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# **An Ecocritical Approach to the Poetry of Ee Tiang Hong**

By:

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# An Ecocritical Approach to the Poetry of Ee Tiang Hong

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In *The Green Studies Reader*, Laurence Coupe writes that the nature of any text has “a double sense: its possible meaning (conscious that ecocritical interpretation is always provisional) and its specific way of referring to the natural world” (253). It is in this double sense that I wish to examine the poetry of Ee Tiang Hong while fully aware that the critical scholarship on Ee’s writing has focused almost exclusively on postcolonial concerns of society and culture and indeed justifiably so. In this essay, I propose that an ecologically inflected reading of Ee’s work sheds light on how, in his verse, issues of identity, nation and nature are not mutually exclusive but are intricately imbricated and enmeshed in each other; furthermore, that the nonhuman world represented in the poetry does not only function as a trope but also addresses the concrete reality of a landscape that is “part of the development, as well as the legacy, of empire” (Hooper 5). The key underlying assumption of this essay is that Ee’s personal, moral, social and political preoccupations do not float amorphously above ground level but bear a visceral and physical connection with place, dwelling and landscape. Lawrence Buell argues that practitioners of environmental criticism have had to “build selectively on poststructuralist theory while resisting the totalizing implications of its linguistic turn and its aftermaths, such that the word-world gets decoupled from the material world to the point of making it impossible to conceive of literary discourse as other than tropology or



linguistic play or ideological formation" (*Future of Environmental Criticism* 10). In the spirit of resisting an exclusive focus on textuality, I suggest that although Ee's "expanse of green" and "golden peninsula" are figurative constructs, an examination of their material links with nature and the sense of place and natural reality which shape these representations is a step toward reconciling the systems/networks of culture with those of the land and redressing the hegemony of culture over nature. Ecocriticism "deconstructs writing about landscape as a political act" (Davis 196); as such, examining how postcolonial writers represent the physical, nonhuman environment and the ecology of their respective universes can reveal the ways in which they negotiate issues of self, society and history. As Keith Sagar explains in the foreword to *Literature and the Crime Against Nature*: "All descriptions of nature are coloured by attitudes, are partly descriptions of the contents of the writer's own psyche projected onto the receptive face of nature. For the scientist this might be a problem; but for the imaginative artist it is the whole point of his art, to strive for a vision which can unify the subjective and the objective, inner and outer". The poetic enterprise is the means by which "the imagination seeks to understand the turmoil of history" (xiv).

In his introduction to Ee Tiang Hong's *Myths for a Wilderness*, Edwin Thumboo discovers in the poetry "an inclusiveness of vision which ensures that even the apparently straightforward nature poems tend to harbour moral comments" and that in poems like "Tembusu" and "To A Shrub", nature "instructs and soothes, is both metaphor and therapy" (*Myths* x). Thumboo's insightful formulation, in my view, hints at the ecological, romantic sensibility of Ee's inclusive vision in which the human world has a direct correlation with the nonhuman and in which nature as instructor and therapist is an



active ministering presence. Thumboo is also probably the first critic to speak of “literary ecology” in the context of commonwealth writing. He considers the writer of the new literatures as being “enveloped by multi-ecosystems” or “multiple literary traditions, each of which is marked by particular linguistic, literary, and aesthetic preoccupations that constitute what can be conveniently called a literary ecology” (“Twin Perspectives” 213). While the literary ecology as explained by Thumboo relates more to the writer’s cultural environment, the concept is remarkably apt in helping to describe the complex network of relationships and interconnections between the various components of a writer’s *total* environment which includes the cultural as well as the natural. I hope to show that in Ee’s poetry, the “crisis of identity, of place and purpose” (Thumboo, *Myths* xiii) is matched on the other side by the ecological crisis. This latter crisis is not only the plausible consequence of the persistent human mastery of the wilderness (which has witnessed the colonial conquest and exploitation of the land), “pushing back an edge of jungle” (“Heeren Street”, *Tranquerah* 52), but also the symptom of a much deeper affliction.

Ee is a seventh-generation Straits Chinese or *Baba*<sup>1</sup> who defines himself as “a true son of the soil”; his sense of a “total self” is grounded in the “*natural* integration of cultures” (“Literature and Liberation” 28; italics added), English, Chinese and Malay. If ecology is defined as the study of the earth as our home, the *Baba* as the son of this earth having traversed “decades of ash and earth” (“Heeren Street, Malacca”, *Myths* 1) is a well-placed ecological model and mediator for a well-regulated ecosystem in which the web of connections and interdependency between self, society and place transcends ethnic differentiations and restrictive nationalist agendas prevalent in Malaysia in the years before he migrated to Australia. Indeed, Ee conceives the word *Baba* itself as “a



