PETALS OF HIBISCUS
A Representative Anthology of Malaysian Literature in English

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Introduction

In spite of the many early challenges and lingering difficulties faced by writers in the English language in Malaysia – challenges and difficulties of a political, literary and social nature, which I propose to discuss later – Anglophone tradition in this newly emergent nation has come a long way, showing considerable dynamism and resilience, since its inception. Critics suggest that Anglophone literature in post-colonial societies generally evolves in three stages. In their collaborative book, Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, for example, explain these three stages as: (i) "[works] produced by 'representatives' of the imperial power," (ii) "[works] produced 'under imperial license' by 'natives' or 'outcasts,'" and finally, (iii) the "development of independent literatures" or the "emergence of modern post-colonial literatures" (5-6).

If we apply the above evolutionary model to the local context and leave out the works of the earlier two stages for their overt "metropolitan" bias – works by writers such as Hugh Clifford, Richard Winstedt, Frank Swettenham, Katherine Sim and Margaret Leong, who engaged in diverse literary exercises but mostly as "representatives" of the imperial power," or the output of such expatriate writers as Gregory

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1 Explaining the evolutionary model, in her article "Finding a Native Voice," Shirley Lim comments, "The theory that post-colonial literatures go through three stages – the first imitative of the mother colony's literature, a provincial stage when writers turn to local colour and nationalistic themes; and a final stage of confidence when writers are free to explore whatever they wish – has been promulgated by influential writers as diverse as A.D. Hope, the Australian poet; Frantz Fanon, the French-Algerian activist and A.L. McLeod, a Commonwealth Literature scholar" (10-11).
It is somewhat baffling though that in spite of such strong convictions on the role of English and English literature in the continuation of the colonial process, and of so much emphasis on the implementation of an English education policy in India, the British were so slow in adopting a similar policy in Malaya, where English literature was introduced as an academic subject only in the 1940s. From a political point of view, this was, perhaps, a boon, as people were spared cultural and ideological contamination and consequently a more rigorous colonisation of the mind than, for example, in the case of India. But, ironically, from the point of view of English literary writings, it only serves to explain why India has produced so many world class writers in the English language such as R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Nirad Chaudhuri, R.K. Ramanujan, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Kamala Das, Vikram Seth and Arundhati Roy – with still more talented younger writers breaking into the scene every day, with Jumpha Lahiri, a Bengali-American, who received the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, being the latest in a long string of gifted writers – while Malaysia can only optimistically hope to match that envious list sometime in the future.

Achievements

Perhaps it is unfair to compare the achievements of Malaysian literature in English to those of India, as the cultural and political circumstances in the two countries have been widely different throughout. However, even compared to neighbouring Singapore, the quantum of creative writing in the English language in Malaysia looks discouragingly small, if not downright negligible. This is in spite of the fact that the literary history of the two countries shares a common origin, which continued to remain one until the island’s departure from Malaysia to become a republic, in August 1965, when Anglophone literature in the two countries assumed separate courses.

Notwithstanding this somewhat arrested growth, there has no doubt been, and continues to be, a tenacious stream of literature in Malaysia that is written in English and is being published. The major writers of the tradition include Wong Phui Nam, Lloyd Fernando, Lee Kok Liang and Ee Tiang Hong as pioneers, and Shirley Lim, K.S. Maniam, Cecil Rajendra, Kee Thuan Chye and Hilary Tham as second generation writers. Of these, Shirley Lim, K.S. Maniam and Kee Thuan Chye certainly seem the most prolific and versatile. Shirley Lim, currently a professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara, for example, has four volumes of poetry, three volumes of short stories, one novel and one memoir to her credit. K.S. Maniam, on the other hand, has
published three novels, four volumes of short stories and four plays, while
Kee Thuan Chye has three plays, two volumes of prose, a few poems and
a novel in the making.

Among the “older” writers, Wong Phui Nam has four volumes of
poetry to his name; Lee Kok Liang, one novel and two collections of
short stories; Ee Tiang Hong, five volumes of poetry; and Lloyd
Fernando, two novels, one of which was also made into a play. Although
Fernando’s creative contribution might seem relatively small, his
contribution to the overall development of the tradition cannot be
underestimated, as he was instrumental in instilling inspiration in many of
the younger writers when he was a professor of English at the University
of Malaya. His several edited anthologies also played a significant role in
the formative years of the tradition. Moreover, Lloyd Fernando is
perhaps the best known of the Malaysian literary critics in the English
language, having published numerous articles both at home and abroad.

