

IMAGINING A NATION: LLOYD FERNANDO'S *SCORPION ORCHID* AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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In the opening plenary of the 32nd AULLA Congress, Ien Ang raised the concept of a “national symbolic field,” the intertwining of history to create a symbolic field of feelings and experiences that can be called national imagination.² This national symbolic field appears in Lloyd Fernando’s *Scorpion Orchid* as a vision of a comprehensive national identity. Fernando expresses this vision in a modernist novel that brings together historical, cultural, and fictional narratives in fractured synthesis. In this paper I would like to comment on the relationship between that vision, which is a vehicle for national imagination, and the form of Fernando’s novel.

There can, perhaps, be little disagreement with Bernard Wilson’s assertion that “Lloyd Fernando is one of the three prose writers who should rightfully be considered at the forefront of Malaysian literature written in English.”³ Though not a prolific writer of fiction, his first novel, *Scorpion Orchid*, is very influential – a regular set text in university courses dealing with Singaporean and Malaysian writing and the focus of much critical attention. *Scorpion Orchid* is remarkable for its experimental form, combining Western and Asian narratives, and for its comprehensive vision of a postcolonial society, a vision that, in retrospect, seems to have been successfully fulfilled in present-day Singapore.

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² AULLA: Australasian Universities’ Languages and Literature Association. The 32nd Congress of AULLA was held at Victoria University of Wellington in early 2003.

³ The other two are Lee Kok Liang and K.S. Maniam. Wilson, Bernard. “‘Do You Wish to Join This Society or Not?’: The Paradox of Nationhood in Lloyd Fernando’s *Scorpion Orchid*.” *Kunapipi: Journal of Post-Colonial Writing*. 22.1 (2000): 11-16.

Written in 1976, the act of composition of *Scorpion Orchid* is situated in a postcolonial world – postcolonial in a chronological sense – but the novel itself looks back to the 1950s, a time of racial tension and nationalistic fervour in an atmosphere charged with the exhilarating anticipation of decolonisation. Fernando's novel has a clear ideological agenda: to promote a tolerant multi-ethnic nationalism by foregrounding a common regional heritage. To create, in other words, a sense of a common cultural memory that can serve as the foundation for national consciousness. The element of national allegory in *Scorpion Orchid* is made very obvious by the self-conscious experimentalism of the novel, and consequently it is a point critics of the novel cannot fail to notice. K. S. Maniam points out that *Scorpion Orchid* “creates myths almost arbitrarily to present an integrated Malaysian nationality” (170). He is referring to the italicised passages liberally interspersed throughout the novel, which together supply the novel's underlining of latent significance with a mythical dimension. Another critic, Koh Tai Ann, is convinced that Fernando “attempts to recreate a version [of history] more consonant with the local's experience and sense of a usurped history” (Koh 49). The theme that emerges from a historical consideration of *Scorpion Orchid* is the theme of national birth and the attendant anxieties of racial conflict and ethnic self-interest. Ron Shepherd notes the metaphor of growing up in *Scorpion Orchid*. He says, “the process of growing up, at all levels, is also the process towards some notion of truth or wisdom. The text itself reflects growth and is part of the metaphor” (53). The four young men at the centre of the novel gain a new awareness of their ethnic identities as they negotiate the race riots that destroy their complacent sense of camaraderie. This awareness is central to their transition from adolescence to adult life, which, says Ron Shepherd, “corresponds in Malayan society to a period of transition between former tolerance and present assertiveness” (53).

Scorpion Orchid is made up of two interlocking narrative levels: one a boys' adventure story, the other a collection of historical and mythical vignettes. On the primary narrative level, *Scorpion Orchid* is a story about the ordeal of four young men, close friends in their final year of university. The four are carefully chosen to represent the main ethnic groups in Singapore: Santinathan is Indian, Sabran, Malay, Guan Kheng, Chinese and Peter D'Almeida, Eurasian. Santinathan is bright, but something of a maverick. Refusing to observe the conventions of university life by missing essay assignments and disrupting lectures and meetings, he gets himself expelled from university and ends up as a village schoolteacher. Fervently political, Sabran gets mixed up with the striking unions and is arrested and detained, his future prospects set back considerably. Guan Kheng comes from a well-to-do Chinese family. And Peter D'Almeida, the Eurasian young man who is confused about his identity, loses faith in Singaporean society and emigrates to England after he is beaten up in the riots (only to return at the close of the novel). The four young men are involved with Sally, a mysterious girl of uncertain ethnicity, who works at a hawker food stall but is also a part-time prostitute. Their relationship with her is highly ambiguous, involving sex,

money, and love in varying combinations. Although they pay her for sex, she is treated as a friend.

