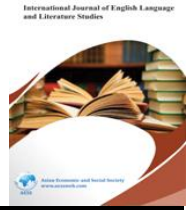




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SHIH LI KOW'S RIPPLES: A DEPARTURE FROM EARLIER MALAYSIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

An analysis of contemporary Malaysian literature in English would, I argue, illustrates how ethnic communities in Malaysia have interpreted, interpolated and reworked the concept of multiculturalism and cultural nationalism so that these becomes less rhetorical and more appropriating the layperson's attempts at understanding and forming his or her identity as a series of negotiations with those sanctioned by the state. On the other hand, a key feature of the development of Malay culture has been its exposure to and its assimilation of foreign elements. Mohd.Zariat Abdul Rani on eof the recent Graduates of university Putra Malaysia addes that Malay society was rooted in ancestor worship and animism, before being exposed to the influence of Hinduism-Buddhism. But the hold of this culture waned after the adoption of Islam, the influence of which reached its zenith in the 16th and 17th centuries. Subsequently, in the 18th and 19th centuries, Malays had to contend with the arrival of Western colonial powers whose priorities were initially economic in nature. The ongoing paper aims to analyse Shih Li Kow's Ripples from this perspective that it has been one of the pioneers in creating a new gate for Malaysian Literature in English. In order to obtain this goal this novel is going to be compared with earlier ones written by some famed Malaysian writers in English like Mohammad Quayum, Lee Kok Liang and Tan TwanEng from various aspects like religious, modernity, identity and unity as very strong tool to form a country and show it to the world.

Key Words: Satu Malaysia, identity, Islam, Modernity, Tradition

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INTRODUCTION

As MohdRamli, a Malaysian scholar believes the Malaysian literature in English in the 1960s was a product of early Malaysian writers' endeavour to spearhead a literary tradition of writings that promoted a national identity amongst the diverse races living the country. This task, however, was

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

An analysis of contemporary Malaysian literature in English would, I argue, illustrates how ethnic communities in Malaysia have interpreted, interpolated and reworked the concept of multiculturalism and cultural nationalism so that these becomes less rhetorical and more appropriating the layperson's attempts at understanding and forming his or her identity as a series of negotiations with those sanctioned by the state.

Most of the countries in the world have at one time or another been colonized. Malaysia was under the influence of the British for many years before gaining its independence in 1957. The effects colonizers leave on the souls and minds of the colonized is not to be wiped from their memories easily. As a consequence, the colonized have a sense of lack of identity. Having been suppressed and oppressed for many years, Malaysians whose country was once under the influence of the British cling to the hope of forming their own identities. What makes the establishing of identity more difficult for Malaysians is the multilingualism. The feeling of being mentally and physically paralyzed left to Malaysians by the British colonization along with the existence of three diverse races within the society makes the establishment of identity more complicated.

Satumalaysia

The themes remained more or less the same. Those who commenced writing in the 1980s and 90s were categorized as the third generation. In this era, slight changes in the themes were becoming apparent. The search for an identity is now sought from an ethnocentric point of view. Writers tended to portray their own race as superior and form their identity as an Indian, Chinese or Malay. No longer was a national identity praised. 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. (Raihanah, 2009)

Most of the earlier works of in Malaysia were almost always racial or political. This is because of the situation of Malaysia in terms of its population. Malaysia's population mainly consists of three races: Malay, Chinese and Indian. All these three races did their best to put themselves in the first

rank and level of positions in the country. Nobody wanted to stop these behaviours and perspectives. These varieties in races causes to creation of three different languages and different ideologies regarding their own lifestyles and country. These political activities caused literature of this country to forms a political and racial one as well.

For instance, the beginning of the novel 'Green is the Colour' authored by Lloyd Fernando is the scare created by violence, vigilante groups roaming the countryside, religious extremists setting up camp in the hinterland. There are still sporadic outbreaks of fighting in the city, and everyone, all the time, is conscious of being watched. Goin through the novel it becomes obvious that The novel has villain, of course, the unsavoury Pangalima, a senior officer in the Department of Unity and a man of uncertain racial lineage (he looks Malay, has adopted Malay culture, so of course, that's enough to make him kosher!). He has coveted Sara for years, and is determined to win her sexual favours at any cost. (Summary from mliegreenisthecolor.blogspot.com)

On the opposite point to the above mentioned one is Ripples and other stories _a recently published book by Shih-Li Kow consists of 25 short stories, some of which had earlier been published in an anthology called News From Home. The book is replete with themes common in Malaysian literature; themes such as search for identity, ethnic pluralism and cultural multiplicity. "Malaysian writers have taken distinct and diverse approaches to dealing with the challenges of multiculturalism." Although Kow addresses all the issues which are common in Malaysian life and literature, she to some extent differs from the earlier writers.