piece of the landscape / harmonising the tongues and ways / of home, neighbourhood and school, / mixing, mediating, more than / Chinese or Malay / of both the flesh and blood” (“Heeren Street”, *Tranquerah* 57). The word *Baba* is *naturalized* as “a piece of the landscape” (57) and “being a *baba* / was being Malayan, or Malaysian” (56). Artificial ethnic divisions imposed by the “new order” (“Patriotism”, *Myths* 53) which regards the *Babas* as an immigrant race and Malays as the true “son of the soil” have resulted in the displacement of this piece and the fragmentation of what was once a land and community of interconnected, contiguous elements. Ee calls the *Baba* “the cultural mediator, the exemplar of a natural integration of cultures” (“Literature and Liberation” 28). This mediation entails the negotiation of not only human and cultural bonds (*Baba* culture is a syncretic blend of Chinese, Malay and British cultures) but also the life-sustaining network of linkages between the human species and the natural world. In all this, Ee displays an intuitive awareness of how the ecology of communities works and how the environment is inseparably linked to the social and personal, suggesting that natural and cultural histories are inextricably linked. At various points of the essay, I will also suggest that Ee’s tropical nature becomes the site for negotiating identity for the “son of the soil”. All in all, an ecocentric reading can enhance our appreciation of how Ee viewed and articulated both the metaphorical and material relationship between the human and the nonhuman and how this interaction interrogates colonial and neocolonial frameworks and reevaluates the human place in the postcolonial land.

In the course of this essay, I will be making liberal use of three complex and highly contested keywords: ‘nature’, ‘landscape’ and ‘place’. By ‘nature’, I refer mainly to Kate Soper’s conceptual distinction of nature as a ‘lay’ or ‘surface’ idea:



Employed as a 'lay' or 'surface' concept, as it is in much everyday, literary and theoretical discourse, 'nature' is used in reference to ordinarily observable features of the world: the 'natural' as opposed to the urban or industrial environment ('landscape', 'wilderness', 'countryside', 'rurality'), animals, domestic and wild, the physical body in space and raw materials. This is the nature of immediate experience and aesthetic appreciation; the nature we have destroyed and polluted and are asked to conserve and preserve. (156)

It is safe to characterize nature in Ee's poetry as 'lay' in that it encompasses precisely the external, observable, tangible aspects of the natural world and is often treated as the antithesis of the city and urban areas. In my discussion of Ee's poetry, my position, wherever possible, is to foreground the "extra-discursive reality of nature" (Soper 8) whenever poetic allusions are made to the climate, flora and fauna, and physical landscape. However, this is not an attempt to force all literary references to nature to mean the 'real thing'. Such a reading would obviously be reductive, even untenable. 'Landscape' is another laden concept which eludes definition. The German "Landschaft" means 'created land' or a place that has been shaped by human intervention. In *Poetry, Space, Landscape*, Chris Fitter traces the history of Western nature-sensibility in relation to landscape painting and poetry and interprets the concept of 'landscape' as "the concern for an organized visual field, for localized and circumstantial description, replete with exact optical effects" and "an historically contingent form for the representation of 'nature' "(9). In his study of poetry from European antiquity to seventeenth-century English poetry, Fitter maps the history of landscape-perception and consciousness and asserts that "historically local structures of 'nature-sensibility' " condition the way each painter/poet perceives and is conscious of landscape. He also maintains that each period has its own nature-sensibility "which is always a product of its particular economic structure and its working relations with the earth, its social conditions and formal



thought" (9). In connection to this, Denis Cosgrove observes that landscape is "a way of seeing that has its own history" (1) and that the historical context of landscape is economic, social and ecological. He asserts that "in landscape we are dealing with an ideologically-charged and very complex cultural product" (11). My use of 'landscape' combines Fitter and Cosgrove's ideas with emphasis on the social, political and ecological underpinnings of landscape depiction and how postcolonial poetry can expose the fault lines within the landscape-consciousness of the dominant master-narrative while "reconditioning our perceptual drives, and crystallizing fresh descriptive figures in poetry" (Fitter 9). The third keyword in this essay with its own vast repertoire of meanings is 'place'. In his landmark book, *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell defines 'place' as "perceived or felt space, space humanized, rather than the material world taken on its own terms" (*Environmental Imagination* 253). In his study of self, place and the pathetic fallacy, Neil Evernden proposes that the human attachment to a physical place is parallel to how animals regard their territory. He states that "there appears to be a human phenomenon, similar in some ways to the experience of territoriality, that is described as aesthetic and which is, in effect, a 'sense of place,' a sense of knowing and of being a part of a particular place" (100). He further suggests that the 'sense of place' is rooted in the natural environment and is animistic<sup>2</sup>. In diasporic literatures, such a biocentric definition of 'place' and implied natural belonging may actually go against the grain of issues such as displacement and rootlessness which are emphasized by postcolonial scholars (hence, the seeming irreconcilability of postcolonial criticism and ecocriticism). In any case, it can be argued that the experiences of diaspora and colonialism can really test a writer's ability to evoke the postcolonial sense of place.