The four start out confident in their friendship, which seems to have reached beyond ethnic categories to bring them together in enduring camaraderie. As seniors at university, they enjoy a certain amount of prestige, which they exercise mercilessly in ragging younger boys. They encounter an aggressive mob for the first time on a particular night out. Baffled at the unmotivated hostility of the encounter, they are later shocked when Peter becomes the object of a racially motivated attack. As the reality of the violence sinks in, they find themselves, together with Sally, caught in the middle of citywide riots. Making their separate ways across the city among prowling gangs and makeshift roadblocks, Guan Kheng and Sally find themselves caught in the midst of a hostile mob. Chased into a cul-de-sac, Guan Kheng disappears and Sally is raped by the gang. He is later racked with guilt for deserting her. The violence forever changes their outlook, shattering their confidence in the racial harmony that they had taken for granted.

The boys' adventure story ends with the dissolution of the friendship that had been built on naiveté and complacency. The violence of the riots causes them to confront their own ethnicity and forces upon them a re-evaluation of their privileged position in society. No longer sure of their friendship, which they had once conceived as an apolitical comradeship transcending race and class, the four seek spiritual guidance from the absent mystic Tok Said, a legendary guru who is present throughout the novel as rumour, but who never makes a concrete appearance. In the end, the quest for identity in a spiritual figure comes to nothing – all accounts of encounters with Tok Said are different. The legendary spiritual centre is elusive, perhaps even non-existent. The four young men go their separate ways each with a more mature understanding of the challenges of multiculturalism. Thus, on the primary narrative level the novel is a story of growing and learning; it is essentially a *bildungsroman*, a quintessentially Romantic Western genre.

Interwoven with the primary *bildungsroman* narrative is a complex secondary narrative. The most distinctive feature of *Scorpion Orchid* is a series of fourteen italicised passages of varying length inserted abruptly into the primary narrative at more or less regular intervals. Drawn from traditional Malaysian texts, these inserts assume a mythical and dreamlike quality and have no causal connection to the plot of the main story, which is essentially a straightforward, third-person narrative centred on the ordeal of the four young men. Together with some fictionalised history, mock poster captions and newspaper articles in the closing chapter of the novel, these italicised inserts form a secondary narrative that runs parallel to, and resonates symbolically with, the primary narrative. *Scorpion Orchid* is an archetype of what Bakhtin calls a secondary speech genre, a literary-artistic event that contains within it other secondary speech genres and primary (simple) genres that take the form of unmediated speech communion (*Speech Genres* 62). Commenting on Bakhtin's work, Michael Holquist points out that the distinctiveness of the

novel as a genre is its ability “to open a window in discourse from which the extraordinary variety of social languages can be perceived” (*Dialogism* 72). Within the polyphonic framework of *Scorpion Orchid* is a wide range of clearly demarcated and easily identifiable speech genres: historical accounts, memoirs, mythical parables, fictionalised history, and mock newspaper articles.

Fernando’s main sources for the passages on the earlier history of the region are the *Hikayat Abdullah* (Abdula’s history), a personal memoir of the eminent 19th century Malay scholar Munshi Abdullah (d. 1854), and the *Sejarah Melayu* (The Malay Annals), a compendium of facts and historical and mythical vignettes dating back to the early 17th century. Both works are prominent cultural and literary landmarks in Malay literary history. In addition to these two monumental works, from which most of the italicised passages are drawn, other biographical and historical texts also figure in *Scorpion Orchid*. Other sources used are: *Memoirs of a Malayan Family*, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, *Syonan – My Story* (by M. Shinozaki, a Japanese author). Fernando gives a full listing of the source texts for the italicised inserts at the end of novel with the proviso that slight adaptations have been made for better integration. These passages from the historiography of the region have been carefully chosen, modified and assembled into a counterpoint to the unfolding realistic primary narrative set in colonial Singapore.

Arranged in loose chronological order with pivotal events and incidents ordered sequentially, the italicised passages in *Scorpion Orchid* do not simply constitute a straightforward historical narrative. Various ahistorical personal and mythical passages disrupt the historiography of the secondary narrative. Although the passages on Raffles, Farquhar, Crawford, and the Japanese occupation unfold in the correct chronological order, there are inserted between these passages much older accounts, some dating as far back as the early 15th century. For instance, a passage connected to the great diplomatic and trading voyages of the Ming Chinese admiral Zheng He (Ling Ho in the novel) and another passage describing the arrival of the Portuguese at Malacca come between Raffles and Farquhar. The chronology is further complicated by passages with a mythical tone and which do not have readily datable temporal markers, such as the story of the toddy-tapper in chapter five. In palimpsest fashion, the secondary narrative is layered with events of varying historical specificity. It is an archaeology of regional historiography. To change the metaphor, the fourteen italicised passages act like an historical unconscious, distributing “items of a great and neglected heritage,” to quote Fernando, along the plot of *Scorpion Orchid* following an associative rather than a strictly chronological blueprint, laying down an underlining of latent significance.