Of the writers discussed so far, Malacca-born Nyonya activist and
feminist, Shirley Lim and Malaysian-Indian writer K.S. Maniam are
perhaps the best known internationally. Shirley Lim has received several
international literary awards, including the Commonwealth Writers’
Prize in 1980 for her first collection of poetry, *Crossing the Peninsula and
Other Poems*, and the American Book Award twice, in 1990 and 1997
respectively, while K.S. Maniam was awarded the Raja Rao award for
Fiction by the Indian Sahitya Academy in 2000. Wong Phui Nam and
Ee Tiang Hong have not received any prizes but they are highly regarded
in the region, with many considering them as two of the best poets in the
English language in ASEAN. Lee Kok Liang and Kee Thuan Chye have
also received considerable critical attention both locally and
internationally but, of the two, Kee is the more politically active voice in
Malaysian literature, often challenging the status quo and appropriating
the role of the “other” in Malaysian political binarism. In a recently
published collection of critical essays, *Malaysian Literature in English: A
Critical Reader*, the first of its kind exclusively on Malaysian Literature in
English, Peter C. Wicks and I pay tribute to some of these better known
writers by focusing on critical appraisals on their writings.

Of course, in addition to those we consider “major” writers, there are
others both old and new. They include Muhammad Haji Salleh, Adibah
Amin, Chua Huat Eng, Lee Geok Lan, Salleh Ben Joned, Nirmala
Raghavan, Ruth Ho, Karim Raslan, Marie Gerrina Louis, Lee Su Kim,
Ché Husna Azhari, Dina Zaman, Rehman Rashid and Amir Muhammad.
Some of the female writers mentioned here have been discussed in
considerable detail in a book I co-authored with Nor Faridah Abdul
Manaf, *Colonial to Global: Malaysian Women’s Writing in English

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1940s – 1990s. However, many of these writers are bilingual, suggesting
an allegiance divided between English and their respective mother
tongues. Furthermore, the output of most of them is very limited,
generally to a collection of short stories (as in the case of Dina Zaman
and Karim Raslan) or a volume of occasional writings (as with Karim
Raslan, Rehman Rashid and Lee Su Kim).

Muhammad Haji Salleh, Adibah Amin, Salleh Ben Joned and Nirmala
Raghavan are all bilingual writers. Muhammad Haji Salleh, for example,
started his career as an English language poet but later changed his mind
to concentrate on the national language as the only medium for his
creative imagination. After the passing of the Language Act in 1967,
Muhammad gradually came to view English as the language of
colonisation and quizzically concluded, “Should I lick the hand that
strangles my language and culture?” (qtd. in Nor Faridah and Quayum
124). Adibah Amin is widely known as a Malay language writer but,
interestingly, she started writing columns in the *New Straits Times (NST)*,
a local English daily, under the pseudonym “Sri Delima” in the 1970s,
when English was going through its most difficult phase. Her articles
were later put together in book form and published under the title *As I
Was Passing (Vol. 1) and As I was Passing (Vol. 2)*, in 1976 and 1978
respectively. Salleh Ben Joned, a former lecturer in English at University
Malaya and currently a freelance writer, is widely known as a rebel who
stands against the grain of accepted social and political norms. Although
his reputation lies mostly in the boldly defiant newspaper articles,
published under the title *As I Please*, in 1994, a second book, his only
collection of poetry, *Sajak-Sajak Salleh: Poems Sacred and Profane*, consists
of poems written in both English and Malay. Finally, Nirmala Raghavan,
a writer who was born in Madras, India and migrated to Malaysia in the
1960s after marrying a Malaysian, is best known for her Tamil works, but
she has nonetheless consistently written feature/occasional articles in the
*New Straits Times* since the 1980s and, to date, has more than 200 such
text pieces to her name.

Among female writers in the English language, Chua Huat Eng and
Marie Gerrina Louis are, perhaps, the best known and most
accomplished, apart from Shirley Lim. Although Rafiah Yusuf and
Karamiah Haji Saodon, writing in the 1940s, are recognised as the
pioneering female novelists in Malaysia, both of them were Malay
language writers. The first English novels by Malaysian women writers
were published only in 1994 when Holograms brought out Chua Huat
Eng’s *Echoes of Silence* and Heinemann, in Singapore, published Louis’ *The
Road to Chandibole*. In 1995, Heinemann brought out Louis’ second novel
*Jumor*. It is expected that this breakthrough will bring inspiration to
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younger writers and propel them to undertake equally challenging and ambitious literary enterprises in future. Shirley Lim's newly published novel, Joss and Gold, set partly in Kuala Lumpur but also in America and Singapore, is a credible addition to this rather small but growing list.

One thing is obvious though, many Malaysian writers in the English language seem to enjoy dabbling in witty journalistic writings rather than engaging in serious literary activities such as the writing of poetry, drama and fiction. Many of the writers listed above are no doubt guilty of this. One reason why Malaysian writers venture more frequently into journalistic/occasional writings than into more serious forms of literature is, perhaps, because it allows them an easier and wider exposure to the potential readership in the country. Given the small pool of readers in English in the country, publishing a book is an extremely challenging task since publishers avoid, as is generally expected in a profit-driven capitalist economy, publishing works that are likely to incur loss. However, according to Rehman Rashid, the explosion of journalistic writing in the country is in keeping with the local literary tradition, as Malaysia, he says, has a "grand old tradition of journalistic commentary... going all the way back to Abdullah Munshi, no less" ("Foreword," Generation: A Collection of Contemporary Ideas xxiii).

