

# **Han Suyin's *Picnic in Malaya: A Story*: A Lament on the Unending Misery of Womanhood in the Newly Independent Malaya by a Chinese Doctor**

**Danny Wong Tze Ken, Florence Kuek & Fan Pik Wah**

**Abstract:** When Han Suyin passed away in 2012, the world remembered her for her description of life in China, the East-West dialogue found in her writings. Little is known of the thirteen years she spent in Malaya and Singapore. It was during this sojourn at the region that Han Suyin was able to spend more time on her medical practices. It was during this period that Han was able to produce some very distinctive writings including her creative writings but also most productive in addressing social ills during the era. It is in this light that this paper will examine 'Picnic in Malaya,' a short story by Han Suyin which focuses on the question of social inequity and ethical predicaments that shrouded the Malay community at a time when the country first claimed independence. The euphoria of the new-found freedom of a new nation is contrasted with the reality on the ground—the plights of the Malay women who found their condition remained unchanged. Through the pen of Han Suyin, a Chinese female medical doctor cum writer, the voice of a recognizable group of ladies cruelly abandoned by their husbands are heard. Nevertheless, 'Picnic in Malaya' brings one's attention to the necessary changes to the inner fabric of a new nation within which the old ethical order has yet to undergo reconstruction. All in all, the ethical choice of Han Suyin to boldly present such a critical story during the Malayan Independence reflects the didactic function of literature as propagated in Nie Zhenzhao's ethical literature criticism.

**Keywords:** Malaya; divorce; Han Suyin; ethical literary criticism; ethical choice

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**标题：**韩素音的《马来亚野餐》：一位华裔女医生看马来西亚独立初期的妇女困境

**内容摘要：**韩素音于 2012 去世时，世人最有印象的是她对中国生活的描述和作品里中、西方文化的对话。很少人知道她在马来亚和新加坡生活和行医了 13 年（1948-1960），那段经历给她有很好的机缘创作出许多题材独特的作品，特别是含有针砭社会弊端的小说。本篇文章将讨论其短篇小说《马来亚野餐》所描述在 1957 年马来西亚独立后，在马来社会中出现不公平的现象和伦理困境。她的文字将大马独立之际有关自由的承诺与现实生活中马来妇女的窘境并没有得到改善的实况做了一个对比。韩素音以一个华裔女医生的视角，将马来社会中一群被她们的男人恶意抛弃的妇女勾画出来。无疑的，《马来亚野餐》清楚反映了一个新兴国家若非重建其伦理次序，社会的内在结构就会一如既往地不会有所改变。简言之，韩素音如斯大胆地将这篇小说写得这么具批判性，可说是她身为作家的一种伦理选择，让文学作品发挥其教诲作用，即中国学者聂珍钊的文学伦理学所提及的文学最核心的价值所在。

**关键词：**马来亚；离婚妇女；韩素音；文学伦理学批评；伦理选择

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### Introduction

The celebrated author Han Suyin (1917-2012), famous for her novels (*Destination Chunking*, *A Many Splendoured Things*, *The Mountain is Young*, *Two Loves and Four Faces*, etc.) and her autobiographical series (*The Crippled Tree*, *A Mortal Flower*, *Birdless Summer*, *My House has Two Doors*, *Phoenix Harvest* and *Wind In My Sleeves*), actually spent 12 years of her life in British Malaya and the post-colonial Malaya which immediately ensued, from 1952 to 1964. This is one of the least known periods of her long life. Her connections with China as well as her celebrated novels and autobiographies have overshadowed her Malayan experience. Little has been written about her life there, but the most comprehensive biographical study on her sojourn in Malaya is by Ina Zhang whose Chinese name is Zhang