As Buell notes in his discussion of American environmental literature: "But for all cultures, the art of bringing to full personal consciousness and articulating a sense of place is arduous, and for new world settler cultures especially so, given the relative shortness of their history in place" (*Environmental Imagination* 257). Extensive borrowings and imported traditions and influences are not uncommon in the invention of place-sense in new world literature and, arguably, especially in Southeast Asian literature in English, considering the linguistic appropriation of the colonial master's tongue. The construction of 'place' is a discursive problematic in postcolonial literature: "The gap which opens between the experience of place and the language available to describe it forms a classic and allpervasive feature of post-colonial texts. This gap occurs . . . for those whose language has been rendered unprivileged by the imposition of the language of a colonizing power" (Ashcroft et al. 9). The postcolonial concern with place and displacement is directly linked with the crisis of identity; postcolonial writings express the "concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place" (Ashcroft et al. 8). In this regard, Yi-Fu Tuan's definition of 'place' refines the whole question of place-sense further: "Place is a center of meaning constructed by experience" (152). Throughout this essay, I tend to conflate and use terms like 'nature', 'landscape' and 'place' interchangeably simply because while they may have their own specific uses, they fall under the broader category of the physical 'environment' and are overlapping concepts.

### **An "expanse of green": Appreciating Ee's Literary Ecology**



In her study of Caribbean literature and the plantation landscape, Helen Tiffin argues that the Caribbean depiction of gardens represents a “re-entry through English or European perceptions to effect the reexamination and revaluation of the local” (201). There are grounds for claiming that Ee enacts this re-entry and revaluation in his engagement with the nonhuman world which ranges from the idea of wilderness to that of garden. Critics have commented on how the image of the wilderness symbolizes Ee’s experience of displacement, political disinheritance and resultant exile. The exilic wilderness is derived from the lapsarian origin story: “After the ejection from Eden, the wilderness is the place of exile” (Garrard 61). Ecofeminist critic Carolyn Merchant argues that “the story of Western civilization since the seventeenth century and its advent on the American continent can be conceptualized as grand narrative of fall and recovery” and that after the banishment of the first couple from orderly garden-paradise to disorderly desert-wilderness, “[h]uman labor would redeem the souls of men and women, while cultivation and domestication would redeem the earthly wilderness” (133-34). The wilderness then is the site for recovery and redemption through human labour which very often translates into the complete human dominion (read: male mastery) over nature. In the eighteenth century, the wilderness also came to be associated with a sublime, Edenic garden:

The Enlightenment idea of progress is rooted in the recovery of the garden lost in the Fall – the bringing of light to the dark world of inchoate nature. . . . The controlling image of Enlightenment is the transformation from desert wilderness to cultivated garden. . . . As a powerful narrative, the idea of recovery functioned as ideology and legitimation for settlement of the New World, while capitalism, science, and technology provided the means of transforming the material world. (Merchant 137)



Some of these concepts of wilderness and garden are present in Ee's poetry, from the cultivated "garden of [his] fancy" ("Reports on Experience", *Myths* 54) to the "darkly creeping *blukar* of oppression" ("For My Son", *Myths* 49). While Ee also approaches the mythic wilderness as a symbolic place of exile and even redemption, nature as a whole becomes the medium through which he interrogates prevailing attitudes towards the nonhuman world in aspiring towards a form of moral/ethical ecology which will bring about justice for all the inhabitants of the "golden peninsula" (*Myths* 1), human beings and nonhuman nature alike.

In the poem "Ownership and Control", Ee links the imperialistic drive to possess and colonize with the drive to commodify nature. The poem is a critique of colonialism and the postcolonial manipulation of nationality by a government determined to re-structure society along communal lines. If the colonial landscape seemed tellingly devoid of human inhabitants in the first stanza, the postcolonial landscape is filled with people but the same drive to own and control persists as the poem broadens its scope to encompass all dwellers of the land, both human and nonhuman:

A thing isn't yours to keep, or occupy, gloat over,  
just because you found it – rock, animal, tree,  
land, strip of water, you name it.

It isn't more yours to tinker at, perpetuate on  
parchment or stone, summon a parliament,  
call out party henchmen, paid mob, police, army,  
or people's court, to defend it.

It isn't the end of the story to have provoked,  
evoked some archaisms – *jura sanguinis, soli, gentium,*  
*naturale*, and all the fuddling distinctions:

prince of the earth, son of the soil, naturalised citizen,  
immigrant, permanent resident, new settler,  
alien, illegal, etc. ("Ownership and Control", *Tranquerah* 33)



