

Bombs as Potent Reminders of War: A Literary-Historical Study of Negara Brunei Darussalam

Hannah Ho Ming Yit and Frank Dhont

Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Abstract

The Second World War brought devastating tragedy and collective disaster. This experience is often played out in literary works using the dual frames of shock and horror. In Bruneian literature, however, its appearance and representation remains scant and largely muted. Only one Bruneian novel appears to deal with events of World War II within Brunei Darussalam. This paper explores the reticence behind war narratives in literary writings produced in the national language of Brunei. By focusing on an analysis of Muslim Burmat's *Permainan Laut* (2008), the paper examines the complex issues surrounding the articulation of the historical war in Bruneian culture through the use of the literary symbol of the bomb. As such, this paper places its emphasis on the image of the "bomb" – what it connotes and how it is construed. It argues for the silence on this tragic historical memory as a symptom of the peace-keeping culture perpetuated within intimate communities within Brunei. Various significance of the bomb, essentially a piece of war remnant that wrought destructive havoc, is discussed vis-à-vis its treatment in the novel in terms of familial interactions set against the geographical backdrop of the small sovereign nation on the island of Borneo. The literary analysis is paired with the historical perspective and Bruneian context of the war to highlight its impact on society. With recourse to an interdisciplinary literary-historical lens, this paper illuminates the constructions of the past through elided memories and subdued voices of narratives.

Introduction

If culture creates "consoling symbols" (1998, p. 19), as Kirby Farrell articulates, then the bomb that features prominently as the focus of characters' scrutiny in Muslim Burmat's novel *Permainan Laut* is a salient reminder of traumatic war and, more pertinently, marks the efforts to "tame" (Vickroy, 2002, p. 7) painful memories of a traumatic past. In the bomb's silence as it appears as latent in its composed intact state having failed to blow up and disintegrate, the bomb symbolises the quietude, solemnity, and somber post-affairs of war. Amongst the successfully detonated bombs that loudly announce war's arrival, this reticent bomb stands out for its strangely non-threatening dormant presence. Having ensured that it will not suddenly detonate through a resort to military technical experts called upon secretly by the village headman (Burmat, 2008, p. 26), the bomb is announced by the village leader as harmless and yet it becomes a focal point of the memory of the trauma and horror of the World War II experience in Brunei Darussalam.

This paper, subsequently, addresses the cultural means and social methods of Brunei Malays to engage with coping strategies and counter-mechanisms in dealing with a historically destructive past. To this extent, the first author will first argue that Brunei Malay culture presented in Burmat's novel plays a crucial role in contributing to the peaceful and

non-conflicting ways that Brunei Malay characters handle the issue and object of the bomb – both a physical reminder and literary symbol in the novel that points to a collective disaster. The aim is to examine the treatment of the war experience as triggered by the sight of the bomb, which is a central symbol in the novel. The second author, for his part, will explore the historical occurrence and associative meanings of actual bombs discovered in Brunei to examine the collective memory of the war within the Brunei Malay community.

Muslim Burmat – The Bruneian author

Bruneian author Muslim Burmat is a renowned writer whose novel *Permainan Laut* features as his thirteenth work of Malay fictional prose. For his prolific literary contributions, Burmat has gained wide recognition both in Brunei Darussalam and within the Southeast Asian region. Distinguished accolades include the *S.E.A. (Southeast Asian) Write Award* (1996), Nusanatra Literary Award (1999), MASTERA Literary Prize (2001) and Brunei Darussalam’s Literary Figure (2002). This particular novel by Burmat has been hailed as “most challenging” or “*lebih mencabar*” (Dr Mataim, Foreword) for its invitation to its readers to decode a narrativised version of a historical event. It is currently being studied at the national university in Brunei, Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD), under the Malay Literature and English Literature programmes (as part of the Comparative Literature component).

The bomb as a literary symbol

Before considering a literary deconstruction arguing for Brunei Malay culture supporting a mechanism for coping with war’s trauma symbolised in the bomb, it will be helpful to lay out an outline of the novel. *Permainan Laut* is set in a fishing village in the Brunei Bay located in Negara Brunei Darussalam, otherwise known as the sovereign nation of Brunei, the “Abode of Peace”. It is against this village backdrop that events unfold around a single war bomb, which characters have pulled out of the waters of Brunei Bay forty years after the Second World War. At the heart of the novel is a Bruneian Malay family, whose lives are affected by their discovery and possession of this derelict bomb that comes to represent past memories of war-time affliction. The responses of individual characters in the novel triggered by this physical remnant of war demonstrate coping mechanisms, whereby individual trauma is suppressed for the collective benefit, as communal trauma is elided through stifled and isolated experiences of individual survivors.