Modernity versus tradition is a key theme in most of her short stories. Unlike the earlier texts as mentioned like Green is the Colour by Lloyd Fernando, the characters seem to have come to an understanding of the need for an integrated community. Despite having their usual arguments, the characters of three diverse races bond with each other to overcome obstacles. In one of the short stories called Deep Fried Devils a Chinese and Malay fight ends in unity to face the new enemy who is an Indonesian girl. As it is stated in a book called Black and Whites and Other Short Stories from Malaysia edited by Dawson and Daly, with the globalization, financial security is not easily attainable anymore. People in all professions compete with each other to survive. With all the new and foreign organizations, locals sense the danger of not being able to compete with the international organizations. The need for a national identity is felt more easily.

Furthermore, This issue is articulated in Shih-li Kow's Deep Fried Devils, a short story published in her collection of short stories, Ripples and Other Stories (2010). Malay-Chinese ethnic tension functions as the main plot of the story wherein a pair of Malay stall owners often quarrel with their competitor, a Chinese lady, as each accuses the other of stealing the other ethnic's traditional food in order to make a living. The ending sees the two sides reconciling with each other in the face of

global competition as the Chinese lady's former helper, an Indonesian, teams up with her Pakistani lover to open their own food stall.

Place to write and identity

According to an abstract written in Universiti Putra Malaysia, as a nation that has progressed rapidly into an industrial nation since independence, Malaysia has carved its own identity and gained recognition as one of the more developed developing nations of Southeast Asia. In its race towards development, it has been argued that Malaysia may have sacrificed its soul by concentrating on material and industrial progress, consequently neglecting its spiritual and cultural development. In the field of literary studies, this has led to Malaysian literature being still a fledgling literature struggling to make its mark in the literary world. A multilingual nation such as Malaysia has the potential of a rich multicultural landscape from which its literature can draw a kaleidoscope of experiences to be captured. (WashimaChe Dan, In Search Of A National Identity In Malaysian National Literature)

The most significant reason of a post-colonial literary piece in various parts of the globe to be written is to indicate the identity of a country and to show the access to the power of written independently. In order to accomplish this goal most of the writers chooses the immigration to the west which was once colonizer to obtain this power in writing and then to write and support their own country's identity by the tools of the west. The reason that provokes them to immigrate is the idea of lack of facilities and tools to empower them to write or back up them. The other sub reason is the lack of strong publishers to help these writers to publish their works to show this identity. Therefore, it can be very risky work to write without these tools and supports.

A look upon the history of literature in Malaysia reveals that it has undergone a rather important change in the portrayal of identity. The writers, who started writing a short time after the independence, were more concerned with the self as an individual being and tried to establish the character's identities as individual beings regardless of their origins. 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 book *London does not belong to me*, by Lee Kok Liang who is a first generation writer is one of the very examples in which an individual is seeking his/ her identity regardless of his/ her origins. The second generation writers shifted their focus from the individual identity to racial identity. The characters of the books were now seeking their identities within their own racial community which prevented Malaya from forming a united nation. "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."(Raihanah, 2009).

One of the key factors in this novel which makes a big gap with previous works from previous writers is locality of the writing. Most of the Malaysian writers like Lloyd Fernando (who born in Seri Lanka, grew up in Singapore, lived for a while in Malaysia and died in England), Tan TwanEng, Lee Kok Liang, Mohammad Quayum or even K.S Maniam _who trained for writing in Great Britain_ unlike Shih Li Kow did their academic trainings in the abroad. There has been a big perspective that the East is not a proper place to show the power in literature, therefore most of the writers travelled the west to be trained and write from their about their own country and its identity. Among these opinions Shih li Kow a Malaysian writer of the current generation (born in 1968) opposed to this idea and chose her country to write and to be a writer by authoring the Ripples. As one of the Malaysian critics utters:

We have no hesitation in pronouncing this one collection of short stories Malaysians can be proud of. There is no 'cringe' factor here. Shih-Li kow proves that we don't have to leave the country and live elsewhere to be a good writer. She will inspire many. (Raman, a Malaysian critic)

She likes the same as the other writers to show the identity and independence in writing to the world. However, she selects a very risky work to achieve this aim which brings her a big success at the end.

