

Literary Puzzle: *Scorpion Orchid*

Second of ten fortnightly articles for Star Two, published on 23 April 2017

In this series of articles, we are exploring how national events and issues have influenced and shaped Malaysian novels in English. We begin our literary excursion with Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid*. First published in 1976 and republished a few times since, the novel is the subject of numerous reviews and scholarly essays. Since the author's biography and quite a number of the reviews and articles are available on the Internet, I shall confine myself here to sharing with you what I have discovered about the novel.

The story is set in Singapore in the 1950s during a time of political unrest. The main characters are university students Sabran, Guan Kheng, Santinathan, and Peter D'Almeida, and Sally, the prostitute they share, whom they all assume to be Chinese but later learn is Malay, her real name being Salmah. When the social unrest erupts into violence, Peter is assaulted by a group of strangers in what he claims is a racially motivated attack and, in a separate incident, Sally is raped by a "multiracial" gang. From then on, interpersonal relationships break down. Overcome by doubt, mistrust, and despair, all five characters become increasingly conscious of their ethnic differences and eventually retreat one by one to their individual ethnic comfort zones.

Clustered round the five main characters are several other characters, which space does not allow us to discuss. The most important one is the enigmatic Tok Said, a shaman-like personage who makes the direst predictions about the country's fate but whom we never see or hear directly. We only know about him through the characters who believe they have met him, but their accounts of the encounters suggest that each has seen a different person.

While the storyline is straightforward, the narrative style and structure are confusing. The disjointed narrative, a perplexing stream-of-consciousness passage, and numerous interpolations of excerpts from historical texts such as *Sejarah Melayu*, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, and *Hikayat Abdullah* contribute to the novel's inaccessibility – both to read and to understand. The only way to make sense of it is to unravel the narrative threads of the tangled knot one by one.

By Chuah Guat Eng for Star Two. 18/4/17

The unravelling cannot begin, however, until one asks the right questions, and whether one asks the questions depends on how clearly one perceives reality. Take the case of Santinathan, a highly intelligent young man with some university education who manages to get himself expelled, finds work as a dockyard labourer and finally ends up in a rubber plantation, thus fitting neatly into the stereotype of the Indian. If you accept that stereotype, you will not see the thread. But if it should strike you as odd because, realistically, in 1950s Singapore (and even today) such a person would have had no difficulty finding an administrative position anywhere, you will have found a crucial thread. This thread will lead you to the stream-of-consciousness passage, which, when correctly deciphered, will reveal that Santinathan's working as a dockyard labourer is a camouflaging tactic to evade his pursuers (real or imagined) who he believes are out to kill him for having had an illicit liaison with a Malay widow and, when found out, fleeing from enforced circumcision.

The Santinathan thread and the threads of the other inter-ethnic affairs (Ellman and Neela, Guan Kheng and Sally) constitute an examination of a major issue among the English-educated minorities in post-1969 Malaysia: whether to comply with the demand for cultural conformity in return for acceptance and a sense of belonging. The men's ruminations concerning their reluctance to marry their lovers evoke the question, "Do we resist conformity because we fear the "otherness" of the outsider or because we fear losing our privileged status as insiders in our own communities? The women's actions, on the other hand, offer a solution; they overturn the conventional insider-outsider power structure by rejecting their faithless lovers. The episode where Sally rejects Sabran's "big-brotherly" offer of help and reminds him that his English education has made him irrelevant in the world of the rural Malay is the intra-ethnic, inter-class version of this act of self-empowerment.

Related to this exploration of insider-outsider power structures and their reversals is the novel's discourse on the centre-periphery structure of the colonial mindset: its origin and construction by the centre, and its perpetuation through the complicity of those on the periphery. To understand the complexity of this discourse, the reader has to be perspicuous enough to question the truth of Peter's claim that his assailants are racially motivated as well as the true nature of Tok Said's existence. These two threads converge on the novel's core message, implied in the image of the scorpion in the text and in the title, and explicit in

Sabran's observation, "Looks like long after the whites go, we will do their work for them, see with only their eyes."

Space does not allow more, but I hope I have persuaded you that *Scorpion Orchid* is not your everyday novel but rather, a brilliantly conceived, intricately wrought literary puzzle that rewards its solver with multiple levels of meaning and ways of looking at national issues. Perhaps its most valuable gift to the nation-building effort is that by forcing the reader to recognise and question the stereotypes and preconceptions pervading the fictional world, it effectively deconstructs and demolishes the reader's real-world colonial mindset.