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## **Narrating 1Malaysia: Nationalism and Patriotism in Malaysian Literature Written in English**

By

AIMILLIA MOHD RAMLI  
INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA (IIUM)

### **ABSTRACT**

Malaysian literature in English in the 1960s was a product of early Malaysian writers' endeavour to spearhead a literary tradition of writings that promoted a national identity amongst the diverse races living the country. This task, however, was generally undertaken by those who were more inclined to write about the issues and interests of their own communities rather than those of others living in the country. In the last twenty years, however, there have emerged a number of fictional writings that depict not only the country's multiracial context but also imply the existence of a sense of national consciousness and patriotic feelings amongst Malaysians. These writings, this paper suggests, veer away from the communal interest of individual ethnic groups by exploring interracial relationships, returning to historical junctures, assessing the effect of globalization and, finally, conjuring alternative cultural paradigms with the single aim of unifying Malaysians and embedding them with the nationalistic spirit of 1Malaysia.

### **Introduction:**

This paper will argue for the necessity of both pedagogical and performative forms of nationalism in creating a national consciousness amongst Malaysians. It suggests that the performative form of nationalism 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 opened to renegotiations and criticism, hence, the patriotic tone of many of the stories 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 be improved and the nationalistic spirit of 1Malaysia may be created in its people.

### **Renegotiating Nationalism and Ethnicity: Cultural Nationalism**

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 (Muhammad A. Quayum, 2007: 89),

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 about 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].

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 its capability of formulating a sense of "cultural citizenship," a community whose sense of belonging are also embedded in common attitudes and values, and to a debatable extent, cultures. However, we should bear in mind that even such concepts are open to changes as are legal opinions and criteria regarding citizenship and nationality change over time and are themselves imbued with cultural meanings, aspirations and values (Daniels, 1998: 8).

Yet the concept of citizen, in Malaysia and elsewhere, has for so long been considered "as a purely formal, culturally 'empty', exchangeable identity—unmarked by regional, ethnic or cultural differences" and has this "emptiness" filled in practice "by the naturalised properties of the socially dominant group" (Bennet, 1998: 8). This emphasis on the hegemony of the cultural practices of the dominant group runs parallel to the traditional concept of nationalism defined by Ernest Gellner as "a theory of political legitimacy which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones" (Gellner, 1983: 1; cf. Also Gellner, 1997). Nationalism, Gellner further argues, should then be ethnic ideologies that hold true that their ethnic should dominate the state. "A nation-state, therefore, is a state dominated by an ethnic group, whose markers of identity (such as language or religion) are frequently embedded in its official symbolism and legislation" (Eriksen, 1998, 98). It also suggests that their nation is better than other nation. It also follows that people who do not belong to this ethnic group living within the nation will be driven towards integration with the ruling ethnic group.

Following Gellner's definition, it would thus be hardly surprising to find that Malay nationalism had for so long been at the forefront of the state –sanctioned nation-building efforts. Although the country practices and maintains freedom of religion and cultural affiliations for the different ethnic groups in the country, only the Malay language is considered the national language, its literature as the national literature and Islam as the official religion. This has been naturally a source of contention amongst non-Malays, like Wong Phui Nam, who argues that non-Malays are often made to feel marginalised by this emphasis on Malay culture and beliefs as the foundation of nationalism in this country. As he argues in "Towards a National Literature" (Muhammad A. Quayum, 2009, 54),

What actually inspires our nationalists is not so much an existing nation as an *ethnie*. This is a community of people who have a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, a common language and an association with a specific mainland (Smith, 1991, 21). Only the Malays amongst the major communities living in this country may be said to possess these characteristics in full. But by themselves, they do not constitute a Malaysian nation. No individual Malaysia has ever willed it, but the fact remains that over the period when the territories that constitute Malaysia were under aegis of British rule, the British colonial administration brought about what may be said to be accretions of alien elements to the original Malay *ethnie*. Until these elements are digested or integrated into the core native *ethnie*, we cannot have a *bangsa Malaysia* or a Malaysian nation in the fullest sense.

