

Strangers in the Land of their Birth: Concepts of Social Integration in Portrayals of the Malay in Contemporary Malaysian Novels in English

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First published in *Southeast Asian Review of English (SARE)*, No. 50 - Singapore & Malaysia Special Issue, 2010/2011, 20-34. MACLALS & Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Introduction

Since 1971, Malaysia has pursued a national literature policy defined by a hierarchy of languages. Only literature written in Malay, the national language, is classified as “national” literature. Writings in other indigenous languages (e.g. those used in Sabah and Sarawak) are classified as “regional” literature, and writings in non-indigenous languages (e.g. English, Chinese and Tamil) as “sectional” or “communal” literature (Tham, 62). The term “communal literature” implies that writers who use non-indigenous languages concern themselves only with communal issues, not national ones. With reference to Malaysian literature in English (MLE), the explanation given at the time the policy was proposed was that English-language writers – then predominantly non-Malay, middle-class, urban, and university-educated – belong to a tiny elite with no experience of the country’s social reality, namely, the world of the rural Malay (Tham, 52-3). Today, the image of MLE writers as deracinated and socially un-integrated continues to haunt scholarly discourse. MLE writers are frequently reminded that “the author’s role and responsibilities are connected to the nation” and that they must take up the challenge of representing a true picture of the nation’s multicultural reality (Mydin, 44). The recent surge in novels by diasporic Malaysians has raised new issues. Should they be regarded as Malaysian writers, or as foreign writers who happen to use Malaysia as their fictional setting? Alternatively, should MLE writings *in toto* be classified as “diasporic” since they belong linguistically to the pool of world literatures in English (Omar, 105-17)?

This paper interrogates the positioning of MLE writers as strangers in the land of their birth by taking a sociology-based (as opposed to an ideology-based or ethnocentric) approach to the study of how the Malays and the Malay world are portrayed in MLE novels.¹ This

approach is part of a larger research project² aimed at developing a new, sociology-based paradigm for MLE studies. It introduces the idea that in any multi-ethnic society, ethnic differences and ethnicised or ethnocentric perspectives should be expected and accepted as part of the society's formal and informal discourses (including its literature). The presence of such discourses does not mean that the society is disintegrating, but rather that it is engaging in the healthy process of negotiating concepts of social integration. Negotiating concepts of social integration involves asking the question, "What can/must be done to hold society together?" Ultimately, the question is linked to the discourse on national unity, which asks the question, "What does it take for citizens to think or act in a united way in matters of national importance?" Therefore, in literature, negative or absent representations of an ethnic "other" should not be interpreted forthwith as indications of the novelists' ethnocentric animosity. Instead, they should be studied as literary attempts to negotiate ethnic and other forms of alterity by exploring concepts of social integration, which could range from assimilation to pluralism³, or from total rejection to total acceptance of diversity.

This presentation of preliminary findings provides a brief overview of the inter-relationship of national policies, the development of the novel genre in MLE, and the portrayal (or non-portrayal) of the Malay in the novels, followed by a discussion of selected novels to uncover the concepts of social integration and national unity embedded in their portrayals of Malays and the Malay world.

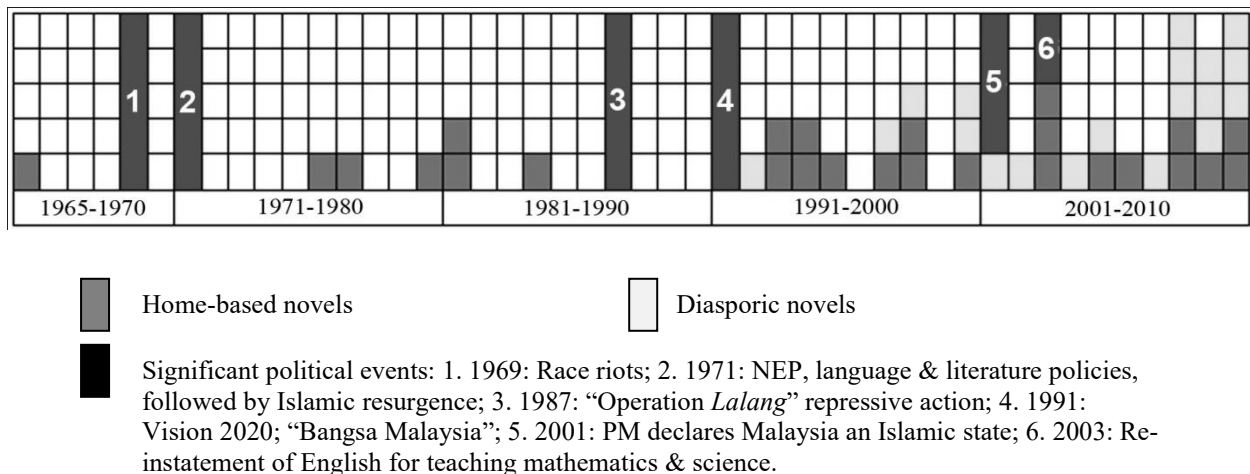
The Malaysian Novel in English 1965-2010: An Overview

