Paradoxes of Malaysian Literature and "Collective Individuality" in Theorising National Identity

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ABSTRACT

After 56 years of Independence, Malaysia still continues to struggle with its efforts in constructing an amicable 'national identity.' The struggle especially centred on the 'one nation one language' policy, which later led to another contentious determinant of national identity, that of 'national literature.' Malaysian literature, due to the nation's colonial experience, consequentially falls under the category of 'postcolonial literature.' This comes with its attendant baggage of also being considered as *peripheral literature*, or *emergent literature*, or *Third World literature*. In other words, it is categorically *non-western* literature. The question this gives rise to is: which direction should Malaysian literature take in asserting a 'true' postcolonial identity? Should it continue to be one that insists on reinforcing the 'one nation one language' ideal with modern Malay literature (written by predominantly Malay writers) representing collectively the nation's identity? Or should it recognize those strong voices of dissent as the 'true postcolonial', those voices of (especially) non-Malay writers who insist on writing in the language of the coloniser (English)? This paper considers these positions by using the German Romantic ideal of "collective individuality" as its measure of how far Malaysian literature (represented by both modern Malay literature and Malaysian literature in English) has truly come to its own as worthy of being called 'postcolonial' literature. In doing so, the paper also highlights the problematic term 'national literature.'

Keywords: Collective individuality, national identity, German Romanticism, Romantic Idealism, Malaysian Literature, Postcoloniality, national literature, nationalism

INTRODUCTION

In truth, the East will probably always look up to the West. Perhaps it is inevitable for Malaysians who have undergone a

Western education to reflect on their national identities from a Western framework, and to ponder (through literature) on how different we are from the West, or how different our journey as a nation is. But when I decided to introduce 18th-century German Romantic Idealism to a discussion of Malaysia's local literary tradition, it was not my intention to glorify the European intellectual tradition. Nor is it my intention to evaluate local literary criticism by comparing it with the Western tradition.

This preponderance for the west is one that has been persistently highlighted by Malaysia's former Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. According to Ho (2003), as the first Prime Minister who "did not study at elite schools or further his education in Britain," Mahathir has often alluded to the fact that the British did not only colonise Malaysia, but also the minds of its people—to the extent that 'west is always best.'

My own journey in tracing the development of a Malaysian literary tradition was incidental, as I explored modern Malay literature and Malaysian literature in English. Both genres exposed me to two different cultural experiences, taking me with them on a journey of two very different cultural ideologies as I investigated what the terms *nationalism* and *national identity* really mean, and why the definition of a *national literature* is so important. I find that the state of this divided nation relates closely to the circuitous polemics of *Bangsa Malaysia*[1] and *1Malaysia*.[2] The perceived polarised state of affairs of Malay literature

(also the national literature of Malaysia) and Malaysian literature in English can be argued to reflect the state of the nation's politics and national policies.

It would seem that the concepts of *Bangsa Malaysia* and *1Malaysia* were created as political strategies to address the conflict of a multi-ethnic nation such as Malaysia, that of the perpetually simmering suspicion[3] among the different ethnic groups in relation to on the one hand, ideas of *ethnic superiority*, or on the other, of *ethnic inferiority*.[4] Thus, *1Malaysia* became an attractive proposition. As Chin (2010) postulates, it "sounded…like political equality, inclusiveness, and an end to institutional racism since the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971" (p.164).

It is through the study of these concepts that national concerns such as fairness in education and public housing, as well as fairness in "providing opportunities, recognising talents and achievements or contributions [of those who are deserving]" (Chin, 2010, p.165) can be highlighted. It is evident that the "thumbs up for 1Malaysia" is a signal that it is time for such concerns to be dealt with.