This is not to say, however, that Malaysians, particularly non-Malays, are not nationalistic. In the last twenty years, in the study of Malaysian literature in English, a body of writing in which many ethnic groups have made substantial contributions, there is an increasing number of works which try to invoke nationalistic sentiments from its readers. To explain their emergence, one would have to resort to Benedict Anderson who in his monumental book, *Imagined Communities* (1983), defined nationalism as "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (1983: 6). The appeal to emotional bonds between citizens of a country as the foundation of nationalism, according to Anderson, is what requires imagination "regardless of the actual

inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship”(1983: 7).

The nature of these calls for emotional bonding between Malaysians in Malaysian literature in English, however, should be viewed from the complexities and multiplicities in any reading of the concept of multiculturalism and nationalism. An analysis of contemporary Malaysian literature in English would, I argue, illustrates how ethnic communities in Malaysia have interpreted, interpolated and reworked the concept of multiculturalism and cultural nationalism so that these becomes less rhetorical and more appropriating the layperson’s attempts at understanding and forming his or her identity as a series of negotiations with those sanctioned by the state. Aihwa Ong provides a useful conception of cultural citizenship as a negotiating process that is inclusive of both sides in the unequal power relationship: the subordinate agency and the domination of the state and civic institution, as Ong says (1999:264),

“...I use ‘cultural citizenship’ to refer to the cultural practices and beliefs produced out of negotiating the often ambivalent and contested relations with the state and its hegemonic forms that establish the criteria of belonging within a national population and territory. Cultural citizenship is a dual process of self-making and being made within webs of power linked to a nation-state and civil society.”

Consequently, out of the contemporary body of literature on cultural citizenship, within the Malaysian context, there have emerged in Malaysian literature written in English calls for the conceptualization of an alternative cultural paradigm that renegotiate the state’s policies for national identity and consciousness with the diverse concerns of Malaysia’s multicultural society.

### **Cultural Nationalism and Malaysian Literature Written In English**

Tangible forms of this “cultural citizenship” could be found in renewed interest in English literature published within Malaysian from the nineties until now. Even at the onset of its inception, English-language literature on Malaysia by Malaysians in the 1960s is replete with calls for the promotion of a national identity, with the aim of celebrating the nation’s multicultural milieu. Because of the conferment of *Bahasa Malaysia* as the national language in the National Language Act in 1967, the Amendment Act in 1971 and the conferment of the status of National Literature on the Malay literature, it was officially regulated to the status of “sectional literature” or “*sastera kesukuan*”, a term that also accommodates a host of other literatures published at that time.

Yet the role that English-language literature published in Malaysia could play both as a form of pedagogical nationalism – in the sense of assuming the Platonic function of literature as a teaching tool of high morals—that promotes nationalism and performative nationalism – in the sense that writers are inspired by their own cultural citizenship when writing fiction – is one that cannot be downplayed. That cultural citizenship, which the writers re-enact in their story, necessarily intertwines one citizen’s life with those of others necessitates their rendition through literature as it inserts a tangible form to Benedict’s “imaginary” bonding of a nation. As one proponent of the important function that literature, over mere philosophy, has on guiding people to develop a sense of nationhood, Richard Rorty argues in his *Essays on Heidegger* (1991: 7378),

A society which took its moral vocabulary from novels ... would ask itself what we can do so as to get along with each other, how we can arrange things so as to be comfortable with one another, how institutions can be changed so that everyone’s right to be understood has a better chance of being gratified.