For this overview, the working definition of the term "Malaysian novels in English" is based on the original language of composition, the date of first publication, and the authors' perception of their relationship to Malaysia. The overview includes only novels originally written in English first published between 1965⁴ and 2010, by local-born writers who regard Malaysia as either their "only" or their "original" home country. The writers are divided into "home-based" and "diasporic". "Home-based" writers are defined as Malaysian citizens domiciled in Malaysia. "Diasporic" writers are those domiciled in other countries, regardless of whether they are currently Malaysian citizens.⁵ The overview here is thus based on 45 novels published by 28 writers over a period of 45 years.

Numerically, the novel in MLE grew slowly: between 1965 and 1990, only seven novels were published and it was only after the mid-1990s that more novels were being published regularly. A survey of the genre's growth suggests the influence of political events and government policies. Table 1 below shows the relationship between political events and the

output of novels in the last 45 years. Dark grey rectangles stand for home-based novels, light grey rectangles for diasporic novels, and numbered black columns for significant political events. The pattern that emerges suggests that political unrest and government measures to suppress dissent during the 1960s (columns 1 and 2) and the 1980s (column 3) had the effect of “silencing”⁶ home-based novelists, while signs of political liberalisation (column 4) resulted in a rise in the number of their works published.

Table 1: Malaysian novels in English: Impact of politics on output of novels, 1965-2010



In more recent times, the relative absence of home-based novels from 1998 to 2002 coincides with a period of political uncertainty marked by the 1997 Asian Economic Crisis, the sacking of the Deputy Prime Minister in 1998, and the Prime Minister’s controversial declaration on 29 September 2001 that Malaysia is an Islamic state⁷ (column 5), while the resumption of publication in 2003 coincides with the government’s decision to revert to using English as the medium of instruction for mathematics and science in schools⁸ (column 6).

More pertinent to this paper are the post-1969 government legislations curbing freedom of expression⁹, which appear to have inhibited English-language novelists’ portrayal of Malays and the Malay world. The most potent of these legislations prohibits the raising of “sensitive issues” – a term that has never been defined clearly, but through usage by Malay nationalists and politicians has come to mean anything deemed critical of the Malays.¹⁰ Equally potent is a government ruling in 1989 prohibiting non-Muslims from using 42 Arabic-Malay words relating to Islamic theology and practice, among them *Allah* (God)¹¹, *salat* (liturgical prayer), and *Ka’bah* (the holy shrine in Mecca) (Yousif, 42). In this discussion, the term “Malay-Muslim policies” will be used to mean specifically these and similar exclusivist policies and legislations resulting from the combined resurgence of Malay-

and Muslim-centric political and ideological consciousness since the 1970s, partly because they are “interconnected and intertwined” (*ibid*, 33) and partly because in the minds of many Malaysians, political Islamisation is “little more than a guise for Malay political-cultural-social dominance” (*ibid*, 39).

The inhibitive effect of Malay-Muslim policies on the portrayal of Malays by English-language novelists becomes evident when Malay characters in pre- and post-1969 novels are compared. In Johnny Ong’s 1965 novel, *Run Tiger Run*, for instance, a Malay schoolteacher is portrayed as an individualist who habitually drinks to excess, visits nightclubs, and questions the practice of praying five times a day. In post-1969 novels, no such portrayal of “un-Islamic” Malay behaviour is found, and Malay villains are a rarity. Characters of dubious morality with Malay names figure large in two novels of the 1990s (Fernando, 1993; Chuah, 2009); but in both cases, it is clearly established that they are Malay-Muslims by conversion and cultural assimilation, not by birth. Villains who are born-and-bred Malays have appeared only in the last decade, and they conform to types long found in Malay-language fiction: the corrupt politician (Gomez, 2008), police officer (Noor, 2010), and corporate head (Chuah, 2010a).

