

Abdullah Hussain. *Interlock*. Trans. Azizah Hamzah and Hashim Yaacob. Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian National Institute of Translation, 2010. 406 pp. ISBN 978-983-068-489-5.

The novel *Interlock* (1971) by Abdullah Hussain was written about the time the Federation of Malaya obtained independence from the British in 1957. It was published in Bahasa Malaysia by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. The work was recently translated into the English language, and published in 2010 by the National Translation Institute Berhad.

In structure, the novel is a fairly simple, even straightforward piece of writing. Its contents and scope are deliberately limited. It centres around the lives of three families representing the three main communities – the Malays, the Chinese and the Tamil Indians – in Malaya during the half a century or so before the country came into being as an independent nation. The events in the novel thus stretch from the end of the First World War to 1957. The novel deals with three generations of characters and their struggle to find a place under the Malayan sun during the crucial and even turbulent times in the nation's history.

The Malay family, Pak Musa, his wife Mak Limah and their son Seman, are shown in the first part; the second deals with the Chinese family of Kim Lock, who follows an uncle to Singapore and then to Malaya. The third part of the novel deals with the family of an immigrant South Indian (Malayali) labourer, who, having seen others from his village become wealthy after working in Malaya for several years, is persuaded to also emigrate to then British colony of Malaya. Essentially the three parts of the novel are separate, but not complete stories, with the completion taking place in the fourth part. Hints of possible connections and continuities, however, appear in the second and third, but not in the first part. It is the final part which develops the interlock theme; here the characters interact and come to terms with each other, as well as to the realisation that Malaya, to be successful as a nation, must embrace a multi-racial identity.

Pak Musa, Mak Limah and Seman live an apparently comfortable life in the village of Kampung Condong, somewhere in Penang State. They have a house, some farming land, cattle and so on. The only major problem seems to be Pak Musa's deteriorating health. On the point of death, Pak Musa reveals to Seman, that all the property which is apparently in their possession, is, in fact, not their own. Before the situation can be clearly explained to Seman, Pak Musa passes away.

Some weeks after the funeral, Seman learns from the Chinese *tonkay* (businessman), Lee Ching Huat, locally known as China Panjang, that all the

property managed by Pak Musa in fact belongs to him. Land titles and agreements are shown to Seman, but, being illiterate, Seman is unable to make sense out of the whole thing. Pak Musa's debts amounting to around 10,000.00 ringgit and the fact that his entire property is mortgaged to the Chinese businessman is confirmed by the Headman, *Penghulu* of the village. All of this comes as a shock to Seman and Mak Limah who herself has all along been in the dark about the situation. They are devastated. The villagers of Kampung Condong are shocked. The revelation of their real financial situation ruins Seman's prospects of marriage with Upik, the daughter of Lebai Man, the local religious teacher. Refusing all help from the villagers, Seman decides to leave the village with his mother. No one seems to know their whereabouts.

Lee Kim Hock, an unsuccessful farmer leaves China for the Southern Region with his only son of around ten, Ching Huat, in search of a better life; the way has been opened for by a visitor, Uncle Kok Leng, who returns to China loaded with English currency. In Singapore, the father and his son end up doing odd jobs. They eventually make their way to Penang. On the advice of an acquaintance, Kim Sui, Lee Kim Hock manages to buy a shop in Simpat Empat, Penang from a local Malay. The grocery shop thrives; Lee Kim Hock is unable to return to China due to the war between China and Japan, and when he learns that his wife is dead he sees no reason to return. On Kim Sui's recommendation he acquires a mistress; eventually both he and his mistress succumb to opium. Lee Ching Huat, who has married Kim Sui's daughter, takes over the business, which he expands. His four children show different traits. Two of them, his second son Yew Seng and daughter Eng Poh, seem to have developed a certain fondness for the Malays. This is something which upsets Lee Chin Huat, who is fiercely Chinese in his outlook and values and even desires to die in China. Family quarrels become frequent.

A crisis develops when Yew Seng and Eng Poh show sympathy towards Seman's family; they protest at the harshness with which Chin Huat deals with them. He has all along regarded the Malays as merely jungle people, and thus basically uncivilised. They are also lazy. Chin Huat wishes to drive Seman and Mak Limah from their house, which legally belongs to him; he has already issued instructions for them to be evicted. Disgusted, he even wonders if the two are really his children. He plans to disown Yew Seng, and to hand over his business to Yew Hock.

In July 1910 Maniam leaves his village in Kerala, South India, as well as his young bride to seek a fortune in Malaya, seeing that his neighbours, and particularly Pillay, has done very well in that land. In Penang, Maniam works as a labourer. Soon, however, with the arrival of other fortune-seekers from his native land, he learns from one Raman, that his wife has in fact deserted him and become Pillay's mistress. Shocked and upset, Maniam decides to move away from Penang island to the mainland to avoid his co-workers from his

native land. Moving from one estate to another he finally gets employed in the estate of an Englishman at Changkat Lima. Here Maniam marries Malini, the twenty year old daughter of the headman, Perumal. Not long afterwards another group of workers arrive, including, to Maniam's shock, Suppiah, also from his village, to work in the estate.