These concerns, which are fundamental concerns in the construction of a nation, have also infiltrated into creative and critical writings on Malaysian literature. At this juncture, it is interesting to note that the national literature (i.e. Malay literature) rarely tackles such concerns, giving rise to queries on its role in representing *national* concerns. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these

concerns have been mainly addressed by 'minority' voices (that of the non-Malay creative writers'), many of whom have deliberately chosen to write in English, rather than in the national language.[5]

In this paper, I postulate that both Malaysian literature in English and modern Malay literature, contrary to their apparently opposing stances in their perceived roles in the construction of the Malaysian nation, may not be that different after all. Both, although supposedly representing postcolonial literature, are found to still conform inadvertently to a Western framework and to pander to 'colonial' rather than 'postcolonial' discourse, thus giving rise to the question of how truly 'postcolonial' they truly are.

NATIONAL LITERATURE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY: A GERMAN ROMANTIC IDEAL?

In a multicultural nation, the simmering suspicion of different ethnic groups towards each other is always in danger of boiling over. This "state of stable tension" (Shamsul, 2005, p.1) is one that is further aggravated by the polemics of a national 'ideal', through a so-called 'national identity.'

The Malaysian ideal of one nation that can be brought about by one language, one culture, and one literature, is one that is not new one, and is one that is rooted within a western ideal. It is framed within the German Romantic ideal of the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Clearly, in the much discussed context of the recognition accorded to Malay literature as 'national literature', with the effect of marginalising other literatures including literature written in English, the bone of contention revolves around notions of 'national language' and 'national identity.' In other words, the heart of the matter has to do with the sense of belonging which relates the definition of national*ness*.

It is in consideration of this that I decided to borrow the concept of 'collective individuality' from the German Romantics. I find this concept useful in drawing attention to the nation's so-called postcolonial tension observed through its literature. I believe this notion is significant in unpacking the different manifestations of national culture and identity.

Curry and Goodheart (1991, pp.13-14) explained that the term 'individuality' (rather than 'individualism') was used by early German Romantics to attack Enlightenment ideas of "natural rights, uniformity, and reason." Rather, German Romantics "emphasised antirationalist factors—e.g. subjectivity, originality, multiformity, diversity and uniqueness. In addition, they stressed the importance of emotion, intuition, experience and irrationality (the unconscious) in understanding the meaning of life, the nature of society, and the significance of history."

> *By recognising the importance of history, the German Romantics thus emphasised the idea that societies were organic—characterised, that is, by change, growth, evolution and decline. Such a view not only precluded the existence of*

universal standards of judgment, as Enlightenment thinkers would have it, but emphasised the idea that history was the result of spiritual rather than material forces.

(Curry & Goodheart, 1991, pp.13-14)

This 'collective individuality' as described above was one which precluded the rationality of the Enlightenment period and embraced German Romanticism which promoted religion as a fundamental identity of German identity in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Similarly, in the construction of the Malaysian nation, the dominant ethnic group, the Malays, have also made religion the first fundamental determinant of their identity. The national Malay Islamic identity is promoted through the establishment of Islam as the official religion of Malaysia. Further, the centring of Islam as part of Malay national identity can be seen in government slogans such as "*Masyarakat Madani, Membangun bersama Islam dan Islam Hadhari*" (literally "Modern Society, Progress with Islam and Islam Hadhari") which worked as an official documentation of *Islam Hadhari* (civilised Islam) promoted under the former Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's administration.

The purpose of such slogans may have been to promote the idea of 'civilised' Malaysians (and to enhance their civility) through Islamic values in creating the image of a moderate (rather than extremist) Islamic community. Abdullah Ahmad Badawi reminded the Malay Muslims of the importance of the Quran and the Hadith[6] as the basis of Islamic Civilization (Wan Mohd Nor, 2006, p.5), and that every aspect of a Muslim's life can be a form of *ibadah* (worship to God).

As such, a modern Malay identity is one whereby the Malays have become comfortable with recognising Islam as the guiding principle of their everyday life, and in which Islam is very much entrenched in the local culture of the Malays. Nevertheless, ironically, the progression of the Malays as a 'modern' and 'secular' community also continues with a growing number of Malays considering Islam as a private or personal practice, rather than communal.

The framing of notions of nationalism, national identity, and national character in Malaysian literature is at the centre of a colonial experience, and is rooted within an imperialist master discourse which carries with it a distinctively European idealism. This universalist European idealism has become the measure of the European nations' intellectual progress and is very characteristic of European intellectualism. Theoretically, the measure of nationalism captured in Malaysian literature is reliant on European idealism.