Islam in literature

A key feature of the development of Malay culture has been its exposure to and its assimilation of foreign elements. Mohd.Zariat Abdul Rani on of the recent Graduates of university Putra Malaysia addes that Malay society was rooted in ancestor worship and animism, before being exposed to the influence of Hinduism-Buddhism. But the hold of this culture waned after the adoption of Islam, the influence of which reached its zenith in the 16th and 17th centuries. Subsequently, in the 18th and 19th centuries, Malays had to contend with the arrival of Western colonial powers whose priorities were initially economic in nature. Thus, though the Western powers were successful in monopolizing much of the economy, they could not deter Malays from their faith in Islam. The influence of Islam on Malay society has not only persisted, but has in fact been reinforced with Islamic revivalism, especially since the 1970s.

It should be noted that Malay literature also evolved in tune with the cultural developments outlined above. In other words, the exposure to different cultures has had the impact of instigating change in the function and orientation of Malay literature. However, the advent of Islam is seen as having wrought the most significant changes on Malay literature—from its concentration on myth and folklore (during the period of animism and Hinduism-Buddhism), to its jettisoning of these elements, and its resulting focus on matters spiritual and divine. This change is closely linked to the

Islamic belief in the Oneness of God (Tawhid) and the potential of the human intellect (Al-Haiwan Al-Natiq), 3 thus leaving no room for superstitious beliefs.

The acceptance of Islam is seen as having contributed to the emergence of a 'tradition' in Malay literary activity, which according to V. I. Braginsky (hereafter Braginsky) was characterized by a 'literary self-awareness' (kesedarandirisastera). 'Literary self-awareness' here refers to the birth of a concrete, comprehensive and systematic awareness of the meaning, function and features of literature. According to Braginsky, such an awareness did not exist in Malay literature during the pre-Islamic period (animism & Hinduism-Buddhism). Islam was thus considered the bedrock of the establishment termed the 'tradition of Malay letters' (tradisipersuratanMelayu), in which literary activities centred on the utilization of the text as a medium for the discussion of spirituality and theology.

By reading and analysing the novel we doubt about the above mentioned issue, since the novel may oppose to some characteristics of Islam. If one reads the Ripples and other stories without knowing where the story takes place or what the name of the author is, it can be read as a European story of high standards; the quality which most other Malaysian texts lack. Kow writes merely as an observer which is one of the many reasons most of the stories are plausible. The characters are beautifully shaped, the narrative is fully formed and the plot is easy to follow. Some of the most important features of a society in which Islam is the major religion has been put into question in the book. According to Islam women are supposed to be obedient wives, devoted mothers, and behave in a gracious and soft manner. They should love their husband more than anything in the world and do their best to please him; however the women in this collection of short stories are not like the definition of Islam. In the story News from Home, the woman cries for two days when her cat dies. Her child in a letter to his brother comments "I don't remember her crying this much when Dad died" (Ripples, 36). The holy picture of Islam is not praised in this book. Islam fails to guide people through the difficulties of life. In the story Ripples, the protagonist is led to believe that we are constantly being tested by God and it is only when we have successfully passed our tests that, we may be rewarded with good things.

In the obstacle course of our lives, we are tested. Again and again and yet again. Or so my father led me to believe; that the sum of my manhood and my measure of worth came from weathering these tests- of courage, of perseverance, of fidelity, of justice, of faith and so on and so forth." (Ripples, 126)

However as the story unfolds it is made clear that the belief the protagonist was holding to was totally useless. He worked hard in spite of all the obstacles. Holding to the belief that he will finally be rewarded with good things, he worked at 3 jobs to make ends meet and lost all the money in the stock market. As if not having suffered enough, his child was afflicted with a high fever which

paralyzed his mind, and then his wife died of a lingering illness. Surprisingly he still thinks that “I was tested to the limits of despair and survived.” He is waiting for a miracle to happen and make him happy but he realizes that he has lost everything. Kow successfully ridicules another lesson of Islam.

