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## **A DREAM SHATTERED:**

### **Lloyd Fernando's Literary Vision of Malaysia**

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Despite a virtually overwhelming official preference for Malay as the language of public discourse in Malaysia, there has been, and continues to be, a vibrant and tenacious stream of literature in Malaysia that is written in English and is somehow being published and read. There are valid reasons for this persistence, reasons that are inherent in Malaysia's modern history as a former British colony and now independent state to which both immigrant communities and former colonial ruler have made vital contributions. English language writing in Malaysia may have suffered culturally and politically because of its association with former British colonial rule. Yet it has also benefited from the relative freedom, potentiality and adaptability of the language and its contemporary cosmopolitanism. Past hang-ups about colonialism can blinker the dynamic and complex nature of current reality. It is obviously crucial that literature be nurtured that reflects the nation of Malaysia in holistic rather than communal terms.

Since initial independence in 1957, Malaysia has produced a variety of poets, playwrights, and novelists who have chosen to write and publish in the English language, and who have attained both national and international recognition. Names like Wong Phui Nam, Ee Tiang Hong, Lee Kok Liang, K S Maniam, and Shirley Geok-lin Lim come readily to mind, all of who have been discussed critically and extensively elsewhere. To this list, the name of Lloyd Fernando, author, former academic and lawyer, is a distinguished addition. This paper provides an analysis of Fernando's two substantial, published works of fiction to date, the

pioneering *Scorpion Orchid*, first published in 1976, and the somber *Green is the Colour*, which first appeared in 1993. Fernando's novels contain themes pertinent to the identity of the land in which he lives, and the peoples who live there, those whom the inimitable Dennis Bloodworth once termed the "mythical Malaysians."<sup>(1)</sup> In both of these works, Fernando, himself from the Eurasian minority, draws attention to the inherent fragility of the Malaysian nation-state, and the seeds of its potential destruction. The novels by Fernando confirm that the parameters of Malaysian identity were, and remain, communally defined and exclusionist on Malay cultural terms. In the contemporary world of nation-states, not all colonization is externally inspired.

### **Fragile Foundations in *Scorpion Orchid***

Both thematically and structurally, *Scorpion Orchid* is a brave book in which Lloyd Fernando has crafted an imaginative, historically well informed exploration of the meaning of independence for British Malaya, then including Singapore. His theme is nothing less than the fragility of a multiracial society as the departure of British colonial rule looms. This colonial system is archly but aptly dubbed 'British Realty', reflecting the congenial framework that colonial 'law and order' provided for the entry and exit of British capital into the Malay peninsula from 1786 onwards. Structurally, Fernando employs the device of archival flashback, interspersing his narrative of the 1950s with extracts from some of the classic historical descriptions of the Malay world from earlier centuries, such as the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals) and the *Hikayat Abdullah* (Story of Abdullah). This device furnishes the reader with some temporal perspective and a sense of continuity. Physically, Malaysia is a land of great natural beauty and cultural vitality, capable of inspiring feelings of affection amongst both inhabitants and visitors, and, as Fernando's concluding paragraphs attest, even amongst those who have once left it in despair at its political absurdities. Superbly guided as *Scorpion Orchid* is by local Malaysian place and time, there is no doubt that Fernando intends this novel to make a contribution to Malaysian writing, as much, or even more than, English literature.

The main characters of the novel are four young men, one each from the main ethnic communities. Sabran is Malay, Guan Kheng is Chinese, Santinathan is Indian, and Peter D'Almeida is Eurasian. Higher education and its associated privileges bind them. All of them are former schoolmates and now undergraduate students at the University of Malaya in

Singapore. Within a stratified colonial society, they also exhibit playful and irreverent attitudes to those they perceive as below and above them.

However, from the very first chapter, it becomes clear that even common membership of a student body is temporary and tenuous, and a shallow basis for lasting association. The family of the young Indian man, Santinathan, is shown packing up on the eve of their departure from Singapore back to India, the land of their ancestors. It is intended that Santinathan will join them later on the successful completion of his university studies, but Santinathan's expulsion from the university for disruptive and disrespectful behavior. He must now find laboring work, and is reduced a marginal, desperate existence in the back alleys of Singapore. This separation from his former university mates matters less, though, as the industrial and political situation around them descends into anarchy and chaos fomented by radical communism as the famed colonial "law and order" is about to be withdrawn. This context of chaos means more to the narrative than some actually rather thin, if recognizably human, characterization.

In his quest for a Malayan focus in the novel, the author also attempts to create two archetypal, transcendent characters to which the others can relate, whatever their ethnic affinities. The first is a holy man, a visionary and soothsayer who goes by the name of Tok Said. Significantly, the reader never actually encounters Tok Said first-hand, but only by hearsay from out of the mouths of other characters who claim to have met him. The reader can never be quite sure. The problem is compounded when each of the characters perceives Tok Said quite differently. To Santinathan, he is a Malay *bomoh*. To Guan Kheng, visiting Malacca, he becomes an elderly Eurasian named Senor Francisco Xavier Entalban. To the Malay, Sabran, Tok Said is a Chinese geomancer. In Tok Said, the young men see what they want to see, and the truth about this ostensibly consensual figure proves elusive. The other intentionally integrative personality is the prostitute first introduced as Sally, who serves in turn to accommodate the physical needs of most of the main characters, again irrespective of ethnicity. Yet, Sally, too, is an ambiguous character. She is alternatively called 'Sally Yu' or 'Salmah binte Yub', so she could be of either Chinese or Malay descent, a distinction of fundamental significance in Malaysia. Her role in the narrative is basic and therapeutic, rather than inspirational or challenging. She says, "Malays, Chinese, Indians, Eurasians, I give them rest."<sup>(2)</sup> Like the ethereal Tok Said, Sally or Salmah is not the stuff of which nations are constructed.