I move on to the next fundamental determinant of the German Romantic identity, which is found in the aspect of 'idealism.' This aspect helps to formulate understanding of the individual in relation to the state. Romantic Idealism expects the state as an institution to hold "higher

moral status than a mere collective of individual beings" (Knapp, 1995, p.207). Therefore, the state had to grant freedom to the individual but this freedom is considered "…an abstract inner freedom which in concrete dealings in the social sphere had to be realized by an adherence to the laws of the state" (Knapp, 1995, p.207). Furthermore, German Idealism promoted inner individual freedom, which, parallel with practical reason protected by the laws of the state (group of people), should lead to moral perfection rather than restriction of individual rights. Thus, the laws of the state must be general and must focus on only specific groups of individuals so that the state holds an outstanding moral status (Knapp, 1995).

Curry and Goodheart (1991) qualified this further, as follows:

If the romantics valued the individual and his right to freedom and self-development, they also stressed the importance of the group, which they 'considered a living organism whose laws of organisation placed the constituent individuals in a relation of mutual dependence.' This conception of the one and the many 'is distinctive and, for the western mind, remarkable.' The 'Western mind; tends to place the group and the individual in opposition—assuming that one of the two must have primacy. Thus romantic individualism, in contrast to the atomistic individualism so characteristic

of Enlightenment thought, did not stress the subordination of the individual to the group but rather the coordination of the two. German romantics thus ascribed individualism not only to persons but to suprapersonal forces—e.g. the Volk, religions or nations.

(Curry & Goodheart, 1991, pp. 13-14)

Hence, 'collective individuality' basically underlines the fact that "a person could achieve individuality or self-expression only within the group or whole" (Curry & Goodheart, 1991). According to this idealism, an individual is dependent on the group to make up a whole and that "[i]dealism leads to the search for universal and eternal truths, separated from the profane necessities and contingencies of everyday life and the rest of society" (Knapp, 1995, p.208).

Obviously, this differs from the general truths sought by Enlightenment thinkers in that the latter focused on reason and individualism instead of tradition. As Bristow (2011) explains, the Enlightenment values of individualism and self-determination" manifested in a "distrust of authority and reliance on one's own capacity to judge" (n.p.). He adds that although it is "common to conceive of the Enlightenment as supplanting the authority of tradition and religious dogma with the authority of reason, in fact the Enlightenment is characterized by a crisis of authority regarding any belief" (n.p.).

I have thus far briefly given two fundamental determinants for consideration in exploring the thorny state of Malaysian national culture and identity (thorny due to the premise of Malay culture and literature as Malaysian *national* culture and literature). I have described earlier that an important determinant of Malaysian identity is that it is rooted in Islam. Another determinant is the concept of individual freedom that parallels practical reason to create an equal balance between the individual and the group. Clearly, the 'collective individuality' of the postcolonial Malaysian nation is fraught with the tension of religion and individual freedom which can be traced back to the state's depiction of high morals. Thus, the notion of 'collective individuality' can be concluded to have challenged both religion and individual freedom.

We must also be aware that German Romantic Idealism also had its negative consequences. In the German case, it was in the effect "Protestantism and idealism had on individual ethical responsibility" (Knapp, 1995, p.220). In extending the argument further, Max Weber (1971) concludes that the division between "religious and philosophical subjectivism" and the idea of "objectivism" (often taken for granted in modern society) essentially denotes that ethics become, in the end, simply a private matter (qtd. in Knapp, 1995, p.220). In consequence, the nation has to contend with collective individuality made up of "moralist[s] of conviction," or persons who cling to their "convictions quite independently of practical consequences of

[their] ideological motivation and moreover, quite independently of the consequences for other people" (Knapp, 1995, p.220).