These words apply most aptly to the case of multicultural communities in Malaysia in which there is a felt urgency for people to get along with each other. Regardless to say Malay literature, as the national literature in the country, has so far failed to forge ties between the various ethnic groups living within the boundaries of the country. Chew Fong Peng’s article “Ethnic Prejudice in Literature” (or *Prasangka Etnik Dalam Sastera*) (2010) argues that Malay literature, as the national literature of the country, has failed to portray equal and unbiased representations of non-Malays living within the nation. In a study of Malay short stories written from the 1950s until the 1990s, the interethnic tension that exists in social, economy and politics amongst the various races is shown to

negatively dictate portrayals of non-Malays as those who are greedy, opportunistic and religiously bankrupt. Yet their depictions underwent a form of transformation, according to the writer, in the 1990s because of the government's call for better interethnic relationship. As Chew observes (1996; 270. As cited in Chew, 2010; 187),

Memasuki era 90-an, seluruh penduduk di kerah ke arah pencapaian negara industry yang moden di bawah Wawasan 2020. Dalam pada itu matlamat utama kerajaan ialah untuk mewujudkan masyarakat yang bersatu padu dan tidak mengenal garis perkauman. Keadaan ini turut digarap oleh para pengarang dalam bentuk cerpen di mana hubungan etnik digambarkan dan dijalin dengan wujudnya persefahaman, tolak ansur dan harmoni. ... Dekad 90-an tidak lagi memperlihatkan cerpen yang bersifat stereotaip, sebaliknya bukan Melayu digambarkan bersifat lebih dinamis dengan adanya interaksi dua hala.

The same can also be said of Malaysian literature written in English written around this decade in the sense that within its body of fiction, there is a remarkable increase both in the number of works on multiculturalism as well as thematic concerns that embodied and reconceptualised the nature of nationalism in ways that many Malaysian would find difficult to understand in the previous decades. Though there are still persistent connections between ethnicity and nationalism, their ties are no longer durable. Later in this paper I will suggest that the concept of "nationalism" and "patriotism" within the multicultural settings of Malaysians continue to undergo various transformations in its thematic treatment in literature in the past twenty years or so. Before delving deeper into "close reading" analyses of the fictional works, we need first to define the concept of nationalism and patriotism.

### **Cultural Patriotism and Nationalism**

Findings for this study show that the idea of nationalism has to be further expanded to include literary writings that suggest a more critical view-point or standing such as those represented by patriotic fiction. Although frequently used interchangeably with nationalism, patriotism implies a vastly different concept. Igor Primoratz briefly defines patriotism "as love of one's country, identification with it, and a special concern for its well-being and that of compatriots"(Primoratz, 2009). Distinguishable, according to some authors like Lord Acton, from nationalism with its "connection with race" or ethnicity "that is merely natural or physical", patriotism implies an awareness of moral duties (Acton, 141-70). While Acton argues that these duties are to the political community, Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that they should be towards "the nation conceived as a project" as cited by Primoratz (MacIntyre, 1984),

the object of patriotic loyalty is one's country and polity; but this does not mean that a patriot will support any government in power in her country.... The patriot's allegiance, he says, is not the status quo of power, but rather to "the nation conceived as a project" (13). One can oppose one's country's government in the name of the country's true character, history and aspirations. To that extent, thus type of patriotism is critical and rational. But at least some practices and projects of the patria, "some of its large interests", must be beyond questioning and critical scrutiny.

MacIntyre emphasis on the rational and critical attributes of patriotism aligns it with the more critical treatment of patriotic themes in literature as it is difficult to find works that are uncritical, or totally nationalistic, of its portrayal of the country and its people. This is not, however, to say, that such works do not exist, it is just to assert that their numbers are not large enough to warrant attention. In fact, one fictional writing analysed here has nationalism as its theme.

Thus, following the narrative turns which both terms, nationalism and patriotism, have undergone in the past twenty years, I argue that contemporary Malaysian literature written in English has witnessed an outpouring of fictional writings centring around them. From attempts at confronting the ugly reality of racial animosity in the country, through reconfigurations of national myths and historical junctures and confrontations with the impact of globalisation and, finally, demands that the colonial affix from the word "postcolonial" be taken to be replaced with alternative cultural paradigm to support nationalism in literature, Malaysian literature written in English suggests both the critical and temporal forms that these concepts can assume in society.

