

MALAYSIA AND THE AUTHOR: FACE-TO-FACE WITH THE CHALLENGES OF MULTICULTURALISM

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ABSTRACT

Multiculturalism, or the plurality of ethnicity and culture, a colonial legacy, is still a contested issue in present day postcolonial Malaysia. The lack of ethnic interaction in plural Malaya has had repercussions on various spheres of society. This paper considers the impact of Malaysia's management of diversity on the country's literary scene. The paper addresses how multiculturalism presents a challenge for Malaysian writers in English both in their choice of language and in their representation of society. The conclusion drawn from the discussion highlights that through their 'authorial-defined' social reality, Malaysian writers in English take distinct yet constructive efforts at representing the personal, communal and national needs of the people.

Keywords: multiculturalism, plurality, Malaysian literature, context-text, authorial-defined social reality

INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism, or the plurality of ethnicity and culture, a colonial legacy, is still a contested issue in present day postcolonial Malaysia. Even with over 50 years of experience as an independent nation, multiculturalism as a socio-cultural and political construct is still debated at various levels of society and in different domains of study. In this paper, I consider one

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particular discipline—literary studies—in order to discuss how multiculturalism generally and the management of plurality in Malaysia specifically has impacted the country's literary scene. The various facets of multiculturalism are a challenge that writers in English have especially had to deal with, including in their choice of language and in their representation of the society. Through their 'authorial-defined' social reality, these writers represent the challenges of multiculturalism faced by the nation as it moves beyond its '50 years of nationhood'.

MALAYSIA AND THE AUTHOR: CONTEXT AND TEXT

In a multicultural society, the author's role and responsibilities are connected to the nation. However private or personal a work of art may be, in a multicultural world it is still "anchored", as Fernando (1986: 116) describes it, "in a live[d] context of culture, history, and environment". As such, a writer of fiction finds himself associated with concerns of social heterogeneity, including issues of ethnicity, culture, gender and language. These issues mould the specific character, setting and themes of the fictional account. The construction of characters, for instance, can have ethnic and cultural attachments that feed into the central theme of the fictional work. Similarly, the setting of a multicultural environment or even a highly ethnocentric one can have different consequences for the types of conflicts faced by the characters. In brief, the context in which the fiction is framed helps to shape the story.

In the Malaysian situation, the local milieu has strong social and ethnological underpinnings. The history of Malaysian society, its development from a colony to independent status, and its shift from plural to multicultural status (where diversity was managed towards assimilation and later cultural pluralism) are all significant in appreciating not only the nation at a specific time of its growth but even more so the psyche of its people and, in this case, its writers (De Souza 2001; Maniam 1996; Tham 1981). As critic and author Lim (1986: 131–132) admits, "The writer who ignores or denies the forces of history, the impersonal influence of materialism on his work is either deceiving himself or stupid."

A multicultural landscape presents a platform for authors to air the country's multitude of voices. In a society with such diverse ethnicities, cultures and religions, writers have a larger pool of exposure to draw from. Each writer taps into a part of the nation's mindset to give her unique response to living in and being a member of such a diverse society. In addition, each writer brings her distinctive social and cultural background to

her creative work and allows for a particular representation of the self to emerge. The marriage of different private and public concerns, which include the personal, the communal and the national, collectively creates the final work of literature (Raihanah 2005).

Issues of self, ethnicity and the nation are vital preoccupations for many Malaysian writers. Each writer is not only an individual in his own right but also a member of an ethnic group and a citizen of the nation. Such identification with the person, ethnic community and nation enriches a writer's life and creates complexities in his literary production. Nonetheless, multiple identifications can also be problematic to the writer as he attempts to represent them in literature. For instance, when a communal outlook takes precedence over and above a national one, the writer, like the nation, faces a significant test of identity. How does one construct identity in one's narrative? Does one focus on the person, the ethnic community or the nation? Or does one consider all three constructs, and if so, what problems might one face in taking up such an endeavour?

Malaysia's multiculturalism, as I concluded in previous research, evolved from a plural background into an assimilative one where the dominant Malay community was given preference in the social, cultural and economic realms through the elevation of the Malay language, literature and culture to a national status (Raihanah 2008). Such an emphasis on the Malay language, though understandable, has had some repercussions on the other vernaculars and their respective literary works. To date, the changes in public language policy since independence have gradually marginalised the significance of literature in other vernaculars in the promotion of nation-building (Vethamani 2005; Quayum & Wicks 2001: x; Zawiah 2004). Malaysian-born poet and critic Ee Tiang Hong (1988: 19) shares the sentiment when he says,

As things stand, writers in English languish on the periphery of national development, spurned by those in control of the production and distribution of knowledge, excluded from participating in a politics of consensus, from contributing to the weaving of a rich and variegated fabric of national life.

