

Malaysian novels about civil liberties

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Social problems such as poverty and racial or gender discrimination have always played a significant role in much of post-1965 Malaysian English-language novels. But the issue of civil liberties was never a subject for literary exploration until the publication in 1993 of Lloyd Fernando's *Green is the Colour* and K. S. Maniam's *In a Far Country*, and in 1994 my novel, *Echoes of Silence*.

These novels can be read on many levels, of course, but read as discourses on civil liberties, their main concerns are fairly clear. The main concern in *Green* is a pathology of the lust for power. *Far Country* examines the pros and cons of imposing one's culture and values on others. *Echoes* examines the reasons for our society's tolerance for injustice. Here, I shall discuss only the first two novels because they both deal with issues of oppressive control.

Green is set in an imaginary Malaysia that is almost a police state. People are still haunted by the memory of May 1969, the racial harmony envisioned by the Muhibbah programme of the 1970s is but a fond memory, clashes caused by racial and religious bigotry is rife, and curfews and military checks are everyday occurrences. As a result, the country is divided into three zones, each controlled by an ideological faction. The dominant faction wants a nation of people with a single cultural and religious identity; the mastermind behind the faction is Panglima. Opposing him is the "liberal" faction wanting a culturally plural nation, and its most vocal advocate is Dahlan, a lawyer with neither position nor power. The third faction is represented by Lebai Hanafiah, who teaches the Islam of tolerance traditionally practised by local Malays before the advent of the racist-religionists.

As a fictional character, Panglima is probably the most vicious and devious villain ever conceived in the history of Malaysian novels in English; he is, in short, a psychopath. Of dubious origin, he grew up in Rangoon and then worked his brutal and criminal way through

Thailand from Chiangmai to the south, where he became a Muslim and married a local woman. From there he slipped into Malaysia and passed himself off as Malay.

When the story begins, he is Political Secretary to the Minister of Home Affairs, a position he uses to acquire classified information about individuals compiled by the Ministry so that he can control them. His primary method of staying in power is by inciting racial and religious clashes, creating what we would now call “false flag” incidents, which provide him with opportunities to commit or instigate acts that break nearly every rule in the book on civil liberties: covert surveillance, sudden and unreasonable searches of people’s homes, kangaroo courts, torture, and rape.

As with most dystopian narratives, *Green* is a cautionary tale. Panglima’s victims are those who are too idealistic and/or naïve to see through his surface charm. If the novel is read in the context of the socio-political situation in the 1980s (the decade marked by the repressive Operation Lalang as well as Constitutional and Judicial crises involving the curtailing of royal powers and the removal of the Chief Justice) it is worth noting that the characters most damaged or destroyed by Panglima are Malay. Sara, the young woman he rapes loses her mind; Lebai Hanafiah, her father, suffers a stroke and eventually dies from it after an unannounced visit by the religious police accusing him of deviant teachings; and Dahlan is tortured to death.

Far Country takes a totally different approach to the issue of oppressive control. The civil liberties dealt with are of a different kind. They lie more in the area of the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (also known as the Barcelona Declaration 1996), which supports the right of individuals, especially if they belong to minorities, to enjoy their own culture, practice their own religion, use their own language, and preserve their cultural history or heritage. Further, it is the narrator, Rajan, who is the control freak and who has to learn tolerance and empathy.

The novel is written as if they are Rajan’s journal entries, made when he is an older man looking back on his life. The entries tell of his formative years; how, as the English-educated son of estate workers, he feels alienated from his parents’ way of life. How he gradually absorbs and adopts, on the one hand, the scientific and rationalistic values of his education, and on the other, the national imperative to reject both his cultural and the country’s colonial heritage.

A major part of the narrative tells of how he tries to impose these personal values on those around him – colleagues, friends, his children, and his wife – and the consequences; and what happens when others try to impose their cultural beliefs and values on him.

Far Country is about respecting other people's civil liberties, and it requires careful and thoughtful reading because it is narrated as a mixture of memories and philosophical observations.