Ironically, therefore, the result is a nation which will bow to "servility, blind obedience, dogmatism, inflexibility, and discrimination against others" (Knapp, 1995, p.220). Thus, Knapp cautioned us about "the shocking success of this ideology [which] resulted in the extremely subtle use of the anti-modern feeling" through the idealization or romanticizing of the idea of "community" or "people's community." Such romantic sentiments lead to the idea of the "community ideal," sliding critically further downwards into anti-modern and anti-progress attitudes which submit to a "totalitarian regime and to an enthusiastic acceptance of technology based on the idea of a 'strong state'" (Knapp, 1995, p.212), or on the attractive idea of a united state.

HISTORICISING MALAYSIAN LITERARY CRITICISM WITHIN POSTCOLONIALITY

Thus, the study of Malaysian literature inevitably starts with the historicisation process in mapping the historical and ideological specificities of the nation's literature which is used to define the nation and its national identity.

Nicholas Harrison (2003) considers the act of historicizing literary texts as the "bread and butter of postcolonial criticism" and that we need to "give adequate weight to the text in its individuality and 'literarity'" (p.2). The complex multi-faceted process of historicisation opens up possibilities of

reading a literary text ranging from being considered a "beautiful piece of writing" to it being "a bloody racist" piece (Harrison, 2003, p.2). This competing discourse is one that is faced by Malaysian literature, in the forms of both modern Malay literature and Malaysian literature in English.

In considering this state of affairs, I refer to two Malaysian literary texts (one written in Malay and the other written in English) presumed to be promoting opposing cultural ideologies: *Echoes of Silence* by Chuah Guat Eng (1994) and *Putera Gunung Tahan* by Ishak Haji Muhammad (1937)[7]. Ishak's novel was his reaction as a Malay writer troubled by the many British heroes found in his reading at that time and the apparent lack of Malay heroes in the local Malay literature. Thus, he made it a point to create Malay heroes in the novel. However, the novel, which Ishak considered as "a very satirical work, continuing many valuable moral lessons" (Ishak Haji Muhammad, 1980, p.xvi) soon passed "rapidly from [the] Malay heroes to its real task of chronicling how Mr Robert and Mr William tried to steal Mount Tahan from its ruler so that the British government could turn it into a hill station" (Ishak Haji Muhammad, 1980, p.xv).

Echoes of Silence, meanwhile, is a text that is considered as a thriller which takes us into the defamiliarisation mode as it works its way to solving a murder case. The novel's genre may have restrained the seriousness of postcolonial concerns within a text from both political and racial angles. The discovery of clues to a murder in the novel leads to a more serious identity discovery going back to the significant date of 13 May 1969.

In historicizing this particular text, we need to find the historical significance of the discourse, and the consciousness of the time in which it is situated. After 1969, the 13 May Chinese-Malay conflict led to the government's more aggressive affirmative action policies, including the controversial New Economic Policy (NEP) with its focus on *Bumiputra*[8] rights. The novel can be read as a form of self-reflexivity of the protagonist's life in which the murder case works as a metaphor for the bloodshed on that emotional and frightening day (13 May 1969).

The process of historicization or historical contextualization positions the texts in their contexts of time. *The Prince of Mount Tahan* was written in the context of Pak Sako's own questions about the British exploration and interest in the hilltops of Malaya.

As Harry Aveling (1993) noted, *The Prince of Mount Tahan* is

> *...undoubtedly 'distinctively post-colonial': it foregrounds a tension with the imperial power and emphasizes the differences between the indigenous culture and the imperial power. It does this, in 1937, by using the devices of allegory, irony, and magical realism, if not perhaps discontinuous narrative, which...are 'characteristic of post-colonial writing.' Ishak's model for this was not, however, postmodern*

fiction, but an inversion of the British 'boys' weeklies' and their tales of brave English adventurers subduing hordes of savages in distant settings (online).

The novel does not only mock at the English but also criticizes the upper class Malays. At one level, the novel can be seen as an anti-colonial text which resisted the Empire, while also criticizing the feudalistic system. In terms of historicization, what is important is the specific historical circumstances that are relevant to postcolonial criticism. In contextualizing the texts in the study, a connection must be made on the "discourse, consciousness, and imperial politics" (Harrison, 2003, p.2).