This being the case, any study of the corpus of Malaysian literature in the English language needs to be cognisant of the effects of public policies on the literary movement, in this case regarding multiculturalism. In other

words, research on Malaysian literature in English has to take into account the consequences of the May 13th 1969 riots, which led to a series of policy implementations in Malaysian public life in the name of peace, prosperity and the management of diversity. These policies, including the Language Act, National Education and the creation of a National Culture, affected, among other areas, the nation's literary expression and tradition in English. How did the writers cope with the national language policy? Did the new policies affect their perspective of what literature should represent? Before understanding the impact of managing diversity following the 1969 riots, however, we would need to consider how pluralism affected the literary movement.

PLURALISM AND THE MALAYSIAN LITERARY SCENE: UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUE

Unsurprisingly, the lack of ethnic interaction in plural Malaya had spilt over into the literary realm. According to Chin (1983: 28), the formation of plural Malaya, especially the "importation of Chinese and Indian labour", became the most significant factor, after colonialism, to affect the "literary conditions" in the country. Each community's language and culture found an avenue in literature. In addition, the 'colonial tongue', which became the language of a "minority elite" (Wignesan 1983: 55), also became a medium of literary expression for some. However, literary output at this stage was merely imitative of the English literature to which the writers were exposed at school and tertiary education (De Souza 2001; Zawiah¹ 2004). The inherited language of the colonial masters underwent "various processes of evolution" as writers began experimenting with the use of "local atmosphere" and local issues (Brewster 1987: 143). Such efforts, known as the "domesticat[ion]" of the English language where the Malayan writers "bend, tend, acculturate, or nativize it so as to render it suitable and workable as an instrument for forging an authentic image of themselves" (Chin 1988: 131), included the experimental language "*EngMalChin*". A conflation of the first syllables of the three languages English, Malay and Chinese, *EngMalChin* was considered by some as a "hybridisation of Malay" (Brewster 1987: 138). Though generally considered a failed attempt to create a Malaysian English, these efforts by some of the earlier writers of

¹ According to the postcolonial critic Zawiah Yahya (2004: 248), the pioneering writers in English were rooted not "in Malaysian soil". These "budding writers from the ivory tower [...] were taught to bend westwards in search of light."

the country showcase their consciousness towards localising the language within the context of the society in which they lived. It also shows, indirectly, the need for the writers to use literature and language to forge a sense of national collectiveness and a separation from the colonial legacy. Ee (1988: 18) elaborates that "*EngMalChin* implied that nationalising the language and literature was an inevitable aspect of the loosening of political allegiance."

Nonetheless, the establishment of the National Language Policy and the National Culture Policy in the 1970s, which are both based on the Malay race, heightened the 'us vs. them' tension faced by the people in the country. Kee (2000: 5) a Malaysian playwright states that, these policies merely erected "barriers when barriers need to be removed". In present day Malaysia, these "barriers" translate into interracial tensions that are not uncommon among its citizens. As a society, Malaysians are still contesting issues of identity as members of ethnic communities separated from each other in a multicultural environment. In addition, Malaysians are also contesting their sense of identity as members of the united nation or *Bangsa Malaysia*. In the literary scene, the 'us vs. them' syndrome is again apparent, this time between literatures written in the national language and those written in English, Chinese, Tamil and other vernaculars. The former is given the National Literature status, whilst the latter carry sectional or vernacular status. The situation becomes more acute when the majority of the "National" writers are Malays while the majority of first generation Malaysians writing in English are non-Malays (Vethamani 2005; Maniam 1996). Such policies compartmentalise literature and ultimately create division and unfavourable feelings among writers. Consequently, instead of nurturing camaraderie among writers of the country, the creation of different types of literature, according to Kee (2000: 5), "stirs up feelings of envy, and fosters defensiveness on the part of the privileged and distrust on the part of the marginalised."