As Burmat’s novel deals with “the fictional depiction of imagined trauma” (Granofsky, 2012, p. 7) rather than historical trauma, clinical symptoms of trauma identified in history’s records of trauma are absent. Even as the novel refers to a time of the traumatic event of the Second World War, evidence of trauma’s syndrome – as defined by leading trauma critical scholar Cathy Caruth (1995) and the medical-diagnostic organization of the American Psychological Association (1980) – cannot be traced in Burmat’s novel (2008). This is to say that flashbacks and interjected re-livings of a haunted past are not experienced by characters to interrupt their progress forward beyond their past, so as to work a degree of normalcy into their everyday lives. Yet, trauma is no less troped in this work of fiction, as Vickroy (2002, p. 7) readily identifies when she states that trauma is a literary trope as well as a clinical syndrome. Trauma becomes readily apparent in individual characters’ guilt,

sadness, and unease with the atrocious period of unprecedented torture, suffering and fatality during the war. That the novel “deal[s] symbolically with a collective disaster” (Granofsky, 2008, p. 5) illustrates the dominance of the physical bomb, which villagers are preoccupied with as they treat it with an amalgam of trepidation and curiosity. The bomb is identified as a physical weapon of the fighting [“*senjata pemusnah*” (Burmat, 2008, p. 51)] during the Second World War that impacted the Malay communities within the nation, such that it triggers immediate collective memories and also the mediated “post-memory” (Hirsch, 2012) of younger generations.

With trauma troped in the bomb, Burmat’s novel determinedly engages the reactions of both younger and older Bruneian Malays in the village. Associated feelings of dread and attendant anxiety triggered by the sight of the bomb feeds into the traumatic experience of war and adds a reminder of a silenced reality that occurred many years ago. Yet, in spite of the traumatic effects war causes, these are muted and negotiated through Brunei Malay culture. In other words, the collective urge is to pacify the threatening image of the bomb and ignore the deeper reality it represents for Bruneian society. As a result, most villagers are seen to distance themselves from the war bomb. Notably, for one survivor, Taha, his determination to preserve the bomb in its close proximity marks his trauma. For him, the bomb functions as a symbol of consolation, in the way it aids in deflecting from the physical event of the war itself even whilst painful memories are accessed through it. As such, the bomb functions as a “*Lieu de Mémoire*” (Site of Memory) (Nora, 1996), as argued by Pierre Nora in his studies on objects and locations that evoke memories. In the words of Nora, such objects act as poignant symbols “where[in] memory crystallizes and secrets itself” (1989, p. 7). In short, the literary symbol of the bomb stands for the traumatic memories of war. These memories are handled in a subdued manner facilitated by the Brunei Malay culture of avoiding confrontations.

Muting social unease – Brunei Malay traditional culture of non-conflict

In the way that the bomb brings into focus the Second World War for the Bruneian villagers, it is far from being a silent reminder of the war despite its currently deactivated state. In fact, the bomb loudly announces the past of the war to the present community. It is the handling of this bomb that differs between the community and individual, with an individual survivor’s trauma palpable just as it is conveniently cast as a case in isolation and its stories suppressed for a larger collective benefit. And so, even as this physical reminder of the war permeates into everyday consciousness, the collective trauma – as theorized by Dominick LaCapra (2000) when extending Caruth’s initial concept of individualised trauma – is largely muted in the novel. In other words, characters’ reactions to trauma are informed by their culture and the norms of their people. In the novel, characters think back to a time when they recount second-hand stories about the disease and fatalities suffered in neighboring villages rather than confronting any immediate destruction in their own village (Burmat, 2008, p. 45). In this way, the community deals with painful memories of war in a removed or detached manner, as it is primarily mediated. On the other hand, survivors are seen actively trying to forget this time of destruction. Apart from Taha, his wife Minah’s emotional exclamation in her response to war’s killing of innocent civilians [“*Membunuh orang yang tidak berdosa!*” (Burmat, 2008, p. 92)] testifies to her disgust that eventually leads to her unwillingness to

talk about it any further. Additionally, the novel alludes to war veterans' traumatic wounds, identifiable as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicidal thoughts to which they are prone (Burmat, 2008, p. 94). In added attempts to do away with what is fundamentally a grim history [*"sejarah kemuraman"* (Burmat, 2008, p. 43)] of the Second World War, Bruneian Malay attitudes of peace-promotion (*Borneo Bulletin*, 2002) and their non-confrontational means (Hussainmiya, 2006) reinforce the private handling of the war, which serves to suppress the overall, collective and social responses to war.

