

SELF-REFASHIONING A PLURAL SOCIETY: DIALOGISM AND SYNCRETISM IN MALAYSIAN POST-COLONIAL LITERATURE

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In “The American Scholar,” one of the earliest of post-colonial works by the American sage Ralph Waldo Emerson, who is also widely credited as the founder of modern, post-independence American literature, the writer pleaded for creative thinking and creative negotiations. He urged the American scholar to be both original and inclusivist in the formation of American culture; he must know the past and consider history as “indispensable to a wise man” (566), and yet he must not allow his soul to be subordinated by the past or pinned down by history, for a scholar is “Man Thinking” (565); he ought to be progressive, innovative and futuristic; his function is to envision the unknown and the unborn by sustaining his sensibility on the present and the bygone.²

This spirit of dialogism and syncretism, of keeping one eye on history and casting the other towards the future; of harnessing and negotiating past, present and future; between the alien and the inherent, the imported and the indigenous, in order to forge and fashion a new self and nation, is what occupies much of Malaysian post-colonial literature. The writers of this tradition are not necessarily reactive or resistant to imperial cultures and colonial history, nor do they act as abiding champions of indigeneity and the autochthonous, but their imagination is defined by a sense of undulation,

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² For a full discussion of Emerson’s inclusivist and equilibrist philosophy, see this author’s *Saul Bellow and American Transcendentalism*, and “Emerson, Whitman and Double Consciousness.”

proactive synthesis and creative transformation, that enables them to consider both the past and the present, the colonial and the local, the self and “other,” with an active soul and a living imagination, leading them towards a future that is at once hybrid, wholesome and holistic, for a nation that is given to cultural multiplicity and ethnic pluralism.

My objective is to argue this thesis in the light of the following works in particular: Lloyd Fernando’s *Scorpion Orchid* (1976) and *Green is the Colour* (1993), K. S. Maniam’s *The Return* (1981), Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s *Joss and Gold* (2001) and Lee Kok Liang’s *London Does Not Belong To Me* (2003).³ These are some of the best works by Malaysian post-colonial writers, spanning almost the entire history of the tradition, which began only in the early 1950s, ironically just before the retreat of the imperial power to its native shores and the attainment of Malaysia’s independence in 1957. However, what brings these works together, in spite of their stylistic differences, is their spirit of “double consciousness” (Emerson’s phrase) and the search for a common national identity through a process of accommodation and acceptance of its ethnic and cultural diversity—one that will lead to a “blessed unity,” without any discriminatory binary or vertical hierarchy afflicting the groups.

One point needs to be clarified before embarking on the main argument of the paper and that is, in spite of the parallels drawn between Emerson’s dialecticism and the consciousness of Malaysian post-colonial writers, there are perhaps more differences than similarities between the two literary traditions. America being a settler colony, with no prior history of its own, except the history of the American aborigines who were displaced and defeated by the European migrants, the problem was for the settlers to establish their indigeneity by distinguishing their culture and literature from that of Europe.⁴ Only by dissociating their imagination from their European inheritance could the Americans establish a new “Adamic” relation with the world. However, for the Malaysian writers, the problem is to retrieve and reconstruct their culture at the end of a period of foreign rule—retrieve because Malaysia had a culture of its own before the arrival of the colonisers

³ The discussion is limited to these five novels for lack of space mainly. Other writers, such as Muhammad Haji Salleh and Kee Thuan Chye, have also developed a similar outlook in their works. For a discussion of the dialectical imagination in Muhammad’s poetry, see for example, this author’s “On a Journey Homeward: An Interview with Muhammad Haji Salleh” and “Dyadic Imagination: Literary Confessions of Muhammad Haji Salleh.” The title of Muhammad’s book, *Rowing Down Two Rivers*, is adequately suggestive of his undulating and encompassing imagination.

⁴ The history of modern American civilisation dates back to November 1620, when the ship *Mayflower* landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts, with several passengers on board, known as the Pilgrim Fathers, who came with the mission to build a “city of God” in the new land. This is the beginning of what is now known as the United States. For details, see “Plymouth MA—Its History and People,” <http://pilgrims.net/plymouth/history/>.

and reconstruct because the cultural ecology of the land was entirely different at the time of the departure of the British from when they first came here.

When the Europeans first came to the Malay Archipelago, its culture was largely monolithic and homogenous as the land was mostly populated by the Malays, although there was a sparse population of Indians, Chinese and *orang lauts* or sea gypsies as well. During the colonial period, however, the British brought over a considerable number of Chinese and Indians as indentured workers to help out with the economy. These people initially came with the hope of returning to their homelands after their lots improved somewhat, but slowly they came to accept the new land as their home, and chose to remain here even after the departure of their colonial-capitalist masters who were instrumental in bringing them over to this part of the former Raj. This presence of a significant body of diasporic population from multiple traditions has given rise to a complexity in Malaysian culture not experienced before the colonial invasion, and it is because of this diversity that the writers feel the necessity of creating a new future by coalescing and mixing the past and the present so that the nation can formulate a new identity in the midst of its current multicultural condition.⁵

