the page for the attention of the reader. A perusal of the illustrated page reveals the information at the reader's convenience and attention and pleasure, and often continues to yield interpretative re-readings.

Kampung Boy tells the story of Mat's birth right up to his 10th year of life, covering the important cultural milestones for a Malay boy including his enrollment in religious school to learn to pronounce the Quaranic verses in Arabic, and his circumcision ceremony. It also provides details of his everyday life – playing, going to school, interacting with family, friends and classmates, doing chores and getting up to mischief with the Meor brothers (labeled the troublemakers by Mat's parents), ending finally with his

passing the examinations required for him to be accepted into the boarding school in Ipoh and leaving home. This volume presents insights into the small close-knit Malay village community in which people are well known to each other. Life in the community is presented through the eyes of a growing Mat – at first, the pace of life in the village seems relaxed and rather care-free as he is allowed to run around and play with his friends for most of the day. As he grows older, Mat becomes far more aware of the financial realities experienced by his family and begins to take on more responsibilities – he helps out at the mosque, goes fishing to supplement the family diet and income, guards durian trees to prevent monkeys from stealing the fruit and does some illegal tin panning to earn some money – a move that ended with him being punished by his parents. The illustrations convey the childlike innocence and eventual growing awareness of the protagonist through an often humorous depiction of the events of his life. The comic exaggeration in the scenes where Mat's father chases him around the house and village after he comes home triumphantly bearing his illegally panned tin ore encourages laughter and minimizes the reality of the punishment which will come, highlighting instead the inappropriateness of this form of trying to be responsible in the family. Towards the end, the narrative highlights Mat's increasing awareness that he must become more responsible for his own actions and the outcome of his life and that this responsibility should take more socially appropriate forms – not stealing tin in a get quick rich scheme but rather, looking after the family land and studying hard so that he can further his education in town. By the end of the graphic narrative, the childlike carefree gleeful Mat has begun to grow up into a more observant boy who recognizes that life is more complex than he had thought it previously.

In *Town Boy* Lat's protagonist begins to have closer encounters with non-Malay cultures primarily through his friendship with Frankie, a Chinese boy who attends the same school as he does. Previously in *Kampung Boy*, Mat is shown to be a somewhat solitary child hanging literally on the margins of group

interaction within his small village community of children. *Town Boy* documents Mat's growth into maturity and early adulthood, his development as an artist as well as all the attendant concerns of adolescence like discovering girls and falling in love.

Mat's experience of town life begins with his acceptance into a boarding school in Ipoh at the age of 10. Until his family moves to a low-cost housing scheme near Ipoh, he lives in a hostel while attending school. While Mat in the narrative appears thrilled at the idea of his family becoming townspeople, there is a hidden cost to the move – at the end of *Kampung Boy*, Mat indicates that his family house and surrounding lands would have to be sold to tin miners for the move to take place, suggesting not only the end of village life for Mat and his family but rather the end of the village itself. As such, Mat's family's move to the town implies a clear loss of connection to the communal way of life in the kampung as well as the connection to nature. In *Town Boy*, we see that Mat's family lives in far more isolated circumstances than previously – at 13, Mat's usual companion is his younger brother, whom he escorts around the town as a pastime. He has effectively no real circle of friends as he had had in the village. Nevertheless, Mat manages to make a good friend in Frankie, whose family runs a coffee shop in Ipoh. Through Frankie, Mat is introduced to both a glimpse of life for a Chinese shopkeeping family as well as western culture in the form of rock and roll. A depiction of some of the cultural differences between family life for Malays and Chinese is shown through the illustrations of Mat's family kitchen and the living quarters of Frankie's family above the coffee shop which they run. Mat's family sits on a mat on the floor to have their meals, as is their practice in the kampung while Frankie's family dines downstairs at a table in their shop. Their meal is eaten with chopsticks whereas Mat's family use their hands as has been seen the earlier volume, *Kampung Boy*. The mode of dress is also different – Mat's mother wears a sarong tied in the traditional manner while Frankie's mother wears a samfoo – a traditional Chinese blouse and trousers set. In the exchange in Chinese between Frankie and his mother, and despite it, due