One final word on the achievements of Malaysian Literature in English, with regard to drama. In spite of the strict censorship laws in the country, where, as Kee Thuan Chye informs us, "a permit to stage a play is required from the authorities and scripts are vetted by the Special Branch who give the final nod" ("Digging into the Diaphragm" 318), there has been considerable interest in the form from the beginning. Commenting on the early years of Malaysian theatre, Jacqueline Lo explains:

A relative explosion of theatrical activities occurred during this period. The Arts Council playwriting competition encouraged many writers to produce local plays; the newly established Drama Council organised at least two highly successful drama festivals in 1969 and 1970, and the Experimental Theatre in the University of Malaya was used to stage a number of locally written and produced productions including The Clay Model by Patrick Yesoh and Goh Poh Seng's Room with Paper Flowers (When Smiles are Done). The proliferation of locally written and produced plays is borne out by the publication of two volumes of plays in 1972 which to date, represent the only comprehensive collection of Malaysian plays in the English language. (95)

Challenges

There are many challenges encountered by English language writers in Malaysia. The most difficult of these is, of course, with regard to their creative medium. Malaysia is a plural, polyglot society in which English is one of the marginal languages spoken by a small group of Eurasians and English-educated middle class. Owing to its historical connection with colonial rule, the language has never been able to fully rise above the many images of oppression and exploitation it invokes, and assert a strong cultural and emotional bond with the vast majority in the country. Moreover, the roots of the language are not deep enough for literature to flourish freely, and the speech community of the language is also not sizeable enough to provide the political and intellectual props required for the hearty growth of literary activity.

This problem of the alien quality of the English language and its lack of claim over the local cultures was no doubt compounded by the language policies adopted by the Government in the post-independence period. The passing of the National Language Act in 1967 and the Amendment Act in 1971, which were meant to unify an ethnically fractured nation through the use of a common language, did not auger well either for English or those writing in the language. It created a feeling of alienation and marginalisation in many of these English-educated writers and stifled or threatened their creativity. The raised status of Malay as Bahasa Malaysia, the national language, also meant that Sastera Melayu or Malay literature, because of its symbiotic relationship with the language, would become the national literature, while literatures in other languages, including English, were but Kesusasteraan sukan or "sectional literatures."
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These developments, though deemed healthy for “homogenising” the nation, put the English language writers in, in Ye Tiong Heng’s words, an “invidious position,” forcing some of them to leave the country and others into a state of permanent or protracted silence. Ye Tiong Heng himself, for example, left the country in 1975 to take up residence in Australia, while Shirley Lim moved to the USA in 1969. Muhammad Haji Salleh decided to give up writing in the language, following these political developments in the country, in order to avert a cultural betrayal of his people as well as to help restore the lost native culture, while Wong Phui Nam entered a phase of prolonged silence. Wong’s first volume of poetry, How the Hills are Distant, came out in 1968 and it took him a long twenty-one years to bring out his second volume, Grandma and Other Poems, published in 1989. Krishen Jit, an eminent figure in Malaysian drama, crisply sums up the distraught state of English language writing in the country in the aftermath of the language policies adopted by the Government, in his following comment on the dwindling state of English language drama:

The battle for the national language has been fought and won, and English no longer threatens the paramounty of Bahasa Malaysia…. By the end of the mid-1970s, local playwriting was a spent force – defeated by the nationalist forces unleashed on May 13, 1969. (Qtd. in Quayum and Wicks, “Introduction” xi)

It needs to be mentioned, though, that the circumstances have changed considerably since the mid-1980s, as Malaysia increasingly recognises the importance of English in the era of globalisation, especially for the purpose of fulfilling the national vision of 2020, when hopefully Malaysia will enter the elite league of developed nations and become a leading player in the international financial and technological markets. Apart from this pragmatism, perhaps time has also been a healing factor, as, with time and the development of new concerns both locally and internationally, the earlier hostilities towards the language, fresh from the memories of colonial oppression and exploitation, have slowly eased and subsided.

In addition to this excruciating challenge arising from the circumstances of English, there are other challenges confronting writers in the English language in Malaysia. One of them is the absence of a local English language writing tradition, and another is the heterogeneous make-up of the national population. The absence of tradition makes the task of writers particularly difficult as they depend on tradition for their examples and inspirations. The local writers cannot draw from European tradition, of course, although their medium is European. To do so would make their literature redundant, rendering it inaccessible to local readers. As a first step towards establishing tradition, the writers will need to alter the language by giving it a more local flair and by infusing more “local blood” into it. This will require considerable negotiation skills and creativity on the part of the writer. It will also require of writers the utmost patience, as traditions are not formed easily and overnight. One might recollect that it took American literature more than two hundred years to find an independent voice and a separate identity from that of European literature; the Pilgrim Fathers landed in New England to set up American civilisation in 1620, but the nation attained its cultural and literary independence only in the 1830s.³

The heterogeneous make-up of the population stands as a major stumbling block to the process of forming a local tradition. Given that writers are from diverse cultural backgrounds, their imaginations and value systems are likely to be different. This means that they will need to loosen the bonds of their rigid cultural systems to create an environment of “horizontal comradeship,” or of one and yet many, and slowly learn to empathise with one another’s cultures and thereby contribute to the formation of a common pool of consciousness. This is again a matter of time and will require writers to step out into a “historyless” zone (Walcott’s phrase), as an effective “contact zone” between diverse cultures essential for the building of a common body of symbols and myths for writers to draw from, can only become possible through a protracted “history of minglings” between the groups, allowing room for a shared, collective memory.