Another distinction between Emerson and his fellow transcendental writers on one hand and the Malaysian post-colonial writers on the other, is their relationship with their medium and the mainstream cultures of their respective lands. For the American writers, of course, English was the “native” tongue and although they sought to reconstruct the language to establish their sense of “Otherness” and difference of place, it is not the same as the appropriation by the Malaysian writers of an alien tongue that was originally used to decentre and dislocate their own cultures. It is this function of English as a colonial instrument that has made the relationship of the Malaysian post-colonial writers with their respective ethnic cultures, as well as with the indigenous culture of the land, so much more problematic. After independence Malaysia adopted Malay or Bahasa Malaysia as the national language, which has of course relegated English—as well as writers in the language—to a marginal position, often reducing their works to an inferior category of what has been dubbed “sectional literature,” as opposed to literature in Malay which is accorded the status of “national literature.” Kee Thuan Chye describes this experience as “demeaning,” especially because, he explains, “you’d have to be writing in Malay to qualify to become a National Laureate or even be considered for the SEA Write Award, which is actually

⁵ According to the 1970 *Population and Housing Census*, the total population of West or Peninsular Malaysia was 8.8 million; of this Malays made 51 per cent, the Chinese 36 per cent, the Indians 12 per cent, and the rest 1 per cent. Cited in Tham Seong Chee, “The Politics of Literary Development in Malaysia.”

bestowed by an external body” (Quayum, “Confessions of a Liminal Writer” 135).⁶

English is not the native language of any of the ethnic groups in Malaysia, which puts the writers in the language at odds with the country’s diverse cultural traditions. Yet it is their choice of medium, and their efforts to “re-place” it in the local context, through a process of appropriation and infusion of local blood, which makes their consciousness cross-cultural and introduces a dynamism and dialecticism in their understanding and interpretation of the local culture. It liberates them from the monocentrism and essentialism inherent in adhering to a single culture and puts them in the privileged position of negotiating between cultures and envisaging the new future of “Bangsa Malaysia,” or a collective soul and an encompassing identity for the newly emergent nation.

The attempt at self-refashioning the nation on the principles of dialogism and syncretism is sufficiently evident in Lloyd Fernando’s two novels, *Scorpion Orchid* and *Green is the Colour*. Published seventeen years apart, the novels deal with the similar experiences of political turbulence that beset Singapore and Malaysia, respectively, before and after independence. *Scorpion Orchid* is set in Singapore, in the 1950s, when Singapore was still a part of colonial Malaya. *Green is the Colour*, on the other hand, deals with the inter-racial riots that rocked Malaysia on 13 May 1969, twelve years after independence. The novels examine the causes of the turmoil and their effects on the society at large, and suggest ways of overcoming them in future—and it is in the author’s attempt at identifying the roots of the problems and his suggested remedies for those social and cultural predicaments that we encounter his social and cultural philosophy for the nation.⁷

⁶ The Language Act which made Bahasa Malaysia the National Language was adopted in 1967. However, since then English has made a comeback in Malaysia generally and there is more acceptance of the language in all sectors of society than, say, in the 1970s, but this has not altered the circumstance of writers in the medium in any significant way. Even younger writers in the English language, such as Dina Zaman (1969-) and Huzir Sulaiman (1973-), also complain about their status or lack of it in Malaysian society. Dina Zaman sums up the dilemma of these writers aptly in her following comment: “I suppose English writing in Malaysia isn’t the greatest because there are so few of us. In general, writing in Malaysia tends to be the domain of Malay writers. I have to admit when I think of writers, I think of Pak Samad etc. [who write in Bahasa Malaysia] first then K. S. Maniam [who writes in English]. This has nothing to do with the quality of their writing, but because of what we were told/informed.” For details, see my forthcoming collection of interviews, *Peninsular Muse: Interviews with Malaysian and Singaporean Poets, Novelists and Playwrights*.

⁷ The theme of multiculturalism and the attempt to create a holistic national identity in the novels of Lloyd Fernando has been emphasised in several other articles. See, for example, K. S. Maniam’s, “The Malaysian Novelist: Detachment or Spiritual Transcendence,” M. A. Quayum’s, “Imagining ‘Bangsa Malaysia’: Race, Religion and Gender in Lloyd

The novels share certain parallels in their narratives as well, as both of them focus on a small group of characters—tied by friendship or family bonds—to enumerate and signify the experiences suffered by the entire nation. Rooted in history and sociological issues, the novels therefore fit Frederic Jameson's definition of the Third World political allegory. In *Scorpion Orchid*, the focus is on a coterie of undergraduate students—Sabran, a Malay; Santinathan, an Indian; Guang Kheng, a Chinese; and Peter, a Eurasian, characters who have been friends since their senior school days—and their shared “girl friend,” prostitute Sally-Salmah. As the novel progresses we witness the violence that breaks out between two workers' unions, one dominated by the Malays and the other by the Chinese, who were meant to take on jointly the might of the British Realty and prove that the colonisers were no longer welcome in their homeland since they were now capable of running their affairs independently. However, a lack of trust and easy communication between the groups—as both communicate largely in their respective ethnic tongues—causes their programme to fail and explode into self-inflicted violence, causing the deaths of many innocent civilians. It is during this mayhem that Peter gets lynched and Sally-Salmah is brutally gang-raped, exposing the friends to a new challenge as to whether their friendship was a mere illusion, and whether the races were ready to live together and form a unified nation after the departure of the British.