To make matters worse, the Language Act of 1967 and later the Amendment Act of 1971, which established the Malay language as the national language of the country, created a "politics of emergent nationalism" (Zawiah 2004: 249) where every aspect of social life connected to language became politicised. As a result of this politicisation of language, other literatures in the country were viewed as "obstructing the full expression of national sentiments" (ibid.). In fact, advocates of the

National Literature policy, especially academicians and scholars, began to contest the validity of literatures written outside the Malay medium. One such critic, Ismail Hussein, went as far as to suggest that literatures in English, Chinese and Tamil are "foreign literature" because they are written in "non-indigenous languages" and they have a "narrow chauvinistic tradition", unlike the Malay literature (Tham 2001: 53; Abdul Rahman & Zalila 2003; Ee 1988). Nonetheless, actual support by Malay writers towards such division remains questionable, as seen in the poem entitled "Dear Friend (for Dr. M K Rajakumar)" by national laureate Usman Awang².

Given the constitutional validation of and strong public sentiment for literature in Malay, the production of literatures in other languages and the participation of non-Malay writers have received poor public recognition. Writers in English during the 1970s coped with drastic public policies against the language in different ways. Some, like Shirley Lim and Ee Tiang Hong, voluntarily left the country for the United States of America and Australia, respectively. Others, like national laureate Muhammad Haji Salleh, made a conscious decision to discontinue writing in English and moved into the Malay literary tradition. And yet others, such as Wong Phui Nam, took a hiatus from writing perhaps as a form of revolt against the public policies regarding English and literatures in English. Wong published his second volume of poetry 21 years after the first publication in 1968 (Fadillah et al. 2004; Zawiah 2004; Ee 1988). Indeed, the May 1969 riots and the culminating public policies that accompanied it, particularly the "pre-eminent position" (Thumboo 1973: xxxiv) given to Bahasa Malaysia, took a strong toll on literary activities in English³. Very few works were produced during that period. Referring to the state of playwriting in

² Consider the following poem by Malaysia's national laureate, Usman Awang (quoted in Maniam 1996, n.p.):

Dear Friend (For Dr. M K Rajakumar)
The one, free
Nation we imagined,
Remains a distant truth,
My anger becomes bitterness,
When we are forced apart
The distance ever wider,
Now that I am proclaimed 'bumiputra'
And you are not.

³ Thumboo's caution back in 1976 is worth noting: "These changes ... can be expected to have a crucial bearing on the course of writing in English, on writers, would-be writers and their place in the literary life of the nation" (xxxiv).

Malaysia, Malaysian dramatist and literary critic Krishen Jit commented: "By the mid-1970s, local playwriting in English was a spent force—defeated by the nationalistic forces unleashed by May 13, 1969" (Quayum 2003a: 187).

The hostile attitude towards the English language is not altogether baseless. Postcolonial critics have often stated that language was an important tool of imperial hegemony; that is, "the most potent instrument of cultural control" (Ashcroft et al. 1995: 283). As the renowned postcolonial Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o illustrates, language has the kind of power to paralyse and captivate: "In my view language was the most important vehicle through which [imperial] power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (Quayum 2003b: 287). In light of this relationship between language and histories of colonial control, hostility to such an 'imprisoning' language in many former colonies such as Malaysia is unsurprising. The rediscovery of one's heritage and culture through restoring and revitalising the language of the land becomes a crucial quest for many post-independent nations. In fact, critics admit that the policy changes seen in Malaysia are "a significant dimension of the postcolonial condition" (Zawiah 2004: 246).

To reiterate, in the Malaysian context, the need for a language to unite the multicultural, multi-ethnic population was met by privileging the Malay community's mother tongue. As Mohamad A Quayum (2003a: 184) argues, replacing English with Malay "was predicated on a patriotic nationalist sentiment that was instrumental in resisting the imperial hegemony and restoring the consciousness of the "disadvantaged people" (Quayum & Wicks 2001: x–xiv). Language is therefore as much a cultural tool as it is a political one, and the politicisation of language and literature has been an important feature of Malaysia's management of plurality.

