

Post-independence Malaysian Short Stories: A Portrayal of Racially Inflicted Pain

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Abstract: This paper addresses pain and its endurance as portrayed in post-independence Malaysian short stories. After independence in 1957, the diverse races were forced to stay together in a young country that was constantly in turmoil of racial dissatisfactions and prejudice. Every race carried with them racial baggage that clouded efforts of togetherness and nation-building. In 1969 Malaysians bear witness to the bloody May 13 racial riot that took many lives and scarred the nation. The stories from 1966 to 1969 reveal poverty, inter-racial conflicts amongst Malaysians as writers reveal the continuous hardship, social and economic deprivation endured by the lower income Malays. Pain and enduring it is portrayed in terms of instances of conflicts experienced by the characters in the stories. The Malay stories *Pengabdian [Submission]* by Awang Had Salleh (1966) and *Gadis Tionghua di Daerah Pendalaman [The Chinese maiden from the remote district]* by Zaid Ahmad (1969) focus to conflicts about inter-racial love and Malay poverty. In these stories the Malays or indigenous people experienced pain when they saw their people deprived of the opportunity to develop economically via higher education. They endured the immense pain to a certain extent and retaliated by accusing the Chinese of being manipulators of opportunities in the new nation. They felt their people were deprived and felt intimidated at Chinese's economic success. The stories depicted anger and prejudice felt by the frustrated Malays towards the other races. In the young nation the ethnic groups suffered the pain of racial dissatisfaction during the early years of independence that blew out of proportion when their economic and social aspirations were constantly not met. There was a lot of suspicion and racial hatred that may have triggered the racial riot of 1969. Nation building in the country continued to be unattainable and blurred by constant turmoil.

Keywords: Inter-racial conflicts; instances of conflicts; nation building

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*Received 30 April 2010; accepted 14 August 2010

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines racially inflicted pain endured by the characters as portrayed in post-independence Malaysian short stories *Pengabdian* [Submission] by Awang Had Salleh (1966) and *Gadis Tionghua di Daerah Pendalaman* [The Chinese maiden from the remote district] by Zaid Ahmad (1969). The stories are from 1966 to 1969 and reveal poverty, inter-racial conflicts amongst Malaysians as writers reveal the continuous hardship, social and economic deprivation endured by the lower income Malays.

The story *Pengabdian* (1966) is about Fee Fong, a rich Chinese university student, who has a Malay driver who drives her to campus in a Mercedes. She is very much attracted to Kamal, a Malay student there. Kamal's family is very poor and his father works in the paddy fields. His mother makes and sells cakes helped by his nine siblings. Kamal says that the Malay driver is a status symbol for Fee Fong's father. As a student leader he wants the Malays to be neither impoverished nor exploited and accuses the Chinese of being opportunist. Fee Fong becomes angry and defensive and this causes a strain in their relationship.

Another story *Gadis Tionghua di Daerah Pendalaman* (1969) is about Hairi, a Malay man who is posted to a rural area as an officer. The place is very remote with the majority of Malays working in the rubber estate belonging to Mr Lee, Nancy's father. At first Hairi is welcome in Nancy's house and has good conversations with Mr Lee. They even discuss the notion of Malays and Chinese living together in peace. Hairi and Nancy fall in love. When Nancy's father finds out about their inter-racial love, he strictly forbids Hairi from visiting Nancy at the house and gives Nancy a beating. Later, Hairi asks for a transfer out of the place and that ends their love.

Racially Inflicted Pain

Racially inflicted pain is emotional pain that is felt by a race arising from another race's act. Skevington says that a schema integrates information about pain, which may be elaborated as a person continues to experience pain. Health Psychology describes the experience of pain is the end result of a number of physiological, psychological, social and cultural factors. McCall and Simmons (1978) view the identity theory as when emotions emerge when a prominent identity is challenged in interaction, as when others do not support one's identity performance. This is evident in the post-independence scenario of the very diverse Malaysian population where one race is affected by another race's pursuit of identity. One race is challenged by another that is trying to mark its existence in the new nation. Hence, pain is endured as a result of disjunctions and dissatisfactions felt by the races in the sixties.

Portrayal of racially inflicted pain in the post-independence short stories

The stories are analysed using Turk's Pluralistic Conflict Theory 1969. Pain is depicted in the short stories when instances of conflict 1 and conflict 3 occur. The conflict indicators are:

Conflict 1 - Ongoing struggle in a heterogeneous society

Conflict 2 - Inter-group struggle for dominance in politics

Conflict 3 - Negative reaction from one group as a result of being provoked by another group's behaviour, cultural meaning, and significance.