Utilitarian attitudes towards nature perceive “rock, animal, tree, / land, strip of water” as objects to be owned and controlled, presumably for the promise of its potential market value as resources for commercial gain (“the bounty of earth” [“Ownership” 33]) echoed also in the poem “Dead End”: “all the mining pools / The latex flowing all year long” (*I of the Many Faces* 24). It can be argued that “Ownership and Control” targets the arrogance of rationalist and colonialist thinking which not only justified “the bringing of light to the dark world of inchoate nature” (Merchant 137) but also perpetuates oppressive and dubious dualisms such as civilized/savage, European/Oriental, Self/Other, human/nonhuman, masculine/feminine and reason/nature. Victor Savage notes that “[c]olonialism, empowered with the new tools of science, technology and the pursuit of progress was seen as an effective vehicle for scientific surveys of *terra incognitae*, exploitation of natural resources, and the expansion of Western civilization and activities” (22). I will venture that, in Ee’s poem, this colonizing dynamic is also manifest in the creation of estranging racial distinctions and a sense of otherness among the inhabitants of the postcolonial land where “prince of the earth, son of the soil” (a direct reference to Malays and Malay dominance in the country) is the privileged term and “others” the inferior term: “reserving for some, all power and privilege, / the pick of the bounty of earth, conferring on / others a piece of paper, (s)crap, leftover cake, / or gingerbread to supplement their dearth” (33). The Latin names used to categorize persons within the country are pointedly redolent of the Latin names used in the scientific classification of flora and fauna. The objectification of nature is linked with the objectification of human beings. In this poem, it is also clear to see that Ee’s sense and vision of community is not restricted to people but embraces “rock, animal, tree, / land,



strip of water”: an extended biotic community as it were. In a non-dichotomized universe, “All men are equal / Under the rain and sun” (“Patriotism”, *Myths* 52). “Ownership and Control” ends with the assertion that “The law that’s becoming is equal, / above all men and nations; / its anthem marches in the hearts of all who need – / to live, each his own way, to love, to give” (*Tranquerah* 33). The ownership of and dominion over human beings as well as nature are based on an ‘unbecoming’, tyrannical law of inequality. Ee’s poetry tacitly addresses the need to resist this legacy of control and exploitation and to reconsider the human relationship with the land and with community, a point which I will take up later.

In the poem above and in many others like “Heeren Street, Malacca”, “Pengkalan Chepa, Kelantan”, “Mood”, “Tranquerah Road” and “A Page from Nature”, it can be said that the material landscape is a recorder of historical and cultural events. One of the things encoded or embodied in Ee’s landscapes is the tension between ‘progress’ as exemplified in the cities and tropical nature which maintains a pervasive presence in the form of mangrove, swamps, marshes, jungle, undergrowth, sea, straits, islands, rocks, monsoon, climate, gardens, plantations, padi fields, vegetation and animal life, right down to that single-cell organism, the amoeba.

They made good progress,  
in no time at all had passed  
the national cliches  
of city, *kampung*, rubber estate,  
and making their way uphill –  
close undergrowth, overhanging ferns,  
tall, trailing creepers, the odour  
of damp and decay, the squeaks  
of an erratic jungle stream . . .  
 (“The Excursion”, *Tranquerah* 5; ellipsis in original)



Here, the depiction of the jungle as a fecund but chaotic wilderness in need of domestication recalls some of the ways in which early Western explorers and colonialists perceived the land. Progress in the age of colonialism was conceived fundamentally as the human control over nature, a control made possible with the aid of science and technology. Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells observes that the “tropical paradise that the European colonizer ultimately secured was the product of human endeavour” (33). Today, arguably, former colonies have assimilated this European legacy by prioritizing progress in the form of agricultural and economic enterprise above conservation. In the poem above, Ee’s comment about how the history of the peninsula has been one systematic conversion of the jungle into “city, *kampung*, rubber estate” is not necessarily anti-progress in tone. There is an unspoken acceptance that, throughout history, humans have been inevitably altering their environment: “It wasn’t a broken axle / or a flat tyre jolted them, / or the sheer, enclosing jungle – / these, after all, they’d expected, / accepted as a fact of life” (5). In fact, as Leong Liew Geok notes, “Ee’s recollection of the Baba landscape is a comment on the *Babas*’ historical role in the establishment of plantations, and service in the colonial administration” (219): “service and loyalty / to state and clansmen, / fruit of those gambier days / and groves of pepper, row after row / *pushing back an edge of jungle*” (“Heeren Street”, *Tranquerah* 52; emphasis added). Nonetheless, Ee also casts a wry eye on “the new landscape” (now a “Business paradise”) which purportedly represents the postcolonial land’s socio-economic aspirations:

Shops and offices,  
 Business paradise,  
 Where Progress, Peace, Prosperity  
 These cars, these buildings symbolise,  
 Where men are ever going places  
 Inspired by enterprise. (“Kuala Lumpur”, *Myths* 5)



In the midst of avid and rapid development, the “dust on a barren ground” (27) in the poem “Arrival”, the “engineer-architect-builder” with “his monuments of sand” (53) in “Developing Societies” and the ironic “Talk of progress, prosperity, harmony” (55) in “Reports on Experience” suggest not only the hollowness of political promises and doubletalk but also a physical wasteland. In “Heeren Street, Malacca”, the titular street “describes / Decades of ash and earth” and “Under antique lanterns / The *Babas*, comfortable on old benches, / Gaze at Fords and Mercedes” (*Myths* 1). In the midst of the decaying street “Reeking cockroach, rat and faeces” the *Babas* long for the luxuries of the new empire of materialism. More significantly, the manic pursuit of progress, power, affluence, status is linked to the increasing separation and alienation between the country and the city, rural and urban:

It's out there  
on the risky margin  
of dry fishing grounds,  
and the caked mud  
of tired padi fields,  
new villages and tapper lines.