MALAY LITERARY LITERATURE

I will start with modern Malay literature in considering the role of historicization in unravelling the content of history and the nation's unconscious. Modern Malay literature is currently energized through its intellectual connections to classical Malay literary works such as *Sejarah Melayu* (*The Malay Annals*) and *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (*Epic of Hang Tuah*). Studies on modern Malay literature, which aspire to carry on Malay ideals, national character, cast of mind and beliefs, argue that modern Malay literature "cannot fail to preserve its connection with classical Malay literature." What this means is that modern Malay literature should not "reject positive elements of classical Malay literature" (Hamdan Hasan, qtd. in Braginsky, 2004, p.3).

Vladimir Braginsky (2004) explains that:

The beginning of scholarly study of Malay Literature falls in the late eighteenth century-early nineteenth century, when, alongside other consequences, the expansionist colonial powers in Asian and African countries brought about a closer acquaintance of European civilizations. Among the factors conducive to the study of Malay Literature…was a keenness on 'Orientalism' and 'the wisdom of the East' so characteristic of the Epoch of Enlightenment, the discovery of the comparative method in philology, the flourishing of Romanticism, with its deep interest in exotic traditions that exerted an enormous influence on European spiritual culture, and scholarship (pp.4-5).

In tracing the literary evolution of traditional Malay Literature, Braginsky (2004) refers to a historical work by R.O. Windstedt published in 1939, which was "the first study ever to bear the title of a *history* of Malay Literature" (p.8). Braginsky (2004) points out that there exist both external and internal factors which influenced the Malay literary evolution, but which, according to him, show that internal factors are more significant than external ones.

Thus, a major weakness of Winstedt's work is that it focused especially on the

external factors, dismissing the social and ideological history of Malay literary texts, such as the "salient features of Malay aesthetics, ethical conceptions, and the religious grounds underpinning [the texts]" (p.9). Another major weakness highlighted by Braginsky (2004) is that Malay literary works with high standards could not have been composed during "the period of deep Islamization" (p.10). Braginsky's explanation of the factual and theoretical errors or weaknesses leads to heightened interest by contemporary Malay scholars to evaluate theoretical problems in Malay traditional literature. In explaining the inherent theoretical problematic of traditional Malay literature, Braginsky (2004) moves on to show how contemporary local Malay scholars of traditional literature made conscious effort to form their own models or approaches in tracing traditional Malay literary development. This is mostly done by ignoring Winstedt's "Orientalist" historical approach, and by centring on "synchronistic indistinctness", which further highlights "his 'ill-defined' categories (for instance his vague divisions of work into Hindu, Hindu-Muslim, and Muslim) (p.14). For Braginsky (2004), the most important consideration is the significance of Islam in the development of Malay literary genres and Malay ideas of literature.

The inherent theoretical element which was not highlighted by Winstedt in his study of traditional Malay literature has been much highlighted by Malay literary critics in their study of modern Malay literature. Perhaps what can be read from Braginsky's

(2004) observation is that the suppression of Islam in the text is made clear in the colonial textual interpretation. Meanwhile, modern Malay literature tends to contain themes inherent to Western literary structures (p.14).

Mana Sikana (1998), in tracing the literary criticism of modern Malay literature, asserts that it was only from the 1950s that there exists an observable Malay literary criticism (pp.61-86). He discovered that the earlier trend in literary criticism (of the 1930s) consisted mainly of pure condemnation and malicious attack on the writers. In the 1940s, the criticisms tended to centre on the formalistic approach which highlights theme, plot development, language use, and academic elements of criticism. Other than the formalist approach, there were some literary criticisms which heaped praise on the writers.

It was only in the 1950s that literary criticism became a means to social change, and began to be critical of current issues of the time. Active critics and practitioners of literature of that time formed the ASAS 50 group, which was then divided further into two groups: one that believed that literature should be *Seni untuk Masyarakat* (Art for Society) and the other that believed in *Seni untuk Seni* (Art for Art's Sake).