Another feature of post-1969 novels is the absence of significant Malay characters in the works of younger and/or diasporic non-Malay writers who first started publishing in the 1990s. When present, Malay characters appear only now and again like spectral dots on the country’s landscape: as roadside fruit sellers indistinguishable from one another (Aw, 2005) or as boatmen providing silent service to the Chinese-Eurasian narrator (Tan, 2007). On the rare occasions that they speak, they are caricatures of the Malay-Muslim politician, chiding the non-Malay characters in fractured English for not speaking Malay (Lim, 2001; Samarasan, 2008).

Do these authors avoid writing about the Malay world in their fiction because the exclusivist, polarising nature of Malay-Muslim policies has effectively reduced their opportunities and/or desire for personal interaction with (and therefore understanding of) the Malays, or because they fear censorship and prosecution? The pertinence of this question surfaces when the novels by women writers of South Asian descent are examined. Most of these novels centre on communal issues, but always within the context of a multi-ethnic society as they often have significant and even major Chinese characters with which the South Asian protagonists have strong bonds of friendship or love. However, while the Malay is almost totally absent in the home-based novels (Louis, 1994; Mahendran, 1998; Sundararaj, 2003; Mano, 2003), there is evidence of the Malay world in the diasporic novels (Manicka,

2002; Samarasan, 2008; Flint, 2009). Thus, Shamini Flint's *Inspector Singh Investigates: a Most Peculiar Malaysian Mystery* exploits the notion that a Muslim man's right to have four wives could be cause for murder, and Preeta Samarasan's *Evening is the Whole Day* contains frankly critical presentations of issues related to Malay-Muslim policies. Is this because the diasporic writers, living abroad, are not inhibited by the Malay-Muslim policies?

Further research is needed to determine whether, and how, the weak Malay presence in these novels is related to the existence of Malay-Muslim policies. What is evident from this brief survey of trends is that despite the restrictions imposed by the policies, a number of novelists, both home-based and diasporic, have questioned and challenged these policies through their portrayals of the Malay.

Portrayal of Malays in Home-based and Diasporic Novels: A Comparison

There is a discernible difference in home-based and diasporic portrayals of Malays in novels, which suggests that the respective writers do not relate to Malaysia in the same way. Brief comparisons of portrayals of the Malay in three pairs of home-based and diasporic novels, paired according to comparability of themes or settings, illustrate this.

The first pair is *In a Far Country* by home-based K. S. Maniam and *Dark Demon Rising* by diasporic writer, Tunku Halim Abdullah. In both novels, the world of the rural, traditional Malay is depicted as inhabited by characters with some kind of mystical connection to the land and its unseen forces. Maniam uses this mystical connection to problematise the non-Malay's quest for recognition as an equal citizen and a sense of belonging. Tunku Halim uses the mystery of Malay magic to confirm the Kiplingesque (or Malay-Muslim political) idea that the Malay world is incomprehensible and inaccessible to westerners (or, in this case, non-Malays).

The second pair is Chuah Guat Eng's *Echoes of Silence* and Beth Yahp's *Crocodile Fury*. Both novels deal with the Chinese Malaysian's fear of the Malays, following the 1969 riots. In Chuah's novel, the traumatised narrator returns home to find her fears allayed and her prejudices proven baseless through her encounters with Malays in a small town where she is a stranger. In Yahp's novel, the fearful anxiety that infuses the fugue-like recollections of the unnamed narrator, her mother, and her grandmother is amplified by the repeated reference to "natives" who throughout remain ominously faceless and nameless.

