

How Malaysian politics in real life affect our fiction

Tenth of ten fortnightly articles for Star Two, published on 27 August 2017

To celebrate our 60th Merdeka Day, we have been exploring the somewhat sparse vegetation of English-language novels written by locally based authors and published between 1965 and 2014, to find out how they have contributed to the national discourse.

Since this is the concluding article, I would like to highlight a significant trend, and then take a quick look at how national events and issues are dealt with in a couple of novels published in the last two years.

Our literary excursion has brought to light a sharp difference between the way nation-related issues are perceived and addressed in novels published in the 1970s and 1980s on the one hand, and in novels published after 1993 on the other. The difference is so sharp, so discontinuous, that it has to be regarded not as a normal literary development but rather as a phenomenon. Nonetheless, it is a phenomenon that reflects the sharp and sudden changes in the way “nation”, “national identity”, and “nation building” were politically conceived and addressed during the 1980s.

It is clear to most readers that the novels of the 1970s and 1980s have been influenced and informed by the May 1969 incident and the racial polarisation following the implementation of the National Language Policy and the New Economic Policy. As discussed in my first few articles, the most significant novels of the period – Lloyd Fernando’s *Scorpion Orchid* (1976), Lee Kok Liang’s *Flowers in the Sky* (1981), and Tajuddin Samsuddin’s *The Price Has Been High* (1984) – place great emphasis on the importance of developing a “national” mindset capable of transcending the racial prejudices inherited from our communal and colonial past. Collectively, these can be regarded as novels in pursuit of social harmony.

However, the impact of the politics of the 1980s on the novels of the 1990s to the present has yet to be noted and studied. For one thing, no scholar (to my knowledge) has remarked on the near-total absence of published novels between 1984 and 1993. My own By Chuah Guat Eng. Writing the Nation. Article 10 for Star Two_ 22nd August 2017.

research suggests a correlation between this literary hiatus, the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984, and the relocation of international publishing houses (which had played a significant role in publishing and promoting local literature in English in earlier years) to Singapore.

In my last three articles, however, I discussed how the novels from 1993 onward show an overwhelming tendency to question and critique the undermining and/or deprivation of civil liberties, individual freedoms, and social and legal justice. Collectively, we may identify such works as novels in pursuit of the Rule of Law – whether the authors are conscious of it or not.

There are clear signs that this trend will continue for some time to come, as new and younger writers who have no memory of May 1969 but who have personally been affected by Operation Lalang (1987) and the Reformasi movement (late 1990s) feel the need to come to terms with the reality of their (sometimes traumatic) experiences through fiction.

Among the clearest signs of this trend are two very recent novels, Julian Jayaseela's *The Prime Minister's Secret* (2016) and Bernice Chauly's *Once We Were There* (2017). These novels are remarkable because both the authors write from their personal experiences. Jayaseela was detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) during Operation Lalang, and Chauly was an active participant in the Reformasi movement.

The Prime Minister's Secret is a highly readable, intelligent, and entertaining work of imaginative brilliance, with many surprising twists and turns. The premise is an alternate history of Malaysia: what if the Baling Talks had concluded with Tunku Abdul Rahman accepting Chin Peng's proposal that the Malayan Communist Party be legalised and allowed to take part in the nation's democratic process? More cannot be said without spoiling it for the reader. What can be said is that a major part of the novel's discourse concerns the ISA; not only its human cost to the detainees and their families, but also the cost to the nation when dealing with countries that view the Act as an infringement of universal human rights.

Once We Were There is another compelling read. Told mainly from the point of view and in the voice of a young activist-journalist, the novel takes us right into the thick of the Reformasi movement as well as the underbelly of KL society. Since the novel has been reviewed by a number of publications, including *The Star*, I shall refrain from revealing too much about it.

So now, gentle reader, we have reached the end of our literary excursion, and it is time to say goodbye. I hope that you have found the series interesting enough to go out and buy – and then read – some of the books that I have mentioned and/or discussed.