Another thing which is banned in all cultures is stealing. Muslims are the ones who are not expected to steal things at all. In the story *Night Shift Blues*, one can actually understand the logic the worker brings as a reason for stealing from work.

Just to get even so I don't lose out. This isn't stealing. How can a man make an honest living if he has to lose out? Honest job, honest mistake, no one can blame me for that.Everything works with logic..... My warehouse buddies and I could all use a little extra income especially with the petrol prices going up again and no news of salary increments from the management. Fair's fair, as they say.” (Ripples, 140)

Kow's short story titled *Grey Cats* is a taboo if looked upon with the definitions of Islam. In an interview Shih- Li Kow is asked to talk about how and why she came to the idea of writing grey cats. The first words she utters to the question is “ No, I wouldn't dare.” The story of a maid getting pregnant, most probably with the landlord's child, has been repeated many times in European books and movies. It does not even attract attention anymore but for a Malaysian in a Muslim country to talk about these types of things would be a taboo. Even Kow, who had the courage to write about such subjects, is not willing to say how she came up with the story in the first place. How Kow writes about Islam is very different from the other writers who try to advertise Islam's true form. In the earlier Malaysian texts there is no such thing as showing Islam's uselessness. In the *Ripples* even the older members of the society are not religious or moral characters. “Mother is neither a role model nor a good teacher in matters of our faith and she knows it. She practices little more than the bare minimum of prayers, fasting during Ramadhan and an almost halal diet. Mother colors her hair, wears skirts and likes rich fruitcake with some brandy in it.” (29)

MODERNITY VS TRADITION

In the subsequence of the latter topic related to the novel, we encounter with some points that may need courage to utter in a country by this extent of directness and frankness. Not having a halal diet and wearing skirts are characteristics that modernity has brought about. As mentioned earlier in all pages of the book the issue of modernity as opposed to tradition is one of the central themes. Life of a young woman with big ambitions is described in the short story *Distraction*. She lives like a robot in order to achieve her goals and live a life like those of Europeans. She does not seem to be aware of the things she does. While reading the story there is a feeling that she has been programmed like a machine to perform the tasks. Even the dinner with her date is not because she

actually is looking for someone to share her life with but more a mechanical step that has to be taken in order for her to be modern and in line with European standards. There are no traces of tradition in this story.

As a nation still caught between tradition and modernity and at the threshold of transforming itself into a developed nation, Malaysians tend to have an ambivalent attitude towards the possibility of a Bangsa Malaysia.”(Dawson, 17)

Another story which shows the clash of modernity and tradition is Seeking Frangipani. The protagonist, Michael, lives in a luxury penthouse, but is not satisfied with life in his private roof top garden. He tries to make a change by looking for a ‘pure strong orange’ frangipani to plant in his rooftop garden which may be viewed as his way of resisting modernity. Finding the tree becomes his only concern till the end of the story and his failure to find it (although his girlfriend finds one for him, he himself has not succeeded), makes him continue with his modern, boring lifestyle. These elements have never been addressed so directly by any other Malaysian writer. Shih-Li Kow is courageous enough to touch on subjects in ways that may not be liked by all. She goes to the extent of patronizing some truly Malay things. In the prize, concluding his father will now allow him leave the country with the lottery money, Daniel angrily says: “Working in McDonald’s suits me just fine. I can do that for the rest of my life. I’ll save up and open a Ramly Burger stall outside your office.” (33)

CONCLUSION

Writers like Shih-Li Kow are in charge of molding the mentality of the nation by portraying a truly unifies society in which peace is dominant. It will be the government’s duty to observe and make sure that the diverse races do not feel superior or inferior. To conclude, Kow is one of the few writers who have unlike the other Malaysian writers illustrated a unified society in which all members can leave without any problems. This paper did its best to indicate the proof for the agreement with the topic of the article. In order to gain this aim, various aspects went under analysis and in the above it was almost fully explained how Kow’s book is different from the earlier works written by Malaysians especially in English. It was suggested and mentioned that even the themes which seem to have been repeated over and over, follow the same objective of, forming a national identity and bridging the ethnic gap, more successfully than other texts.

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