And right there, where you are,  
in the heart of the capital city,  
where BMWs, Volvos, Mercedes impress  
on the nation's consciousness. (“Scene”, *Tranquerah* 14)

In “Developing Societies”, Ee ponders on the ethos and fate of a so-called ‘developing’ society and civilization and wonders if the path undertaken by his motherland is the right one:

Sure we need to have doctors,  
Teachers, builders, and all that,  
Else there wouldn't have been  
(Consider also the fate of)  
Borobudor or Angkor Wat.

Trouble is where do we stand



Should the diagnosis be wrong,  
The teacher not prepared to teach,  
And the engineer-architect-builder carry on  
With his monuments of sand? (*Myths* 53)

What Ee ironizes is modernism/progress as a monolithic imperative and the consequences of wrong decisions and policies as well as shallow ideals in the relentless push for development. Angkor Wat, in particular, belongs to an Eastern civilization which had fallen due perhaps to poor water-management resulting in what Jared Diamond describes as ecological suicide or ecocide (6).

Ee does not offer solutions to an impending ecological crisis; neither does he condone a "return to mangrove, sand and mud" ("Heeren Street" *Tranquerah* 54) despite a degree of unease over the prospect of failure. Returning to an 'undeveloped' state would be tantamount to the blatant erasure of history and the misrepresentation of facts perpetrated by those who subscribe to the new political order. The history of the nation is interwoven with the history of the land and the uses put to the land. Demolishing the past is akin to undoing the work done to build up and grow the land:

We know,  
we've learnt how history is created,  
written, rewritten,  
at times made to order,  
the facts, the interpretation.  
We've seen how human, how so fallible  
the motive and the methodology.

Let them rewrite,  
and if they so desire,  
uproot these houses,  
return to mangrove, sand and mud.

Or let them seek the truth,  
sieve fact from dross,  
here where we used to cycle,  
when the street was golden,  
paved with grit,  
and the commitment of our fathers. ("Heeren Street", *Tranquerah* 54)



The “golden” street (and the “golden peninsula” mentioned in an earlier version of this poem in *Myths for a Wilderness*) is an allusion to the myth of the Golden Khersonese: a fabled place of great wealth in the Western imagination. In “Patriotism”, Ee invokes the long history of his forefathers in the land as a history of toil, hardship and sacrifice in the wilderness as they extracted its wealth: “And if there was gold / In the mines and in the jungles / There were also death, hunger and disease” (*Myths* 52). The landscape records this history: “Here in the good old days / The *Babas* paved / A legend on the landscape” (“Heeren Street, Malacca”, *Myths* 1). The verb “paved” connotes stonework and suggests the mastery of the landscape in the form of streets and pavements: “paved with grit, / and the commitment of our fathers” (“Heeren Street”, *Tranquerah* 54). That such a longstanding commitment to the land by the “son of the soil” (“Literature and Liberation” 28) is not recognized (even if the very stones cry out) amounts to a painful betrayal: “They demand / That we accept the new order, / Stomach the reversal of our lot, / Hold our tongue, seal our lips, / Be grateful for what we have got / (The fruits of our toil)” (“Patriotism”, *Myths* 53); and “[We] have no right to want / Islands shimmering with hope and plenty” (“Justice”, *Myths* 51). In “Heeren Street, Malacca”, the speaker laments over the decline of the *Babas* as a community and can only wish nostalgically that their descendants would rise up and initiate another era of glory:

Ah, if only our children  
On the prestige of their pedigree  
Would emulate their fathers,

Blaze another myth,  
Mediating in every wilderness  
Of this golden peninsula. (*Myths* 1)

What these lines suggest is that the history of the nation is the history of the land: a history of human actions in “mediating” the raw materials of the wilderness. Sadly



though, there is a sense that the future is bleak for the *Babas* and that the streets are no longer paved in gold for them. Only neglect and decay (both spiritual and physical) remain, embodied in “tattered lanterns”, “diminished . . . houses” and “dusty . . . carved facades” (“Heeren Street”, *Tranquerah* 52, 53). Nature, the nonhuman character in this blighted and degraded landscape, seems to acknowledge the twilight and “end of golden day”: swallows and kites “shriek” and “[scream]” (52, 53) ominously. Ee’s treatment of these birds is not purely figurative. Swallows and kites are creatures which are also affected by cultural history: swallows who nest in the “obscure eaves” of houses will also be displaced if these human dwellings are razed and kites too as sharers of this habitat will be adversely affected. The “underlying law of community ecology” is namely “that biodiversity is the key to the survival and adaptation of ecosystems” (Bate 258). The *Babas*’ homeland is a complex ecosystem which is endangered and under threat of being rewritten.