Xinhong.<sup>1</sup>

This paper is an attempt to retrieve and reintroduce one of Han Suyin's least known short stories produced during her sojourn in Malaya. Entitled "Picnic in Malaya, A Story," this short but rather critical piece of literature was published in 1961. It gives an account of the ethical dilemma of Malay women at the threshold of the country's independence. Despite being part of a people who should have benefitted from the nation's transformation towards modernisation, a significantly large segment of this Malayan community was still being plagued by the miseries of old practices in a predetermined ethical environment. This paper will examine Han Suyin's writing style, the manner in which she brings her subjects of different ethical identities into the scene, and how these are consistent with her own account of her life in Malaya in *My House Has Two Doors* (1980). It also probes into the necessary changes to the inner fabric of a new nation within which the old ethical order has yet to undergo reconstruction, which again points to the value of this short story by Han Suyin.

### Han Suyin in Malaya

Han Suyin, whose original name was Rosalie Mathilda Kuanghu Chou, was born in 1916 to a Chinese father and Belgian mother—her father had spent several years studying in Brussels before returning to China. Hence, she has had to embrace a bifurcated ethical identity since birth. Initially educated in China, she received a scholarship to pursue Western education in Brussels before finally completing a degree in medicine in London. In 1952, she moved to Malaya and practised medicine in the southern states of Johor and Singapore. During this time, she was married to Leon Comber, a colonial police officer with the Special Branch.

The period of her stay in Malaya coincided with the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), during which the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) launched an armed insurrection against British Colonial rule. The majority of the MCP members were Chinese, and this was where Han Suyin's sympathies lay. Her most famous work from her sojourn in Malaya, *And the Rain My Drink* (1956), deals with the plight of the ethnic Chinese during the Malayan Emergency. It is a story of modern Malaya as seen through the eyes of Han Suyin, who was a largely impartial but nonetheless sympathetic observer. Her anti-Colonial stance led her to highlight the plight of the people who were caught up in the MCP struggle against the British, and who had to bear the brunt of British Colonial repression against members of

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<sup>1</sup> See Zhang's monograph *Han Suyin in Malaya*, and the transcription of an interview with her about Han Suyin at NTU's alumni newsletter at the list of citation.

the MCP, their sympathisers as well as their family members, including detention and deportation. This did not endear her to the British Colonial establishment, who saw her as a radical writer, albeit whose feminist inclinations came at the cost of the ethical dilemma of instigating the authorities. Also, the Malayan society during that era was not ready for such views.

To make the situation worse, the publication of *And the Rain My Drink* cost Han Suyin's husband, Comber, his career in the Colonial police. He was obliged to resign from the Special Branch. Almost as if in consolation, Han Suyin, on the other hand, continued to gain popularity among English readers. She engaged in academic activities at Nanyang University, where she also worked as a medical officer in addition to teaching a course on Contemporary Asian Literature. Apart from giving lectures, Han Suyin also published some of her work in Nanyang University's earlier publications—one of them was the *Suloh Nantah*, or *Torch of Nantah* ("Nanyang University" in Chinese), through which "Picnic in Malaya" was published in 1961. It was also republished in the October 1961 issue of *Eastern Horizon Monthly Review*.

### Ethical Literary Criticism

As a writer of great moral courage in offering perspectives different from her time, Han Suyin along with her propositions encountered frequent rebuff and repudiation. This article will examine the undertone of her "Picnic in Malaya" through the lens of ethical literary criticism as proposed by Prof Nie Zhenzhao, namely, "a critical theory that reads, analyses and interprets literature from the perspective of ethics so as to identify the ethical nature and moral teaching function (of literature per se)" (Nie 3). In an interview with Prof Charles Ross of Purdue University, Nie clarified that since a literary work is a "historically contingent presentation of ethic and morality, the mission of ethical literacy criticism is to uncover the ethical value of literature" (Ross 75-78).

