**Pushing the Envelope:**

**A Three-Way Balance between Story, Statement and Provocation**

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**Introduction**

The independent publication in Malaysia has given much room for the creativity of writers to fully develop and thus a breath of fresh air for the local readers. Publication houses such as FIXI has encouraged the urban contemporary and pulp fiction genre giving rise to the *KL Noir* anthologies – *Red, White, Blue* and *Yellow* (not coincidentally, the colours of the Malaysian flag). What had prompted the idea of this anthology was a thirst for crime stories set in Kuala Lumpur and how can certain crimes be uniquely painted against the backdrop of this particular city. At the point of this conception, FIXI had been in the Malaysia publishing industry for two years and was fast gaining popularity but in the Malay language; the *KL Noir* anthologies would be among the first of many English publications under FIXI.

Exploring the idea of noir among Malaysian writers proved to be an exciting, new realm. FIXI received many inquiries regarding the word “noir” and what it actually meant, but to quote FIXI publisher Amir Muhammad in his blog post regarding the *KL Noir* anthology, “All noir stories are, at heart, barbed valentines to our cages.” While telling the tale of how the idea to publish this anthology came about earlier in the post, he had written, “The idea for this book came about when the charming man-of-letters Jérôme Bouchaud suggested a KL version of the anthology *Bangkok Noir*. Of course KL isn’t as old, big or notorious as Bangkok but (and I say this with pride) we can do crime and sleaze, too!” But the most interesting part was how Amir Muhammad differentiated Asian noir stories from the Western ones by saying, “We in the exotic Orient have ghosts, since supernatural beings are not immune from the grudges and mayhem that noir can thrive on.” That being said, the four volumes of *KL Noir* had four different editors; each of which were given the freedom to either stick to the known definition of noir (meaning “black” or “dark”) or redefine it by broadening the meaning to maybe quirky or weird.

Needless to say, the entries that came in varied tremendously but a majority still stayed in the territory of “crime and sleaze.” While there were few resistance against the written word no matter how sensual, gory or violent, the challenge came in the form of actual visualisation, when a production house decided to adapt four of the short stories to short films; each with its

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own disturbing quality. The stories had ranged from street crimes and domestic violence to rape, incest and murder.3 While this is accepted in written form, displaying it on screen creates a more direct audio-visual experience that may be received negatively by the general public. That being said, the production house had insisted on minimal to zero censorship for the YouTube release of these short films. Out of four scripts, three were made into short films under the Dark Triptych series – ‘Savages’, ‘Miita’ (originally titled ‘Anai’) and ‘Stones of Justice’. This paper will talk about each of the four stories' adaptation process from the writer’s personal experience and finding a balance between telling a good story, making a bold statement and creating plain provocation.

From Short Story Writer to Screenwriter

As far as short stories go, I have been writing for as long as I can remember but I’ve only begun my professional foray into screenwriting since 2010. My name was suggested by Amir Muhammad (FIXI) when Catwoman Productions and Seeing Eye Films expressed their interest to adapt four short stories from FIXI; three from the KL Noir anthologies (‘Anai’ from KL Noir: Yellow by Wong Pek Mei, ‘Big Bertha and the Stones of Justice’ by Angeline Woon and ‘Savages’ by yours truly – both from KL Noir: White) and one from Lost in Putrajaya (‘Listen to Your Grandmother’ by Jeannette Goon).

I had agreed to the job because it would be my first time adapting short stories to short films, so I was sure that the learning experience would prove worthwhile. But hearing the news of the adaptation before reading the other short stories to be adapted, I could not help but wonder how this would be executed. I fancy myself a filmmaker, albeit an inexperienced one, and I knew for sure that ‘Savages’ was written as an introspective piece – how would I translate that onto screen?

‘Savages’ came to be like how almost all stories began – the magic “what if”. In the case of ‘Savages’, when I wanted to write it, the “what if” questions I was asking myself were what if I were to put a gritty spin on the classic girl-meets-boy fairy tale and turn it into a twisted vigilante story (it was for an anthology entitled KL Noir, after all)? What if [spoiler alert] the girl had met a horrible boy, resulting in a change of heart and catapulting her into a series of sickening actions? We’ve all read stories of a woman scorned; what if this woman takes it the ninth level of Hell (assuming that normally she would take it to Level 8)? And from all these questions, ‘Savages’ was born.