There are some additional challenges to the ones mentioned above, but they are not specific to writers in the English language. These challenges are political and cultural in nature and they affect writers, and literature, generally across the board. The subject of a closed political environment in the country, resulting in widespread lack of freedom of speech, has been addressed adequately by Salleh Ben Joned and Kee Thuan Chye, and perhaps there is no need to go over the issue again

³ Harold Beaver, for example, explains that even in 1831 America had no “national literature” (53), and adds, “But the 1830s, which first introduced the expatriate and international themes... were also the decade of America’s declaration of literary independence” (64). The following passage from Emerson’s “The American Scholar” (1837), is often cited as America’s declaration of cultural independence:

Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the serene remains of foreign harvests. Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves” (55).
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However, something needs to be said about the challenges arising from the cultural state in the country. Malaysia is a tradition bound and yet modernising country. This push and pull tendency cuts the writer and his imagination both ways. Tradition encourages a closed culture for the sake of its own perpetuation. This means new ways and behaviours are not welcome and people are expected to condemn in the harshest terms anything that violates the norm. This is very unhealthy for the development of literature as writers like to experiment and search for things that are different and new. One example of how tradition and cultural orthodoxy create a hostile environment for the writer can be found in the following complaints by two local writers. Lisa Ho, for example, has complained that she has been “gossiped about by spiteful women and men” and accused of “living the sinful lives of her characters” (qtd. in Nor Faridah and Quyam 336-337) because she has created a female character with some sexual fantasies in one of her stories. On a similar note, Nirmala Raghavan comments, “When a woman writes a story about another’s affectionate feelings for a man, or so much as mentions the word ‘sex,’ she is instantly looked upon with suspicion. Her family is justly concerned for her reputation” (NST, 23/3/93: 11). This is how an orthodox society, entrenched in tradition, brutalises the imaginative freedom and creative sensibility of the writer. I believe male writers are also confronted with several problems associated with tradition, but perhaps of a different nature.

Finally, the challenges arising from the process of modernisation. Though, ideally, modernisation by helping to open up the culture should create a more congenial atmosphere for literature, ironically, it does more harm than good. By creating a culture of “getting and spending” (Wordsworth’s phrase), in which people are more preoccupied with money and matter than the finer things of life, modernisation itself becomes a stumbling block to the growth of literature. When commerce and culture in a society do not converge, commerce slowly consumes the culture, leaving people with the bare practicalities of life and writers as useless entities, with little to contribute to a surrounding that is steeped in its own appetite.

Prospects and Future

In spite of the many challenges and the relatively slow growth experienced to date, the future of Malaysian literature in English looks full of promise. Especially with the changed circumstances of the language, writers now enjoy greater freedom in expressing their imagination. They don’t feel the political and cultural pressures that were endured by their predecessors. English is now no longer seen as a part of colonial hegemony, disrupting the formation of Malaysian post-colonial national identity. In a recent interview with Bernama, the country’s Prime Minister, in his characteristic dynamism, redefined the role of English in Malaysian nationalism:

Unfortunately, some people feel that you should neglect English entirely if you are a nationalist. If you are a Malay nationalist (they say), then you should learn Bahasa Malaysia.... We believe that a nationalist is someone who has acquired all the knowledge and mastered all the skills, and is capable of contesting against the rest of the world. That is a true nationalist. (NST, 29/12/2000).

The impact of such a positive environment, where writers can choose their medium without feeling unduly conscience stricken, is already evident in the proliferation of Anglophone literary activity in the country since the nineteen nineties. Drama and Biography, which were lagging behind, have also made a strong comeback in the last decade or so.

Another element that should help boost Anglophone literary activity in the country is the slow demise of nationalism and the rise of an international and a neo-universal world-culture. Nationalism has been the dominant force in global politics for the last two hundred years and was instrumental in creating a sense of identity in the once colonised societies, helping them to attain freedom from the hegemonic rule of the British. Now, however, it is being superseded by multinationalism and globalism. Timothy Brennan comments, “we often hear that nationalism is dead” (45). Daniel Bell is of the view that the nation state is simply too small for the big problems of life and too big for the small problems of life. Given this changing circumstance, in which the world will increasingly acquire an intranational and international synergetic culture, Malaysian writers in English who have chosen the global language as their medium, and ipso facto have chosen multiple ways of life and a sense of a multiple belonging, are well poised to depict the Malaysian “mosaic” reality for the growing readers of a transnational world.