In Nie's narrative, human society evolves from natural selection to ethical selection. Using the Sphinx, a creature with a human head and an animal's body as a literary analogy, Nie demonstrates that the ethical dilemma of yielding to one's animalistic nature or human nature will dictate one's decisions and ethical choices in life. The famous line in *Hamlet*, "To be or not to be" is not a dilemma between life and death, but an ethical choice (Ibid). Youngmin Kim, in an interview with Chen Lizhen, expresses his amazement with the analogy of the "Sphinx factor." He remarks that Nie's "idiosyncratic representations of the psychosomatic convergence of human body and the psyche" closely relates to, among others, the Freudian model

of the “aesthetics of sublimation” of the primary double tripartite id-ego-superego and conscious-preconscious-unconscious (Chen 389-414).

The key terms of the theory have been adapted for the discussion at hand, and the working definition of these terms are as follows: (a) ethical identity—referring to the objective identify of an individual in relation to other human beings under given circumstances within a society or relational context. It is a determinant of a certain individual as perceived and determined by his or her setting, e.g., what is expected of X as a member of the society of that time; (b) ethical choice—referring to the decision one makes out of all the considerable options in solving one’s problem. It is made out of one’s will and rational minds; (c) ethical dilemma—referring to the mental conflict whereby an individual is unable to resolve his or her problem without making an ethical choice, i.e., a choice between two mutually exclusive options. Such an unsettling circumstance occurs when both options are moral imperatives of some sort. To comply with one denotes the violation of the other; (d) taboo—referring to a prohibition that is guarded by cultural custodians of a certain community; (e) ethical reconstruction—referring to the reframing of the ethical order after a state of disorder or confusion due to ethical-related issues such as the dissonant states of taboo-breaking, or the social rejection of one’s legitimate identity.

### “Picnic in Malaya”

Out of all her works, little is known of Han Suyin’s efforts in documenting the plight and ethical dilemma of Malay womenfolk as told in “Picnic in Malaya”. This is one of her least-known works because *Suloh Nantah*, the literary magazine in which the story was published, had a limited circulation that was too small to make an impact. It was largely unknown until it was included in a collection of essays in 1990 entitled *Tigers and Butterflies: Selected Writings on Politics, Culture and Society*. Although originally meant as an essay on social criticism, “Picnic in Malaya” is actually a short story, albeit a very short one. Nevertheless, because of the social issues raised in the story, it was treated as an opinion piece. Yet when read carefully, it can surely be ranked as one of Han Suyin’s finest short stories.

Han Suyin is known for her ability to produce vivid visualisations in her stories. In *A Many Splendored Thing*, her description of the view overlooking the old Hong Kong harbour from the hilltop at Queen Mary Hospital has been acknowledged as being even more cinematographic than its big screen portrayal in the Oscar-winning film adaptation of the same name (Craig-Bennett, 2010). Apart from that, her writing is always permeated with lively characterisations of people, as

well as down-to-earth language sprinkled with occasional humour and spontaneity. "Picnic in Malaya" definitely presents its Malayan characters, their ethical identities as well as the development of unanticipated events that the characters encounter in a very authentic manner:

"My eyes are not good," she (Hasnah) said to Maimunah, "a devil sits in front of them. Please read this from Idris, my husband."

"Allamah," cried Maimunah, "he has given you the three *talaqs*!<sup>1</sup> You are divorced. And you were not even present. Hasnah, what did you do wrong?"

... With the first sound of weeping automatically the women left the machines. The sewing girls, many of them married and divorced and remarried and redivorced again, and who knew without being told what had happened, crowded round Hasnah..." (49)

Writing style aside, this short story is among Han Suyin's most critical works on the plight of Malay women at the point of Malaya's independence. According to Zhang, the story was inspired by Han Suyin's interactions with Khatijun Nissa Siraj, the wife of Mohamed Siraj (Zhang, 165-166). Khatijun was a women's rights activist in Singapore and leader of the Muslim feminist movement at that time. She campaigned for the establishment of the Syariah court in 1958, and was the court's first case worker (Soin and Thomas 51-52).