The third pair is Lloyd Fernando's *Green is the Colour* and Shirley Lim's *Joss and Gold* (2001), two novels that take a critical look at the impact of post-1969 policies and politics on the Malays of the 1980s. In Fernando's novel, the Malay world is made up of a variety of

Malay-Muslims with different socio-economic backgrounds, educational experiences, religious values, political views, and concepts of social integration. Through this portrayal of the Malay world as a heterogeneous society in flux, Fernando problematises issues important to nation building during the 1970s and 1980s: the Constitution's definition of Malay identity¹², the divisive forces unleashed by those who use Malay-Muslim policies for selfish ends, and the inability of Malays who value more inclusive and egalitarian concepts of social integration to neutralise the divisive forces. In Lim's novel, such nuances are absent. There are only two Malay characters of any importance, Abdullah and Samad, who are presented to us from two viewpoints: that of a diasporic Chinese Malaysian who has settled in Singapore, and that of an American revisiting Malaysia after a decade-long absence. Abdullah and Samad are also presented in two time frames: 1969, when they were politically engaged university students, and 1981, when they have become respectively, a top-ranking civil servant and a successful businessman. Despite the differences in viewpoint and time frame, the Malay characters are seen consistently as Malay-Muslim nationalists, whose concept of national identity and unity is based on total assimilation through conversion to Islam and adoption of Malay culture.

In the above comparisons, what stands out in the diasporic novels is the psychologically distant and distancing way the Malay world is portrayed and its "otherness" emphasised, communicating implicitly or explicitly the impossibility of social integration between non-Malays and Malays.¹³ In contrast, despite legal and cultural restrictions, authors of home-based novels are prepared to problematise divisive ideologies in local socio-political discourse by showing non-Malay characters engaging directly and even intimately with the "otherness" of the Malays. Their portrayals of the Malay world are thus part of their exploration of alternative concepts of social integration.

Some Concepts of Social Integration in Home-based Portrayals of the Malay

To uncover the concepts of social integration embedded in home-based portrayals of the Malay world, close study is made of a selection of novels perceived to be challenging the alterity of Malay-Muslim policies from identifiable ideological standpoints. Discussed here are novels representative of four standpoints: Islamic, Hindu Tamil, "Leftist-Intellectual", and "global". Although different in detail, all these standpoints represent concepts of social integration based on ethical governance, humanitarian values, and social justice.

Most Malay novelists have avoided using their portrayals of their Malay characters to contest or problematise Malay-Muslim policies. A noteworthy exception is Mohd Tajuddin

Samsuddin, in whose novel, *The Price Has Been High*, we detect an Islamic challenge to the policies. The novel, about guerrilla warfare during the Japanese Occupation, has been described as “out of step with its time” (Yahya, 22). However, when one reads it in the socio-political context of the years preceding its publication in 1984, one becomes aware that the novel addresses a major concern among Muslim intellectuals during the late 1970s and early 1980s – namely, the “underdeveloped” leadership quality of the Malay elite, who were perceived as “suppressing the proper understanding of Islamic values amongst the Malays” by instilling feudalistic and racially discriminating ideas (Maaruf, 120). *The Price Has Been High* can thus be read as a didactic discourse on Islamic values, and the portrayal of the characters as a working out of Islamic ideals about how to conduct oneself with justice and honour in one’s dealings with invaders, oppressors, fellow Muslims and non-Muslims. The two main characters, Rahim and Hassan, seem too good to be true because they exemplify the Islamic concepts of a good follower and a good leader respectively. Rahim’s public criticism of Hassan is uncharacteristic of Malay behaviour because the Islamic imperative to speak up against wrongdoings is being valorised, not Malay feudal custom or *adat*. Although the characters are predominantly Malay, there are sufficient portrayals of good and honourable non-Malays and non-Muslims (including a Japanese colonel) to suggest that Tajuddin’s preferred concept of social integration is based on Islamic ideals of moral integrity, social justice, non-racism, and religious pluralism. The concept is summed up in the words of one of the guerrilla fighters at the mass burial of the multi-ethnic victims of war (Samsuddin, 254): “They were, after all, the children of God.”

The Hindu Tamil challenge to Malay-Muslim policies is explicit in K. S. Maniam’s novels. His main Malay characters are seen through the eyes of narrators who are the descendants of Hindu Tamils brought to the country during colonial times to provide manual labour for the rubber plantations and public works. One result of this narrative technique is that his Malay characters come across as the adversarial “other” with whom the narrators engage in a two-fold conflict over issues arising from Malay-Muslim policies: the Hindu Tamils’ right to a stake and hence a sense of belonging in the land of their birth on one hand, and the erosion of their ethnic identity and cultural and historical heritage on the other.