As the crisis builds towards a climax, with people being burnt alive on the streets and the four friends drifting apart with increasing distrust between them, it appears that the narrative is about to fulfil the prophecy of Ethel Turner, a female English character in the novel, who has been living and teaching in Singapore for several years. During routine sex with her compatriot and colleague, Ellman, she says in her characteristic colonial arrogance:

It's not a single society, really Thank God, the British are here. The Malays are in their kampongs, the Chinese own all the business, and the Indians are in the rubber estates. And the Eurasians—not the half-castes . . .—the Eurasians sit in their cricket club and imitate us, rather poorly actually. You see, they have nothing in common. If we left tomorrow, there'd be such a lovely bit of mayhem that we'd have to come back and keep the peace. No, I'm afraid we have to grin and bear it—the white man's burden, I mean. (89)

It is precisely this view of Ethel Turner—echoed by many colonial writers from Kipling to Burgess—which the writer challenges by indirectly showing

Fernando's *Green is the Colour*,” and M. Y. Chiu's, “Imagining a Nation: Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* and National Identity.”

in his narrative how best the imminently independent Singapore could form “a single society” and a “common” set of values, through the cultivation of a sense of national togetherness.⁸ His strategy is to introduce symbols and interlayer the present narrative with translated passages from the Malay classics, *Sejarah Melayu* and *Hikayat Abdullah*. While the symbols are designed to undercut the totalising view of race and create a sense of “monogensim” among the people, the translated passages are intended to anchor the novel in the local tradition and deconstruct the Eurocentric version of history that flourished on interpellative rhetoric of race and hierarchic codes of regulation.

The novel’s title itself, for example, serves as a potent symbol of what Singapore could or could not attain as a nation. The orchid is a native flower, now deemed Singapore’s national flower. The author’s use of the flower in the title therefore indicates Singapore’s potential for attaining racial symmetry between its three main races, i.e. the Chinese, Indians and Malays, like the symmetrical shape of the flower itself, with its three petals. However, while the author expresses this hope of a harmonious future, he also cautions that the hope could not be realised if the circumstances were not right, or the flower was not tended and nurtured with utmost care and scorpions, lurking “among the roots in the rich soil” (130), were allowed to creep into it in the form of racial distrust. In other words, the writer suggests that, Singapore being a multiethnic society, it is important for its nationhood to be carefully constructed and cultivated, and if due attention were not given to self-refashioning itself through a process of cultural negotiation, it would probably fester with destructive “worms” like a fetid orchid.

The characters of Tok Said and Sally-Salmah are also used as symbols. Tok Said is believed to be a *bomoh* and is deemed instrumental in causing the riots that have gripped the country, with his rumours spreading fear among the people. Nobody actually knows what the true identity of Tok Said is; Santinathan, Sabran and Sally who claim to have met him consider him a Malay, Chinese and Indian respectively. This is of course the author’s way of exposing how the local imagination is “racialised” and how every group thinks that the other is to blame for the unrest. But on another level, it is also the author’s way of dislodging the race discourse—that racial differences are more illusion than reality. Although race has been used as an ideological weapon to achieve many political ends and became the *sine qua non* of the colonial rule, the distinction between one race and another is but perceptual and at best cultural, and does not correspond to any biological or epistemological absolutes. A person who looks like an Indian to some might

⁸ See for example, Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden” and Burgess’s *Time for a Tiger*. Singapore eventually became independent in 1965, after two years of participation in the Federation of Malaysia, in the wake of the departure of the British.

appear like a Malay or Chinese to others from his/her behaviour; thus it is important to forsake the monolithic and one-dimensional view of identity for one that is more flexible and encyclopaedic. Rigidity in race undermines the human potential for adaptability and the awareness that, notwithstanding our outer differences, underneath we are all *one* and belong to one human race.

Fernando reinforces this idea of inclusivity and adaptability by attributing a similar figurative role to Sally-Salmah, who in spite of her narrative role, turns out to be a symbolic figure on two levels. As a prostitute who is shared by four multicultural friends, she is an embodiment of their friendship as well as the homeland. The four friends “love” Sally despite their ethnic differences, and Sally returns their “love,” “freely” and indiscriminately, and “often without money” (86). In the same way, the people ought to share their love for the country categorically and the country in its turn should show affection for all its denizens without partisanship or bias. Only then, through this dialogic process of mutual respect and allegiance, will Singapore realise its full potential as a nation. On the other hand, if every group tries to inscribe its authority on the island and seeks to deprive the other groups of their due share from the country, it will lead to the degradation and potential destruction of the homeland, in parallel with the way Sally is sexually assaulted by a mob at the height of the crisis.⁹

Moreover, Sally’s identity, like Tok Said’s, is shrouded in mystery. Everyone initially thinks Sally is a Chinese who could speak two languages, Malay and Cantonese, with equal ease. But after the rape it comes to light that her full name is Sally Yu alias Salmah binte Yub. This throws everyone into confusion as her name points to two ethnic roots—“Sally Yu” indicating her Chinese connection, and “Salmah binte Yub” pointing to her Malay-Muslim tie. When asked what her born name was, her reply helps little in resolving the problem, “it didn’t matter, Sally or Salmah, it was the same” (121). This deliberate confusion surrounding her identity is again a clever strategy by the author to dispel the totalising view of race and indicate how easily racial boundaries could be altered through a process of transculturation or the creation of hybridisation zones. Sally, who could speak both Malay and Chinese, could pass off as Malay or Chinese, which shows how bilingualism could help break down the racial borders in a multiethnic society like Singapore, and create the right environment for developing a collective national soul and an encompassing identity for its people.