to the details of the drawings, readers are able to gather that Frankie's desire to invite Mat to lunch with his family is thwarted due to cultural and religious differences surrounding food. Mat cannot eat pork as he is Moslem and Chinese food tends to use pork in many of the dishes. Frankie then makes an arrangement with his younger brother to get something for Mat to eat that is non-pork based. It is only later when the two of them are alone, Frankie's younger brother having delivered a "kaya pau"⁴ for Mat, that the two youngsters begin to discuss cultural and religious differences. The tone of the encounter is neutral. Both boys are curious and accepting of cultural differences, treating the situation with some humour. When Mat asks Frankie if there's anything he cannot eat, he replies "Mutton!" Mat goes on to ask, "Why?...Because of religion?" to which Frankie replies, "No, because I cannot tahan the smell..." a response which provokes laughter in the reader.

This encounter unlike much of the rest of the volume, is depicted both in several frames within the page and across several pages. We are compelled to follow the narrative through the frames and pay special attention to the sequencing of both the images and text. The cultural encounter between Mat and Frankie provokes a moment of insight about how the two of them, both good friends, are actually separated by economic, linguistic, cultural and religious differences that are largely premised on racial difference. Racial difference intervenes, in this episode, for the first time in the graphic narrative, as a categorical separator with respect to the idea of identity and community. Frankie's "easy" solution to the problem presented – getting Mat something "safe" and quintessentially Malaysian to eat while he has his own lunch – seems to suggest that while race and religion may create difference, consideration, dialogue about and understanding of this difference can be useful for consolidating inter-race relationships.

⁴ A steamed bun filled with coconut jam

Mat's encounter with rock and roll proves later to be a significant formative influence on his identity. This is clearly depicted initially in the illustration where the boys use a badminton racket, a mop and a broom to lip-sync to the lyrics and simulate guitar-playing much to the consternation of Frankie's family and also later in the narrative when Mat is 17 and attempting to dress in a "cool" fashion. A classic example can be seen in the page where Mat and Frankie "and the boys would go down town to check out the cinemas." All of the boys are depicted wearing sunglasses, some form of black or striped trousers and floral shirts. They are also shown standing with their hands in their pockets with one leg bent and casually crossed at the ankle – the Malaysian version of the epitome of the "cool kids." The influence of western cinema and music (both the James Dean and Elvis looks and body posture) suggests the multiple cultural elements involved in shaping and creating the Malaysian youth identity of the 1960s.

Going briefly back to the depiction of Frankie's living room, it is notable that the decorations and possessions – a record player, American music records, photographs of family members, some traditionally dresses, one with an Elvis haircut and another wearing a colonial outfit suggest the multicultural influences that shape and ultimately influence Frankie's identity. As a child growing up in newly independent Malaya (1957) and then Malaysia after the inclusion of the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak with all of its colonial past and postcolonial present, Frankie as depicted in *Town Boy* highlights the plural nature of the Malaysian individual whose identity is formed by multiple cultural influences beyond the ethnic group to which s/he belongs. Frankie, born in Malaya into a Chinese family, grows up within the Chinese culture, is educated in English at school, is influenced by American music, has a group of multiracial friends and ultimately goes to the United Kingdom for his higher education.

The kind of broadening multicultural influences on identity experienced by Mat and Frankie in *Town Boy* stand in sharp contrast to the influences of globalized culture on Malaysian children's identities as later seen in *Kampung Boy Yesterday and Today* which appear to genericize or collapse differences between cultures by imposing a largely Americanized cultural identity upon the postcolonial multicultural child – creating, as Lat seems to suggest, superficial sameness rather than depth in identity. James Lull in *Culture in the Communication Age* describes what he terms superculture: “superculture refers to a cultural mode that is above other modes, has a higher rank, quality, and abundance than is reflected in other conceptions of culture, and certainly exceeds the norms which typify and limit traditional ways of thinking about culture. Moreover, supercultures are composed in part of symbolic content that is made available by super media” (133). Lull also comments, “Supercultures are customized clusters, grids, and networks of personal relevance – intricate cultural multiplexes that promote self-understanding, belonging, and identity while they grant opportunities for personal growth, pleasure, and social influence” (132). Lull's understanding of superculture is productive and also quite positive as it allows for flexibility in the adoption and adaptation and perpetuation of cultural belonging experienced by individuals. The transformation of the definition of community from small up to and including global largely through shared through media is however double-edged, as the “dynamic interfaces that link and mediate the available cultural spheres” (132-3) and which allow “[p]eople today [to] routinely fuse the near with the far, the traditional with the new, and the relatively unmediated with the multimediated, to create expansive material and discursive worlds that transform life experience and radically reconfigure the meaning of cultural space” (133) could equally find the “traditional” and “relatively unmediated” aspects of a localized cultural life overwhelmed by the expansive nature of globalized culture. This is indeed the subject of Lat's third volume in the *Kampung Boy* series – *Kampung Boy Yesterday and Today*.