In exploring these conflicts, Maniam writes with a strong sense of social injustice from the perspective and in the voice of the economically marginalised, underprivileged Hindu Tamils. However, his novels are not entirely ethnocentric. His narrators are always surrounded by friends of various ethnicities, including Malays, with whom they have friendly and mutually supportive relationships.¹⁴ Therefore, their conflicts are not with Malays as an

ethnic group, but with a socio-political system dominated by Malay-Muslim policies that discriminate against ethnic and religious minorities; and Maniam combats the system either implicitly through the plot, or explicitly through his characters.

The combat is executed through the plot in *In a Far Country*. The adversary is the Malay, Zul, who identifies with the indigenous Malayan tiger to justify his exclusive claim to the land, and repeatedly reminds the Indian narrator, Rajan, that he can see the tiger he seeks only if he changes his essential self. In post-1970 political terms, this means that Rajan has to become a Malay-Muslim to enjoy the same privileges as Zul. Rajan finds the prospect of giving up his religious and ethnic identity unacceptable, but – in what may be described in combative terms as an “authorial feint” – he does not question or dispute Zul’s claim. He merely returns to his own community to live in pluralistic co-existence with people of other ethnicities. However, through the plot, Zul’s self-image as being strong and noble like the tiger is first undermined and then dealt a fatal blow. Despite their government-sponsored privileges, Zul and his son fail to make progress while unprivileged non-Malays around them prosper. Then Zul’s son runs amok, an act of irrational violence that exposes the ironic ambivalence of the Malay’s identification with the savage/noble tiger, and leaves open to interrogation the former’s very nature.

In *Between Lives* (2003), the adversary is the government, which is determined to evict Sellamma, an old Indian woman, from the land on which she has lived all her life. The narrator is Sumitra, a young, westernised social worker sent to persuade Sellamma to give up her efforts to resist eviction. Through her encounters with Sellamma, she rediscovers her ethnic roots and her historically determined social responsibilities, and ends up identifying with Sellamma and her cause. Together with her multi-ethnic friends, she uses the Internet to wage a war against social injustice, a war that must continue until the marginalised “return from our exile”, as she declares at the end of her narration. The word “exile” reveals how keenly Maniam feels the injustice of Malay-Muslim policies. From this and the descriptions of his narrators’ relationships with their friends of other ethnicities, we infer that his preferred concept of social integration is based primarily on non-discrimination, equal opportunities, and religious-cultural pluralism.

A more compromising approach to the alterity of Malay-Muslim policies is found in the novels of Fernando, Chuah, and Lee Kok Liang, who are labelled “Leftist Intellectuals” here because their concept of social integration resembles that of the pre-Independence, nationalist Leftist English-Speaking Intellectuals (LESI)¹⁵. The LESI believed in the need to have Malay as the national language, to identify with the rural Malays, and to debunk colonialist myths

and other ideologies (Puthuchery, 13). Conscious that their English-medium education had cut them off from their ethnic roots, they nevertheless saw themselves as having a special role to play in “helping towards unity” because they were “forerunners of people drawn together from the different communities” by a common language that is acquired and not their mother tongue (*ibid*, 145). The LESI’s approach to national unity is a form of acculturative amalgamation, a process by which unity in a multi-ethnic society is achieved through the people’s willingness to learn about, adapt to, and adopt aspects of one another’s culture without altogether losing their individual ethnic identity. Several features in the novels of Fernando, Lee, and Chuah suggest that they subscribe to the same view and approach.

Firstly, nearly all their main characters are English-educated individuals of various ethnicities, who are depicted as being out of touch with the country and its people. In Fernando’s *Scorpion Orchid*, Guan Kheng, the ethnic Chinese, describes himself as “in reality a stranger who had never understood the people among whom he had been born, or the land in which he had spent his whole life” (84), while the Malay, Sabran, is reminded by a Malay prostitute, that his English education has made him irrelevant in her world of the hardcore rural poor (130). In *Green is the Colour*, the western-influenced Malays, Sara and Dahlan, fall victim to the unscrupulous Panglima because of their ignorance of the realities of power play in local, specifically Malay, politics. In Lee’s *Flowers in the Sky*, Mr. K, a surgeon of Sri Lankan origin, observes without corresponding self-reflection, that his Indian wife’s English education has left her with “a general distaste for the stupidity [sic] of the non-English educated”(30). In Chuah’s *Echoes of Silence*, the Chinese Malaysian, Ai Lian, confesses that she “was more of a stranger” in her own land than her English lover was (9). In *Days of Change*, the economically successful, western-influenced Malay, Hafiz, has grown remote from his hometown and and forgotten not only his ethnic but also his moral identity.

