

CROSSING BOUNDARIES



**Musings on Language, Literature
and Culture**



IIUM Press

Edited by Md. Mahmudul Hasan

Crossing Boundaries

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Contents

Acknowledgements	03
01 Introduction: Crossing Boundaries and Celebrating Diversity <i>Md. Mahmudul Hasan</i>	09
02 The Almost Enforced Mingling of Cultures: Anthony Burgess' Depiction of Races and Race-Relations in Pre-Independence Malaya <i>Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof</i>	17
03 Quest for Spiritual Guidance and Illumination in Namangi's Imfiraji and Kemala's Ayn <i>Umar Abdurrahman</i>	31
04. Awareness of Gender-sensitive Expressions in the Print Media: A Study of Malaysian English Dailies <i>Haja Mohideen Bin Mohamed Ali</i>	47
05 A Malay-English Cross-linguistic Study of Present Time Forms <i>Maskanah Mohammad Lotfie</i>	53
06 Mirza Ghalib as a Mystical Poet: Introducing Two Urdu Ghazals <i>Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof</i>	61
07 "Narrating Malaysia": Nationalism in Malaysian Literature in English <i>Aimillia Mohd Ramli</i>	73
08 On membership of the class of articles in English <i>Ridwan Wahid</i>	83
09 "Why Poetry?" Why Not: Relevant-sing Poetry at IIUM <i>Nur Sheena Baharudin</i>	97
Afterword	113
Notes on Contributors	115

CHAPTER 7

“Narrating 1Malaysia”: Nationalism in Malaysian Literature in English

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Abstract: This paper argues for the necessity of performative forms of nationalism, in addition to its pedagogical version, to any attempts at creating a national consciousness amongst Malaysians. It suggests that this can take the form of “cultural citizenship”, reenacted within the pages of Malaysian fiction, especially those written in English. It also argues that this kind of performative nationalism is open to renegotiations and criticism, hence, the patriotic tone of many of the stories is analysed in this paper. By exploring interracial relationships, returning to historical junctures, assessing the effect of globalization and, finally, conjuring alternative cultural paradigms, Malaysian literature in English suggests ways in which racial relations in this country may improve and the spirit of 1Malaysia may thrive among the citizens.

Keywords: Nationalism, multiculturalism, Malaysian literature in English, race, cultural patriotism

Introduction

Responding to an online interview question in 2003 on the best way to achieve a collective national identity, Wong Phui Nam, Malaysia’s foremost poet in English, has this to say:

I do not think that national identity is something that should be planned. If you agree to this kind of planning, you are in effect saying that you consent to a small group of people taking upon themselves the authority to draw up a template in accordance with their personal ideas of what our national identity should be.... I think people should be left alone.... Malaysians left to themselves will, in time, evolve into a nation (i.e. Bangsa Malaysia). (qtd. in Quayum, 2007, p. 89).

Wong’s argument that national identity “should not be planned” by the government but be allowed to come into existence by undergoing some kind of evolution and progression in mentality and actions on the part of the country’s citizens rightly demonstrates the importance of performative forms of nationalism over its pedagogical counterpart. Yet to suggest that political policies should have nothing to do with moulding the mentality of a people in any nation would be, I argue, to suggest that identity-formation, particularly those that are connected to nationalism, is apolitical as well as stable; and clearly this is not the case. Wong, however, is right to suggest that national identity has to emerge from some kind of process because nationalism originates not only in the citizenship of a people to a particular nation, but also in its capability to formulate a sense of “cultural citizenship,” a community whose sense of belonging is also embedded in common attitudes and values, and, to a debatable extent, cultures. However, we should bear in mind that even such