Suppiah reveals to Mariamma, one of the older women in the estate, that Maniam was previously married. Soon the whole estate knows it. This leads to serious problems between Maniam, Perumal and Suppiah. Following several incidents, Maniam has to leave the estate, leaving behind his pregnant wife. Perumal does not want her to go, and so she stays behind against her wishes, until her child is born. A group of estate workers, instigated by Suppiah, try to kill Maniam. Badly wounded, he meets Musa, who takes charge of him. They both go to Simpang Empat and then to Changkat Janggus. Maniam and Musa exchange their stories. Maniam learns that Musa needs to work, so that he can save enough money to elope with his beloved Halimah. Maniam manages to get a job in the estate while, through him, Musa gets temporary employment at a Malabari restaurant. Eventually he too joins Maniam as a coolie in the same estate. After several months, when Musa decides to return to his native village, they part in a warm, brotherly manner. In the estate, Malini has a son. After some time, Suppiah rapes her and she becomes pregnant again. While the elders are trying to persuade Suppiah to marry Malini, she hangs herself.

While the three parts of the novel thus far discussed deal separately with the three families, there are points at which they touch, giving hints of what is to take place later. In a sense then, the fourth part is the most important, towards which the earlier three are preparatory. It is in the fourth part, the most complicated of all, that the principal themes unfold.

By the time the fourth part of the novel begins, over twenty years have passed in the lives of the characters. Seman, in search of a job, meets Maniam. Maniam realises that Seman is the son of his old acquaintance, Pak Musa. Yew Seng and his father, Ching Huat, are constantly at each other's throat, mainly because Yew Seng is close to the Malays and is concerned about their backwardness as a community. Like some others, he feels that every community has contributed to the development of the country, and the land's riches should thus be shared by all. Yew Seng says that Malays are humans too and should be treated with due respect, not in the manner in which his father treats them calling them names, such as *huan na* (jungle people). Yew Seng runs away, and he gets a job in a tin mine.

Seman appears in Kampong Nyiur Condong after two and a half years in search of Lazim. His intention is to approach Lebai Man for the hand of his daughter Upik. Ironically, she has already married Lazim. He meets Gayah, and Lazim encourages Seman to approach her father for her hand. Lazim's parents, when approached to do so on Seman's behalf, are not keen, fearing rebuff due

to their family's higher status and wealth. However, the proposal is made and Mat Ranggi is upset. It appears that he has rejected several other suitors for Gayah. Finally, following some further inquiries, he consents to the marriage. Seman marries Gayah and stays in Kampong Nyiur Condong.

The Japanese invasion takes place and this causes major upheavals in the village. The Chinese are particularly badly affected, because of the war between China and Japan. The Japanese are determined to take revenge against them. Some Malays are happy to welcome the Japanese, feel that now they have arisen, and can drive the British out. But there are other views. The war changes everyone. Even Chin Huat, whose shop gets looted by Malays, begins to have different views regarding that community. Seman in particular, stands firm; he will not be against the Chinese, even though he is tempted to enter Chin Huat's shop and steal the documents related to the land and property. In this he does not succeed.

Many major events unfold in the final part of the novel, the most important being the fact that, as a result of the war, with a new generation of locally born Malaysians having come into maturity, there is a greater sense of racial unity with a common feeling that the three major communities should come together against British rule. There is also the rise of the Malayan Anti-Japanese Army, to liberate Malaya. Yew Seng and his sister Poh Eng are involved in this struggle. In the end, however, all efforts are devoted towards independence of the nation, and this is achieved following the rejection of the British proposal for a Malayan Union, the Malays opposing such an idea, fearing that their Sultans would lose power.

The key element in all this is the realisation among the characters that all three communities have to work together to get independence, and to build a nation. By the end of the novel this goal of an independent Malaya is achieved.

Over all, the novel in the first three parts especially, does not impress. The scope is highly limited, not allowing for the proper development of characters. It is only in the second part dealing with the Chinese family that some sort of tension is felt.

The final part, on the other hand, presents too many issues which could have been more substantially developed for greater effect had more space been devoted to them. Essentially it is in this part that the more vital themes of the novel are developed. Certain weaknesses remain in the delineation of characters, and settings are often not sufficiently credible, coming, undoubtedly, from a lack of clear understanding of the cultural backgrounds. This is something that proper research could have resolved. These weaknesses have been a source of considerable recent criticism directed at the novel, in particular in connection with the depiction of Indians. Still what the novel tries to achieve is significant. There are very few Malaysian literary works in any language that achieve this

kind of highly desirable vision, incorporating the various communities. For this effort the novelist is to be commended.

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