MALAYSIAN LITERATURE AND THE ETHNIC FACTOR: IDENTIFYING THE CHALLENGES

Given the division created by the policies on language, literature and culture, ethnocentrism became a defining feature of the Malaysian national psyche. Literary production following the riots, especially in the 1970s,

1980s, and early 1990s, was greatly influenced by racial consciousness. Writers were aware of their identity within a multi-ethnic environment, and they wrote about identity in a rather ethnocentric manner at the expense of their sense of nationhood. The original intentions of balancing the social, political and economic fabric of the country towards creating an integrated and stable nation, as seen in the need to create a 'new' creolised English language, *EngMalChin*, are drowned by dominant communal attitudes (*The New Cauldron* 1949–1950, Editorial⁴). Kee (2001: 70) considers the acuteness of "race consciousness" in Malaysia as a major obstacle: "Almost every issue is seen from the perspective of race to the point that it is impossible to obtain a consensus of public opinion on any issue". However, as much as the riots were the catalyst in changing the landscape of race relations in the country, public policies that were set up after 1969 are the real perpetrators of the prolonged race consciousness in the country (Gomez 2004; Ramasamy 2004).

In the literary scene, ethnic representation has become an important point of contention among writers and critics. Race consciousness causes a writer's literary work to be viewed with suspicion by some segments of the population. According to Kee (2001: 70), what the Malaysian literary scene lacks is a unified mindset or "a developed Malaysian consciousness" among the diverse population. Such a consciousness, he insists, is vital in order for a writer "to address his views with sanguinity", without which there is no "covenant between writer and audience" (Kee 2001: 70).

Moreover, due to this lack of collective consciousness, the writer is left with few options but to merely represent the community with which he is familiar. Given that identification with a particular cultural community colours our appreciation of others, writers cannot be expected to create characters outside their 'horizon of expectation' (Jauss 1982). Zawiah (1988: 76), for instance, accepts that writers would naturally "exploit" the milieu that is "familiar" to them in order to gain "full control of their reproduction into the fictional world." The element of "control" is necessary in order for the work of art to be believable. As the critic adds, "To venture into alien territory of which they know very little can be a hazardous undertaking"

⁴ Consider the opening paragraph of the Editorial of *The New Cauldron* (1949–1950), the official newsletter of the English society in University Malaya: 'Professor T. H. Silcock, in his pamphlet "Dilemma in Malaya" says that "Self-government implies a self to do the governing, and it is our responsibility to bring that self into existence." Before that "self" can emerge we must have a solidified concoction of all the socially, economically, politically and culturally disunited peoples in Malaya. Can we achieve that solidarity? Assuredly we can. The process of transforming different peoples with diverse ideas into a single unit may take a few decades but ultimately unity is ours.'

(ibid). However, this focused approach has also been criticised by others as "a will towards particularism", where instead of a more multicultural representation, writers confine themselves to the "arteries of ethnic particularities" (Chin 1983: 30).

Due to this reality, some critics go as far as suggesting that almost all Malaysian literatures are "sectional and often sectarian", largely for the kind of "political realities" that they portrayed (Chin 1983: 30). It has to be accepted, however, that this parochial mindset is a reaction to the constant pressures applied by the authorities that writers not dwell on racially sensitive issues (Salleh 1994). This has resulted in a further widening of disparities felt within the country, as well as literary representations of the nation that do not appear comprehensive. For this reason, some foreign readers assumed that Malaysia was a predominantly Indian nation after reading K.S. Maniam's novel *The Return* (Lim 2001). In a similar fashion, Muhammad Haji Salleh's poetry merely presents the "Malay point of view" to "the other ethnic groups and the world at large", according to critics (Chin 1983: 30). All the same, what effect does parochial representation have on a literary movement?

The effect of ethnocentrism in the writer's work is like a double-edged sword. In focusing primarily on their own communities and in creating fiction based solely on their own social and cultural backgrounds, writers are seen to present a communal outlook of society (Tham 1981). However, in presenting the issues and concerns of a particular group, the writers become the 'mouthpiece' for the community. Writers accordingly have the difficult task of striking a balance between the two competing social demands placed upon them by different ethnic groups and by the nation. Should they tap into their ethnic associations and shape characters that are believable, or should they be politically, culturally and socially correct and create characters that represent every community in the nation? One assumes that writers in English can contribute to the building of the Malaysian nation-state. However, is it presumptuous to think so? To better understand this issue, one would need to position these writers within the context of the nation's history.