Another strategy adopted by the author to dismantle the essentialist view of race and create the spirit of dialogue between the local groups is to insert passages from the Malay classics that highlight the history of mingling

⁹ In the post-independence period, Singapore has by and large adopted a path similar to what Fernando outlines in his novel. In Singapore, all the races are treated equally, at least on the official level, and no privileges are given to any particular race. Singapore believes in “meritocracy” rather than racial protectionism as a national principle.

between the Malays, Indians and the Chinese before the arrival of the British. The author's argument is that the groups have been living together happily and with mutual trust and acceptance for hundreds of years, and it is only through the cunning manipulation of the colonisers that the groups are now rife with discontent and distrust. By turning away from the divisive imperial constructions and focussing attention on their interactive past, the groups could overcome their present differences, restore the spirit of accommodation and friendly unity, and achieve their common destiny as a nation.

One such passage, which appears towards the beginning of the novel, is taken from *Hikayat Abdullah*. It is about an ancient rock, "Allah alone knows how many thousands years old" (18), which was found "at the point of the headland . . . lying in the bushes" (18). The rock was covered with some chiselled inscription, but nobody could determine the script "because of extensive scouring by water" (18); to the Indians it looked like Hindi, to the Malays like Arabic, and to the Chinese, Chinese. But before anybody could decipher the writing, the rock was unfortunately broken by an Englishman, Mr. Coleman, "prompted perhaps by his own thoughtlessness and folly" (19). The passage goes a long way in establishing the harmonious past and ancient history of the various local groups, and the nonchalance of the British in erasing that history from their self-righteous national self-aggrandizement.

Two other passages from *Sejarah Melayu* argue the same point and help establish the author's vision for Singapore's future. One of these passages recount the story of a lost Malay boy rescued by an Indian family and adopted by them. The other is about a Chinese princess who voluntarily came to Malaya with "five hundred sons of Chinese ministers" (78), married Sultan Mansur Shah of Malacca and settled down with her men in this country. She later gave birth to a son named Paduka Mimat, who in turn gave birth to a son called Paduka Sri China. This is the beginning of the arrival of the Chinese to the Malayan territory who have been living here harmoniously with the other groups since then. Both the passages highlight the shared experiences of the Malays, Indians and the Chinese and their potential for compatibility and building a unified nation.

In *Green is the Colour*, again, the writer envisions an encompassing and encyclopaedic nation through a process of dialogism and syncretism between the various racial and religious groups. The focus of this novel is on Siti Sara, a university lecturer, and her racially and religiously bigoted husband Omar; Siti Sara's cross-cultural lover, Civil servant Yun Ming; Dahlan, a childhood friend of Yun Ming and a radical Malay egalitarian; Siti Sara's friend and colleague Gita, later Dahlan's wife; Panglima, a corrupt Secretary of Home Affairs, with a stranglehold on the nation and absurd sexual designs on Siti Sara; and Siti Sara's elderly father, a religious teacher with an extraordinary accommodative spirit and openness of heart, Lebai Hanafiah. The author shows the effect of the explosive and intractable riots

on the entire nation but more so on this band of closely linked individuals—how their relationships are affected by the event and, especially, by their contesting views of the nation.

Panglima and Omar share a rigid, reductive and exclusivist view of nationalism, characterised by a centre/margin—us/them; Malay/non-Malay—binarism and the doctrines of forced homogenisation and structured dominance. Panglima, whose actual name is not given in the novel, signifying that he could be an embodiment of the corrupt bourgeoisie and shady politicians in the country, suffering from, in Fanon's phrase, a "spiritual penury" [156]), believes that the only way to overcome the racial and religious differences in the country is by enforcing Malay values on the rest of the population. Ironically, however, he himself is from Rangoon, Burma, and is neither a Malay nor a Muslim by birth, but has no doubt successfully used the disguise of a Malay to climb the social and political ladder all the way up to the position of Secretary of Home Affairs. In a conversation with Siti Sara, he fiercely postulates, "The people divided, so many religions, real *rojak*, partitioned not into two parts but many parts. We need a single set of values to keep us together" (182-83). His objective is to push Malay values to the centre, because he believes that, being "outsiders," the Chinese, Indians and Eurasians, as he fervently claims at another point in the novel, are obliged "to understand us" (143). Acting upon this privileging norm, he allows Tok Guru Bahaudin and Pak Zaki to go around preaching their brands of Islam, but refuses similar freedom to Ti Shung, a Chinese spiritual leader.

Panglima eventually ends up forcing himself sexually on Siti Sara, which reflects how unscrupulous he is and how he uses force to accomplish his vain, selfish, nefarious plans. However, if we take Sara as a trope of woman-as-nation, as is customary in many Third World political allegories, then Panglima's act of bodily violation of Sara, like that of Sally-Salmah in *Scorpion Orchid*, exposes the brutality and destructive consequences of the monolithic model of nationalism championed by both him and Omar. The latter also, coincidentally, forces himself upon his wife on at least two occasions, motivated, like Panglima, by a racial and religious orthodoxy, and an exclusivist, monocular and totalising view of nationalism, devoid of a sense of dialogism and constructive engagement. Omar believes that "kafirs" (non-believers) like Yung Ming, Sabapathy and Gita should not be trusted and be kept at a distance, because they are, he announces to Sara, "a distraction and ultimately a danger" (40). He also expresses his hierarchic sensibility and the us/them binarism inherent in his perception of the nation, telling his wife, "this country is ours. We will make it our own" (109). His refusal to sign Sabapathy's application for extension and renovation of a Hindu temple, despite Sabapathy being his friend, and later his sexual assault on Sara for signing the petition, shows how Omar uses Islam to "colonise"

and “silence” those whose vision of the nation is contrary to his own, including his non-Muslim friends and fellow citizens, as well as his own wife.