One common criticism against Malaysian literature generally has been that it is too communally oriented and inward looking. Explaining the lack of a holistic outlook in Malaysian writers that would enable them to rise above “pride and prejudice, irrational attachment to things, people or causes or blind loyalty arising from habit and custom,” Cecil Rajendra, in a recently published article in NST, in commemoration of Merdeka Day, most cynically and sarcastically asks, “How many Malaysian writers
are truly independent and have the courage to stand by their convictions? How many Malaysian writers do not have a blind loyalty to their language and race?” (NST, “Literary,” 29/8/2001: 5). In the same article and published on the same occasion, the former head of the DBP's publishing department and chief editor of Utusan Melayu, Johan Jaafar, comments:

After 44 years of independence, Malay literature as evidenced in the genre of the novel is still intractably Malay-centric... Malay writers seldom explore the world outside their cocoon. (NST, “Literary,” 29/8/2001: 6)

Such comments imply that Malaysian writers have not been able to contribute to nation building in the way expected of them. Writers in a multi-ethnic society should preferably address national issues objectively and impartially, and dismantle all prevailing hierarchies for creating an all-inclusive nation, founded on a broad-based understanding and mutual recognition of differences between the various ethnic groups. I believe this is a responsibility the English language writers in Malaysia should be able to fulfill easily. Because of their inherent multicultural make-up – as they are often multilingual and exposed to more than one culture – they should be able to rise above the psychological and cultural moorings of their respective communities and appropriate a more balanced and equilibrated sensibility, gradually paving the way for them to make due contributions to the formation of “Bangsa Malaysia,” or a holistic national identity, that will eventually allow Malaysia to rise above provincial nationalism and seize that glorious future, as part of a global community, that awaits the nation. After all, as Fanon astutely said, “[i]t is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows” (247-248). Every modern nation-state, in order to fulfill its destiny, ought to appropriate this sense of dynamic “twoness,” that allows the nation to experience a feeling of a separate identity and yet keeps it open to possibilities of connectedness through a progressive unsettling/erasure of a monologic/monolithic sense of nationhood and/or a totalitarian sense of identity.
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8.1.5

MALAYSIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Noritah Omar

INTRODUCTION

This course explores creative works of Malaysian writers written in English. The course maps out the development of Malaysian Literature in English, highlighting its position in the establishment of Malaysia's national language and literature, and its contribution to national identity and nation building. The discussion on selected works for the course is approached from their thematic angle, narrative style and form.

THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN MALAYSIA

In the course, the issue of the politics of language and literature in Malaysia is a core issue that will be addressed as it relates to the status of English and literature in English in a nation that is trying to break away from its colonial past.

This discussion presents the history of Malaysian literature in English (MLIE) as a genre which stands to be marginal yet superior. This position that MLIE finds itself in despite being in the margins of Malaysian literature, paradoxically causes it to become the preferred literature amongst the western educated middle-class Malays and non-Malays. "...English continued to remain a dominant language, especially among the ruling and privileged circles." Thus, the tradition or the history of Malaysian Literature in English needs to be juxtaposed with the definition of Malay Literature/Malaysian Literature in relation to Malaysia's language policy.

Malaysia (previously known as Malaya), gained its independence from the British on the 31st of August, 1957. As a country struggling to define itself as a nation, Malaysia found itself having to manage its newfound independence and to reconcile with its multicultural identity. In coming to terms with this new identity, Malaysia had to decide on a language that would be able to carry the burden of unifying the different ethnic groups that now made up the nation. This language is Bahasa Melayu (Malay language), often alternately referred to as Bahasa Malaysia (Malaysian language) to reflect its defined role as both the national and official language of Malaysia.

Still apprehensive of its new role, Malay language had to compete with the colonial language, English, an already established world language or lingua franca. In order to help strengthen its position and use as the national and official language of Malaysia, the government established the Institute of Malay Language and Literature (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, widely referred to as DBP) to promote Malay as a language of knowledge and literature. Thus, among the main roles DBP plays is the promotion of the use of Malay in the writing and publication of creative and critical works in the language, and also the translation of literature written in Malay into English.

With the establishment of Malay Language as the national and official language, Malay literature becomes the Literature of the country. Malaysian National Laureate Muhammad Haji Salleh, in his Anthology of Malaysian Literature, inadvertently defined Malay literature as Malaysian literature. In his acceptance speech of the National Literary Award, Muhammad Haji Salleh delineates the history of Malay Literature and explains:

Colonisation belittled us, alongside our culture and language. Now we begin to unravel ourselves, having become entangled by oppression and disagreement among ourselves. An author must learn from all this. If we do not learn from history, we are reminded that our race will be condemned to

repeating it. The wisdom in historical events can be looked into to help us go through a future that is still to come, which can still be gained for Malaysia, for our literature [Malay Literature].

We may assume that Muhammad Haji Salleh's definition of national literature is made by linking literature with the nationalism of the Malay; that is, only the Malay writer or poet may be considered as "an elder and conscience of his society." (xxvii) Muhammad Haji Salleh, who writes both in Malay and English, connects these nationalist ideals to Malay writers' efforts to combat Western culture/values and to uphold the Malay adat or customary practices as well as Islamic practices in their writing. In doing so, they negotiate modernism and project the economic predicaments of the Malays due to the immigration of Chinese and Indian labourers to Malaysia in the 1930s and 1940s.