The good part of adapting ‘Savages’ from short story to short film was that I was both the short story writer and the screenwriter. The bad part was that I was both the short story writer and the screenwriter. It was good because I knew the story well; it was bad because I knew the story too well. I’ve never been one to be too attached to the stories I write but the amateur filmmaker in me kept wondering how something so introspective can be turned into a unique audio-visual experience.

‘Savages’ was written in the first person point of view. It explored the transformation of a girl in retrospective form; when the readers first know her, they get a glimpse of what she used to be in the past but only as a façade she was using to fight for her newfound cause. It was a story about a timid and naïve girl who had dreams about living in the big city and in her desperation, fell in love with the wrong man who sold her into prostitution. As a form of self-

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3 “Spotlight on Local Gems.” An article by Daphne Lee in The Star Malaysia, 14 April 2013.
defence, she found herself killing her rapist – and liking it. She felt that it was her true calling to be rid of it all these scums of the earth; and it wasn’t long before she started generalizing men and killing them regardless of whether or not they had committed a crime. She began luring them in and finishing them off with her signature move – cutting off their private part.

I understood from the get-go that some readers might fixate on the final gory and graphic part. After all, that was what the story ended with and endings tend to resound more in readers. But when I wrote it, there was more to it than that – there was the heartbreak of an innocent girl, the detachment of a victim and the righteousness of the superego. It was how tragedies can transform us differently and in the case of the protagonist in Savages, it drove her to develop a near multiple personality disorder. But of course, that was the psychologist in me talking and as a psychologist, I also understood that readers don’t necessarily view a story the same way a writer does – they don’t need to and that’s the beauty of stories; people can interpret them differently.

That being said, ‘Savages’ was written like how I always write – to tell a story. An interviewer came up to me when the KL Noir: White book was launched⁴ and asked whether I was making a feminist statement; whether I had a deep loathing for rapists to which I replied, “Who doesn’t?” He asked again if ‘Savages’ was a feminist story and whether or not I was a feminist. I said if being a feminist means I think women are made for some things and men are made for some things and we should live in symbiosis; then yes, feminist be I. He said if that was the case then I’m not a feminist and I said I was alright with that. Suffice to say he lost interest in me and interviewed other writers (often times, people tend to lose interest with me when I say I’m not some sort of an activist – maybe they feel that writers have the opportunity of making a statement and here I am squandering my ability to just tell a story).

Interestingly, in the midst of writing this, I had just watched a film entitled The Party.⁵ What I found most amusing about the film is the conversation between two lesbian life partners [again, spoiler alert] where one of them has just discovered that her partner has slept with a man before. The “untainted” partner could not get over this fact and kept referring to the man as a rapist. At this point, I was mildly confused because it was clearly established that the sexual relationship her partner had with the man was clearly consensual – how did the word “rapist” make its way into the conversation? This piqued my curiosity and after looking it up, the name that primarily came up was Andrea Dworkin. Andrea Dworkin was a feminist and author of the book Intercourse, which had the controversial sentence of “Violation is a synonym for intercourse.”⁶ This had led to various interpretations; one of them being “all heterosexual sex is rape.” However, many have debated this interpretation, particularly stressing on the fact that the original sentence was normally taken out of context by those who were quick to slander Dworkin’s work.

Reflecting back on what I had written, ‘Savages’ was never intended to perpetuate this belief. I never posed the protagonist as a medium to deliver these ideologies. When I develop a particular character for any story, what would concern me the most is the character’s backstory and how it would shape his or her current actions. In the case of ‘Savages’, the young and innocent protagonist had transformed into a vigilante not just because of a tragedy, but what

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⁵ The Party (2017) directed by Sally Porter starring Patricia Clarkson, Bruno Ganz and Cherry Jones.
the tragedy represents – crushed dreams, cruel reality and the destruction of purity (purity here being love, not virginity). As a coping mechanism, the protagonist developed a mission. But what must be noted is that this mission was driven by what happened to her even before the tragedy (of being sold into prostitution by the love of her life) – she was consistently raped by her father. Therefore the development of the character was heavily reliant on her backstory; a tainted childhood with hopes of turning things around. She has lived with hope long enough that when the chance of hope materialized, she was at a make-or-break point in her life. When the supposed love of her life betrayed her for even more non-consensual sex, something inside her snapped. Whether or not she has had psychopathic tendencies all along is secondary. The simpler (yet somehow, deeper) questions would be – wouldn’t you snap if you were in her shoes? If not, what would you do?