Conflict 1 - Ongoing struggle in a heterogeneous society

In *Pengabdian* (1966), Fee Fong and Kamal exhibit the conflict of an ongoing struggle in a heterogeneous society. A conflict is exemplified and the racially inflicted pain is felt when Fee Fong supports Kamal's convictions to eradicate poverty amongst the Malays. "[By] doing that, I feel I devote myself to his race, the Malay race. But, this does not mean I am a traitor to mine, because I hope this devotion will lessen the tension between the two races." Fee Fong experiences this conflict as she loves a man out of her own race and simultaneously she conforms to her Chinese value system of communal and clan allegiance.

Undeniably, she supports Kamal's convictions of eradicating poverty amongst the Malays and she must stay loyal to her Chinese people. Kamal and Fee Fong endure the pain as the issue of race and economic dissatisfaction heightened contributing to their breakup. Fee Fong experiences the pain because Kamal, a Malay accuses the Chinese of being opportunists in the new nation. He recklessly utters, "[The] Chinese really make use of the opportunities given to them. The Malays are not utilizing the opportunities to develop, because the opportunities are not given to them." Hence, a portrayal of Conflict 1 - an ongoing struggle in a heterogeneous society is evident here.

Irrefutably, there exists deep discontent in Kamal when he compares the economic success of the Chinese compared with his poor Malay people. This hurts Fee Fong deeply as Kamal is her boyfriend and yet he accuses her people. Kamal too experiences the pain resulting from the conflict when he sees his race deprived of the opportunity to develop. In the sixties, the Malays were poor and uneducated. Some blame the British for the 'Divide and Rule' policy that restricted the Malays to the villages, the Chinese to the towns and the Indians to the rubber estates. The Malays were thrown into the vicious cycle of poverty and deprivation of good education. The diverse populace was required to live together amidst their racial baggage and discontent.

Another example of this conflict is when Fee Fong feels very upset and concerned with Kamal's speeches that are intentionally trying to evoke the Malays' anger and prejudice at the other races. She says, "[They] become angry at others, who all along have profited more than them." Kamal, a student leader at the university uses his speeches to evoke awareness amongst the Malays but instead they are hurtful to Fee Fong.

An instance of the conflict is evident in the second story *Gadis Tionghua di Daerah Pendalaman* (1969). Here, Tuan Lee, the estate manager tells Hairi, a Malay man who teaches English to his daughter, Nancy that he supports the Malays and Chinese living peacefully together, "[Isn't] it nice if the Chinese live peacefully with the Malays like us now." Tuan Lee, Nancy's father appears to have positive thoughts about the Malays and Chinese living peacefully. Ironically, he does not condone his daughter's love for Hairi. Tuan Lee endures the conflict of an ongoing struggle in a heterogeneous society as he witnesses his daughter loving Hairi, a Malay man. He seems almost hypocritical as he tells Hairi of his desire to see the Malays and Chinese living harmoniously together despite the difference in religion and foods, "[You] just think. Why must we fight with the Malays? The Malays don't eat pork. But, why worry? We live together peacefully as we work." With such positive thoughts it is unquestionably sad that Tuan Lee gave Nancy beatings and sent her far away from Hairi. It seems that the elders want the races to live in peace but that deal does not include being in love or inter-marriage. In the sixties, racial gap existed amongst the races as they strive to live in the young nation. Inter-racial love is forbidden as the races adhere to their cultures and religions.

However, the story extends the ideas of values and beliefs amongst the young Chinese. This is highlighted by Nancy's daring confession of love for Hairi, "[You] mustn't hide anymore! You mustn't hide anymore!" While Nancy sees Hairi's concealment and denial of his feelings for her as unnecessary, we can also read his intentions as one of being cautious in an inter-racial love. Nancy endures the racially inflicted pain when Hairi is discreet about his feelings for her.

The stories reveal no instance of conflict 2 - Inter-group struggle for dominance in politics. This is comprehensible because in the sixties, the races were more adamant in their pursuit of economic success in the young country.

Conflict 3 - Negative reaction from one group as a result of being provoked by another group's behaviour, cultural meaning, and significance

In *Pengabdian* (1966) an instance of this conflict is evident when Fee Fong justifies her breakup with Kamal, "[Now] I have to leave Kamal. If I continue to be with him I am with the person who speaks badly of my own race." Fee Fong endures the pain and conflict as she pledges allegiance to her race and decides to leave the man she loves. She feels the negative reaction from Kamal who is provoked by the Chinese's success. There is prejudice and bigotry as the races strive to live together.