Subsequently, the muted manner in which the bomb is treated by villagers is a salient indication of the social culture of the local Malay people. The peace-loving terms upon which Brunei Malay culture is founded are shaped by intricate values of tradition, including social customs and communal rituals that strengthen amicable ties amongst Brunei Malays (Haji Aziz Umar, 1992). The community's efforts to renovate a local mosque is an example of an attempt at peaceful means of a collaborative life of (religious) harmony fostered by Brunei Malays (Burmat, 2008, pp. 14–16). The Malay fishing village is also announced as a quiet and serene community [*"kampong nelayan yang aman dan damai"* (Burmat, 2008, p. 73)] imbued with a spirit of cooperative unity [*"Kita hidup mesti bertolong-tolongan"* (Burmat, 2008, p. 188)]. Even as the war is indubitably a source of painful trauma, the visceral effects are predominantly silenced by Brunei Malays. With Taha's loss of sleep [*"kurang nyenyek tidur"* (Burmat, 2008, p. 52)] that indicates his deep awareness of the bomb's symbolic threat to the serenity of the village, the bomb's destructive potential [*"kemusnahan"* (Burmat, 2008, p. 50)] is contemporaneously suppressed from emerging to the fore as villagers dismiss it as an old, rusty, and useless piece of metal [*"besi buruk sebenarnya"* (Burmat, 2008, p. 51)]. Such "[spatial] distance" (Granofsky, 2012, p. 6) Brunei Malays position between the bomb and themselves speaks of the way war memories are – as best as possible – relegated to the past, as Brunei Malay culture actively promulgates an ethos that highlights a conciliatory way-of-life in the "Abode of Peace" (read within the national descriptor "Darussalam"). In other words, the "space" that survivors and post-generations consciously place between themselves and the traumatic experience/event is fostered by a communal spirit of, and love for, peace at large. As one scholar explains, "The Brunei Malay mindset is to cooperate or defer rather than to confront" (Black, 2011: 323), thus illustrating the safe distance Brunei Malays position between themselves and disconcerting, uncomfortable, and problematic issues. Therefore, as a result of cultural reactions to the bomb, physical and emotional detachment are sought by Brunei Malay villagers who are uncomfortable with its physical presence [*"Nanti orang takut datang ke mari kerana melihat bom tersandar di pantaran,"* ("Folks will become scared and uneasy to see a bomb lying on the platform,") (Burmat, 2008, p. 124)]. For others, they also wish that the bomb will serve as a quiet and private rather than loud and communal reminder of the past. In fact, with the deactivation of the bomb kept a secret from the community [*"Dan cerita mematikan bom itu pun dirahsiakan"* (Burmat, 2008, p. 26)], the reduced threat of the bomb that should have been communicated to the villagers illustrates a general silence that prevails about the bomb. Furthermore, that the important process of neutralising the bomb's threat is kept from villagers signifies a conscious decision to suppress any news and updates of the bomb in public. The village headman's choice of silence clearly instantiates the way memories of war are not really dealt with, and are still very much "live" as the trauma may resurface at any time from its latent period of suppression. Hence, the headman's action (or rather non-action) displays the way he is in tune with the rest of the Brunei Malay community

in not talking about the bomb within the community, even as the “silencing” of the bomb via its deactivation may have provided comfort to villagers rather than cause alarm. In short, such passive reaction exemplifies the physical and mental distance desired from this *lieu de memoire*, as well as from the bomb’s attendant meanings of physical and psychological trauma (in terms of the wound, or injury).