Sara, Yun Ming and Dahlan are in fact, in one way or another, the author’s spokespersons in the novel. They believe in an all-inclusive “rainbow” nation, structured on the principles of mutual recognition, creative negotiations and evolutionary symbiosis. Dahlan, a radical lawyer, is perhaps the most fiery and idealistic of the three. His act of marrying Gita, a non-Muslim woman, whom he never urges to convert to Islam (although it is a legal requirement in Malaysia for non-Muslims to convert to Islam upon marrying a Muslim, in order to access the *bumiputra* privileges), is perhaps one of the boldest gestures in the novel. This acts as a powerful symbol of unification and a trope of the syncretist possibilities of a multicultural nation that is currently, in the novel’s present tense, experiencing racial rupture and raging religious strife. Dahlan honestly believes in the justice and equality of all the citizens. Therefore, a Malay himself, he spurns “opportunities given to *bumiputras*” (63) and fights for the rights of the Chinese spiritual leader Ti Shung to preach his religion freely. In a conversation with Gita, he poignantly says, summing up his vision of a Creole nation, “All of us must make amends. Each and every one of us has to make an individual effort. Words are not enough. We must show by individual actions that we will not tolerate bigotry and race hatred” (67).

However, in spite of his best intentions, Dahlan’s programme leads to bloodshed. This is because, being *Harry* Dahlan, he is too Eurocentric and radical for the local context. He fails to realise that syncretism needs to evolve, and that the formation of a unified nation in a multicultural society is a process which could be achieved only with time and creation of a new collective memory. Dahlan’s friend, Yun Ming, however, has no such problems. A second generation Chinese who works for the Ministry of Home Affairs under Panglima, Yun Ming is gentle and moderate, and looks at things from a “human point of view” (142). He believes in the “brotherhood of all” (143). Sincere and trustworthy, he does not mind distributing relief goods in the Malay areas even during the peak of the riots, virtually risking his own life. He has opportunities to migrate to England, where his former wife lives with his son, or to Australia, where his brother has emigrated, but he prefers to stay in the country he considers home. In fact, his sacrificial spirit and sense of dialogism is most evident in his offer to convert to Islam so that he could marry Siti Sara, the woman he loves. This offer to forsake his faith and tradition to marry a Malay-Muslim woman might seem excessive to some, but in reality it marks the triumph of love and humanity over the artificialities of race and religion.

Like the cross-cultural relationship between Gita and Dahlan, the relationship between Yun Ming and Siti Sara, that occupies the centre of the

novel, acts as a metaphor of Fernando's fabric of an encompassing nation. It is appropriate that Siti Sara should find her new love in Yun Ming, after walking out on Omar, because their sensibilities are very much compatible. Like Yun Ming, she does not have a unitary, parochial sense of identity, nor does she espouse a monolithic model of nationalism like Omar. Her father is a religious teacher who has been teaching the *Quran* for forty years and yet her best friend is Gita, a Hindu woman, and her boyfriend is Chinese. She is American educated and has been teaching at a premier university in the country, yet she sees herself as a *kampong* girl, visiting her father and her friends in the village quite often. Her Creole consciousness and dialectical imagination is best summed up in the following statement of her father, Lebai Hanafiah, who has certainly been instrumental in making the liberal, tolerant and accommodative woman that she is in the novel:

There are so many who want to force you to follow the right path. Each one's right path is the only one. I am tired of seeing the folly spread in the name of such right paths. I fear those who seek to come between me and love for all humanity. They are the source of hate and destruction. (116)

This Tagoresque statement, in which soul, conscience and humanity are placed above all constructed ideologies, beautifully delineate Fernando's outlook in the two novels. As long as we consider love as the base of all metaphysics and humanity as the highest principle in life—as Emerson, Whitman, and Tagore have advocated,¹⁰ and as Fernando recommends in his two novels—we can never go wrong in self-refashioning ourselves as a nation or a society, in which equality, justice and inclusivity remain the dominant principles.

K. S. Maniam's *The Return* seems a very different novel from Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* and *Green is the Colour*. However, if we look underneath, we will notice that many of the socio-cultural ideas advocated by Fernando are also evident in Maniam's work. An autobiographical novel and a *Bildungsroman*, the primary focus of *The Return* is on Ravi, the author's doppelgänger—the process of his moral and psychological development in a “new” land and the anxieties, as well as the emotional and economic sufferings, experienced by him and his family/community owing to their cultural dislocation. Because of the novel's singular focus on the “journey”

¹⁰ Emerson, Whitman and Tagore are known for their humanism and love for mankind. Emerson's “Self-Reliance,” Whitman's “Song of Myself,” and Tagore's essays on nationalism, in which he roundly condemns nationalism for its lack of encompassing humanism, provide examples of their philosophy of life. One may also look up Whitman's poem, “The Base of all Metaphysics,” for the poet's celebration of love as the life's highest principle.

of the Indian community in Malaysia, it has sometimes been accused of monologism and exclusivism, or dismissed as a narrow, partial narrative that fails to reflect/represent the multicultural ethos of modern, postcolonial Malaysia.¹¹ Notwithstanding this limitation, the novel's ultimate message is one of dialogism and syncretism as the writer shows how the diasporic, deracinated Indian community in Malaysia could best overcome their crisis of identity and sense of dislocation by adopting the values of accommodation and transculturation, and searching for a new identity through a process of cultural cross-fertilisation.