Wilderness as a mediated landscape (shaped by a particular type of nature-sensibility) reflects social, economic and ecological realities. It also becomes a filter through which history is understood and lived. In the expanded version of this poem, the lines are altered to: “blaze another myth / across the teasing wilderness / of this golden peninsula” (“Heeren Street”, *Tranquerah* 51). The word “teasing” demonstrates more tellingly how nature is constructed by the poet: in this instance as a landscape which beckons to the beholder in a manner which almost borders on benign mockery. If the meanings of places are constructed by human experiences, then the meaning of this wilderness becomes a property of Ee’s anxiety over the question of identity, home and attachment (if not belonging). In “For My Son”, the anguish of the self-exile is



exteriorized in the form of a wilderness which frustrates and taunts the hapless explorer-cum-mediator *ad infinitum*:

One bright auspicious hour  
You will hear your elders speak  
Of Freedom soaring in the sky,  
And hovering on a cloud, and stirring  
In the leaves of sun-aspiring branches.  
Inspired, you will burn in your passion  
To hack through treacherous swamps  
And the darkly creeping *blukar* of oppression.

.....

So, it will go on and on,  
The flame, the smoulder and the ash,  
Clearing after patient clearing,  
As you cut and criss-cross  
Every hydra creeper of the mind  
Obscuring caves and corners  
Of an elusive wind. (*Myths* 49)

Often, as in the poem above, Ee's landscapes tend to resist the notion of exotic or recovered Edens preferring instead to focus on elements of the tropics which were once deemed enervating and life-threatening to the colonizer such as swamps, *belukar*, "Mosquitoes. Monsoon" ("Pengkalen Chepa", *Myths* 7). Even if tropical nature is exoticized and rhapsodized it is often portrayed as aloof and indifferent to the fantasies, whim and fancy of the human spectator. In "To a Shrub", the "Glorious perennial" namely the seductive *Bougainvillea* is characterized by its sheer indifference and detachment from human longing:

Gay shrub,  
I never tire of your tireless beauty,  
Your beautiful endurance,  
Your crepelike blossoms softer than silk,  
Your odourless indifference.

As in a wild dream  
You flaunt in the heat of sun and sand  
Myriads of crimson lips,



While I gaze at your glory  
With desire, unrequited,  
In this sweltering shade. (*Myths* 19)

In Ee's "apparently straightforward nature poems" (Thumboo x), flora and fauna seem to maintain a dignified, steadfast presence in the face of natural adversities. In "Tembusu", the instructive value of the poem seems to lie in the premise of nature as the agent of its own transformation and preservation. The majestic and resilient organism displays great ability for survival and adaptability and as such "instructs and soothes, is both metaphor and therapy" (x) for the human observer.

See  
how the *tembusu*  
stands –  
upright and stately  
rigid trunk shooting  
above the green  
of common trees.  
And though the elements  
sustain their pressure  
hard on the shoot  
and branches  
down to the root,  
the great tree  
still upholds its versatility,  
safely, conveniently  
turning and twisting  
in every limb  
and fibre,  
and then resumes  
in some quiet hour  
its steadfast  
stature. (*Myths* 16)

Going beyond this, if living organisms can be a source of edification for the human, in "Thoughts in a Garden", Ee seems to disavow the human propensity to make nature a source of one thing or another. In this poem, we encounter the same indifferent nature as in "To a Shrub" but with the crucial difference that the speaker relinquishes the inclination to aestheticize and anthropomorphize nature and instead thinks of nature as



possessing intrinsic value in and of itself, a worth which is not assigned to it by human perception or utilitarian modes of thinking: “How refreshing for a change, / To look upon grass / As grass, / An expanse of green / Irrelevant to any human preoccupation” (*Myths* 26). The restoration of autonomy, substance, validity and agency to nature is also evident in “Nightjar”, when behind the repetitive call of the bird is “the insistence / On *being*, / *Something, somewhere*” (*Myths* 18; my emphases). The “somewhere” is a definitive allusion to place and suggests the bird’s identification with place.

This brings to mind Ee’s attempt to reclaim a relationship with the land when he depicts his sense of self as “a piece of the landscape” (“Heeren Street”, *Tranquerah* 57), a figure which can be read as ‘one with the landscape’. Nevertheless, like the detached leaf buffeted by the wind in “A Page From Nature”, the exiled self is “a fragment” broken off from the landscape and “compelled to leave” (“Tranquerah Road”, *Tranquerah* 66). There is the bleak prospect that intimate contact with or grounded-ness in the landscape results in disillusionment and desolation:

detached  
a leaf  
falls  
yellow sail  
fluttering  
like butterfly  
on brittle wing,  
tacking  
in gusts of air  
driftwood  
on an ocean bare.

a touchdown  
on a long grey tarmac  
keels the *grounded* leaf  
and then a glimpse  
of the stranded hull  
silent  
on a stretch of reef. (“A Page From Nature”, *Myths* 17; italics added)