Subsequently, Kamal tells Fee Fong that the Malay driver is her father's status symbol, "[I] feel that the Malay driver is your father's status symbol." In the sixties, the Malays began to compare their poverty to the other races' and felt challenged and embarrassed when their people worked as drivers to rich Chinese people. Malays then were very proud of their status as *Bumiputera*. This also signifies socio-economic issues amongst the races. Another example is when Fee Fong becomes even more hurt by Kamal's accusatory speeches, "[I] resent this. I am so hurt. It seems that my Malay friends scold and hate other people who are more fortunate and use this as escapism." She is subjected to intense racially inflicted pain.

Another portrayal of this conflict is when Fee Fong expresses her regret and sadness to Kamal via a letter, "[But], you are using another track now: you spark the fire of anger between our two races. Obviously, I cannot follow that track." Here, Fee Fong feels the negative reaction and is provoked by Kamal's behavior. Kamal feels the pain too as he watched his people's living in poverty, [They] are made poor. Abandoned! Suppressed!" Kamal's utterance is a negative reaction of being provoked by the Chinese's accumulation of wealth. In the sixties, the poor Malays aspired after better living and eradication of their prolonged poverty.

DISCUSSION

The issues in the stories are not merely consequences of inter-racial forbidden love. Socio-economic deprivation and uncertainties are also portrayed that led to racial prejudice, intolerance and unattainable love. The educated young Malays feel the pain as they watch their uneducated people deprived of a better life and they are determined to see their people pull through the poverty. They felt the conflict watching other races benefit living in this country while they continue to suffer in hardship. In matters of the heart, the elders are not in support of inter-racial love as they hold fast to their cultures, religions and identity. Racial dissatisfaction and suspicion blur any effort to unite the different races in matrimony and these young innocent people suffer immensely.

Malaysia is a new nation with a plural society comprising Malays, Chinese, Indians and other ethnic minorities. The country achieved independence from the British in 1957 after having experienced colonialism. From 1957 to 1969, the new country with its diverse ethnic groups was striving to forge itself into a nation. On 13 May 1969, a bloody racial clash occurred that shook the country and left scars in race relations.

The conflicts experienced by the ethnic groups during the early years of independence blew out of proportion when there was a lot of suspicion and economic aspirations were constantly not met. Experts speculated that these led to the racial riot of 1969. In contemporary Malaysia, there is harmony but issues of religion and identity constantly cause uproars of dissatisfactions amongst the races. In 1998, there was a racial clash at Kampung Rawa in Penang the issue was the proximity of a Hindu temple to the Kampung Rawa mosque. In 2001, the country was shaken by the Kampung Medan racial riot in Jalan Klang Lama, Kuala Lumpur between the Malays and the Indians. This was mainly due to the socio-economic dissatisfaction of the lower income community. S. Nagaraj (2008) verifies this saying in March 2001 ethnic violence broke out in southern Petaling Jaya. He goes on to declare that ethnic and religious tensions resurfaced with greater intensity in the last two years.

The country is tested again. This time the issue is the usage of the *Kalimah* Allah by the Herald in its Catholic weekly publications. The Muslims protested to the usage of Allah as the Malaysian Christians' God when the Malaysian high court declared that the Herald can use the word 'Allah' in its publications. Hence, a few churches were attacked in the country. Adding salt to the wound, a mosque was attacked with bricks causing the glass doors to break. The issue of religion is undeniably very sensitive in a country like Malaysia. Values and norms are adhered to although they stand to the test of time and modernization. The issue of religion is undeniably very sensitive in a country like Malaysia with its diverse population. Values and norms are adhered to although they stand to the test of time and modernization. As time passes, certain values are diminished amongst some Malays. S. Husin Ali (1981) notices the different degrees of conformity to Islam amongst the Malays:

We have seen many Malays, who seldom pray or fast as required by Islam, but become emotionally upset when Islam is criticized, especially by a non-Muslim.