In an article entitled, "New Lamps for Old," Vijay Mishra, himself a Fijian-Indian suggests, "Where ethnic doctrines are based on ideas of exclusivism and purity . . . diasporic epistemology locates itself squarely in the realm of hybrid, in the domain of cross-cultural and contaminated social and cultural regimes" (71). Maniam's vision for the Malaysian-Indian community in *The Return* is not far from this. In accomplishing his objective, Maniam establishes an unspoken affinity between the fate of Ravi and that of his community; thus Ravi's journey, his ups and downs, the sorrows and triumphs of his experience are also, by extension, the roller-coaster journey and the fluctuating fate of his community, and finally, Ravi's attainment of subjectivity and agency by adopting a syncretist and deterritorialised imagination, and his rejection of the staunchly ethnic outlook of his ancestors and their backward-looking dream of possessing land as a mark of identity and emotional security, is meant as a prescription for the new generation of Indians in Malaysia for coming to grips with their present plural environment.

Ironically, however, Ravi's subjectivity and agency, and his appropriation of a modern, dynamic, hybrid sensibility comes at a price. He would have never broken away from the regressive and exclusivist outlook of his grandmother, Periathai, his first ancestor in Malaysia, and his father Naina, if he had not been sent to an English school and exposed to Miss Nancy. Miss Nancy and his English education were instrumental in isolating him from his community and disfiguring his view about his own people as "filthy" and "shabby." Nonetheless, it is Miss Nancy who helps Ravi to see his own potential as an individual and writer, and his English education which empowers him to break out of his ghetto life at the longhouse, defy and demystify the caste hierarchy represented by Menon and the "yellow territory," and acquire a skill-oriented, mobile, deterritorialised life style that signals a fresh start for him, and implicitly his community, in Malaysia.

¹¹ Shirley Lim is one such critic who accuses Maniam of cultural monologism and exclusivism in his *The Return*. See Lim's article, "Gods Who Fail: Ancestral Religions in the New Literatures in English from Malaysia and Singapore," for details.

Periathai, Ravi's grandmother, who first came to Malaysia from India with her four children in search of a better life, was an exceedingly bold, spirited and imaginative woman. She was capable of making sense of the most barren and adverse of circumstances. Yet being a first generation migrant, she harboured certain regressive tendencies and an urge to reclaim the homeland. Therefore, she would surround herself with the symbols and artefacts of India, and because her consciousness was overly steeped in Indian values, and in memory and the past, she failed to break away from the hierarchic structure of the caste system, even outside her originary homeland. Besides, being uneducated and from a farming background, she continued to associate her identity with owning a piece of land and building on it. It is this obsession to possess land in order to find her identity that turned out as a fatal weakness for her, causing disillusionment, despair and eventually her tragic death, when one morning, after two years of bitter encounters with the town council for illegally living on government property, she passes away speechless and without bidding farewell to her family. Unfortunately, after Periathai's death, Ravi's father, Naina, inherits her backward-looking dream and becomes equally obsessed with finding identity in building a home on "borrowed" land. When Ravi shows reluctance to approve of his wish, Naina explains in an urgent tone, "Can't you see? We can make all the money, get all the learning. But these are useless if our house pillars don't sink into the clay of the land" (159). Eventually, his mother's tragedy visits Naina when a similar struggle with the town council provokes him to set his house on fire, which consumes both him and the house.

Ravi himself has moved away from the narrow, one-dimensional outlook of his ancestors. "I stood outside Periathai's and Naina's preoccupations. Their imagination could not grasp the real complexity that surrounded us" (140), he says. He has however not only shed the territorialised imagination of his ancestors but also their unquestioned allegiance to their culture. Menon humiliates Ravi as a washerman's son, in spite of Ravi's superior performance at school than his own son, and insists that he deliver Menon's washed clothes faithfully, in keeping with Ravi's tradition as a washerman's son (who belongs to the lowest caste in the Hindu hierarchic tradition). Ravi has never understood the logic behind this: he realises that it is unfair, but that Menon is somehow protected by Hindu religious conventions. One day, when he is physically assaulted by Menon for crossing over to the "yellow territory," in defiance of the social custom, Ravi furiously challenges his tradition and questions the irrational caste system practised with piety by his kind for centuries. He says, "I don't know what promises I made to myself but a grain of iron must have entered my soul for, from the following day, I turned away from the God who ruled my people" (30). This is Ravi with his bifurcated consciousness and hybrid sensibility. Brought up on two sets of values—one from Periathai and Naina,

and the other from Miss Nancy and the English books—it is likely that Ravi will live by straddling the borderlands of multiple cultures, and form his identity from the intermixing, confluence and synergy of cultures, instead of adhering to a monolithic and essentialist view of culture and identity like his forebears. This dialogic spirit of Ravi and the dynamics of interaction and sharing also prepare him and indirectly his people to claim their subjectivity as Malaysian-Indians by traversing and negotiating the cultures on both sides of the hyphen and actively participating in self-refashioning the Malaysian plural nation.

Shirley Lim's *Joss and Gold* is divided into three parts and set in three different countries, spanning a period of twelve years. The novel's first part, "Crossing," is set in Malaysia, during the volatile period of the riots of 13 May 1969; the second part, "Circling," is set in New York, in 1980; and the third part, "Landing," is located in the post-industrialised, "stony paradise," city-state of Singapore, in 1981. The novel is essentially "communal, social and political" (Nor Faridah 305),¹² as writing should be in Lim's view, and the writer's focus in all its three parts remains on cross-cultural relationships and on nation-building in a dialogic and syncretic mould.