In the 1960s, criticism of modern Malay literature had begun to center on poetry and short stories. The 1970s then saw heightened interest in the use of western theory in Malay literary criticism. It was also in the 1970s that a growing interest in Islamic literature and a focus on Islam came

about (Mana Sikana, 1998). The inseparable connection between Malay identity and Islamic identity has meant that this interest in Islamic approaches to reading literature has continued until today.

MALAYSIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH (MLIE)

On the other hand, Aveling (1993) asserts that:

> *English literature in Malaysia maintains, at best, a precarious position. The rewards of publication, readership and prestige prizes in Malaysia belong to Malay literature, which is the creative writing proper to the National Language, the language of the schools and government (online).*

Thus it was that Malaysian writers writing in English faced an identity crisis due to a sense of rejection brought about by the definition of national literature which exclusively categorises literature written in languages other than Malay (including English) as ethnic/sectional literature. Since it is not technically accurate to classify literature in English as ethnic literature (since English is neither the mother tongue of any Malaysian ethnic group nor a local language, but rather a relic of the country's colonial past), local writers who pen their works in English are still looking for a "voice and identity," a sense of belonging, as well as a recognition of their contribution towards Malaysian literature.

According to Wong Phui Nam, "even if there were writers who thought about which language to write in, they may not be able to acknowledge that the choice wasn't really theirs to make" (qtd. in Shamsuddin Jaafar, 1997, p.84). Wong (qtd. in Shamsuddin Jaafar, 1997, p.84) elaborates on the dilemma faced by Malaysian writers writing in English:

> *By using English, we then realised that we became almost 'foreign'—not once 'removed', but thrice 'removed'…there was an incongruity between the way we thought and felt in the language we were using, and our respective traditions, not only in literature but also in terms of philosophy, religion, politics, scientific literature and other forms of writing that were commonly termed as belles lettres[9] (p.86).*

Wong (qtd. in Shamsuddin Jaafar, 1997, p.86) also argues that Malaysian literature in English has more in common with other literatures in the region than with English literature itself, denying that there "is a continuity, in any form, with the tradition of Shakespeare and Milton."[10] The angst of Malaysian writers who write in English like Wong himself is the regret in discovering that "whatever we write is considered 'sectional' and remains fringe literature."[11]

Despite persistent arguments by some nationalists opposing the right of Malaysian

literature in English to be recognized as national literature, as a genre, MLIE has gradually gained strength due to some policy changes made by the Malaysian government in recent years. This includes the reintroduction of literature in English as part of the secondary school curriculum. This move is in line with the government's growing concern of the declining standard of English in Malaysia and the move is seen as one of the recommended solutions.

To reconcile this position with the contesting position of English as an important language for Malaysia, and Malay language as the national language, or Malay literature as an important literature of the country, more effort has been taken to translate Malay literature into English. Interestingly, this re-introduction of literature in English has included the translated works in English written by Malay national laureates, such as Keris Mas's *Jungle of Hope* (the original Malay *Rimba Harapan*). Thus, MLIE as introduced to schools is defined to include works which were not originally written in English.

CONCLUSION

I have proposed that German Romantic ideals form fundamental determinants in the development of Malaysian 'national' literature. It is clear that central to the definition of a Malaysian national literature is the issue of race or ethnicity. National literature in the context of Malaysia has become an ethnocentric pursuit, revealing perpetual hang-ups about race. This reflects

the state of the nation whereby Malaysia's national language (meant to be the symbol of a *Bangsa Malaysia* if we consider the 'one nation one language' policy) continues to be only associated with the majority ethnic group.

Perhaps this explains the general tone of pessimism in MLIE as MLIE was originally a space for writers (many of them non-Malay) to express their dissatisfaction of how a 'national literature' has purposefully excluded literatures written in all other languages of Malaysia, including English. To writers of MLIE (especially the early generation of writers), the issue of national language and literature reflects the division of the country into two categories—those who speak Malay and those who do not—further translated into those who are Malay and those who are not.