Here, the peace-keeping model testifies to a social and cultural construction that is in place to help war survivors in the community suppress their memories and repress their painful experiences. In this way, trauma is muted through social mechanisms that are intricately undergirded and underscored by the Brunei Malay culture-at-large. Even if trauma necessarily entails unsolicited confrontation with “repetitive seeing” (Caruth, 1996, p. 94), which is testified by Taha’s nightmare (Burmat, 2008, p. 219) about the war, the amicable manner Brunei Malays deal with their traumatic memories of the war is attributed to Brunei Malay culture that “prefer[s] more consensual modes of addressing dispute resolution” (Black, 2011, p. 323). Brunei’s peace-reinforcing measures have, thus, been termed the “Malay factor” (Black, 2011, p. 323), arguably serving a prominent role in alleviating war’s destructive effects to maintain peaceful relations in the village. Notably, Burmat mentions no legal implications in his novel as no recompense is sought by villagers for damages and deaths. Hence, Brunei Malays are seen to deal with the memory (and post-memory) of the war by casting it aside or dealing with it privately (as in Taha and Minah’s case, Burmat, 2008, p. 92), so no social unrest may result in a public instantiation of demonstrable feelings of the war.

Unregistered Trauma – Bomb’s significance across generations

Burmat registers the varying responses of Bruneian villagers, as the bomb is received in juxtaposed ways by various generations – the old (survivors) and young (post-generation). Conflicting responses suggest the different levels of trauma: subdued in older folks, and seemingly non-traceable in younger villagers. Older survivors react in a way that recalls their sympathetic attachment to, yet desired detachment from, the war. Conversely, the post-generation, which Marianne Hirsch (2012) defines as younger generations born after the traumatic event, are unwilling to retain the bomb as a keepsake, having themselves no direct possession of memories with which to associate. In the novel, children stay clear of the bomb whilst the naughtier ones treat it as a source of amusement. Younger adults also frivolously speak about selling it off for its metal scraps (Burmat, 2008, p. 29). In contrast to youths, the older villagers who survived the war are keen to forget the painful past of suffering and death – “*Orang-orang tua ramai yang mau melupakan zaman perang, zaman semua manusia hidup sengsara dan ramai pula menemui ajal*” [“Most older folks wish to forget the wartime, a time of gross torment when many met their fatal end,” (Burmat, 2008, p. 29)].

Yet, the exception is Taha who desires that memories of the war not be forgotten, which points to his private attempt to deal with the past. Upon his sons’ discovery of the bomb, Taha announces that the bomb should not be removed from the village as it serves as a timely reminder of the past war – “*Itu menjadi peringatan kita dengan perang yang lalu*” (Burmat, 2008, p. 25). Taha is adamant about retaining the bomb so that he can contemplate it every day and be privately reminded of the past [“ *mungkin bapa mau melihat lama-lama setiap hari*” (Burmat, 2008, p. 51)]. Memory, here, is directly connected to the object (Nora, 1989, p. 9). The bomb is powerful as it represents psychological trauma, yet also war memories of

survivors. Additionally, the other villagers' reactions signify the bomb as a symbolic threat, via its awkward displacement as a source of entertainment for children and entrepreneurial opportunity for young adults (Burmat, 2008, p. 29). Even as the physical threat of the bomb is downplayed by peace-loving villagers, its presence points to their thoughts of the collective and individual memories of the war retained by survivors, including Taha who struggles to come to terms with the painful history of cruelty [*"kezaliman"*] (Burmat, 2008, p. 42) that affects villagers and neighboring villagers. The Malay collective outweighs the individual's need to deal with the trauma, and therefore the object symbolising this trauma is regarded as unwelcome in society.

Taha's affinity towards, yet simultaneous distaste of, the bomb marks his ambivalence with trauma's belatedness. He brings the destructive weapon of the bomb [*"senjata pemusnah"*] (Burmat, 2008, p. 51) to his own heightened attention, when declaring that he has purposely chosen to place the bomb in plain sight to serve as his own reminder of collective suffering: "*Bom itu sengahaja ditaruh di sana untuk manyambung ingatanku kepada suatu masa semua orang merasa sengsara*" ("...to recall my memories,...," Burmat, 2008, p. 45). The bomb, in Taha's present time, thus bears both attractive and repulsive forces. Upon instructing his sons to situate the bomb on the platform (*"pantaran"*), where children tend to play and men from the village push out (and pull in) their boats, Taha shows his awareness that the bomb serves as an aide-memoire of the war that struck the community. As a survivor, Taha does not easily forget the war. His purposeful attention to the suffering of war that witnessed attacks on Bruneian villagers (Burmat, 2008, p. 51) recalls an unpleasant and tragic time that exposes the internal scars he carries. In this sense, Taha's failure to cauterise his psychic wound can be read as his belated perpetuation of the unregistered shock associated with war's trauma, since he retains a war remnant that others have quickly viewed with disregard (Burmat, 2008, pp. 28–29).