The title of the poem, "A Page From Nature", suggests that we take a leaf out of nature's book; but what exactly does Ee suggest we learn from nature apart from the painful lesson that arrivals/touchdowns are evidently hazardous? While the "grounded leaf" and "stranded hull" are obvious allusions to the diasporic history of the *Babas* and their subsequent political dispossession in the postcolonial land, what I'd like to focus on is the image of the leaf landing on the "long grey tarmac", the touchdown which "keels the grounded leaf", as well as the pun on "keels", all of which combine to add an interesting dimension to the poem's meaning. The tarmac of a modern airport with its obvious connotations of arrivals and departures is a symbol of nature's vulnerability as modernizing societies proceed to 'tame' and conquer the wilderness. In "Pengkalan Chepa, Kelantan", the speaker's "office overlooks the airport" in a poem which also describes the gradations of human progress (from untouched wilderness to cultivated land) in the preceding lines: "Inland all swamp and padi and a dark green wall / Of coconut palm horizon" (*Myths* 6). In "A Page From Nature", the "stretch of reef" is certainly a compelling environmental icon<sup>3</sup> and reinforces the reality of nature's vulnerability. The choice of these images harks back to an earlier point made in this essay regarding Ee's critique of the human proclivity for ownership and domination over perceived inferior, alien or peripheral bodies. The poem sets up a deliberate parallel between the forces affecting the nonhuman world with those affecting the human even as it can be argued that the journey (before the tarmac landing "keels" it) and fate of the solitary leaf (a fragment of nature) parallel the journey and fate of the persona-poet ("a piece of the landscape"). The leaf is strikingly and poignantly out of *place* on the tarmac



just as the shipwrecked vessel, a metaphor for the displaced Malaysian, is out of place in its environs.

On the whole, although Ee tends to portray the dislocated citizen and his landscape as fragmented memories severed and detached from the land, there is a contradictory impulse to this portrayal. Leonard Jeyam asserts that “the country [Ee] had left behind . . . becomes bitter but meaningful fragments of a landscape lost in memory, sometimes being placed outside time and history” (189). Deploying Bill Ashcroft’s concept of ‘horizontality’, Jeyam argues that Ee’s landscape is severed from its spatial, actual moorings: “In many ways Ee’s sense of history and of ‘place’ speak about what Ashcroft means by a sense of belonging without a real sense of ‘spatial location’ in that the link between the writer’s imagined place and the actual place mentioned are kept apart as he continues to build on his nostalgic longings and on personal, unitary locations of home” (189). On the other hand, I would like to maintain that in spite of the overwhelming intangibility suggested by detached memories of home, in “On a suggestion that I make a song about you”, the speaker compares his sense of place in the land with that of birds in their respective natural habitats: “You are my home and haven after the bright resthouses / Of the heart, as in the heat of day the common sparrow / In the shade of *rambutan*, in the lap of mangrove / The crow coarse-throated at dusk, and the nightjar / Snug in the marshes of your evening” (*Myths* 56). Animals like birds have an acute sense of place or territory, a trait made possible by heightened sensory abilities. The choice of such a simile coupled with the sensuous immediacy of these lines demonstrate that although Ee’s sense of place does seem to stand outside of time and history, the home place/dwelling that he *naturalizes* in his poetry is spatially-bound to a



specific place which in itself has a concrete, extra-discursive reality namely the country of bones, “of both the flesh and blood” (“Heeren Street”, *Tranquerah* 57). In “Nightjar”, the “dull, wooden” knocking of the bird that reverberates through time “Off and on, / For more than a decade” (*Myths* 18) functions almost like a mnemonic device which transports the poet back in time and through space to the wilderness habitat of the bird. Arguably, this wilderness is also the place of his ancestors’ arrival and beginnings in the land, a “misty swamp” where the first note of the bird was heard:

The lonely pendulum beats  
Urging the years  
Back to a misty swamp

When the first single note,  
Crude, tentative,  
Cracked a dumb darkness. (*Myths* 18)

The swamp wilderness of the peninsula is the “somewhere” that the bird’s unwavering vocalizations carry him to: “There is the *insistence* / On being, / Something, *somewhere*” (18; emphases mine). This “somewhere” is the place which preserves the memory and history of the diasporic immigrants and so is closely woven into the poet’s sense of identity, of “being / Something”.

Ee’s postcolonial country is also a country of gardens. In the poem “Thoughts in a Garden”, the garden is a significant theme apart from the thoughts themselves. The garden as the recovered Eden in the colonial imagination is very much a Eurocentric, colonial space; botanic gardens for instance functions as “emblems of imperialist power and Eurocentric culture”. Cynthia Davis contends that “[e]ven aesthetically, [these gardens] contributed to the commodification of the tropical landscape and reinforced the power of the Empire” (196, 197). Having the following thoughts in a garden can be read



as a resistance to the 'othering' and colonizing of tropical nature which extends to the 'othering' / racializing of the peoples who inhabit these tropical landscapes. In this way, the poem turns this legacy of mastery, alienation and control on its head, prompting us to rethink the human place in nature as well as the human relationship with the land and community:

How refreshing for a change,  
To look upon grass  
As grass,  
An expanse of green  
Irrelevant to any human preoccupation,  
Serene

As jade. What relief to forgo  
In the thick of daily  
Human clamour  
The private and the petty  
Grief that would swell into a forum  
Of self-pity,

How crisp those bougainvillaea  
Bracts along slender branches  
Afloat  
Like festoons of brilliant  
Crepe blossoms threaded in space  
Indifferent. (*Myths* 26)