Nevertheless, not all MLIE writers share this sentiment. Chuah Guat Eng, in an interview with Muhammad A. Quayum (2007), presents a different viewpoint. She argues strongly for the need for a national language:

> *As a citizen, I believe with all my heart that we need a national language. I felt it most when I was in Germany, and had to go through the humiliation of having to admit that I can't speak my "mother tongue" (Chinese), that I am rather bad at my national language (Malay), and that the only language I can use with any degree*

*of competence is the language of my
former colonial masters (English).*

(Quayum, 2007, p.147)

In view of a national literature that
is defined by what the national language,
Chuah explains that:

*[a]s a writer, I can only write in
the language I think in, which is
English. Am I bothered by the fact
that Malaysian literature in English
is categorised as 'sectional' and
not 'national' literature'? Not a
bit. These words are only labels. If
my writing has to be labelled, the
last label I want for it would be
'national'.*

(Quayum, 2007, p.147)

Interestingly, despite the supposedly
marginalising of MLIE by the national
language and national literature policy, the
National Library chose *Between Lives* (a
novel by KS Maniam, an early generation
of MLIE writers) to represent Malaysia at
the International IMPAC Dublin Literary
Award 2005, instead of any literary works
written in Malay. As Bernard Wilson (2008)
explains, the novel is

*[an] exploration of the sacred
spaces that connect ancestral
heritages, competing histories and
environment as a vision towards
the rediscovery of a polymorphous
self and the possibility of a nation.*
(p.409)

One of the biggest challenges faced by
writers of Modern Malay Literature is to
depict the multicultural reality of modern
Malaysian life. This reality is rarely handled
by these writers, with the majority of them
choosing only to depict an ethnocentric
reality populated with Malay characters,
and issues that are seemingly of exclusive
concern to Malay community.

Ungku Maimunah Mohd Tahir (1995,
pp.62-63) explicates the state of modern
Malay literature as one which she claims
has been reduced to works written to "win
competitions" organised by the government
body responsible for the promotion of
Malay literature as national literature. She
elucidates that:

*[t]he dynamics of racial
relationships are rarely addressed
in modern Malay literature, despite
Malaysia being a multiethnic
nation. Although there are works
that address these matters, they
are usually coloured by certain
perceptions. Racial issues perceived
in these works are portrayed in a
positive light, depicting harmonious
racial relationships manifested
through interracial marriages, such
as when non-Muslims embrace
Islam, or adopted children (usually
Chinese children raised by Malays)
bring together two estranged
families. Perceptions such as these
can be clearly seen in the novel
Interlok by Abdullah Hussain...
This novel was submitted to the 10th
Independence Day Novel Writing*

Competition, and depicts racial relationships between the Malay, Chinese and Indian characters as being very tightly knit. Given the context of such a competition, maybe this perception of interracial harmony is not surprising (pp.62-63).[12]

Until Malaysia is ready to embrace the idea that to be truly 'postcolonial' is not simply an issue of language, efforts towards building a canonised Malaysian literature which is inclusive rather than exclusive will be in vain.

It is evident that the paradoxes of so-called 'postcolonial' narratives may be traced to the volatile definition of the term 'national' which can be perceived as at best *ethnocentric*, or at worst, *racist*. Following a western framework in defining a 'national' identity contradicts the ideal of a nation that should be built based on "collective individuality," or the collective experiences of its people. What this exploration has highlighted is perhaps the need to reconsider the suitability of a singular 'national' identity for a multilingual multicultural country like Malaysia. Such a concoction of nationalism is fraught with paradoxes, and therefore must reflect a more cosmopolitan ideal in order to work more seriously towards resolving the continual 'tension' of a constructed Malaysian national identity.

ENDNOTES

[1] The idea of a *Bangsa Malaysia* (literally 'Malaysian race', but loosely translated as Malaysian nation) was created by Mahathir Mohamad, who wanted to promote an inclusive national identity for all Malaysians, regardless of ethnicity.