### **Racial and Religious Clashes**

One of the earliest patriotic writings in the 1990s to be genuinely concerned with interracial relationships is Lloyd Fernando's *Green is the Colour* (1993). The novel centres around incidents that happen at the aftermath of the bloodiest racial clash of 13 May 1969. The main characters include Dahlan, whose outspokenness against racial and religious bigotry finally leads to his untimely death, Yun Ming, a Chinese government officer who tries to diffuse the racial tension, Siti Sara, a Malay university lecturer who is torn between the demands imposed by her husband Omar, who forces her to embrace the radical teachings of his religious cult, and her love for Yun Ming. Other characters include Panglima, a man whose identity is embroiled in mystery although his title indicates his governmental connections and Lebai Hanafiah, Siti Sarah's father, the only proponent of a moderate voice in the novel.

While it deals with the negative aspects of racism, the novel tries to model its suggestion of racial tolerance on Westernised ideals of free speech and interracial romantic relationships. Opposing such values and the main cause for the interracial conflict is the Malays' adamant stand to protect their cultural and religious supremacy from the threat of dissolution posed, in their minds, by the presence of their non-Malay others. In its defence of multiculturalism, the novel warns of any nation-building strategy that seeks to impose a forced uniformity amongst Malaysians as Andrew Ng comments (Ng, 2009: 284), one of the characters desires that everyone "must follow one way of life, have one way of doing things ... [They] should have one religion" (*Green*, 20).

Though the narrative sets the stage for Islam to be viewed as a cult-like religion, full of foreign influences and, thus, alien to the nation and its people, the voice of one character, Sara's father and imam of a local *masjid* resounds with the voice of tolerance and respect for the various cultures. The various description of Malaysia landscape in the novel and the deep concern attached to the issue of multiculturalism in the aftermath of the 1969 racial riot lend a critical reading of the novel as patriotic writing. Yet because much of the narrative is concentrated in senseless violence caused by political riots and the sexual harassments that Sara has to endure from both her husband and the patriarchal political figure, Panglima, the novel lends itself to a psychoanalytic reading rather than providing an alternative cultural paradigm to solve the racial problems faced by the fictional Malaysia of the setting.

Other types of fictional outputs published in the country in the early nineties seem to be coloured by the same searching for a national consciousness and identity. And like Fernando's novel, this quest is shown to be futile yet necessary. The most poignant rendition of this search will have to be "Haunting the Tiger" (1991), K.S. Maniam's first-prize winning entry of the *New Straits Times* short story contest. An allegorical rendition of the diasporic existence of the Indian community in Malaya, the main character, an Indian man on the throes of death, remembers his past as a young man who frequents a nearby jungle to hunt for a tiger. In several of these haunting trips he is guided by a knowledgeable Malay man, Zulkifli. The various quests end disappointingly because in order to succeed, in the words of the old Muthu, "... [Zulkifli] wanted me to think myself like a tiger, to feel myself like one. I refused..." (*Haunting the Tiger*, 10).

There is no racial animosity in the story since the Indian protagonist clearly has an amicable friendship with his Malay guide. The tiger is clearly an emblem of the Malaya as Muthu says "What better way to know a country than to hunt down the beast that knows it well?" (*The Tiger*, 3). Muthu, however, fails to neither identify with nor possess it. Though it is not easy to pinpoint the reason for Muthu's failure to feel a sense of belonging to Malaya, the novel hints that the forced migration and acculturation of Indians into another culture and society involve a more complex process than physical assimilation. Muthu misses this point as he wishes to be a chameleon in order to trap the tiger, a figurative portrayal of his idea that physical assimilation is akin to acculturation. Though the thematic concern is not on nation-building, it resounds with a warning that unless there emerges some kind of

national consciousness, the alternative could clearly transform into a sense of “emptiness and nothingness” for Malaysia’s non-Malay “others”.