One would reckon that "Picnic in Malaya" takes a unique approach to the genre, since it is written as the reflections of a Chinese female doctor on the social ills prevalent among the Malay community at that time, particularly in relation to the practice of polygamous marriage. The story depicts how the religious authorities colluded with erroneous and wayward husbands to abandon their existing wives for new ones by exploiting loopholes in the Syariah law. Hasnah and some other women in the story are unjustly divorced by their husbands, but are unable to seek redress in a satisfactory manner. There is outright ethical chaos and nonsensicality about the entire situation.

Nevertheless, the story is in many ways a representation of reality. It also highlights the changes that were taking place in Malaya at that time—the euphoria of the recently gained Independence, the hopefulness that this would bring about positive changes to society, and the despair at not seeing these dreams fulfilled.

<sup>1</sup> Talaq or talaq, in Islamic law, constitutes a formal repudiation of one's wife. When the husband pronounces the talaq three times, the divorce with his wife comes into effect.

“Picnic in Malaya” is told in the third person by Han Suyin, a Chinese doctor who gets to know Maimunah and her sister, Hasnah. Maimunah is a forward-looking woman who had taken part in the anti-British movement, while Hasnah, from Han Suyin’s point of view, is the constant victim of unjust treatment from her husband, Idris. Idris is portrayed as a civil servant who decides to issue Hasnah a pronouncement of divorce through a letter. When the women confront the religious authorities on the validity of such a pronouncement, their words are taken ironically given that Idris had registered his pronouncement of divorce on the basis of Hasnah’s alleged unfaithfulness. Han Suyin’s story goes on to reveal that the actual reason Idris divorces Hasnah, his second wife, is because he plans to marry a new wife. If he does not divorce Hasnah, he would not be able to marry another as he would have exceeded the quota of four wives as is permissible in Islam. “Picnic in Malaya” presents a chorus of many women in the same shoes as Hasnah. Uneducated, with insufficient skills to make a living and little financial resources, these women faced the ethical dilemma of either accepting or standing against the cruel treatment from their husbands. A majority of them, as delineated in Han Suyin’s story, choose to subject themselves to merciless abuse and abandonment by their men. After being divorced and left to fend for themselves and their children, they likely face the predicament and eventual pitfall of prostitution and jail (for being a prostitute). In this matter, Han Suyin was ahead of her time for advocating counselling and aid instead of punitive action. Her take appears to constitute a call for ethical reconstruction, in defiance of the conventions of the time.

In this respect, Maimunah, the protagonist of the story, is portrayed as a progressive woman who organises sewing classes for women, thereby giving them the skills to earn a living on their own. She is a freedom fighter who had been jailed for two years by the British. Unfortunately, despite Maimunah’s anti-British reputation, her prison sentence somehow causes her to be stigmatised even by fellow women, including the mother-in-law of her sister, Hasnah. Instead of seeking redress for the injustice done to her, Hasnah demonstrates an attitude of subservience which Han Suyin finds difficult to accept. In her ethical dilemma, Hasnah chooses not to have her own voice heard but to accept the wicked scheme of her husband. Along with that choice, Hasnah even begins to blame herself, thinking that maybe she had committed adultery without realising it, and that it was probably the work of the devil. In this way, Han Suyin highlights the ignorance of Hasnah and other women in similar circumstances. The story goes on to criticise those in official positions—civil servants and Syariah court officials who collude with errant husbands and block every avenue for seeking redress.

Women who are more hopeful place their trust in a new Malaysia,

“After *merdeka* (Independence in Malay), there will be schools for the women, then we shall be educated, and if our men divorce us we shall be able to work for ourselves. We shall not have to become prostitutes to feed ourselves and our children.” (44)

Maimunah even seeks the help of Che Marriamah, a female Member of the Parliament (MP). However, no help is forthcoming as the female MPs themselves are facing challenges in the male-dominated parliamentary hall, where their voices are largely ignored and made fun of by their male colleagues (50). It would seem that this overbearing male environment suffered little resistance.