With the implementation of the National Language Act of 1967, English language was accorded the status of the second most important language in the country, second to the Malay language. The Constitutional Amendment Act of 1971 later reiterated the important status of Malay language by making it illegal to contest the status of the established national language. With this status, literature written in English consequently became a sectional literature like other literatures written in the other languages of Malaysia such as Tamil and Mandarin.

**LOCATING MALAYSIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH IN THE NATION**

Malaysian literature in English (MLIE), as a genre within the expanding New Literatures in English, is a literature that is not without controversy. While Malay literature struggles to find its footing as a new literature within world literatures, MLIE (often seen by Malay nationalists as a heritage or leftover of the colonial experience) also struggles to find its own recognition as Malaysian literature. The argument for allowing some scholars to consider Malay literature as Malaysian

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5 Mohamad A. Quayum (2001) discusses in length the implication of the language policy on Malaysian literature in English. The language policy according to him has stunted the growth of Malaysian Literature in English.

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a self-conscious attempt at providing for a literature to express the national identity that was in the process of forming and, at the same time recognition of the important part that this literature has to play in the creation of that identity out of the disparate extant cultures in the country.\textsuperscript{8}

\textbf{THE MALAYSIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH CANON}

Quayum defines Malaysian writers writing in English within three broad categories – "the pioneering generation", "the post-independence generation", and "the 'new' generation".\textsuperscript{9} The pioneering generation are writers of the 50s and the 60s such as Lloyd Fernando, Wong Phui Nam, and K.S. Maniam who experienced life under the British and Japanese occupation. The post-independence generation are those who wrote mostly between the 60s and 80s such as Shirley Lim, Hilary Tham, Salleh Ben Joned, Chua Guat Eng, and Kee Thuan Chye. The new generation are writers of the late 80s onwards such as Karim Raslan, Dina Zaman, Che Husna Azhari, Mulaika Hijjas, Khoo Gaik Cheng, and many others who represent the rebirth of writings in English in Malaysia.

In another introduction to Malaysian Literature in English, Quayum also points out the politics of Malay literature or \textit{Satirika Melayu} as National Literature which excludes writers who wrote in English or other languages. This act of exclusion led to "voluntary exile" and act of silence on the part of the writers writing in English. The "voluntary exile" can be identified in Ee Tiang Hong's poem "Exile," the poet who left Malaysia for Australia and Shirley Lim who left for the United States of America. The permanent act of silence experienced by these two poets is compared to the experience of "protracted silence" experienced by Wong Phui Nam, MLIE's best poet who remains in Malaysia.\textsuperscript{10} Shirley Lim felt that "... the Language Act was a 'more effective silencer than tanks and barbed wire.'"\textsuperscript{11} The act of silence may be considered as an act of protest against the policy made by the Malaysian government in imposing the importance of Malay Language or as a sign of "... painful rejection ... [by these two poets] from national culture and identity. ... In the first place their decision to self-exile is mainly due to a strong sense of belonging to Malaysia/Malaya."\textsuperscript{12}

More importantly, the three generational groups of writers have established MLIE with a new identity.

\textbf{NARRATIVE STYLE AND FORM}

MLIE forms its own unique narrative style, use of English language, themes and concerns. These aspects of literariness situate MLIE amongst the New Literature genre such as Singapore, Canadian, Australian, Caribbean and other new nation states' literature\textsuperscript{13} which need to form their own sense of national pride and dignity after colonisation.

In terms of their narrative style, it is worth noting here that journalistic style is quite popular amongst Malay writers writing in English ranging from older writers such as Adibah Amin (\textit{As I was Passing By, Volumes I and II} and \textit{Glimpse: Cameos of Malaysian Life}) Rehman Rashid (\textit{A Malaysian Journey}), and Karim Raslan (\textit{Ceritalah and Ceritalah: Journey through Southeast Asia}) to younger generation such as Amir Muhammad, Kam Raslan and Sheryll Stothard (who wrote \textit{Generation: A Collection of Contemporary Malaysian Ideas}). This journalistic writing may perhaps be rooted in Malay culture exemplified in the writings of Abdullah Munshi, who wrote \textit{Hikayat Pelayaran Abdullah} (\textit{Tales of Abdullah's Travels}).\textsuperscript{14}

Writers of MLIE have shown a distinctive way of stamping their own literariness through their use of English. MLIE writers work at introducing localised use of English through their sentence structures and word choices. Some


\textsuperscript{9} Mohammad A. Quayum, in Quayum, Taib and Omar (eds.), \textit{Peals of Hibiscus: A Representative Anthology of Malaysian Literature in English} (Petaing Jaya: Pearson, 2003), ix.


\textsuperscript{11} Mohammad A Quayum in dina zaman & mohammad a quayum, \textit{silverfish new writing 3: an anthology of stories from Malaysia, Singapore, and beyond} (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfishbooks, 2003), 186.