The story in Book 1 is very similar to Lloyd Fernando's in *Green is the Colour*, as both narratives deal with the same historical event that rocked Malaysia in 1969, and show how the country could overcome such racial and political animosities by dismantling rigid cultural divides through a process of creative negotiations and transactions between groups and cultures. The country's present state of race relationships, which has set off the riots, is reflected in the views and actions of several of the characters in the novel, especially Abdullah and Samad, who believe in a totalising view of identity and monolithic model of nationalism. Their sense of cultural purity/rigidity and isolationism/monologism is evident when Abdullah tries to explain to Chester the tragic consequences of the Gina (Chinese)-Paroo (Indian) inter-racial relationship, which has resulted in Gina's suicide, and a failed attempt by Paroo:

Very difficult this interracial affair Better that like stay with like. Indian and Chinese cannot mix, too many differences—food, custom, language. To be husband and wife must share same religion, same race, same history. Malay and Chinese also cannot mix, like oil and water. Malays have many adat, Islam also have shariat. All teach good action. Chinese have no adat, they eat pork, they like gamble, make

¹² For Lim's views on her writing and in particular her novel *Joss and Gold*, also see this author's "Shirley Geok-lin Lim: An Interview."

money Of course Chinese also have their own religion. But they must become like Malay if they want to marry Malay. (58)

The statement shows the hardened position of the races and their exclusivist outlooks, but it also underscores Abdullah and Samad's homogenising or centralising vision of nationalism—that the Malaysian nation should be built with the Malay people and culture at the centre. The duo believe that since the country is *theirs*, the immigrant races, i.e. the Chinese and the Indians, would have to fit into *their* way of life. This sense of us/them binarism is further evident in the following statement of Abdullah, when he explains the cause of the riots to Li An, Lim's protagonist in the novel: "I told you the Chinese cannot push us too far. This is our country. If they ask for trouble, they get it" (98).

The same monolithic and totalising view of race is also shared by Gina's father and Paroo's mother, who are both culturally insular and refuse to consent to the cross-cultural marriage of Paroo and Gina. However, Li An, a young tutor at University Malaya, sometimes seen as the author's alter ego, seeks to dismantle her compatriots' rigid view of identity by advocating a protean, plastic sense of the individual that allows the various groups living in the country to accommodate one another and form one inclusive and composite nation. Li An's Creole, hybrid imagination is reflected not only in her love for English and English literature and her own cross-cultural relationship with Chester, an American who has come to Malaysia as a Peace Corps volunteer, but also the way she keeps supporting and encouraging Gina to marry Paroo, in spite of the objections from Gina's father, and the way she showers her love on her Amerisian daughter, Su Yin, despite what the society thinks of her and the child. Her dialogic imagination and composite view of nation is most evident in her following statement, when in response to Chester's inflammatory comment that the Chinese were not "really Malaysian" and "could be in Hong Kong or in New York's Chinatown" (44), she comments:

Everything in Malaysia is champor-champor, mixed, rojak. A little Malay, a little Chinese, a little Indian, a little English. Malaysian means rojak, and if mixed right, it will be delicious Give us a few more years and we'll be a totally new nation. No more Malay, Chinese, Indian, but all one people. (44-5)

This "mixed" view of Malaysia, and that Malaysia is for all Malaysians and not for an exclusive group of people, is also evident in her affirmation to her husband, Henry, "But I am not Chinese. I'm Malaysian;" or in her diary entry, where she explains why the country is exploding in a racial furore, in the wake of the national elections, "All this talk about Chinese rights makes

me sick too. Malay rights, Chinese rights. No one talks about Malaysian rights. I am a Malaysian. I don't exist" (90). What Li An suggests is the rejection of all unilateralism and ethnocentrism, and the gradual evolution and invention of a unified imagined community through multilateralism and synergy of cultures, somewhat similar to the Chicano aesthetic of "rasquachismo" that Homi Bhabha speaks of in *The Location of Culture*, in which all available resources are brought together "for syncretism, juxtaposition, and integration . . . a sensibility attuned to mixtures and confluence . . . from both sides of the border" (Rivkin 938).

In Book 2, Lim's focus is largely on dismantling gender hierarchy and restoring women to their rightful place in society through an extended interrogation of the matrimonial relationship of Chester, who is now a professor at Columbia, and his self-assertive and resourceful wife, Meryl. Nevertheless, a part of the writer's energy is also invested in scrutinising the race relations and nation formation in her adopted homeland, America. Being an Asian-American herself, of course her interest is to see how the Asians are accommodated in the formation of the American nation, and what she discovers is absolutely astounding to her. She notices that the same exclusionary tendencies and vertical hierarchies that her protagonist experiences in Malaysia also exist between the races in the States, although not to the same explosive degree. For example, Dan, a white American, sees the Korean shopkeeper who has started a new grocery shop in his suburb, as an "alien," in spite of Chester's repeated reminder that the shopkeeper is an "Asian" (157). Meryl herself is upset by the fact that a Korean should be running a store in an affluent suburb like Westchester County, "The first time the Korean served her in Skivy's . . . she had felt weird, like the city had suddenly intruded up-county" (156). Roy Kumar, a leading scientist from India, has been invited to help out in a project in the American Defence Department, but the government did not bother to grant a visa to Kumar's wife, which is an indication of how Kumar, in spite of his world class talent, is regarded as inferior as a human being. All these examples show how the whites put themselves at the centre, pushing the Asians and other ethnic minorities to the periphery in America, despite the country's claims of being multicultural, cosmopolitan and, of late, the guardian of democracy. The writer's objective is to rectify this discrepancy between the claim and the practice in American society and indicate how important it is to establish equanimity and inclusivity in order for America to realise its full potential as a nation.