Lat's drawings in this volume provide a cogent and critical look at the historical, material and cultural changes that have occurred in Malaysia and the ways in which the shape of the Malaysian childhood experience has changed and been partially subsumed by globalized commercial culture. Lat also highlights the materialism that has come to qualify/signify contemporary childhood where play cannot be accomplished without commodities and where clothing is stylistically generic in its adherence to globalized consumer culture fashions. He contrasts this with the freedom and creativity of his childhood where play was invented out of the imagination and whatever objects were available and accomplished with a group of friends.

In *Kampung Boy Yesterday and Today*, Lat's comparison between life in the 50s and in the 90s reveals a sense of nostalgia for the lack of materialism and the simpler pleasures of his childhood. His graphics also highlight the material changes that have taken place due to the modernization of Malaysia and the stronger contact with globalized consumer culture. The contrast between the spacious kampung house grounds of his childhood (his family house is set against the backdrop of a dusun (orchard) and the jungle) and the cramped terrace house structures of the present overshadowed by future high rise structures that loom ominously over the houses, implicitly suggest that the increasing affluence and progress chased by the country may not necessarily be an unqualified benefit to the individual. It results in a loss of individuality, and a lack of connection to both nature and to the community. The houses are depicted as being crammed together with the neighbours all performing the same actions – all are washing their cars at the same time, like little cookie-cutter people who live generic lives, and all look askance at Lat's protagonist as he introduces his son to the pleasures of one of his long lost childhood activities as though these activities are completely foreign to them.

This sense of loss of individuality and connection to others is further suggested in his depiction of the solitary, disconnected, sedentary entertainment in which his children partake – television and

computer games, where whatever interaction between the children takes place on the screen instead of personally with each other, versus the active hide-and-seek and communal chase games he enjoyed that encouraged close ties with the other kampung children. Both of Mat's children lie on cushions with controls in their hands – their attention is focused exclusively on the screen where all the action and noise is taking place. Furthermore, Lat draws attention to the number of different computer games owned by the children. They do not merely have one, they have many, all of which encourage player-screen engagement rather than personal interaction among the children. Lat moves from this familiar territory for contemporary children to sharply contrast this with the minimalism of his protagonist's childhood drawing us firmly into a past in which we are invited to immerse ourselves through the details of the drawings. As he points out, as a child, "[as a matter of fact [he] had nothing on" (12) and as a very young child played with a wheel on a stick toy that his father had made for him. The detached, disinterested nature of the 90s child is highlighted by Lat's drawing of the children who look off at an angle on the page or who have their eyes closed, not meeting the gaze of the reader. This is sharply contrasted with his depiction of Mat who stands in the centre of the page looking directly at the reader with an expression of surprise on his face. The graphic seems to suggest that it is not only we who "look" actively but also that the protagonist is "looking" and interacting actively with us thus encouraging a more participatory engagement with the graphic narrative.

The games Lat's protagonist, Mat and his friends play in the past are created out of their resourcefulness and inventive spirits. They played hide-and-seek, and duel with long grass/weeds ("kemuncup"); they collected rubber seeds to make "helicopter" propellers that fly; they played with bottle tops and discarded cigarette packs and made their own "gasing" (tops), kites and "rubber-band" pistols. What is apparent from the illustrations of these activities is the sheer enjoyment and glee experienced by the children in their active and inventive play. Their faces are drawn exhibiting almost

