

## Days of Change

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Chuah Guat Eng. *Days of Change*. Malaysia: Holograms, 2010. 286 pages.  
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*Echoes of Silence*, published in 1994, was Chuah Guat Eng's first novel. It ends with the protagonist, Ah Lian, passing a necklace which featured prominently throughout the novel to Hafiz, a secondary character in the text. Now, Chuah has written a sequel which continues where the first left off.

Her new novel *Days of Change*, however, no longer follows the story of Ah Lian but revolves around the dilemmas of Hafiz, the new protagonist. In light of this change, the aforementioned necklace can now be seen as a symbolic handing over of the narrative to a different character and perspective. Still, the plot development of this novel is familiar as it begins with a mystery that has to be solved through a personal quest, as did the first. Hafiz has lost his memory after mysteriously falling into a ravine and finds, on his return to society, that he has responses towards people and subjects that he cannot explain. Determined to uncover the truth and his memory, he retraces his steps while finding solace in Chinese I-ching hexagrams. What he discovers is far from pleasant and along the way, he has to deal with political manipulation and threats to personal freedom; ultimately, he recognizes the truth that every individual has to come to terms with his own demons in order to achieve any sense of peace.

Chuah steps away from the familiar and expected in this novel in a choice that displays commendable boldness. In the current Malaysian socio-political climate, Chuah's choice to use a Malay male protagonist and narrator is quite a surprise. Though this does carry risks such as the reader questioning whether or not a member of one cultural community can truly tell the story of someone from a different community, Chuah is careful to emphasize that Hafiz faces conflicts that any Malaysian in general could encounter and thus, suggest that race is not the sole discriminator when it comes to living in the Malaysian society. In other words, the central theme of this novel is one that most Malaysians and readers can relate to: a search for belonging and home.

The most intriguing aspect of this work is the novel's structure. Even though the premise of the story is similar to the previous one, where a personal quest or search for truth is used as an avenue to reflect social themes such as acceptance, discrimination and materialism, Chuah divides her chapters according to Chinese I-ching hexagrams even though the protagonist is Malay. Although it seems a little odd to read of a protagonist who relies heavily on the spiritual guidance of another culture, the mixture (forced though it may be) does show how hybrid Malaysian society can be. Rather than fault the lack of believability or explanation for this peculiar combination, the author should be credited for trying to portray how the various cultures in Malaysia may influence each other.

Not only does this novel differ from the first in the choice of a protagonist, it has an added spiritual layer that was not present in *Echoes of Silence*. This added spiritual aspect dominates the protagonist's psyche and thus, the presentation of the novel. While it is seemingly included to add a layer of intrigue and mysticism which ought to reflect how deeply spiritualism is ingrained in Malaysian society, I find that it becomes one of the largest stumbling blocks in my reading of the text instead, for I question its necessity in the novel. The use of popular spiritual myth is slightly too obvious and could have been more subtly treated and approached to bring out its almost subconscious influence on Malaysian society. Perhaps this is due to the style of writing – which is dry and terse yet fluid—that results in a less gripping or mysterious narrative.

However, the choice of setting and a wide variety of characters does make this novel, in most ways “A Malaysian novel” as declared on the cover of the book. Despite the aforementioned shortcomings, Chuah has, in the end, written a readable novel that is ‘Malaysian’ in its scope and concerns. Most admirable of all is that Chuah Guat Eng has written a novel that attempts to break cultural boundaries by showing that regardless of race and culture, Malaysians go through the same struggles and that stereotypes of what and how each culture should be, no longer have a place in our nation.