AUTHORIAL-DEFINED SOCIAL REALITY: THE WRITER AND THE NATION

Given its pluralistic landscape, the contested space of the Malaysian nation is an important concern for many first generation English writers in the country. These writers, including Ee Tiang Hong, Edward Dorall, Wong Phui Nam and Lee Kok Liang, can best be categorised as "postcolonial writers" who, according to Thumboo (1996), were a generation that directly experienced the power transition from the colonialist to the locals. As members of the 'postcolonial' generation, these writers were undoubtedly affected by the events that took place in the country to the extent that "their thinking, awareness, assumptions, judgment and sense of history are influenced by the times" (Thumboo 1996: 14). In light of this postcolonial experience, their realities both as members of a particular generation and as creative voices within the nation require careful consideration.

Furthermore, Malaysia's "search of self-realisation" allows it, like other "unformed nations" and ex-colonies, to be in a constant "state of flux", especially given the "daunting challenges" that the nation faces in "building up institutions and the means to service them" (Thumboo 1996: 13–15). In the literary context, the daunting challenges in coping with diversity become the responsibility of writers who have to be mindful of the nation that they represent in their literature. Some writers are more concerned with representing a heterogeneous Malaysian landscape and trying to incorporate a 'multicultural' setting in line with the policies of plurality, which highlights the notion that literature should be used as a tool to promote integration and harmony among the many races (Salleh 1994; Zawiah 2001). As the Singaporean poet-critic Thumboo (1973: xiv) aptly sums up, "[T]he individual's hope has affinities with public aspiration and it becomes difficult to write of one without implicating the other." Even in the genre of children's literature, the consciousness with which a writer creates a sense of diversity is apparent. For example, Devaraj Munusamy's 1976 collection called *Stories from Malaysia* illustrates how the writer uses his public persona to construct characters and settings that appear socially and politically correct. The following extract is a sample of such an effort:

Shan had three of his schoolmates living close to him. They were Ali, Kim and Pal Singh. Ali was a Malay, Kim, a Chinese and Pal Singh was a Punjabi. Shan's parents were Indian but Shan, Ali, Kim and Pal were all born in Malaysia, and this made them Malaysians. The boys spoke to each other in English for they were attending English schools. They could also speak Ali's mother tongue, Malay, without any difficulty. Kim did his best to teach his friends a few words of Chinese, and he thought it very funny

to hear his mates converse with the Chinese shopkeepers. The shopkeepers were always very happy to hear the boys speak Chinese, and they made sure they gave the boys a little extra of whatever they wanted (Munusamy 1976: 23).

The concerns encapsulated in the above excerpt about a group of young multiracial boys who are Malaysians by birth and speak a common language, that is, "Ali's mother tongue", include what constitutes being Malaysian, especially among former migrant communities, what the common language between the multiracial groups was and how they related to each other. If such a one-dimensional representation does not do justice to the true depiction of the nation, what then is the solution for the writer and his/her craft?

A "good" writer, says Fernando (1986: 5), seeks "to be most" himself, to take the "jangling heterogeneity of the modern world in [his] stride". In the postcolonial context, to be most oneself as a writer can translate, according to the Malaysian novelist, as "balanc[ing] what he knows of others" (ibid.). Ngugi expresses similar sentiments. The renowned novelist defines himself as "a product of the community" who should "simultaneously swim in the river and also sit at the bank to see it flow" (Poza 2004: n.p.). He adds, "I am a product of the community and I would like to contribute something to that community" (ibid.). Thus, the question of community, that is, the "other" in the self vs. other binary, is an important "reality" in the writer's consciousness, and even more so if the nation is multicultural, multiracial and multireligious. Each writer of such a diverse nation deals with this reality in his her own way.

On the other hand, as stated previously, as members of an ethno-cultural community, some Malaysian writers in English, like their fellow writers from Southeast Asia, may tap into their "dominating fact", i.e., their ethnic attachment, for genuine resources for their literary production (Tham 1981: vii). In addition, according to Tham (1981: x), even though the focus of "struggle" for a newly independent nation may shift from a more "nationalistic cause" during the early stages of independence to a more personal one in the post-independence era, the "communal process" can still be the motivating feature of "literary creativity and development." Hence, as Wignesan (1983: 53) phrases it, as an "engage[d] writer", the Malaysian

writer's ideology is centred on his "life-long partisan in the service of the advancement of his own particular racially-biased culture".

