

## WRITING THE NATION 3

***Flowers in the Sky* addresses Malaysian bigotry**

*Third of ten fortnightly articles for Star Two, published on 16 May 2017*

The second stop on our exploration of how national events and issues have influenced and shaped Malaysian novels in English is Lee Kok Liang's *Flowers in the Sky*, first published in 1981.

The story is set in an unspecified Malaysian island-town in the late 1970s. It consists of three separate events loosely linked by Mr. K, a Ceylonese surgeon. Two events take place in his surgery and involve his patients: Hung, a Chinese Buddhist monk, who needs a hernia operation, and Ah Looi, a stomach cancer patient. Apart from some comic scenes illustrating the communication breakdown between the Chinese-speaking Hung and the English-speaking Mr. K, the narration of these two events consists of these two elderly men's thoughts. And because both are first-generation immigrants, their thoughts are dominated by nostalgic memories of their former homelands and their discontent with Malaysia, their new homeland.

Sandwiched between these two men's lengthy, rambling ruminations of their discontent is the third event. It takes place in the garden of Mr. K's seaside home, where a statue of the Hindu God, Ganesha, has washed up overnight and attracted a crowd of devotees led by Swami Gomez. A conflict arises between Mrs. K, who wants the crowd to leave immediately, and Swami Gomez, who refuses to move the statue before the auspicious hour of sunset. Police Inspector Gopal is sent to resolve the conflict, but makes things worse partly because he is secretly a devout Hindu and mainly because his masculine pride is wounded by Mrs. K's superior attitude. Through a comedy of errors, the reinforcement he calls for is answered by Inspector Hashim of the Crowd Control Division, who arrives on the scene with his riot squad. The conflict is happily resolved, however, thanks to Hashim's diplomacy and compromising spirit.

By Chuah Guat Eng \_Article 3 for Star Two. 8/5/17

On first reading, nation-building seems to be the least of the novel's concerns. The story is told by a narrator who is not a character in the story, but whose remarks and side-comments project the personality of a gossipy man, who is an all-round bigot with a disdain for women, people of another ethnicity, and anyone with a slightly dark skin.

What were the national events and issues giving rise to such a novel?

By 1981, Malaysians had lived through 10 years of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the National Language Policy (NLP). And no community was happy. Not even the policies' beneficiaries. Many blamed the policies for the falling standard of English, ethno-religious discrimination and polarisation, and inefficiencies and corruption in government institutions. But due to the numerous laws prohibiting public expressions of dissent, their criticisms were expressed only in the safety of their thoughts and private conversations.

Why then would Lee write a novel where the thoughts and views of the narrator and the main characters mirror so faithfully the divided state of the nation?

There is much evidence in the text to suggest that the novel holds several nation-building lessons. Here, I shall mention the three most important ones.

The first lesson is that the voice of the nasty narrator is our own. His bigotry is our vehemently denied bigotry, his thoughts our most secret thoughts, and his words our words when we speak among close friends and family.

The second lesson is that habitual complainers have a rigid mindset, and the rigid mindset is a sign of some form of psychological dysfunction. This lesson is delivered, parable-like, through the portrayals of Hung, Dr. K and Gopal, the three disgruntled and misogynistic men who suffer from sexual dysfunction caused by sexual perversion (Hung), lack of self-esteem (Gopal), or advancing age (Mr. K).

The third and most important lesson is that we must stop hankering for some imagined past and start adapting to new and changing circumstances. This is suggested in the

novel's structure, which is reminiscent of the "coconut" structure found in traditional Indian narratives. In the image of the coconut, Lee's nation-building message is clear. The central Ganesha episode, where the characters find happiness by responding to change with integrity and a compromising spirit, is the sweet, vital, seed-bearing fruit. The surrounding narratives of Hung and Mr. K clinging to the past and complaining about the present are the husk, destined for the waste heap.