### **Cultural Myths and National History**

What is intriguing about the Maniam’s story is the way in which national consciousness as is shown in literature is often linked to the existence of collective cultural symbols and myths. Wong Phui Nam certainly sees the repository of these could be uncovered in the history of the founders of Melaka and that the *Sejarah Melayu* should be taught as Malaysia’s founding document (Wong, 2009: 58). Chew Fong Peng cites the same work by Tan Sri Lanang as containing many episodes in which Arabs, Chinese, Indians and Burmese intermingle with each other (Chew: 2010: 183). Yet, Wong criticises Muhammad Haji Salleh’s critical poetic appraisals of *Sejarah Melayu* in *Sajak-Sajak Sejarah Melayu* that his poems are reflective of “the poet’s nostalgia for the past as he imagines it, a past that is ‘pristine’ and not yet ruined by the advent of Western colonialism and the mass incursion of immigrants, of outsiders – a nostalgia combined with the wish that nothing has changed in the present” (Wong, 2009, 61). This tendency to be inward-looking to the community Muhammad Haji Salleh’s poems for Wong Phui Nam, is evidence of how non-Malays have been systematically written out of the collective literary memory of the nation and another evidence of an exclusively Malay nationalism.

To counter this absence of unifying myths and symbols, there are a number of writers who turn to recreating historical junctures in the past as events that could be taken to symbolise the collective history of the nation’s multicultural society. In this respect, Suschen Christine Lim’s *A Bit of Earth* (2001) stands out as an exceptional story on that nationalistic zeal that had coloured the history of British colonialism in Malaya. Though the protagonist is a Chinese, *A Bit of Earth* chronicles the lives of a multicultural people of Malaya as they forge alliances against a common enemy, the “other” British imperialists as each struggles to get his or maintain his control on “the bit of land” called Malaya. It is a chronicle of the tales of two generations: one, the son of a Chinese learned poet and his *peranakan* family; second, a dying Malay feudal ruler and the rise of his poor yet nationalistic son.

The story lends itself to a postcolonial reading with passages that suggest the struggle against British imperialism as an important factor that unites the races. However, these are limited to a few episodes wherein the lives of the Chinese, Malay and Indian Muslim characters converge, particularly in the two episodes when all three are ambushed by a rival Chinese triad and, later, by the British government for the Malay ruler’s involvement in the murder of a British resident. The bulk of the story, however, seems more concerned with the divided loyalties that the main character, China-born, Tuck Heng, feels, on the one hand, for his adopted family, on the other hand, for China. Malaya, in general, and the fictional town of Bandung, in particular, appear as places where Tuck Heng could develop and possess to serve as emblems of his success in a new country. While the narrative returns again and again to the need for a kind of national consciousness, this promise is largely unfulfilled except in the person of Ibrahim, the poor school teacher who launches a nationalist periodical to provoke the same sentiments in others.

### **Globalization and Literature**

For stories that have nationalistic tones, however, authors do not always look at the past for inspiration. The recent impact of globalization within the last twenty years, have also brought forth stories which have a nationalistic theme. The influx of immigrants into the country and the growth of international companies competing with local businesses have set an unprecedented tone to calls for nationalism amongst Malaysians in various spheres of life such as economy, politics and, even, literature. Intercepted in such discourse is the call for better ties amongst Malaysians and pleadings for understanding, tolerance and respect for the diversity of cultures and people in the country. The reason behind such invocations, however, is a concern with the economic welfare of Malaysians at the competing edge with foreign companies and enterprises.

This is articulated in Shih-li Kow’s “Deep Fried Devils”, a short story published in her collection of short stories, *Ripples and Other Stories* (2010). Malay-Chinese ethnic tension functions as the main

plot of the story wherein a pair of Malay stall owners often quarrel with their competitor, a Chinese lady, as each accuses the other of “stealing” the other ethnic’s traditional food in order to make a living. The ending sees the two sides reconciling with each other in the face of “global” competition as the Chinese lady’s former helper, an Indonesian, teams up with her Pakistani lover to open their own food stall.