Consequently, Taha's traumatic feelings attached to the physical sight of the bomb works on a deeply unconscious level. His nightmare is one instantiation of the unconscious workings of traumatic memory. It violently intrudes into his sleep, thus exemplifying the repressed and unregistered emotions harboured about wartime experience. Concomitantly, his troubled sleep makes apparent Taha's guilt of survival associated with the war. In the dead of the night, Taha wakes up screaming and thrashing, hence disturbing and rousing the entire household. Having dreamt himself as a soldier who perversely commits killings against his fellow Brunei Malay villagers (Burmat, 2008, p. 219), Taha shows himself to be troubled by the day-time sighting of the bomb, which has triggered latent feelings of regret, sadness and guilt. As Caruth writes, trauma may be identified as "the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (1996, p. 94). Interestingly, Taha's guilt of survival is translated and transposed into the murderer's guilt, with the two roles aligned closely in his frightening account of imagined complicity. This eerie modulation of the past during an unconscious stage of sleep suggests suppressed thoughts and repressed emotions – characterising the traumatic condition – that surface during the unconscious state. Even as Taha's nightmare lacks the true sense of a traumatic re-awakening, to adopt Freud's term, it causes a moment of temporary fright and shock to Taha and his family, who are rudely awakened. Freud states, "Dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of bringing the patient back into the situation of the accident, a situation *in which he wakes up in another fright*" (in Caruth, 1996, p. 66, original emphasis).

Hence, Taha's nightmarish revelation speaks of a trauma unregistered, proving itself latent but very much present in the aftermath. It is not just the "incomprehensibility of survival" (Caruth, 1996, p. 66) that plagues his nightmare, it is the perversion of the survivor's role into a culpable murderer in the war zone that serves as an augmented form of traumatic shock for Taha.

The bomb, subsequently, stands for the physical war itself. In this way, the villagers' treatment of the bomb is suggestive of their private management of a past event. In other words, the bomb becomes a medium for dealing with the war indirectly. As both young and older villagers are unable and unwilling to deal with the war directly, they use their private responses to the bomb as a way to dissociate themselves from war's traumatic consequences. The way villagers handle the bomb – banging on it rather than talking about it, for instance – is emblematic of the cultural milieu that muffles social responses as individuals eventually deal with the past by tackling it themselves, such as Taha's crashing of his psyche in his nightmare about the war. Taking into account Granofsky's contention that the literary symbol imposes itself between the reader and thing symbolised (2008, p. 6), readers of Burmat's novel thus hear about the war through such mediated means of the literary symbol of the bomb, which poses itself between the external reader (as post-generation) and war (as unregistered trauma).

From fiction to reality: The bomb as an object of memory, trauma, and symbol of the subdued Bruneian war history

The novel is, of course, a work of fictional prowess by one of Brunei's foremost acclaimed authors Muslim Burmat. In the novel, the bomb that becomes the symbol of the war and the trauma of war is dropped by a Japanese aviator. Muslim Burmat also touches on Japanese memories of war (Moriyama, 2011) through the story of this aviator and his ward Yoko who comes to Brunei. For Bruneians, the bomb in the novel carries great importance as a symbol for the history behind it and what it represents. The bomb represents the past history and, as was shown above, people react to it in various ways. The object has meaning attached to it, thus possessing a representative function as a marker of the trauma and war experiences in Brunei.

The will to remember is attached to the bomb and the history behind what it represents are both present for the people who see the object. This association makes the object a site of memory (Nora, 1989, p. 19). The memory and the act of remembering are extremely important, but so is the story or the history behind the object. The actual experience also stresses the tension between the individual and the collective. Trauma experienced by an individual produces a different memory than the general image that the collective community attaches to the war experience or the image the younger generation attaches to this past historical event. Therefore, it is important to examine the actual historical record of Brunei during World War II and explore the degree to which this history has been encapsulated in Burmat's novel. It is clear from the novel that the war experiences and trauma are rarely addressed directly. One can experience glimpses of Brunei Malay society's dilemma with history in the novel (Burmat, 2008, pp. 226–227), especially through relayed expressions of the vagueness or non-specificity of the war experience. As the narrator recounts, "*Cerita itu [tentang pembunuhan, penderitaan dan penyakit] terlalu kabur bagi mereka. [...] Apa pun yang mau dikatakan tentangnya kesannya tidak akan dapat berubah*

lagi” (“Stories [of murder, suffering and disease] were nebulous to them. [...] Furthermore, speaking about these historical experiences will not change the outcome and consequences,”) (Burmat, 2008, p. 226).