In Book 3, again the author examines the state of nationalism in Singapore and brings to light that in spite of some progress made by this largely diasporic nation in healing the racial differences, so that the local races do not feel threatened by one another, there is still much to be accomplished before Singapore becomes an inclusive, pluralistic nation.

This is reflected in the way the teachers and students treat Li An's Amerisian daughter, Su Yin, at school. Because of her hybrid identity, people see her as "chap-cheng-kwei" or "mixed-up devil" (204). This is a reflection of Singapore's parochialism and centripetal tendencies, because in spite of its bold claims to cosmopolitanism, the people are so harsh to a young, intelligent but innocent girl just because she has "green-brown eyes, reddish hair, and dramatic height" (204), contrary to the appearance of a "regular" Chinese girl. The writer's advice is again, as in her previous books, for the country to open up to dialogism and syncretism so that an inclusive national identity could be formed by shedding all unilateralism and exclusivism.

Published posthumously, eleven years after the author's death, Lee's *London Does Not Belong to Me* is a very different novel from the other works discussed in this essay. It is not set in Malaysia or Singapore, but in Paris and London; most of its events take place in London, but some of the chapters are set in Paris when the novel's narrator-protagonist goes there in search of his Muse/*Manasi*/Medusa, Cordelia. It is believed that the novel was written in the 1950s and deals with Lee's experiences as a law student in London from 1952 to 1954. The focus of the novel is on a small group of characters who are from different cultures, and have different tastes and temperaments, but are locked in a common fate by their mutual relationships of love, hatred, hypocrisy and jealousy: the narrator, a Malaysian; Beatrice, Cordelia and Stephen, Australians; Ken, Tristram and Derek, English; Gopal, an Indian; Arlette and Dickie, Irish; and Guy and Collette, French. The novel's "metropolitan" setting and the narrator-protagonist's deliberate attempt to enter the European consciousness of course compromises its potential as a postcolonial work, yet the novel does address the postcolonial themes of binarism and liminalism, imperialist constructions and the indigenous self-fashioning of a nation, albeit in an indirect style.

The novel's title itself, *London Does Not Belong to Me*, has an overt reference to the post/colonial discourse of "othering" and East/West binarism. The narrative aims to dismantle this cultural divide by showing how in-betweenness and hispanicisation could empower the individual and resist the discourse of dichotomy. The narrator himself is considerably hispanicised and lives a hybrid life; he is a Malaysian-Chinese and yet speaks English, loves English culture and mingles with his English, Australian and Irish friends, without prejudice. Moreover, he has established emotional/sexual relationships with two "white" women: Cordelia, whom he loves, and Beatrice, who loves him. This relationship with the "white" women is clearly emblematic of his transculturation and mental miscegenation; it shows how he has successfully penetrated the Colonialist Self and the Imperial Other, and subverted the binary of self/other, white/non-white, English/Chinese, European/Asian, coloniser/colonised. Given that the novel was written before Malaysia became independent (albeit

published much later), this modality of hybridity—that an individual or a nation could appropriate an identity away from ethnic purity or racial hierarchy, or by mixing and juxtaposing the values of multiple cultures—would offer a significant conceptual tool to frame the cultural discourse in Malaysia. Thus, in spite of its diversity, Malaysia has the potential to form a “rainbow” nation through a process of hybridisation and confluence of culture, or by dismantling a binary and hierarchical culture in favour of one of creative negotiations, proactive synthesis and horizontal living.

Conclusion

These five novels encapsulate the general trends in Malaysian post-colonial literature. Many of the writers, if not all, recommend dialogism and syncretism as the best way of building the Malaysian nation, given its current cultural and ethnic pluralism. They advocate inclusivism and synergy of cultures as more constructive and wholesome for a multicultural society than binarism, cultural hierarchy and dichotomous relationship between the different ethnic/religious/racial groups. However, the methods and approaches adopted by these writers in crystallising their vision for the country are conspicuously different. The approaches of Lloyd Fernando and Shirley Lim, who interrogate the explosive incidents in the nation’s history before or after independence, are forthright and frank; they dramatise the contesting visions of the nation to show how Malaysia would gain from an inclusivist and encyclopaedic approach and how unilateralism and exclusivism would bring destructive consequences for this newly emergent nation. The approaches of Lee Kok Liang and K. S. Maniam are, however, more indirect, as they use the individual and individual’s consciousness as a trope for the nation and national consciousness, and suggest hybridisation of the self or a group as a way of building a syncretic nation. Despite their differences, they all write political-cultural allegories, and like that of Emerson’s American scholar, their imagination remains essentially dialectical, holistic, accommodative, and futuristic. They also believe in Fanon’s dictum for “going beyond the historical . . . to initiate [a] cycle of freedom” (Rivkin 938), and in Walcott’s advice for imaginative escape from the destructive aspects of history to attempt a fresh start and fashion a nation that will adopt dialogism and syncretism as its main underpinnings.¹³

¹³ See Walcott’s “The Muse of History,” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*.

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