In the end, Hasnah tries to commit suicide but does not succeed. She delivers the baby conceived before the divorce but dies ten days after childbirth due to an infection from a boil on her midwife's finger (Ibid). The story's title, “Picnic in Malaya”, appears towards the end, when Han Suyin the Chinese doctor brings the Malay women who work at Maimunah's sewing workshop and their children to the beach. There, they see some Europeans having a picnic, and the women decide to do likewise as a way of escaping from their harsh reality. In spite of the big gap between their ideals and their actual experience, their identity as a member of a newly independent nation might warrant the justification of their cases in subsequent social efforts in the days to come.

### Three Chinese Elements

As “Picnic in Malaya” is written by Han Suyin, a Chinese, certain elements of Chineseness can be detected in the story. Firstly, Maimunah's adopted daughter Khalsom is of Chinese origin. The same goes for the mother of Hasnah's husband, Idris—she had been given over to a Malay family as a child. In this way, Han Suyin draws the readers' attention to a common occurrence at that time, especially during the trouble years of the Great Depression and the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960).

The second Chinese element in the story is the Malay perception of the Chinese as being astute in business and having an entrepreneurial spirit. Despite being brought up entirely as a Malay, Idris' mother's Chinese blood is believed by others in the Malay community to be infused with entrepreneurial qualities. Even with regards to Idris' business acumen in making money, Hasnah comments, “That's because his mother is a Chinese” (44). This common misconception among the Malays about the ethical identity of the Chinese prevails to this day.



The views expressed in these two points are consistent with similar sentiments expressed in Han Suyin's autobiography, *My House Has Two Doors*. She reports that during her early days in Malaya, "I would meet so many Malay families who adopted Chinese children, girls especially; so many Malays were proud of having a Chinese mother" (Han, *My House Has Two Doors*, 82).

The third point made by Han Suyin is the perception that the Chinese (and Indians) are well-to-do, and that they dominate the ranks of the professionals. As told in "Picnic in Malaya", the lawyers whom Hasnah and Maimunah approach to fight Hasnah's hopeless case are Chinese and Europeans (49-50). This is probably a reflection of the situation in Malaya at the time, in that the majority of the professionals in private practice were Chinese.

### **Women in Medical Services in Malaya**

Probing into the changing landscape of female participation during the early years of nation-building, "Picnic in Malaya" highlights women's attempts to renegotiate their own social standing and welfare, namely, an ethical reconstruction of their identity and roles in society. As a medical practitioner herself, Han Suyin also takes note of the female presence in the medical profession during that era. In *My House Has Two Doors*, Han Suyin reports that there were no Malay female nurses at that time: "Nursing was not allowed for Malay women. No woman was allowed to 'touch' a man or to be in his proximity" (Han, *My House Has Two Doors* 69), as it was interpreted as committing *khalwat*.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, in order to prevent a contentious situation, it was a taboo in those days for Malay women to join the nursing profession. However, Chinese, Indian, Eurasian and even European nurses were already in service.

In fact, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a stereotypical perception within Asian society that women were not meant to be in the medical profession. Han Suyin went a long way to become "one of the first Chinese women physicians in Asia", and is notable for her medical career in Malaya which spanned over a decade (Windsor 91-92). She earned her Bachelor of Medicine & Surgery (MBBS) with Honours from the London School of Medicine for Women, and completed her housemanship at the Royal Free Hospital, United Kingdom. In 1952, after marrying her second husband Leon Comber, a Special Branch Officer in Malaya, Han Suyin settled down in Malaya and worked at the Johor Bahru General Hospital. She started

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<sup>1</sup> Khalwat refers to a man or a woman found in close and suspicious proximity with a member of the opposite sex who is not his or her spouse. It is a violation of Islamic Law and carries a penalty similar to that of incontinuity, affinity, fosterage or unlawful conjugation. Kindly refer to Section 115 of Part XI—Offences under the Enactment No.3 of 1964, Administration of Muslim Law Enactment, 1963.

her private medical practice at Jalan Ibrahim, Johor Bahru in 1953, and opened her second clinic at Tanjong Pagar, Singapore in 1956.