Not only is the individual confronted with a traumatic memory, but this narrative also shows that Muslim Burmat as a Bruneian knows the story behind the war, as it has become part of the history of Brunei and has been represented in history. In the novel, Taha and his wife Minah do not wish to talk about the history of the Japanese occupation during the war, partly because of the presence of the Japanese girl Yoko who has come to live in their house. Such a dilemma clearly instantiates the difficulties of the war history and Brunei Malay culture of quietly and individually addressing the trauma of the past.

The bomb as a symbol within Burmat’s narrative is very well chosen as illustrated by several news sources. Bruneians are regularly reminded of the war, as this find in 1961 shows when a bomb was discovered in Muara (*Pelita Brunei*, 1961, p. 1). The bomb is a reminder of the Japanese occupation of Brunei and acts as a memory for multiple generations of Bruneians, as illustrated by these newspaper articles from 2015 where 27 unexploded bombs were again found in Brunei (*Pelita Brunei*, 2015; *Borneo Bulletin*, 2015). Even in the sea, many mines were dropped during World War II. The American shipwreck USS Salute that sank in the Bay of Brunei and remains there today was struck by such a mine after clearing 143 mines itself (*Borneo Bulletin*, 2016). As such, the bomb serves as a very powerful metaphor and reminder of the war experiences and the trauma of the war. There is present a seemingly non-existent and invisible lurking object under the surface, until society is once again startled by its appearance from generations of Bruneians in the past up to the current generation of Bruneians.

The war’s historical record

Contrary to the story in Burmat’s novel, almost all bombs were dropped by Allied airplanes or as shells fired from Allied ships in order to weaken the Japanese defenses before the Allied landing to liberate Brunei from the Japanese began in June 1945. Actual bombing and reconnaissance missions over Borneo became easier when the Allies had captured the island of Morotai east of Sulawesi in September 1944 (Reece, 1998, p. 174). The actual bombing intensified after the Australians had landed in Tarakan on 1 May 1945 as well as Labuan and Muara when air strikes and naval bombardment preceded the operation (Reece, 1998, p. 176).

A brief sketch of the Japanese Occupation of Brunei as depicted in *Brunei* clarifies the general context of World War II and the Japanese occupation in the novel. When the Japanese joined World War II, the war had already been raging in Europe past its initiation through the German invasion of Poland in 1939. Japan itself had also, however, been at war with China since 1937. It became engulfed in the war conflict specifically when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on 8 December 1941. Starving for oil resources Japan immediately attacked the Brunei region and, on 16 December 1941, 10,000 Japanese troops landed in Seria where they captured the Bruneian oil resources (Sabihah Osman et al., 1995, p. 95). The Sultan of Brunei Ahmad Tajuddin surrendered power to the Japanese on 22 December 1941 when the Japanese had made their way to Brunei town (Sabihah Osman et al., 1995, p. 95).

The actual fight was very brief as the British were totally understaffed and underequipped to defend Brunei as well as the whole of British controlled Borneo against the Japanese. From then on, Brunei would be ruled by the Japanese. Initially, there were enough food supplies in Brunei but it was only towards the end of the Japanese rule that shortages occurred (Sabihah Osman et al., 1995, p. 97). The Japanese and even Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin pushed the Bruneians to grow food in order to address these shortages (Sabihah Osman et al., 1995, p. 98). When inflation set in, the Japanese introduced currency became worth much less and only on the black market were rare items such as food and clothes still to be found (Sabihah Osman et al., 1995, p. 99). The era was that of tremendous hardship and, as Japan could not address these problems, the Bruneians began to dislike the Japanese. The Japanese were ready to use violence if they felt they were not respected by Bruneians, and this threat made them even more disliked. In Brunei, however, the experiences were not as bad as in Sabah or Sarawak as there was still enough food (Sabihah Osman et al., 1995, p. 105). It was only in the final year of the Japanese occupation 1944–1945 that the situation worsened and increased Bruneian dislike for Japan. Many Bruneians moved into the interior and Allied forces began bombing Brunei (Sabihah Osman et al., 1995, p. 106).