[2] *1Malaysia* is a policy under Malaysia's current Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. He explained that his "vision of 1Malaysia includes that of a nation whose people have enriched their lives through the pursuit of and a positive application of knowledge. A life-long education process which takes place in and outside of the classroom will produce Malaysians who are able to think and act less selfishly, and more for the community in which they live" (2009). Najib Tun Razak also operates with the slogan of "People First, Performance Now." See "Thumbs up for 1Malaysia" (2009).

[3] Shamsul AB in his article "Making Sense of National Unity in Malaysia: 'Break-down' versus 'break-out' perspectives" in *Readings on Ethnic Relations in a Multicultural Society: Promoting National Unity and Practice of Noble Values* (2005) defined this simmering suspicion as "stable tension."

[4] The privileges accorded to the Malays as Bumiputras (natives of the land) have continually become a bone of contention among the non-Malays, especially to the two other main ethnic groups, the Chinese and the Indians. Policies relating to such privileges are perceived as reinforcing the ethnic superiority of the Malays over other ethnic groups. Najib Tun Razak, in addressing this issue in the last general election (GE13), acknowledged that "there is a need for national reconciliation between Chinese and Malays."

[5] A pertinent point here is that Malay literature and Malaysian literature in English are taught as separate streams in many literature programmes at Malaysian universities.

[6] Sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad, p.b.u.h.

[7] Ishak was more popularly known by his pen name *Pak Sako*. The novel was later translated by Harry Aveling as *The Prince of Mount Tahan* (1983).

[8] The definition of *Bumiputra* as 'natives of the land' included the Malays and other indigenous groups, but excluded the major minority groups such as the Chinese and the Indians, hence causing the "simmering suspicion" or the "state of stable tension" (Shamsul AB) referred to earlier, to continue until today.

[9] Wong Phui Nam, in Shamsuddin Jaafar (1997, p.86), translated from the Malay: "[*d*]*engan menggunakan bahasa Inggeris, kami sekali gus menyedari bahawa kami menjadi 'terasing' oleh penggunaan bahasa itu – bukan sahaja sekali 'terasing', tetapi tiga kali 'terasing'... terdapat kejanggalan dalam cara kami berfikir dan merasakan dalam bahasa yang kami gunakan itu dan dengan tradisi kami masing-masing, bukan sahaja dalam kesusasteraan tetapi juga dari segi falsafah, keagamaan, politik dan ramalan-ramalan saintifik dan jenis tulisan yang lain yang biasanya digolongkan sebagai belles letters*."

[10] Wong Phui Nam in Shamsuddin Jaafar (1997, p.86), translated from the Malay: "*tidak adanya kesinambungan, walau dalam bentuk yang rapuh sekalipun, dengan tradisi Shakespeare dan Milton*."

[11] Wong Phui Nam in Shamsuddin Jaafar (1997, p.86), translated from the Malay: "*bahawa apa pun yang telah kami tulis atau akan kami tulis adalah dianggap sebagai tulisan 'sukuan' dan yang demikian ia merupakan sastera pinggiran*."

[12] Translated from the Malay: "*...soal dinamika perhubungan kaum jarang sekali timbul dalam sastera Melayu moden walaupun Malaysia adalah masyarakat berbilang kaum. Tidak dinafikan ada karya yang membicarakan perkara ini tetapi ini biasnya diwarnai oleh persepsi yang tertentu. Persepsi tersebut rata-rata lebih senang menyingkap soal perkauman ini dari kaca mata yang positif dan menggambarkan perhubungan kaum yang harmonis yang dimanifestasikan melalui perkahwinan campuran apabila yang bukan Islam memeluk agama Islam, atau anak angkat (biasanya anak Cina yang dibela oleh orang Melayu) yang mengeratkanhubungan keluarga dari dua kaum ini. Contoh persepsi seperti ini jelas dilihat dalam novel Interlok karya Abdullah Hussain. Novel ini diajukan untuk menyertai Peraduan Menulis Novel 10 Tahun Merdeka dan menggambarkan perhubungan kaum Melayu, Cina dan India yang sangat erat. Bertolak dari konteks peraduan yang sedemikian, mungkin persepsi perkauman harmonis ini tidak menghairankan*."

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