The fourteen italicised passages are nodes through which the boys’ adventure story opens onto a wider domain of historical and cultural consciousness. One prominent node at which linear real time intersects with mythical time-space occurs in the toddy-tapper story in chapter five. The chapter opens with an account of a toddy-tapper who saves a boy whom he discovers adrift in the sea. The boy turns out to be a prince and asks to be

taken back to his father's land, promising to reward the man handsomely. Too poor to make the trip, the man persuades the prince to remain instead. Curiously, the prince acquiesces immediately whereupon he is given a new name and lives happily ever after. Taken from the *Sejarah Melayu*, this quasi-mythical account begins with "now one day," a variation on the familiar formulaic "once upon a time." Between once upon a time and happily ever after is the abstract time-space of the mythical chronotope cut off from historical materiality and the biographical space of a concrete individual. This mythical chronotope intrudes non-causally into the real linear time-space of the main story and disrupts the historiographic schema of the italicised passages.

Situated at the opening of chapter five, the toddy-tapper story is located in the middle of a long, two-chapter narrative section on the life of Santinathan. Chapter four describes Santinathan's rebellious exploits that end in his expulsion from university. And the rest of chapter five, resuming after the italicised toddy-tapper story, tells of Santinathan's manual exertions as a shipyard day labourer and of his subsequent painful encounter with his estranged sister Neela, pregnant with a white man's child. Santinathan's life story is a story of alienation and frustration. Uncomfortable with university life, he stands out as a maverick and a troublemaker. At the shipyards, he is conspicuous as an educated novice unaccustomed to rugged work. And in his reminiscences with Neela, the nostalgia for their lost world of rural childhood harmony throws into relief his present frustration and loneliness in the metropolis, amid "the alien swirl of life in the city" as Sabran puts it (107). Santinathan is not at home in Singapore, his home away from home. His story, an integral part of the primary narrative of the novel, resonates with the story of the toddy-tapper – which is a story of exile and adoption – and also with the short italicised passage that closes chapter five, this one taken from *Memoirs of a Malayan Family*. This concluding passage, taken out of context and quasi-mythical in tone, is a narrative of the exile and dispersal of a family. The two italicised passages intrude onto the linear real time narrative of Santinathan and connect it with mythical chronotopes located in abstract time-space.

The kind of weaving together of the primary and secondary narratives that I have just described is a hallmark of *Scorpion Orchid*. A similar kind of narrative interlacing runs through the entire novel, connecting fictional biographical chronotopes with the mythical/historical. The *bildungsroman* imbues the fragments of history with teleology and in return the collage of history and myth invests the story of growth with deep cultural significance. Thus, a western narrative genre, transplanted into Asian soil and crossbred with local texts, takes root, flourishes and becomes an indigenous plant.

The setting of *Scorpion Orchid* in a decade of violence is significant for Lloyd Fernando who, in the preface to *Cultures in Conflict*, his collection of critical essays, notes his preoccupation with the cultural contact zone between Asia and the West, a subject frequently revisited in the course of his literary-critical career. In an early essay, "Literary English in the South East Asian Tradition" (1969), he urges local writers writing in English to rework the

cultural and historical traditions of their past into works that take into account the effects of the colonial encounter:

If they [local writers] aim to deny the present which has been profoundly complicated by Western norms, and if they seek the restoration of a bygone, relatively homogeneous, Asian cultural order, they are likely to be caught, in V. S. Naipaul's phrase, in a middle passage. They should rather aim to retrieve and recast items of a great and neglected heritage in the light of the complexities of the second half of the twentieth century. (137)

Seven years later with the publication of *Scorpion Orchid*, Fernando fulfils his earlier call to arms. *Scorpion Orchid* does not seek to recreate (or invent, perhaps) a pristine, pre-colonial indigenous national culture. The novel is not driven by a nativist impetus. *Scorpion Orchid* duly acknowledges the influence of European imperialism, for better or for worse, in shaping the communities of the region. European contributions to the development of regional nationalism are set in the context of a gradually evolving regional cultural consciousness. Fernando's vision of a comprehensive national heritage accommodating Malay folklore *and* the impact of imperialism (both British and Japanese) is expressed metonymically in the form of the novel. National emergence is the "content of the form," to borrow a phrase from Hayden White. In creating this vision of a comprehensive Malaysian nation, Fernando mobilises his encyclopaedic knowledge of the region and his Western education. He is in fact participating consciously and actively in the creation of a communal imagination through the manipulation of knowledge.