The Allied bombing destroyed many social facilities for the population as well as hospitals, offices, shops, Kampung Ayer and the British residency on Jalan Residency (Sabihah Osman et al., 1995, p. 106). On 10 June 1945, the Australians landed and liberated Brunei after landing in Labuan on 9 June 1945 (Sabihah Osman et al., 1995, p. 105). Overall, the Bruneian records on the war are relatively muted. The stories of victimisation are very unclear and Brunei is even considered not to have been the hardest hit. Other historical accounts do show that there was individual suffering. T.S. Monks, who arrived as British administrator with the Australian forces to Brunei during the landing and stayed after the war, states that during his time he had to prosecute collaborators who had tortured people in Limbang. Monks writes, “Witnesses told of how Salim had brought them to the Japanese torture room and how Salim had been a vicious torturer, not just obeying orders from the Japanese, but enjoying his power. He made an impassioned plea from the dock for mercy, claiming that like hundreds of others during the Japanese regime he had only been doing the job forced on him” (1992, p. 115). The Japanese secret police had also tortured Bruneians and used informants to spy for them (Monks, 1992, p. 68). He also related how the Dayak killed many Japanese near the end of the war and how the British found many sick and dying Javanese in Brunei when they arrived (Monks, 1992, pp. 147-148).

The history of the Japanese occupation as a narrative leaves much unsaid and, even as perhaps understood by the older generations, it is lost to those who did not witness or experience the trauma of World War II. As the case with Burmat’s novel, a lot about the war is muted. Recently, however, individual memories have been uncovered and added to the historical record under the form of oral history.

Reflections on the collective Bruneian memory of the war and individual Brunei victimisation

As bombs are regularly found in Brunei up to this present day, thus compelling Bruneians to remember World War II and the Japanese occupation of Brunei during the war, it is important to address the impact of the Japanese Occupation and World War II on Bruneian

society from a historical point of view beyond the reflection that Muslim Burmat already hinted at in his novel. *Memoir Seorang Negarawan* commemorating the experiences of the ruler of Brunei Sultan Haji Omar ‘Ali Saifuddien III has one chapter with the title “*Penderitaan dan Kesengsaraan*” (suffering and hardship) (Muhammad Hadi Muhammad Melayong, 2009, pp. 54–63). This chapter deals with the Japanese occupation as experienced by then Pengiran Muda Omar ‘Ali Saifuddien, who was the younger brother of Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin. The title itself readily sets the tone for the Bruneian war experience of World War II, as it alludes to clear negative consequences. Historically, it was towards the end of the war that the inhabitants of Kampung Ayer ran and hid in the interior of Brunei as they feared Allied bombing (Muhammad Hadi Muhammad Melayong, 2009, p. 57). The pictures in the chapter also make the fear, trauma and horror clear. In two pictures, smoke rises from a bomb that just hit Bandar Town with the comments: “*Bandar Brunei dan Kampong Ayer yang musnah akibat pengeboman Tentera Berika*” and “*Bandar Brunei musnah akibat Perang Dunia Kedua,*” which refer directly to the destructive havoc caused by the bombings. Other pictures show Australian soldiers who inspect the destruction of the area in Bandar Town as well as one barefoot, loincloth-clad, skinny Bruneian boy in the midst of this destruction (Muhammad Hadi Muhammad Melayong, 2009, p. 57).

Hadi’s book is, therefore, illustrative of the experiences of the Bruneian society: “*Semua lapisan masyarakat mengalami kesengsaraan dan penderitaan yang dilalui sepanjang tiga tahun lebih yang melibatkan tekanan jiwa, mental serta fizikal akibat daripada dasar kuku besi pemerintahan tentera Jepun itu. Kenyataannya gambaran hidup sentiasa dalam ketakutan, buruk sangka, kemiskinan, kelaparan dan kesusahan [...]*” (“Every walk of society experienced suffering and sadness for three years or more, which caused mental and physical stress, under the iron fist rule of the Japanese. The reality was a life of fear, misfortune, poverty, starvation and hardship”) (Muhammad Hadi Muhammad Melayong, 2009, p. 63). Testimonies of ordinary Bruneians have also been recorded and they echo the message above: “The British army [...] used planes to drop bombs. All the houses and shops in Bandar were destroyed” (Maslin Jukim et al., forthcoming 2017, p. 33). The Allies actually dropped messages to warn the Bruneians of the bombing that would take place (Maslin Jukim et al., forthcoming 2017, p. 31). These stories again depict how the Japanese administration controlled Bruneian society. Bruneian witnesses of the era describe the hardships suffered under harsh Japanese rule, the shortages of food and clothing, and a devastating fear of getting killed by the bombing towards the end of the war (Maslin Jukim et al., forthcoming 2017).