Through his image of "An expanse of green / Irrelevant to any human preoccupation", Ee posits an alternative standpoint on nature, a new nature sensibility or myth for the literal, physical wilderness which challenges the widespread human mastery over nature: a corrective myth by which the "Human clamour" and "Grief" tacitly caused by oppressive, neocolonial socio-political realities might also possibly be assuaged and injustices prevented. There is a sense, however, that this radical, new attitude of respect which forms the basis of an ecologically ethical relationship with the land, while refreshing, is only a fleeting change. In the same poem and almost in the same breath, nature is again idealized as "Serene" and "Indifferent", a human construction which



serves the insatiable human need for relief and tranquility. Just for an invigorating moment though, the poem contemplates a world which forgoes "Human clamour", "The private and the petty / Grief" and "self-pity" instead of a world which assumes that "human life is the central fact of the planet" (Coupe 302). The lines indicate that nature is hardly ever irrelevant to "human preoccupation" in an anthropocentric world.

In "Mood" and "On a suggestion that I make a song about you", Ee turns from the hinterland to coastal environments and seascapes in memorializing the Chinese diaspora of which he is a distant descendant: "The journey is over, / The conflicts, the strains, the trials / Resolved generations ago / In that choice, irrevocable, / To cross the seas" ("Patriotism", *Myths* 52). Mangrove swamps and coastal regions bear historical witness to the arrival of immigrant communities; as such, the poet's diasporic identity is viscerally grounded in this littoral landscape. In "Mood", the vivid natural world imagery evokes and records the memory of that historic landfall: "delta / of thoughts", "dull mangrove roots, / alluvium, mud", "coarse / *ketapang* leaves / hoarse in the breeze", and "streams / croaking for the floods / that will overcome / these banks and these hollows" (*Myths* 20-21). In this poem, the moment of arrival is also the moment of a new beginning as represented by the "longing / for that nucleus of an amoeba, / the fission" (20). The coastal biota includes the single-cell amoeba which to me reflects on the newly-arrived as an organism which starts out with a single cell before splitting, multiplying and developing into a complex being. The symbolism of this biological fission is clear: influenced by its local environment, both cultural and natural, the *Baba* culture developed from its most basic form into a complex entity in the land. The *Baba*, a "son of the soil" ("Literature and Liberation" 28), germinated and evolved in this new habitat.



Nevertheless, ironically, no matter how deeply-rooted the *Baba* is in this landscape, the poem suggests that there is no such thing as an “authentic belonging in the land” (Cilano and DeLoughrey 84). The intractable ebb and flow of the tides seem to expose the fault line between place and belonging:

only the sea  
awakens  
and inspires.  
wave after gentle wave  
a challenge  
creeps on the day’s siesta –  
whispers of sadness from afar  
return, withdraw and return. (“Mood”, *Myths* 20)

The contradiction within the “son of the soil” lies in this paradoxical condition: anchored to place and yet cast adrift in that there is no real belonging to this place. In Ee’s imaginative world, the sea is “that space of migration, flux and change” (Cilano and DeLoughrey 84). He may feel completely at one with the land and sea (“Your straits are my straits as on the horizon / Our hopes at sunrise, and at sunset the hours of our / despair” [“On a suggestion,” *Myths* 56]) but he is also “Marooned on these shores” (“Adrift”, *Myths* 22) as the melancholic image of the “stranded hull” (“A Page From Nature”, *Myths* 17) suggests. Perhaps the lot of the exile is to forever “return, withdraw and return”. In this way, the shoreline and tidal movement of the sea best embodies the exile’s negotiation of identity.

In this essay, I have sought to perform a green reading of Ee’s poetry. By way of a conclusion, I will stress that my reading of nature and nation in Ee’s works is provisional and contingent upon the principles of literary ecology. In the final analysis, Ee’s work proves beyond doubt that nature, landscape and place are contested terrains in more ways than one.



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## ENDNOTES

1. The Straits Chinese men (*Babas*) and women (*Nonyas*) refer to those “born primarily in what was formerly the British-ruled Straits Settlements of Malacca, Penang and Singapore. The origins of the *Babas* are shrouded in speculation owing to the lack of written records, though the first *Baba* community is believed to have been set up in Malacca in the fifteenth- or sixteenth-century through intermarriage between Chinese traders and the local population” (Leong 214).
2. Neil Evernden argues that the Pathetic Fallacy poets are accused of is not as false as it is made out to be in this context: “For once we engage in the extension of the boundary of the self into the ‘environment,’ then of course we imbue it with life and can quite properly regard it as animate – it is animate because we are a part of it. And, following from this, all the metaphorical properties so favored by poets make perfect sense: the Pathetic Fallacy is a fallacy only to the ego clencher. Metaphoric language is an indicator of ‘place’ – an indication that the speaker has a place, feels part of a place” (101).
3. A reef, like a mountain landscape or an ancient rainforest, is not just a natural environment but also a cultural icon: a “human [symbol] . . . [a repository] for values and meanings which can range from the savage to the sacred” (Cronon 20).



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