Nonetheless, regardless of a writer's incorporation of the communal element in literature, within the discourse of multiculturalism, successful writers have certain responsibilities to themselves, to their ethnic group, and to their nation. If a writer's responsibility were to be charted on a continuum, on the one end she or he would be seen as "social critics, teacher or guru, nationalist, protagonist, ideologue and arbiter of justice and tradition" (Tham 1981: viii). On the other end of the continuum, however, writers may use their chosen medium as an outlet of personal expression, creating art for its own sake (Lim 1986). In the first instance where writers are seen as social critics, their literary and public persona gives them the license to voice concerns of which they feel that society and authorities need to be aware. Fernando (1986: 103) concurs that an author is in many ways the 'guru' for society, one who helps the public distinguish "the real from the vainglorious, truth from inanity". Therefore, writers need to use the opportunity accordingly and should not abuse their public position for personal gain.

In the second instance, however, where writers consider their art personal and private, expecting them to use their voice as a societal mouthpiece would amount to an invasion of their creative space. Writers need to have the freedom to decide on the context and content of their texts instead of being asked to adopt "a certain Eastern way of writing" (Quayum 2003a: 194) purely to assist the country in achieving economic stability. Suggesting that "intellectual freedom" should be put on hold for the sake of attaining a developed nation status may not be in line with the true spirit of Vision 2020. As Quayum (2003a: 194) states, attaining a "developed nation status by 2020" requires "harmony and political stability, and the "status" can only be achieved by "the loss of intellectual freedom" in order to "ballast the boat and avert the anarchy and endless cycle of suffering that exists in some of the Asian and African countries, where intellectual freedom has rendered the people hostages of political opportunism." I contend that such a constricted approach to literary production can eventually threaten the true contribution of the literary movement to the nation's overall progress. This is because one assumes that there is only one way for the writers to be truly successful in assisting the nation in achieving its aspirations. I also hypothesise that it is in the meeting of these two specific and varied focuses, namely, between being a social guru and writing for sheer personal satisfaction, that a writer can truly create a sense of equilibrium between being a social creature with a sense of ethnicity and nationhood and harnessing his/her creativity for personal satisfaction. That

is the reality for the Malaysian writer as a member of a multicultural nation, an ethnic group and a person in his/her own right.

The notion of 'reality' is itself a construct. Shamsul Amri Baharuddin's (1998: 18) conceptualisations of "authority-defined social reality" and "everyday-defined social reality" highlight the distinction between the private and public realms of society. The former is "authoritatively defined" by those in power, while the latter is a reality "experienced" by the general population in their everyday lives. My own conceptualisation of "authorial-defined social reality" or author-defined social reality (Raihanah 2003: 68–69), which I submit as a subcategory to illustrate the writer's role, gives the authors, poets and playwrights greater space or license to construct the Malaysian nation. As members of society, these writers have a public voice to participate in a dialogue (between themselves and within society at large) on issues such as identity politics, racialised representation and the state of plurality in the country. Using their choice of characters, setting, conflicts and themes, writers can create a link between "the real with the fantastic, the physical with the metaphysical, the personal with the social" (Ibid.: 69) in order to raise our awareness of issues affecting the nation. In short, by using authorial-defined social reality, one may better appreciate the writer's public persona within the nation-building project. And this public persona should be given creative license to stand "alone" within the "creative medium" and act as "an observer" of society (Greet, 1991: 10). Being an observer, the writer's authorial-defined social reality then becomes the voice of conscience for the nation.

Moreover, an important element in the creation of a socially and politically conscious writer is the level of public recognition that he or she receives. On the other hand, writers in the English medium can feel a sense of relief as the lack of "official assistance" on the part of the authorities excludes them from subscribing to the "thematic priorities" expected of those writers who are recognised as National Laureates. As Tham (1981: ix) states, "With any kind of recognition by the authorities, there is a kind of implicit understanding that "the writer is sensitive to the underlying social and political constraints in operation." On the other hand, without any kind of national support, the writer may feel that he is not able to contribute to society (Ee 1988; Vethamani 2005: 9–10) for the international awards won

by Malaysians writing in English)⁵. With or without public recognition, however, Malaysian writers in English, like their counterparts writing in other vernacular languages, are committed to the concerns of the country. Writers like Lloyd Fernando, Muhammad Haji Salleh, K.S. Maniam and Shirley Lim use their authorial-defined social reality to represent their social and political ideological standpoints, whether centred in the person, ethnicity or nation. Each one's positionality in the construction of identity is a true representation of Malaysian identity politics. As with writers in any multicultural society, Malaysian writers in English have diverse concerns and preoccupations. However, despite different racial, cultural and even gendered perspectives, an underlying pattern emerges in the literary representation of multicultural identity in the country, as the final section of the paper highlights.