Secondly, in the political and thematic structures of these novels, the central Malay characters are always placed in social and situational positions where their leadership qualities are required to bring the fictional conflict to a harmonious resolution. If they are the “heroes,” they are shown to be good people, albeit with human weaknesses; and the trials and tribulations they go through are journeys to the discovery of their innate leadership potential. Sabran in *Scorpion Orchid* has to learn that his bilingualism is needed to build cultural bridges between the non-English speaking Malay majority and the non-Malay speaking minorities.¹⁶ In *Flowers in the Sky*, Inspector Hashim, the crowd control specialist, must understand that to prevent a conflict among Indians from escalating into violence, he has to give up his personal ambitions temporarily and let an Indian politician take the credit for his

work of reconciliation. In *Days of Change*, Hafiz must live up to his name (which means “the preserver”) by taking steps to protect his family, his land, and the ecology of his home district from a politically connected corporation intent on flooding the district’s valley for a Disneyland-type theme park.

Lastly, these novelists’ portrayals of the Malays are frequently drawn from the “inside.” They use narrative techniques such as free indirect discourse, partial stream-of-consciousness, and (in Chuah’s case) first-person narration to take the reader into the minds of their Malay characters and to present the world through their eyes. These techniques reduce the psychic distance between the readers and the Malay world, enabling the novelists to reveal the heterogeneous, multi-voiced, and conflict-ridden reality of Malay society, dismantle essentialist and absolutist ideologies, and expose the corruption and hypocrisy of those who use such ideologies to wield oppressive power.¹⁷

It should be pointed out that all the novelists discussed so far in this section were born either before or during the Japanese Occupation. In the works of younger writers, we do not find the same preoccupation with the need to transcend ethnic differences. In Brian Gomez’s *Devil’s Place* and Mohd Rozlan Noor’s *21 Immortals*, for instance – although topical socio-political issues and Malay characters have important narrative and thematic functions – Malaysians of all ethnicities are shown living, loving, suffering, and working together to combat crime, corruption, and injustice. Their concept of social integration may be described as “global”: national unity is taken for granted while social integration is seen not in terms of transcending ethnic differences, but in terms of embracing diversity in all its forms.¹⁸ Their fictional worlds are populated by characters that literary scholars might consider stereotypes (e.g. the Malay police officer, the corrupt politician and his entrepreneurial cronies, the Chinese triad leader and his mistresses, and the guitar-playing singer-songwriter Eurasian dreaming of international success) or unacceptably non-conformist (e.g. the long-haired Malay who owns a pub). Yet who is to say they are not part of the writers’ reality?

The fact is, the world experienced by the Malaysian novelist writing in English today is radically different from any world that could have been conceived for national literature policies in 1970. It is a world in which global events such as the 11 September 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre (WTC) in New York and international terrorism, as well as domestic skulduggery, are experienced instantaneously and with such immediacy that they often inform and shape novelistic structure and plot.¹⁹ It is a world influenced by borderless concepts of social integration that bear little resemblance or relation to the ethnicity-based concepts of national unity constructed by politicians past and present. It is, above all, a world

where information flow is so copious and unending that no one can claim to know everything there is to know about anything, not even the land of one's birth. Therefore, the question to be asked is not whether the contemporary English-language writer is a stranger in the land of his birth, but whether that question should even be asked in literary scholarship today.

Conclusion

This paper's non-ethnocentric, sociology-based study of novelistic portrayals of Malay characters throws new light on the issue as to whether the Malaysian Anglophone writer is ignorant of the Malay world and uninterested in national issues. The preliminary findings suggest that exclusivist and restrictive Malay-Muslim policies have had an impact not only on the output pattern of the novel genre but also on novelistic portrayals of the Malay world, albeit perhaps less so today. Thus, the novels roughly fall within three categories of responses to the policies. First, the policies may account for the absence of Malay characters in most home-based and diasporic English-language novels published since the 1990s, as well as the propensity among diasporic writers to portray the Malay world as the inaccessible "other". Second, a number of older-generation, home-based novelists have consistently questioned and challenged the policies by using portrayals of the Malay world to explore various, alternative concepts of social integration. Third, and more significantly, novels published in recent years by younger writers have shown a trend towards global integration, in which the unity and multi-ethnic nature of the nation are taken for granted. We conclude therefore that the question of whether English-language writers are strangers in the land of their birth should no longer be an issue in literary criticism of MLE because novelists today experience a reality and hold views of social integration radically different from the concepts of reality and national unity favoured by national literature policy makers in the past.