Collectively, these memories represent the memory of the war found in Bruneian history. Individual trauma is far more difficult to document. Indeed, there are testimonies that speak of such occurrences, but there are no testimonies of people who were tortured or sexually abused. What does emerge from the testimonies is a broad-based knowledge that these events occurred: “The Japanese were fond of anyone who reported to them. And those [who were reported] were tormented” (Maslin Jukim et al., forthcoming 2017, p. 17). The Japanese regularly slapped, brutalised and tortured people often on the slightest pretext, as mentioned in Burmat’s novel (Burmat, 2008, p. 226). Near the end of the war the Japanese began to treat people more harshly as the war intensified: “Once the British and Australians were closing in on Brunei, the Japanese were locking people up. [...] they slaughtered people in Tungku” (Maslin Jukim et al., forthcoming 2017, p. 19). A lot of Javanese who had been brought into Brunei as slave labour died of starvation and Bruneians themselves had very

little food” (Maslin Jukim et al., forthcoming 2017, p. 23). The risk was higher for women and there are stories that show how Bruneians were aware of the risk to girls (Maslin Jukim et al., forthcoming 2017, p. 24).

In sum, the above historical narratives hint at individual trauma, but testimony is elusive for reasons outlined earlier in this paper. Victims were forced to carry the trauma and pain of the war experiences themselves, and collectively their suffering is part of a subdued historical narrative. There is very limited historical data on Bruneian resistance in the narratives too. As long as Brunei did not prevent the Japanese from extracting the oil resources from Brunei, the Japanese main goal was met. Bruneians clearly focused on their memories on the painful final months of the war when the Allied forces prepared for an invasion by bombing the area first to soften Japanese resistance. Food shortages were also an element of the final year of the war.

Conclusion

The paper has argued that the depiction of the war in Muslim Burmat’s novel is handled in accordance with Bruneian Malay culture. In other words, the trauma of the war is greatly subdued as it is not addressed explicitly by the community, so as to avoid unpleasant communal relations. Burmat illustrates the individual responses to the physical sight of the bomb through his characters who refrain from speaking openly about it and the war. Burmat’s novel, thus, depicts war’s memory – via these individual responses – within Bruneian society, even as the novel exercises literary creativity with who actually dropped the bomb in Brunei. As shown, the bomb in Burmat’s novel is an incredibly powerful symbol of the war as well as the subdued collective experience, including the trauma that remains a challenge for Bruneians to deal with, seeing as actual bombs are occasionally unearthed even many decades after the war. The ignoring and hiding of these experiences are not without a cost for the Bruneians, as depicted by the way Taha suffers when struggling with what to do with this bomb.

The bomb encapsulates both the memory and trauma of the war as witnessed, experienced, and internalised by a muted Bruneian society. Reactions to this war weapon-cum-remnant range from showcasing to ignoring to burying the bomb, just as Bruneians display their various handling of the history and trauma surrounding World War II in Brunei. Individual trauma, even when it does emerge, is suppressed in favor of keeping the peace within the Bruneian collective, as this social harmony is closely influenced by the Malay culture of non-confrontation. Total ignorance is, however, also not the case as both the novel and historical documents demonstrate that Bruneians are aware of this war history, along broader lines. The muting of war’s traumatic effects can, however, bring about a less accurate representation and fading over time of the intense suffering of those victimised during the Japanese occupation.

Finally, the tension between silencing and un-silencing the past remains as traumatic experiences take a long time to heal or fade. Just as actual objects are continuously dug up, the bomb in Burmat’s novel serves as a reminder, a source of memory that encapsulates the war by inviting people to remember and become aware of the historical event of the Japanese occupation in a society culturally prone to avoidance of confrontation and a desire for peace.

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