MALAYSIAN WRITERS AND MULTICULTURAL REPRESENTATION: MAKING CONNECTIONS

The "first generation" writers, that is, those who began writing in the 1950s and 1960s (Vethamani 1996: 61) such as Lloyd Fernando, Wong Phui Nam, Lee Kok Liang, Muhammad Haji Salleh and Ee Thiang Hong, have a sense of fraternity from their exposure to formal education and British culture through English literature and language, which were taught in schools and universities. Many began their literary journey as university students. However, communal concerns remain pivotal in their writings. The preoccupation with the ethnic community is rooted, as critics point out, in the "fear" of "cultural extinction" (Chin 1983: 31). Each community feels the "threat" of the other, be it "Malay dominance" in the case of the non-Malays or "pluralism" in the case of the Malays (Ibid.: 32).

⁵ In addition, public recognition undoubtedly creates a larger readership that all writers aspire for, as seen in the case of K.S. Maniam. Maniam first received recognition from outside the country when his fictions were read in different Australian universities. Following which universities in Malaysia too began introducing his short stories, plays and novels to their students. [As Maniam states in an interview the lack of support he received can be clearly seen in the kind of reception his works get at the local universities, particularly the one in which he was a staff member (Greet 1991)]. Consequently his novel *The Return* was incorporated into the secondary education literature text. The 2000 Raja Rao Award that Maniam received in New Delhi was a definite boost to his international acclaim as a writer. And this was followed by the 2003 Malaysian Library Book Award. It is without a doubt that such recognition both nationally and internationally gives the writer an added motivation in pursuing his work of art.

All the same, these writers do represent diverse racial and cultural perspectives of Malaysian society⁶. Some are more ethnocentric in their work through using their community of origin as the persona of their fiction. Other writers consciously move away from taking any one racial representation. The Malay poet Muhammad Haji Salleh, for instance, taps into the personal and the private, and he relates it to the concerns of the individual living in a society. Muhammad's more personal persona is prevalent in his early poetry in English. As he says, "You write for yourself as much as about your people" (Fadillah 2003: 16). Ironically, Muhammad's poetry has been criticised as too nationalistic in its choice of themes, which have been considered too communal-centred. It would be fair to say that since switching to writing in Bahasa Malaysia, Muhammad has begun to take on issues that are directly related to the Malay community. The poet's response, albeit not unlike that of non-Malay writers, indicates his position on identity and writing, as he says, "My poetry is 'communally-centred' in as much as I write about myself, a Malay and the community I know best, my own" (Fadillah 2003: 15; Raihanah & D'Cruz 2003).

It may be that non-Malay writers face similar circumstances in pledging allegiance to their own community. Other Malaysian poets such as Wong Phui Nam and Ee Tiang Hong take similar communal-based positions. The former's poems are "marked by the depth of their involvement in the psyche of the Malaysian Chinese community" (Fadillah et al. 2004: 55). Similarly, the latter's poetry can also be read within his ethnic boundaries, "a seventh generation Chinese of Baba heritage" (Ibid.: 28). Yet Shirley Lim, the Malaysian-born Chinese American, takes a different position with regards to her poetry. Lim conceptualises writing as a very personal and intimate action. The following excerpt highlights the extent to which her 'person' colours her literary production:

I write because I am moved by some powerful feeling which somehow wants to express itself in a specific shape. I write because I master these feeling when I utter them in the shape of a poem. I write in order to invent myself and my past. I write because I am moved by some idea of beauty that is just waiting to be formed. I write because I believe someone needs

⁶ However, is there truth in Tang Soo Ping's (1993) claims that the "non-Malay writers", in comparison to the Malay counterpart, hold a "narrower" sense of "Malaysianness" by focusing on ethnic and racial concerns at the expense of a national one?

to write down certain aspects of a communal past that would not be expressed otherwise. I write in order to communicate opinions, thoughts and feelings. It is usually personal urgency rather than social mission that leads me to write, but that doesn't mean I do not write from and of social concerns.... Writing blesses me with this experience of connectedness: it is the act by which I am centred" (Lim 1993: 23–24).

The emphasis placed on the "I" is undoubtedly obvious. Perhaps the intrinsic quality of poetry in itself calls for a way of writing that is more introspective. However, the focus on self could also be a reflection of personal inclinations, which in this case is centred more on the individual as opposed to an ethnic group and nation (Lim 1986).