So the seeds of division prove deeper than the immediate ties of friendship. Threatened by militant Chinese mobs in Singapore, Sabran symbolically decides to move north to Malaya itself. Threatened by the imposition of Malay as national and official language, Peter D’Almeida resolves to leave the colony for a better life in Australia, though he actually ends up in wintry England, ironically soon pining for his equatorial homeland in Malaya. Guan Kheng and Santinathan remain in solitary circumstances in Singapore, but, influenced by the departure of his family, Santinathan is destined, sooner or later, to return to India.

### **A Dream Shattered: *Green is the Colour***

Lloyd Fernando’s second novel highlights the limitations of multiracialism as a guiding ideology for Malaysia. *Green is the Colour* is set in Malaysia some time after the racial riots of 13 May, 1969. In the national capital, Malay civil servants behave as though nothing untoward has happened. They mouth neo-Confucian platitudes about loyalty and patriotism, and ritualistically denounce Western influence on Malaysian society. In fact, the country is awash in disruption, disorder, and violence. Cars are dented, glass is splintered, and Hindu shrines are desecrated. There are curfews, roadblocks, and military checkpoints. Armed militia roams the landscape, assaulting and torturing the enemies of powerful politicians and Islamic fundamentalism.

Resonances of *Scorpion Orchid* permeate Lloyd Fernando’s second novel. Again, Fernando is superb on the context of Malaysian place and time. His love of the physical landscape verges on pantheism, emphasizing the seductive appeal of the red hibiscus and the angšana tree, the cool, flowing water of the rivers, the green padi plants of the *sawah*, and the taste of fruits such as mangosteens, bananas, rambutans, and durians. There is also the easy familiarity with an urban academic milieu.

The four main characters are drawn from an upper-class multiracial elite, held together by the bonds of school, university, professional careers, and the English language. All of them are doomed. There is ‘Harry’ Dahlan, an Anglicized Malay lawyer, activist, and social critic notorious for his unconventional views and outspoken behaviour. There is Yun Ming, the Malay-speaking, idealistic civil servant who works for the Department of Unity, but finds very little of it outside Kuala Lumpur. There is Sara (short for Siti Sara Hanafiah), the

beautiful academic sociologist trapped in a loveless marriage to a fundamentalist convert. There is Gita, another academic sociologist and Sara's best friend, who marries Harry Dahlan only to see him arrested and brutally tortured for his beliefs.

There is much greater depth of characterization in Fernando's second novel. Sara is ostensibly the key integrative personality for the plot. Most of the male characters lust after her, including the sinister, devious, power-mad Panglima, a senior officer in the Department of Unity whose ethnic origins are shrouded in mystery and ambiguity. He could be Thai, or Cambodian, or Indian or Eurasian, but passes for Malay. It is the ill-fated, cross-cultural relationship between Sara and Yun Ming which centres the novel. Their passion and intensity cannot prevent their arrest by Muslim authorities in a country, which has descended into a scenario of horror and anarchy worthy of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. Yun Ming is savagely beaten and Sara raped and assaulted by the Panglima to the extent that, at the end of the book, she cannot bear to contemplate male company ever again.

Ethnicity, inflamed by Islamic puritanism, matters most in the end. Yun Ming might once have told his superiors that Malaysians of Chinese and Indian descent had to disregard their cultural roots and adopt one national way of doing things, but even the obliging Yun Ming balked at asserting that all Malaysians should follow the same religion. (3) Sara comes closest to the truth when she reflects in calmer times: -

“Nobody could get May sixty-nine right, she thought. It was hopeless to pretend you could be objective about it. ...the wound beneath continued to run pus.” (4)

## **Conclusion**

The two fictional works by Lloyd Fernando offer testimony to the persistence of substantial minority cultures that are different from the Malaysia as defined by ethnic Malay nationalism. The reader is left in no doubt that Fernando has a deep and profound affection for Malaysia, which is, of course, the land of his birth and upbringing. He yearns for recognition of cultural pluralism that is more than political lip service, and for a larger view of Malaysia that is integrative rather than assimilationist.

There is a forensic detachment in Fernando's work, as well as a fascination with the public process and possibilities of nation-building. However, even he finds Malaysia very difficult to conceive in imaginative terms. For Fernando, Malaysia has never achieved its multicultural promise, let alone the tantalizing potpourri featured in tourist promotional brochures.

## Notes

Bloodworth, D. *An Eye for the Dragon: Southeast Asia Observed, 1954-1986*. Singapore: Times Books International, 1987, p. 299.

Fernando, L. *Scorpion Orchid*. Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Asia, 1976, p. 110.

Fernando, L. *Green is the Colour*. Singapore; Landmark Books, 1993, p. 21.

Ibid., p. 93.

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