### **The Need for an Alternative Cultural Paradigm**

Yet stories on colonization and globalization do not do much to provide alternative readings of cultural paradigms that the existence of culturally diverse Malaysians seem to promise readers. The unquestioning acceptance and application of aesthetical standards and criteria that underlie British and American literary canons in any interpretative study of Malaysian literature, for example, maybe indications that, as Shirley Lim suggests, that there is a lack of independent aesthetical criteria in the first place, leading to, in certain cases “the insidious alienation of Asian writers and critics from their societies” and an increasing obsession with western models of tradition and an “aridity of imagination” (Lim, 1993, 6). Creating a new literary and interpretative community, however, does have its pitfalls, as she continues (Lim, 1993, 7),

One possible problematic in this attempt lies in a narrowing interests leading to parochial or chauvinistic attitudes, an increasingly insular, self-obsessed and suspicious cultural climate. However, the alternative problematic in not undertaking this task is the continuance of Western domination of cultural life and the suppression of native, national literary expressions. Arguably a colonised mentality in a national literature is reflective of larger social and political problems, among them a yet unevolved cohesion of national identity that is fundamental to an assurance of social and political stability.

Following Lim, it could be argued that Malaysian literature written in English so far lends itself much to Western aesthetic standards and interpretative readings. To claim that a complete rejection of these is required in order to come up with alternative cultural paradigms, however, would be very ambitious and dismissive of universal concerns that all literature written across the globe might reflect. Yet there is truth in the fact that an overemphasis on Western traditions causes the suppression of native and national traditions and this is shown by the lack of attention to other alternative paradigms in constructing culture in Malaysian literature written in English. Insofar as Malay literature is concerned, the most contested debate on alternative cultural paradigm involves the cultural paradigm offered by Islam. Concepts such as the oneness of God [*Tawhid*] and Islam’s belief in the potential of the human life, rather than plain superstitions, are the ideals and bedrock of Islamic literature. There is, however, not enough of substantial attempts being made by Malaysian writers in English at creating a similar attempt at creating an alternative cultural paradigm.

Yet Chuah Guat Eng’s recently published *Days of Change* (2010) represents this much sought after and refreshing departure from the Western narrative modes and even postcolonial readings. Its main character, the Malay-Muslim Hafiz resorts to the Chinese classic book of divination, *I Ching* or *the Book of Changes*, to provide insights and conjure his memory, having experienced amnesia after his fall from a ravine, an event that seem all the more intriguing because of his lack of desire for his wife. As *I Ching* centres on the dynamic balance of binaries, the evolution of events as a series of process and the acceptance of change as being inevitable, what began in the narrative as Hafiz’s possible departure into the realm of postmodernist “emptiness” and “disjointedness” and even Freudian exploration of repressed sexual drives are revealed to be natural changes as life takes upon new meanings for him. Guided by *I-Ching* hexagrams, Hafiz’s personal memories and experiences are put to constant cross-examinations before he finally accepts the fact that changes do happen in life.

To argue that the novel proposes a singular and Chinese cultural paradigm in literature would be to ignore the fact that the novel refers frequently not only to Islam, Hafiz’s religion, but also to the traditional Malay way of life as those practised by the people whom he met and treated him after his fall. Indeed, where Hafiz, whose name in Arabic ironically means “the preserver” or “the memorizer” has failed to live up to his name, the *I Ching* hexagrams come to the rescue, complementing rather exchanging one world view with the other.

## Conclusion

Malaysian literature written in English within this last twenty years show the concerted effort of writers not only to bridge the ethnic gap amongst the country's diverse races, but also to create a national consciousness and identity amongst its people. This has taken various forms, from exploration of interethnic tension, through looking back and forward in history in order to find a unifying symbol or a converging juncture of collective moment wherein Malaysians became united as a nation and, finally, alternative cultural paradigms that give voice to the native traditions and beliefs of its people. Though not many stories published within this period deal with nationalism and multiculturalism within the same text, the attention to both within the writings analysed provides a refreshing outlook into the possibilities that lie ahead for Malaysian literature towards making Malaysia concept a reality.

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