Malaysia's diverse populace holds on to language, religion and cultures that unquestionably bring about each ethnic identity. This phenomenon undeniably creates a racial gap that clouds racial harmony and nation building. Maya Khemlani David & Subramaniam (2007) state an important task in nation building is to promote ethnic harmony and ethnic integration. They believe that inclusive education can promote ethnic integration where all learners are valued, the achievements and contributions of all ethnic communities are acknowledged and the distinction between indigenous and immigrant groups that have lived together for four generations in the country are removed. This formula is indeed promising for ethnic unity and nation building yet seemingly unrealistic in a country of 22 million diverse Malaysians. One must not forget that ever since the riot of 1969 the government has introduced the Malaysia Plans to ensure economic stability amongst the races. Frances Stewart (2008) quotes the Second Malaysia Plan (1971 to 1975) as to secure national unity, to accelerate the process of restructuring Malaysian society, to correct economic imbalance so as to reduce and eventually eliminate the identification of race with economic function. Salfarina Abdul Gapor, et al (2009) state that those who feel disadvantaged or marginalized will feel dissatisfaction, which may accumulate into ethnic conflict. They stress that discriminatory and exclusivist policy will exacerbate the feelings of dissatisfaction and further deepen ethnic conflict. Racial dissatisfactions cloud effort to foster racial unity and nation building. It is even more challenging as the races are segregated.

Malaysians are unevenly distributed in rural, semi-rural, urban and semi-urban areas. This leads to less contact amongst the races and less or no assimilation between them. In their study Salfarina Abdul Gapor et al (2009) discover that the non-Malays who are minorities in Kelantan tend to partially assimilate more than the non-Malays in Perak. They also find that the non-Malays in Kelantan have more contact with the Malays compared with those in Perak. This finding shows that partial assimilation is very little and it depends on the race factor - which race dominates which area. Hence, ethnic relation is really complex and conflicts occur.

When racial riots or conflicts broke out, the government quickly introduced efforts to foster better unity amongst the races. Mahathir Mohamad in his speech '*Building a Malaysian Nation*' at the Launching of the Programme on Socialisation, at Putra World Trade Centre, Kuala Lumpur, on 1 August 1988, said:

The authorities have no intention of wiping out the identity of any race. All races are free to perpetuate their own identity in their language, religion and culture (Mahathir Mohamad. 1988. *Building a Malaysian Nation*. Prime Minister, Malaysia. *Ceremony for Launching of the Programme on Socialisation*. Putra World Trade Center, Kuala Lumpur. 1st August, 1988, 10.30am.)

The conflicts are cyclical and they continue to exist in contemporary Malaysia although they are under control. There are ways to address the conflicts such as 1Malaysia. It is an on-going campaign announced by Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak on September 16, 2008, calling for the cabinet, government agencies, and civil servants to more strongly emphasize ethnic harmony, national unity, and efficient governance.

Najib's 1Malaysia slogan is "People first, performance now." Najib says, "The government is committed to carrying out a transformation programme as its main agenda based on approaches and philosophy of 1Malaysia -- people first, performance now." Malaysia can be the ultimate prescription for unity and tolerance amongst the different ethnic groups if its eight values are materialized. The values are perseverance, acceptance, education, integrity, meritocracy, humility, loyalty and culture of excellence. These are very significant values for unity and nation building yet irrefutably challenging to materialize.

The government also introduced the New Economic Policy (DEB) – to restructure the communities and to decrease the gap between the races' income and social economic status (SES). Another way of addressing the conflicts is to create the *Bangsa* Malaysia (Malaysian nation), a policy introduced by Mahathir Mohamad to create an inclusive national identity for all inhabitants of Malaysia. He said it means "people being able to identify themselves with the country, speak *Bahasa Malaysia* (the Malay language) and accept the Constitution."

The 'Bangsa Malaysia' received various responses from the ministers. Abdul Ghani Othman Johor says, "Even if the term *Bangsa Malaysia* is to be used, it must only be applied in the context of all the peoples of Malaysia with the Malays as the pivotal race." Lim Keng Yaik says it should be used as a government policy. Najib Tun Razak then says it has nothing to do with the skin or colour of the races. The Bangsa

Malaysia concept is a good promising step towards tolerance and nationhood although it is challenging when it concerns the rights and privileges of the Malays as *Bumiputera*.

CONCLUSION

The issues in the post-independence stories are consequences of inter-racial issues. The races are subjected to inter-racial love, relationships, acquaintanceship but matters of the heart are not easy to materialize. The racial dissatisfaction, bigotry and suspicion blur any effort to unite the different races in matrimony and these innocent people suffer immensely. The educated young Malays feel the conflict as they watch their uneducated people deprived of a better life and they are determined to see their people pull through the poverty. They felt the pain watching other races benefit much living in this country while they continue to suffer in hardship. They aspire for better life and higher education for their Malay people. The conflicts experienced by the ethnic groups during the early years of independence blew out of proportion when their economic and social aspirations were constantly not met. There was a lot of suspicion and racial hatred that actually led to the racial riot of 1969. Malaysia has come a long way since its independence. Perhaps Malaysians should embrace their differences and not think of them as hindrance to nationhood. Accepting our diversity may help the country achieve nation building.

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