At the end of the day, I always write a story for the sake of telling a story, not to deliver subliminal messages. I feel that the core of storytelling has always been “There was a man/woman – he/she did this or something happened to him/her.” I’ve always personally felt that writers who write with the intention of making a statement end up with a story contrived towards that statement, resulting in characters doing things that are out of their character and things happening without any particular rhyme or reason. This is of course, a personal opinion. But it is this opinion that I carry with me whenever I read – I look for a story, not a statement.

With this, I began to read the three other stories to be adapted.

The Other Short Stories

I started with ‘Anai’, a heart-wrenching story of a child bride by Wong Pek Mei. The gush of emotions you feel when you read this – imagining a primary school child, still with her self-indulgent desires but having to give all that up when her parents, buried in debt, marries her off to a wealthy, much older man to make ends meet, only for the child to be abused physically, emotionally and sexually. Just knowing this burns you up with anger, fills you up with sympathy and might just crush your faith on humanity. Different readers will have a different feeling that might prevail; for me, it was just overwhelming sadness.

With ‘Big Bertha and the Stones of Justice’ by Angeline Woon, I felt the fear and insecurities of being a single woman in the city. The story delved into the experience of a woman being the victim of a snatch thief – a crime which has grown rampant over the past few years so much so that we have either been through it ourselves or known someone who was a victim of it. The similarity that I found between this and ‘Savages’ is that it was introspective and it had almost the same victim-turned-vigilante ending. I could relate but again, I worried about translating it onto screen.

I was very intrigued with ‘Listen to Your Grandmother’ by Jeannette Goon as it incorporated the lore of having a pet snake that sleeps beside you only to measure itself against you before having you as its next meal (a tale also used in Paul Theroux’s novel The Lower River, 2012). This lore was told by the protagonist’s grandmother, who was actually forewarning her about seemingly loving but abusive husbands. It was one of those rare occasions that I was attracted to the statement as much as I was attracted to the story. Narcissistic abusers strike a nerve with me and I felt very strongly about exposing them through literature and film to create more awareness towards domestic abuse; a crime that goes unreported a little too often.

Having read all four stories, I proceeded to the next (and somehow always the toughest) step: a meeting with the producer.
Writer versus Producer: The Age-Old Battle

It started off with him saying how much he loved ‘Savages’ and half-jokingly asking whether it was drawn from actual experience to which I replied, “I hope not – for your sake.” We had a good laugh then it was on to business. He shared his vision of how he wanted these short films to be – words like “bold” and “daring” were frequently used. He admitted that he wanted to push the envelope, purposely make people uncomfortable while watching it and provoking the audience towards a reaction. I said “I feel uncomfortable already” – again, he laughed. I was beginning to wonder if I was the right person for the job but maybe I could provide a balance to this, which could be a good thing.

I expressed my concern about two of the stories being introspective, particularly ‘Savages’ which was written without the thought of ever making it an audio-visual experience (some writers do write with the intent of it being turned into film form). He said on the contrary, there were many elements in ‘Savages’ that he was particularly drawn to produce – the incest, the rape, the blood and gore of it all. Since it was going to be shown on YouTube, there will be no problems with censorship and they can be as provocative as they want to be. But I’ve never been the trigger happy type – so even though there will be minimal to almost zero censorship, I wanted to stick to my less-is-more principle when it comes to filmmaking. After all, the scariest horror movies are always the ones where you never see the ghost.

Developing ‘Anai’ was, of course, a delicate matter. Seeing that the producer wanted to feature the juicier, more graphic parts of the story, I wondered if it would be wiser to stick to the raw emotions of a child going through the ordeal – a harder thing to achieve, but I was up for the challenge. I could see that the producer was most excited about ‘Anai’ – the issue of a child bride brings a lot of controversy to the table. I wrote the first draft which focused on stolen innocence but an intern writer was brought onto the project to provide a darker approach to things. My notes on the darker draft were the dialogues being too heavy-handed and the graphic images might come across as being cringe-worthy rather than edgy. The producer had replied “Ideally I like the films in this project to be dark and violent (no big deal in today’s current standards). I like the audience to feel and be shocked by the explicitly - rape and abuse are shocking after all. We can always have two different cuts.” So it was rather obvious where ‘Anai’ was headed and despite my efforts to maintain an understated yet disturbing feel to it, I was asked to move on to the other scripts without being further involved in the later drafts of ‘Anai’ (which later became ‘Miita’).