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson puts forward the idea that nations are products of a collective imagination. Anderson sees the novel as an important vehicle for a sense of communal identity, "providing the technical means for representing the kind of imagined community that is the nation" (25). The novel (and the newspaper) helps to fix the national language, and, more importantly, facilitates a new mode of apprehending the world – as a collection of simultaneous occurrences unfolding on a stable social background.

Characters in a novel play out their roles against a representation of a stable social background. The skilful author creates a detailed, almost palpable image of a social environment upon which the various characters go about their business. Although it goes unnoticed, the backdrop is the linking device that binds together the separate lives of all of the characters; whether or not they are aware of each other's existence is unimportant. The stable society in the novel is the social community to which all of the characters belong. The fictional community in novels, the stable backdrop on which the simultaneous lives of life-like characters unfold, reinforces the imagination of a corresponding external community by presenting to the reader the illusion that it is simply mirroring what is already out there. I have here paraphrased an idea from Anderson's *Imagined Communities* to facilitate the discussion of

Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid*, a novel that displays in a very obvious way what Anderson calls "the technical means for representing the nation."⁴

The fictional backdrop in *Scorpion Orchid* is Singapore in the 1950's, a time of social instability and imminent decolonisation. The inchoate nation is the setting for a story of growth involving four young men who represent the major component races of the region. The four start off with a "given" identity. They are part of an elite community in a colonial institution (the university), above and oblivious of the seething social tension of the world outside. In the course of the novel their given identities disintegrate. After careful consideration, the character who most comprehensively embodies the history and experiences of the region, the Eurasian Peter D'Almeida, decides to return to Singapore, which he sees as the true home for his hybridised identity. Peter is the one who suffers the most in the ordeal. He is singled out for racial attacks. In a moment of disenchantment, Peter complains to Sabran of his cultural rootlessness:

I was born in Malacca speaking Portuguese. That's because the Portuguese colonised us so many hundred years ago. The Dutch didn't stay long enough, or I suppose it's a toss up I would be speaking Dutch instead now. Anyway the result was no one outside understood the Portuguese I spoke. Then because the British had ousted the Dutch, I learnt English and forgot my Portuguese. It was like taking out the parts and organs of my body and replacing them with others. Then the Japs came and we were told forget English, learn Japanese. So once more I began taking out parts and putting in new ones – unlearning my language and learning another. Now it seems I must unlearn it once more and lean Malay. (142-143)

Peter's disenchantment with the process of cultural erasure and replacement is clear. Yet his own hybridised identity is like a record of colonial influence. As a 20th century figure, he would probably not have learnt Portuguese. The "I" in his complaint is rhetorical, a generalised speaking position on behalf of people like himself. Portuguese, though, lives on in his name: D'Almeida. Peter, whose family lives a life of garden tea parties, goes away to England, where he thinks he belongs. *Scorpion Orchid* ends with Peter's announcement of his return: "I shall be starting on my travels again," he writes to Sabran, "This time back home. I love Malaya. I love Singapore" (156).

Coming immediately after Peter's reaffirmation of his love for his homeland is the final paragraph of the novel, a quasi-mythical italicised passage hinting at the potential for a new nation. It is a potential for prosperity but one fraught with challenges. The final sentence: "All along the river as you go upstream there are homesteads, and in the river there are fierce crocodiles" (157). This is the river that Peter, the metonymic embodiment of the *volk*, has

⁴ *Imagined Communities*, 25-36.

consented to navigate. In the person of Peter is found the answer to Ernest Renan's question.⁵ "A nation is," says Renan, "a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future" (19).

Scorpion Orchid is an embodiment of the desire for a constructive multi-culturalism – one in which a new unity is forged from diverse historical and cultural experiences. This gathering together of history and culture into the fictional space of the novel is an attempt to give these elements teleological coherence. The knowledge of the past (historical knowledge) and knowledge of myth and folklore (cultural knowledge) are combined with knowledge of Western modes of fictional representation. Formally, then, *Scorpion Orchid* incorporates Western and Asian discourses to recast in an Asian context the Romantic notion of a community growing out of the past to fulfil its destiny as nation. It is in this sense that Lloyd Fernando has mobilised knowledge to "produce" a nation.

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⁵ Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?

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