

Malaysian novels and the national discourse

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This year, we shall be celebrating our 60th Merdeka Day. It seems like a good time to take a closer look at whether our English-language novelists have contributed to the national discourse, and if so, how.

Many Malaysians do not think of our English-language novelists as being in the least bit interested in national matters. There is even a tendency to think of them as still hankering for the colonial past. While it may be true that they don't write about the nation in the same way as, say, the Malay-language writers, it doesn't mean that they have somehow insulated themselves from whatever is going on around them.

Writers, like everyone else, are influenced by and respond emotionally and intellectually to the circumstances specific to their time and place in history, and, whether they are conscious of it or not, these influences and responses will make their way into their creative works – regardless of the genre or the quality of the writing. This is especially true of locally based writers, that is, those who live or have lived most of their lives in Malaysia, who are unequivocally Malaysian citizens, and for whom this country is the only homeland.

From my research, I have found that in general, locally based novelists show a greater propensity (than, say, Diasporic writers) to portray the country as it really is. Their fictional worlds are multi-ethnic and culturally diverse, even when they are presenting a reality seen from their main characters' ethnically centred perspectives. They are less likely to set their narratives in their ancestral homelands, and when they allude to those homelands, they do not romanticise them or write of them with nostalgia. They are also more likely to deal head-on with the present-day issues relating to their lives in the context of Malaysia's changing social and political scenes.

More importantly, although many of the novels are directly or indirectly critical of the state of affairs, one discerns in them a desire to find or offer solutions and resolutions to the problems and issues they criticise. In other words, our locally based novelists identify themselves as “stayers”, committed to the quest for national unity and a national identity. Through their novels, we get an insight into how they, and those of their generation, try to negotiate the various concepts of social integration floating around over the years – should we assimilate, adopt and adapt, or should we defy and contest the dominant discourse? In short, most of the local English-language novels we'll be looking at are, in one way or another, nation-building novels.

In this series of articles, therefore, I am going to celebrate the novelists who have chosen to stay by inviting you to join me on a guided tour of their works. What we shall be examining is how the nation and national events have influenced their ideas and ideals of the nation, and how, in turn, their ideas and ideals have influenced their works. Hence the theme: Writing the Nation.

As in the previous series, I shall be looking at novels published between 1965 and 2014. I begin with 1965 because that was when Singapore left the federation; leaving us the Malaysia we know today. And I stop at 2014 because I have found it impossible to form a credible, unifying retrospective of the number and diversity of new novels published in the last couple of years.

So what are these novels, and what are the issues they deal with?

While it is easy to identify the novels, it is less easy to isolate their issues. Nation building is a huge, amorphous subject, and since, like everyone else, novelists respond to socio-political changes with their whole beings, their novels tend to be multi-faceted and sometimes multi-layered in meaning. After all, novelists are not textbook writers.

Nevertheless, for the purpose of this series, I shall divide the novels into three broad categories, according to their dominant themes or the main issues they deal with. Within each category, I shall discuss in some detail the main representative novels and survey others that touch on similar issues.

The first are the “nation-building” novels: Lloyd Fernando’s *Scorpion Orchid* and Lee Kok Liang’s *Flowers in the Sky*. Published in 1976 and 1981 respectively, these two novels are not only the first major novels written by Malaysians, they also deal specifically with the socio-political problems following the May 1969 riots, when the nation was forced to redefine itself and rebuild itself on a new footing.

In the second category are the historical and heritage novels. Novalis, the 18th century German writer, once said, “Novels arise out of the shortcomings of history.” Certainly, it is possible to read most of our historical and heritage novels as contestations of the “official” history of the nation found in government policies and school textbooks. Since official histories tend to have an impact on the sensitivities of ethnic groups, the novels are subdivided according to the novelists’ ethnicity. Among the novelists who write in this sub-genre are Mohd Tajuddin Samsuddin, K.S. Maniam, and Alex Ling.

In the third category are the social-critical novels. These comprise the majority of the novels written between 1994 and 2014 and it is impossible to single out any one for mention here. In the articles, I shall discuss the novels according to the three core issues they raise: domestic violence, law and justice, and corruption.

I shall then conclude the series with an overview of current trends.

This is the first of a 10-part series of articles on Malaysian novels in English. Chuah Guat Eng is a Malaysian author, whose works include two novels (*Echoes Of Silence* and *Days Of Change*) and three collections of short stories (*Tales from the Baram River*, *The Old House And Other Stories* and *Dream Stuff*). She was conferred a PhD by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in 2008 for her thesis *From Conflict To Insight: A Zen-based Reading Procedure For The Analysis Of Fiction*. Currently, she teaches Fiction Writing at the Universities of Monash and Nottingham in Malaysia.