On the day her first clinic launched, a Malay male doctor named Dr Ismail commented while examining her newly installed autoclave, "You won't have any patients. People don't like women doctors" (Han, *My House Has Two Doors* 100). Contrary to that remark, Han Suyin proved that female doctors were even more welcome, provided that they had what it took for the profession. She recalls, "By the end of the first month I had twenty patients a day and by the second forty to fifty a day, more than any other doctor in Johore Bahru" (Ibid). Some of her patients came from the new villages and rubber estates, telling her, "I've kept my disease for you to look at, Doctor" (Ibid). Her dedication to her work and some medical 'miracles' that she was able to perform earned her a plaque of appreciation as the "STAR OF SALVATION" (Ibid).

The literacy rate in Malaya at that time was rather low, and only 1% of the population made it to tertiary education (Educational Statistics of Malaysia 1938-1967, 6). Incredibly, some local women of great calibre managed to equip themselves professionally and served the Malayan community wholeheartedly as certified medical doctors. One of Malaya's first Chinese female physicians was Dr Soo Kim Lan (1894-1981), who received her education at King Edward VII College of Medicine, Singapore. She began her medical practice locally in 1923 and established her private clinic in 1927. Besides her home base in Kuala Lumpur, she would even deliver medical aid on her own to remote villages in Terengganu on the east coast of Malaya.

By the time Dr Han Suyin was serving in Johor Bahru, Malaya, three Malay female doctors had already started their medical careers in Kedah, Perlis and Kuala Lumpur respectively. They were Dr Salma Ismail (Faridah Abdul Rashi 224-25), Dr Ruby Khaltom bt Abdul Majeed (*The Daily News*, 13 April 1948), and Dr Siti Hasmah bt Haji Mohamad Ali (Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, 2016). The presence of these early female doctors during that era is quite phenomenal, considering that the majority of women were still hindered by their lack of education, marital autonomy, or a clear understanding of faith and religious matters.

### Conclusion

The ethical choice of Han Suyin to boldly present such a critical story during Malayan Independence reflects the didactic function of literature as propagated in Nie Zhenzhao's ethical literature criticism. Although the gender bias and religious malpractice portrayed in "Picnic in Malaya" has largely been addressed in a

practical sense over the decades, and the position of women in the region has seen considerable progress, one might argue that some of the issues faced by Malay women in 1961 have not disappeared completely. Han Suyin's concern for the plight and ethical dilemma of Malay women in the new nation-state of Malaya was likely to have been influenced by her friendship with Khatijun Siraj, but it is also consistent with the themes of ethical reconstruction that she championed by her all along in her public speeches and other writings. It is notable that this empathetic depiction of the social standing of the Malay women of that era is done through the lens of a Chinese female doctor. One might wonder whether the tone of the story would be as critical as it is had the author not been Han Suyin but a Malay woman from 1961. All in all, how writers deal with their ethical identity carries great weight to the construction of the characters under their pen.

In a nutshell, "Picnic in Malaya" presents a poignant view of the lives of the common Malay womenfolk in Malaya, set against the backdrop of a time of euphoria following Independence. Although resembling a feminist activist, Han's Chineseness remains visible as delineated in the previous section. Not represented in this short story is the rise of a few extraordinary female medical professionals including Malay female doctors, who were able to serve their generation during a critical time of nation-building. Nevertheless, "Picnic in Malaya" is still one of the must-reads among Han Suyin's many writings for its historical, cultural, and ethical reflections on the modernisation of Southeast Asia during the postcolonial era.

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