I had asked the producer if he wanted a different writer for ‘Savages’ too since he might be afraid that I was too attached to the story. After a gruelling five drafts (all of which also involved the intern writer who provided a darker approach to things), I handed in my final notes before being informed that I will be taken out of the loop; the gist of my notes mainly imploring them to focus on character motivation and development, as well as being able to differentiate between “psychopathic” and “psychotic”.

‘Big Bertha and the Stones of Justice’ went by quite smoothly in the sense that I only wrote one draft and they seemed happy with it – unless I was unaware that I was discreetly taken out of the loop.

Unfortunately, ‘Listen to Your Grandmother’ did not make it to the screen for reasons unknown (to me).
The Final Product

‘Miita’, which was developed from ‘Anai’, had two major differences: the protagonist was Indian (as opposed to the original Malay character) and the protagonist seemed older than the age featured in the original story. These production changes were probably made to avoid facing the issue of cultural sensitivities (to understand this better in the Malaysian context, an article published in the The New York Times pertaining the censorship issues of a local movie Dalam Botol might be useful) and also, in terms of logistics, it was easier to work with an older, more professional actress.

Watching ‘Miita’, I assumed that it was everything the producer wanted it to be – disturbing, uncomfortable to the point of furrowing your eyebrows and provocative. It was a well made film but as far as story goes, unlike the emotions the short story managed to evoke in me, the short film just gave me the general feeling of uneasiness.

I was informed by a good friend of mine that she would be directing ‘Savages’. I’ve known most of her work and have had the privilege of working with her on many projects before. So seeing that I know her, I asked her this crucial question: “Are you comfortable doing this?” She said she had to make a few changes to fit her style (she was not against being provocative; just that she has a more modest way of doing things). She apologized beforehand for changing the script too much and I told her I took my hands off it a while ago and I was just looking forward to seeing the final result. When I saw ‘Savages’, I immediately loved the look and feel, but found there was something amiss – there were two characters that could easily be lifted out of the story and not change the plot, which meant they were redundant. Then I realized that these characters were from a different story that the director and I had written together; and the director had used this short film as a platform to introduce these two characters. I must admit, it distracted the audience from what was actually going on and again, in the end there was just grit and gristle without much meat.

‘Stones of Justice’ was rather straightforward and there were not many missed opportunities – things were portrayed as they should, although some may argue that since the look and feel was quite grounded, the ending required too much of a suspension of disbelief.

Conclusion

At the end of the project, the producers may have succeeded in creating an atmosphere of shock and distress through the short films, but I could not help but wonder whether a finer balance between story, statement and provocation could have been achieved; resulting in waves rather than ripples.

The cultural sensitivities in Malaysia remain to be conservative but at times, contradicting itself. For example, anything that involves rape is permitted to be shown onscreen (provided, of course, the rapist repents later in the story) but consensual premarital sex is still considered taboo. Gore and violence are normally allowed with the appropriate viewer’s discretion advice, but the moment it involves any reproductive organs it’ will be censored or worse, the entire story banned altogether. Any crimes that even merely insinuate the involvement of an authority figure in a negative way would have to go through a lengthy piece of red tape that might result in the film being kept in the vault for an indefinite period of time.

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And finally (although I’m certain the list doesn’t end here), any depiction that puts the majority race in a bad light will be thoroughly scrutinized for any underhanded intentions to disrupt the overall racial harmony.

With all these limitations, it is understandable that feelings of oppression will result in acts of rebellion – in this case, independent filmmakers wanting to push the envelope, even when the story does not necessarily require it. Although I understand the sentiment, I personally feel that the process of storytelling should not be clouded by the goals of a particular movement lest the story will lose sight of what it set out to be – to present a compelling tale, not thwarted by the maker’s personal vengeance towards a particular system.

But of course, these are my personal thoughts on the matter. Some writers have been known to write for a cause; to fight for an ideology through their writing. I write to tell stories – whatever layers the readers may peel and what they may reveal is unique to each receiving end. That, to me, is the beauty of storytelling.

* All three short films can be watched on YouTube under the Seeing Eye Films account. The KL Noir anthologies can still be purchased online via www.fixi.com.my

References

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