exaggerated emotions of determination, happiness, excitement, dismay and surprise. The pleasure and joy derived from these activities seen on the children's faces is contrasted sharply with the blasé expressions on the faces of Lat's protagonist's children in the earlier pages. Furthermore, in the scene where the children in the village play hide-and-seek under the house., Lat's illustration brings to life elements and items of kampung life that are beginning to vanish from the constantly urbanizing and industrializing Malaysian landscape. In this scene the children are featured as running helter skelter around the "lesung kaki" or rather the foot operated mortar for pounding rice to separate the grain from the husk, and ducking under a work table on which sits a hand-woven basket for storing cleaned rice and a hand-woven winnowing tray intended to separate the rice from the chaff once it has been pounded. In the pre-electricity days of kampung life wood was used as fuel for the cooking fire and as such we can see a neatly stacked woodpile located under the house. Contemporarily, most locally produced rice is milled in factories and sold in grocery stores and hyper/supermarkets. The majority of kampungs in Malaysia have easily accessible gas supplies for cooking, and electricity. With the proliferation of cheap factory-produced consumer goods, girls are no longer taught to weave "mengkuang" mats and other household products as they had been in the past. These drawings thus provide a "thick" (as in "thick description") illustration of life as experienced by a child in the 1950s, one that, through the proliferation of detail serves to draw the reader into the experience itself.

The contemporary Malaysian child reading Lat's *Kampung Boy Yesterday and Today* would in fact be drawn into a historical cultural encounter that is simultaneously familiar and defamiliarized through Lat's comparison between the past and present. The child is drawn into the world of the past – the world of Lat's protagonist, Mat, and into the experience of growing up without the overdetermined materialism and mediation of modernization and cultural globalization in Malaysia. The world of childhood past in this volume is intensely, almost exclusively coloured by Malay cultural and village life

although Lat does point to the encounters with western culture through the screening of films in the village. It is interesting to note that even the encounters with Hollywood are strongly shaped through Malaysian cultural practices albeit of the past.⁵ Lat depicts the screening of films at the village as occasional occurrences that are participated in by the entire village. Unlike the silence and solitude encouraged in movie theatres today, viewing films (replete with commercial break) in the village implied communal interaction and engagement with the material shown on screen. Lat's illustrations depict the children getting involved with the whole ceremony of preparing for the projection (watching with wide intent eyes the projectionist handle the projector), responding vocally to the film (screaming as the train approaches the stalled car on the tracks) as well as active adult vocal censorship of scenes considered too explicit for tender eyes (the protagonist's "conservative grandmother" yelling at the children to close their eyes at what appears to be the lead-up to a kissing scene). Here, it is possible to see "the idea of culture as personal orientation and experience and... the dynamic ways that meaningful social interaction, activities, and identities are constructed by people through contemporary modes, codes, and processes of human communication" (Lull 132).

The nostalgia Mat feels for the past and the uncomplicated pleasures of his childhood is especially clear in the last few pages of the volume where, as an adult, he introduces his son to an activity he enjoyed as a young child – being dragged along on a fallen "upih pinang" or a fallen pinang leaf. We witness his son's initial suspicious regard for a play activity that is spontaneous and not commercially packaged with predetermined instructions, and his subsequent great enjoyment once his father starts to drag him along on the leaf. This moment of innocent wholehearted childish glee, overshadowed by the hulking concrete construction of a block of condominiums on one side and penned in by the cramped terrace houses on the other can be read as ambivalent – while there is still

⁵ This exposure to western culture, especially in the form of music and films is more clearly depicted in *Town Boy* through Mat's friendship with Frankie.

room for the traditions of the past to emerge into the present the tight space they appear accorded in rapidly modernizing Malaysia does not suggest that they will persist for long. Mat, after all, can do no more than drag his son in a very small circle around the single pinang tree left in his neighbourhood of concrete.

It is of particular note that *Kampung Boy Yesterday and Today* ends with this instance of ambivalence rather than with parting – first from his family in Kampung Boy and then from Frankie in *Town Boy*, both of which signify moments of growth for the protagonist and his movement to another level of maturity. Mat has already achieved maturity – he needs instead to return to a time of innocence to stave off the cynicism and disillusionment the progress and development in Malaysia has brought. This final scene, which full of motion freezes in some way the last vestiges of the protagonist's innocence, keeping it suspended and offering hope that ugly modernization will not completely destroy all the beauty of the past.

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