The Malaysian writer K.S. Maniam similarly anchors his fiction in the psyche of his own community, the Malaysian Indian. As he tells Kee (1992: 15) in an interview, his preoccupation with the working class is real, as through their lives one gets to understand "what the human personality is about". They are, as he states, "what he knows best" (Maniam 2001: 264), and his writing not only speaks of them, but perhaps more importantly, it speaks *to* them. In Maniam's fiction, Indian philosophy and religion find a new home in the adopted land of the migrant workers. His writing discusses the struggles faced by the migrant community as they attempt to develop a sense of belonging in a new and foreign land.

In addition to focusing on the community, Maniam's fiction also presents the concerns of the individuals who undergo various struggles for a better awareness of their sense of self, at times outside the ethno-cultural attachments. Many of the characters in his short stories, plays and novels take a particular journey, akin to a hero's quest towards self-discovery, and each returns in some form or other, better aware and perhaps better prepared to continue their lives.⁷ As a consequence, even though the characters may have Indian names and the plots use the Malaysian Indian social and cultural milieu, the conflicts that they face are not altogether foreign to

⁷ Maniam admits that the issue of self has a special place in his writing. In an interview he states that his fiction dwells on "the death of the self—the falling away of a personality as it had been known—and being replaced by a paradigmatic self that is capable of encompassing more." (Kee, 1992: 14). He also admits to be keen on discovering the true value of the self, as he says, "I want to see how many personalities can be contained in one self. I want to see the universe in man. I want to see the world in a broader sense. [...] I know it sounds like a lofty idea but the feeling is very down-to earth. I feel it very strongly" (Kee 1992: 16). Thus it is not surprising that the writer dislikes being considered a communal-centred writer who promotes "a communal outlook" (Maniam 2001: 264). His approach as a writer, according to him, is ruled by his interest to understand the individual in all his sensibilities. He merely utilizes the "immediate and local", i.e. the concerns of his community to address larger more global issues pertinent to human beings and society.

Malaysians regardless of their culture and racial backgrounds. Any community or individual who faces issues such as poverty, substance abuse, illiteracy, marital problems and family conflicts can relate to the difficulties faced by Maniam's Tamil characters. As an author, Maniam approaches his fiction by oscillating between more communally centred concerns and the concerns of the individual (D'Cruz & Steele 2000) as and when he feels the need.

On one end of the personal, communal and national literary continuum is Lloyd Fernando. Fernando is one of the few Malaysian writers in any vernacular whose writings do not centre on his ethnic group. Despite being born in Sri Lanka, his novels do not take a non-Malay point of view. As critics have pointed out, Fernando is seen as a writer who presents a more multiracial representation of characters without giving "any special attention to the Malaysian Indian" (Vethamani 1995: 52). In addition, he is also known to make conscious efforts to showcase a more heterogeneous social reality about the nation as a means to address issues "that still plague us today" (Zawiah 1988: 21). My own reading of his fiction concludes that Fernando successfully raises awareness of the complexities of being a member of a multi-ethnic, multicultural society where inter- and intra-racial dialectic is a known reality, which he accomplishes without focusing on any one ethnic group (Raihanah 2008).

CONCLUSION

Given the varied literary constructions of Malaysian identity by the different Malaysian and Malaysian-born writers, what can be concluded about authors and the multicultural nation? Malaysian writers have taken distinct and diverse approaches to dealing with the challenges of multiculturalism. The authorial-defined social reality of Malaysian writers can be grouped into three major categories. The first is the person-oriented reality that highlights the needs of the individual irrespective of ethnicity or nationality. The second is the more ethno-cultural or communal-oriented reality that centres on the representation of particular ethnicities. The third is the nation-oriented reality that presents the collective needs of Malaysian society given the diversity of ethnicities. These three subcategories of authorial-defined social reality are the mechanisms utilised by the authors in dealing with

issues of national diversity. Each positionality represents an author's construction of a particular need of multicultural Malaysia as she adjusts to the competing demands of the individual, the ethnic group and the nation. In conclusion, through the discussion in this paper, I assert that with over fifty years of independence, Malaysian writers in English demonstrate that the challenges of multiculturalism can be met through the intersections and interactions of personal needs, ethnic-cultural needs and national needs.

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