\textsuperscript{13} Wang Gunyew in Jomo K.S.(ed.) \textit{Reinventing Malaysia: Reflections on its Past and Future} (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2001) 16-22. In this chapter he discusses the concepts of nation-state and cultural pluralism in relation to the need for countries which were colonised to establish their own nationalism. Countries such as Malaysia with heterogeneous population is expected to face problems in their process assimilation as one new nation, ending colonial ties in their brand of politics and cultures.

\textsuperscript{14} Mohammad A Quayum in dina zaman & mohammad a quayum, \textit{silverfish new writing 3: an anthology of stories from Malaysia, Singapore, and beyond} (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfishbooks, 2003), 183.
of these sentence structures may look ungrammatical such as Kee Thuan Chye’s purposefully non-standard English in his short-story “A Sense of Home”. Kee attempts to give a local flavor of English by capturing the sound of the vernacular (Hokkien, a Chinese dialect) language in the written form recognisable from its spelling as informal spoken Malaysian English15: ‘Mama died two nights ago. Very quietly. No one expected. We were surprise because she’s always so noisy. Don’t say but I didn’t cry much. In fact, I think I feel... different... maybe like more free.’16

Salleh Ben Joned, a Malay writer who writes in both Malay and English identifies the local English used in his poem the “Malchin Testament” by the adaptation Malay, Chinese and Indian stresses when speaking in English. This poem captured the sound of a Malay using Malay stress in English language17:

We always have them about us
Everytime talk English lah
Our way of talking the lingo
Is our way of being unique also18

Capturing the Malay, Chinese, and Indian sounds or stresses in English is a means to create a sense of Malaysian-ness of a plural society. The unique English language use has become a literary mark for MLIE writers to use words in Malay, Indian, or Chinese in their writings. These words are culturally ingrained in multicultural Malaysian society such as words referring to food, cultural items or practice. Words that refer to popular food items such kooay teow, roti canai, nasi, nasi lemak, mee goreng, etc. as well as words denoting local environment and culture such as selendang, sirih, belukar, cangkul, parang, pendatang, kampung etc. are common Malay words used by MLIE writers. Although Quayum has identified that MLIE writers lack a “common source of collective imagery, symbols, and myths.”19 the pool of words and sentence constructions drawn from the multicultural local languages is a dynamic assimilation of these cultures into Malaysian English, making the language unique to local usage.

Besides centering the vocabulary from Malaysia’s pool of languages, MLIE reveals a literature concerned with issues of identity, particularly within themes of ethnicity, diaspora, immigrant and exile, hybridity, position of women, and sexuality.

**CAPTURING THE POST-COLONIAL NATIONAL IDENTITY**

The themes of ethnicity and migration are evident in the writings of the first generation of MLIE. Amongst internationally award winning and internationally recognised writers are Shirley Lim (who won the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize), K.S. Maniam (who won the Raja Rao Award), Lee Kok Liang (popular in Australia), Ee Tiang Hong, and Wong Phui Nam.20 Their works centre on themes such as the experience of making a home in a new land, sense of belonging to a nation, diaspora, and self-exile (as mentioned earlier) presented in the poetry of Ee Tiang Hong.21 A sense of exile is also felt in the poetry of Wong Phui Nam. “The foundation of Wong Phui Nam’s poetry rests on the multi-ethnic Malaysian socio-cultural and political environment and its minefield of tensions and sensitivities.”22

K.S Maniam represents stories of the economic, cultural and political struggles of Indian families or community as immigrants of the country. The notion of Diaspora is another issue that is often analysed in the works of Lee Kok Liang and

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15 In standard English spelling (in italics): ‘Mama died two nights ago. Very quietly. No one expected. We were surprise because she’s always so noisy. Don’t know why but I didn’t cry much. In fact, I think I feel... different... maybe like more free.’
17 In standard English spelling in italics: ‘Everytime talk English lah/Our way of talking the lingo/Is our way of being unique also’
21 Ee Tiang Hong writes "I left Malaysia then when I could no longer accept, intellectually or emotionally, the official and Malay definition of Malaysian nation and culture. And because the gap in our perception was so wide as to make negotiation impossible, I was convinced that I had no place in the new order of things, and not just as a writer but even as an ordinary citizen" in ‘Literature and Liberation: The Price of Freedom.” Edwin Thumboo (Ed.), Literature and Liberation: Five Essays from Southeast Asia. (Manila: Dolidardad, 1988) quoted in Mohammad A Quayum in dina zaman & behemba a quayum, silvershine new writing 3: an anthology of stories from Malaysia, Singapore, and beyond (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfishbooks, 2003), 200.
Shirley Lim as well as K.S. Maniam. Diaspora is a major concept that relates to questions of identity and sense of belonging. This notion relates to alienation, anomie, anxiety, detachment, dislocation, displacement, rootlessness, or in terms of being deculturalized, deracinated, deritualized, homeless or marginalized. This sense of displacement or rootlessness is not only felt by the non-Malay writers of MLIE, but also by Malay writers writing in English. The following stanzas are chosen for comparison in analysing the sense of anxiety and homelessness—the first stanza is from 'Bukit China' by Shirley Lim:

Bless me spirits I am returning.
I light the joss. A dead land.
On noon steepness smoke ascends
Briefly. Country is important,
Is important, This knowledge I know
If it will rise with smoke, with the dead

The following extract is from 'Si-Tegang's Home Coming' by Salleh Ben Joned:

I, Salleh Ben J., an unlucky Malay,
returned to my wallow to nurse my wounds;
but the kampung dreamt in my desperate lays
is now a giant condo blocking the moon

Both poets in returning to their homeland lose their sense of home in both material and spiritual ways. The sense of nostalgia is indicated in their reference to 'dead land' and 'kampung.' For Shirley Lim, the burial ground of her ancestors becomes a spiritual or ideological landmark of her ethnic identity. She asserts that "the loss [is] not only [of her] father/Malaysia, not only the Chinese traditions of a Peranakan society; rather the poem describes lost roots symbolised by the father, roots now severed by guilt imposed by time and diaspora." Like Shirley Lim, Ben Joned's Malayness/Malaysianness is clearly measured by the sense of Malay kampung (village) he longed for before he left the country. The geographical landmarks thus symbolise the poets' cultural alienation.

Other related themes highlighted by MLIE writers are cultural hybridity and sexuality. These are also issues that relate to the new Malaysian identity, particularly for those who find themselves trapped in cultures that bear different values and beliefs. Karim Raslan, Amir Muhammad, and Kam Raslan are amongst those writers who problematise the issue of hybrid identity. They also struggle in unpacking the Malaysian/Malay culture within the parameters of modernity and tradition. Although tradition may be categorised as personal in which it relates to religion and ancestral/local cultural practices, it should not be considered as "...mere detritus of history, a carry-over from some pristine past..." Wong Soak Koon contends that 'tradition' itself is multi-faceted, changing according to the economic-political needs of the groups that create it." In demonstrating the process of modernisation of Malaysia as a nation, Wong Soak Koon relates to Lloyd Fernando's novel Green is the Colour. This "modernity of tradition...is a recent construct" in Malaysia. The concept of tradition is often referred to the local while modernity to something that is foreign. In Green is the Colour, "the use of the pronoun 'our'...relates to a sense of 'traditional' whereas 'other people's ways' points to liberalism inherited from the colonialist." If modernity is a notion borrowed from the West, then cultural observations made by MLIE writers that do not fit in the mainstream cultural practice may be considered foreign.

 Writers such as Karim Raslan and Dina Zaman who write to instill modernism find themselves at odds with mainstream Malay cultural tradition. This is observed in their exposure of homosexuality and sexual acts which are considered taboo in Malay culture. Che Husna Azhari and Dina Zaman are two Malay women writers whose writings are categorised as feminist writings. They champion women issues, relating to the act of oppression through cultural or sexual practices. Some of the issues include polygamy and women's body.

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26 Shirley Lim, Monsoon History xiv.
28 Wong Soak Koon, 2001 'Unveiling Modernity and Ethnicity' Lloyd Fernando's Green is the Colour' 78.
29 Clive Keesler in Wong Soak Koon, 2001 'Unveiling Modernity and Ethnicity' Lloyd Fernando's Green is the Colour' 78.
30 Wong Soak Koon, 2001 'Unveiling Modernity and Ethnicity'. Lloyd Fernando's Green is the Colour' 78.
Most young writers of MLJE are those who write to unpack the everyday struggle of individuals living in an industrialised nation. This is obvious in the works of Khoo Gaik Cheng who writes about economic equality and the issues relating to the National Economic Policy of the Malaysian government, presented in one of her short-stories, "Jason" (from a novel in progress). Some minority issues relating to Indian-Muslim culture and Kelantanese women 31 are dealt with by Ghulam Sarwar Yousuf and Che Husna Azhari respectively.

CONCLUSION

Malaysian literature in English still has a young history consisting of multiracial writers with multiracial concerns that form the kind of nation-state that struggles to be recognised amongst the world's new literatures. The increasing strength of the English Language despite its secondary status, particularly with the government's new policy to make English as the language of instruction for Mathematics and Science subjects at school, has caused some concerned individuals to be nervous in relation to the status of Malay Literature as an equally significant literature in the world. Ideally, the establishment of an encompassing Malaysian Literature that includes all works of literature in different languages is what many would welcome in this nation-state. However, the problematics of a plural society will persist and the negotiation amongst cultures of Malaysia is expected to continue to ensure a stable government which continues to establish a strong economic and political institution.

This chapter has covered briefly the themes and issues that will be addressed in the course and has presented the argument for the recognition of the significance of Malaysian Literature in English in Malaysia's continuing struggle to build a nation from the leftovers of colonialism. Through the course, students will not only be acquainted with important works written by major Malaysian writers writing in English, but will also be able to identify and locate their own experiences and observations as they explore the different identities that make up Malaysia, represented by these works.

31 Kelantan is a state in the East coast of Malaysia which is ruled by the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS). The culture of Kelantanese women has always been isolated and portrayed negatively.

REFERENCES