NOTES

This is a shortened version of a paper first presented at the International Seminar on the theme "Fictions and Factions in the Malay World" at Goethe University, Frankfurt, on November 11-12, 2010. The full version will be published in Mohamad Rashidi M. Pakri & Arndt Graf, eds. *Fiction and Faction in the Malay World: Volume 1*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, forthcoming in 2012.

¹ To date, there are only two studies of novelistic portrayals of Malay characters in local novels in English. See Yahya, 1988; Talif, 2006.

² The research project is funded by Universiti Putra Malaysia under the Post-doctoral Research Fellowship Scheme.

³ The term “pluralism” is used to describe a situation in which people of different ethnicities live “side by side but separately, within the same political unit” and where each group “holds its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways ...” (Furnivall, 304-5).

⁴ The year 1965 is selected as the starting point of the study because it marks Singapore’s political separation from Malaysia and, arguably, the separate development of the two countries’ literature in English.

⁵ Place of domicile is given precedence over citizenship status in the case of “diasporic” writers because in this study, the concern is with the writers’ perceptions of their relationship to Malaysia, which may be affected by geographical distance and not just legal status.

⁶ By “silencing”, it is not meant that writers stop writing. It is surmised that publishers would be reluctant to publish their works during times of political uncertainty because of the Printing Presses and Publications Act, first instituted by the British in 1948, and revised, each time with more restrictions, by the Malaysian government in 1972 and 1984.

⁷ This declaration has been contested as unconstitutional by constitutional lawyers and opposition leaders, including the leader of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). See Thomas, 2005.

⁸ This policy is in the process of being dismantled. From 2011, children starting school will be taught mathematics and science in the national language.

⁹ As Tham (50) has noted, “The contentious issues which had caused rancour among the various Malaysian communities in the past – language, education, citizenship, and culture – lost their saliency after 1971 not because they had been solved or become irrelevant but because of legislation passed in Parliament.”

¹⁰ For a recent example, see the article “Lee Kuan Yew Should Not Raise Sensitive Issues on Malaysia: Zahid” in *New Straits Times*, 17 September 2010.

¹¹ One of the repercussions of the ban on the use of such terms by non-Muslims was the so-called “Allah controversy” of 2009-2010. For a contemporaneous report of events and a discussion of their political implications, see Mahli, 2010.

¹² Article 160 of the Malaysian Constitution defines “Malay” as “a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom and (a) was before Merdeka Day born in the Federation or in Singapore or born of parents one of whom was born in the Federation or in Singapore, or is on that day domiciled in the Federation or in Singapore; or (b) is the issue of such a person.”

¹³ This is not to say that diasporic novels should be labelled “non-Malaysian” and banished from the MLE corpus. They should rather be studied as representing types of sociological and literary responses to post-1969 Malay-Muslim policies.

¹⁴ In Maniam’s short stories, those who discriminate against the underprivileged Tamils include wealthy Indians and bigoted Chinese. See, for example, “The Eagles” and “Removal in Pasir Panjang” in Maniam, *Haunting the Tiger*, 1996.

¹⁵ The non-Malay left-wing English-speaking intellectuals (LESI) were politically active from about 1948 to the mid-1960s. See Puthuchery, 1998 and Poh Soo Kai *et al*, 2010.

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of the narrative function of Sabran as translator and mentor, see Chuah, 2010b.

¹⁷ For a Zen-based reading of *Scorpion Orchid* and *Flowers in the Sky* as myth-debunking novels, see Chuah, 2008. The phrase “flowers in the sky” is used in Chinese Zen texts to mean “myths,” “socially constructed fictions,” and/or delusions.

¹⁸ The non-ethnicized call to embrace difference and non-conformity is particularly marked in MLE short stories, which frequently speak up on behalf of the socially marginalised such as homosexuals, sex-workers, those living with AIDS, and immigrant workers.

¹⁹ For examples of novels that use the September 11 attack and international terrorism for plot and structure, see Gomez 2008, Flint 2009, and Chuah 2010a.

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