

## **Lloyd Fernando: A Tribute**

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Lloyd Fernando (1926-2008)



Writer, academic and critic, Lloyd Fernando passed away at the University Hospital in Kuala Lumpur, on the evening of 28 February 2008, at the age of 81 almost 82. He has left behind his wife, Marie, daughters, Eve and Sunetra, and an extended family. He has also left behind two novels, one play, one short story, two volumes of criticism, several edited anthologies of short stories and plays, and critical essays published on Victorian literature, Commonwealth literature and Malaysian literature in scholarly journals at home and abroad. More important than his works, perhaps it is his spirit, inspiration, encompassing imagination, unyielding courage and determination in the face of adversity and his vision for Malaysian literature that will continue to motivate and guide many of his friends, fellow

academics and writers. Lloyd Fernando was a trailblazer, a pathfinder in Malaysian literature and culture and for his many contributions to English writing in the country, especially during the early years of Malaysia's independence, he should appropriately be dubbed the "founder" and "father-figure" of Malaysian literature in English.

In one of his interviews, Fernando explained that he started writing "at the age of 12, if you count some unpublished schoolboy attempts at gangster stories and cowboy stories [and] at the age of 24, if you consider my first short story which was broadcast over Radio Singapore." A friend also remembers that Fernando had

a play, "Strangers at the Gate," staged sometime in the 1950s, which was "very political." He took up writing early in life because, Fernando proffered, "Creating a novel or short story is presenting an important alternative way of looking at life. For me it is one of the most worthwhile things in life to do." His objective was to "hold up fragments of life in this part of the world for inspection and reflection." Propelled by such intense desire to create and re-create life through the attribute of imagination, Fernando became very active at the university in the company of fellow student-writers such as Edwin Thumboo, Ee Tiang Hong and Wong Phui Nam and started a literary magazine called *Write*, in 1957. In 1967 he founded another literary journal, *Tenggara*.

As professor of English in Malaysia's only university during the early years of independence, Fernando defended the language and literature in English from its detractors with conviction, but never expressed doubt about the importance of Bahasa Malaysia (or Malay) as the country's new national language. During this time, he was "accused of being pro English and anti-Malay by a group of lecturers at University Malaya." In a personal interview with me, Fernando conveyed, "It was a plot to bring me down. Krishen Jit was approached but refused to join them. I was very diplomatic about the way I defended English. They began to feel embarrassed. Later it all fizzled out." He also met the then Minister of Education to talk about their wanting to do away with the teaching of English and English literature at University Malaya, but the minister assured him that there was no such plan.

The Cultural Congress of 1971 marks a defining moment in Malaysian literature and culture. It set the direction for the future of both and introduced the convenient tags of "national" and "sectional" literature in the description of local writing. When Fernando spoke at the Cultural Congress, to explain his hopes and aspirations for the future of Malaysian literature, society and culture, later developed more fully and articulated in his two novels, *Scorpion Orchid* (1976) and *Green is the Colour* (1993), he did so in the Malay language.

Fernando paved the way for the growth of literary activity in English by introducing courses in Commonwealth literature and creative writing in the curriculum at University Malaya, which encouraged young students to quell anxieties that English was a colonial relic and consider it as a suitable artistic medium instead. Once asked why a Malaysian should write in English, he affirmed that a writer is not free to choose his language and could write in one in which he "not only thinks but also feels in the depths of [his] being." No doubt, as a true blue Malaysian citizen, Fernando came to master the country's national language, such that he would often choose to give lectures in the classroom and later voluntarily argue his cases at court after becoming a lawyer, in the Malay language. Yet English always remained his first language after, to quote from one of his interviews, "I lost fluency in my mother tongue, Sinhala." Thus he became a

champion of English and continued to create in and fight for this language of his soul.

Fernando was born in Wattedagama, near Kandy, Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), on 31 May 1926, to Sinhalese Catholic parents George Edmund Fernando and Veronica Florence Fernando. He was the youngest in a family of six children. His mother died when he was only four. Fernando began his education at St. Anthony's College, an English convent school in Colombo, Sri Lanka. In 1938, when he was twelve, his father, a sanitary inspector in the Ceylon Civil Service, chose to migrate to Singapore with the family to provide better educational and future career opportunities for his children. Upon arrival to the new land, Fernando continued his schooling at St. Patrick's.

The Japanese Occupation of Malaya from 1943 to 1945 marked a turning point in Fernando's life as his father was killed in a Japanese bombing raid. Following this tragic event, he was forced to drop out of school and take up work as building labourer, trishaw rider and apprentice mechanic to support himself and alleviate the financial burden on his family. He later joined the Ceylon branch of the Indian National Army for the same pragmatic reasons rather than from any patriotic/political zest. This military experience formed the basis of his short story "Surja Singh," and the memories of Japanese atrocities during the occupation filtered into his novel *Scorpion Orchid*. "Surja Singh" is based on a real person by that name, who worked in the Indian National Army as a Captain during the Second World War and whose selfless patriotism made him a role-model for Fernando: "I was moved by his patriotism which had nothing to do with the Japanese, but taught me to be proud of the person I am without arrogance."

Fernando completed his Cambridge School Certificate in 1947 and taught at various schools in Singapore for six years. In 1955, he entered the University of Singapore, graduating with double Honours in philosophy and English in 1959. During this period he taught part-time at a Teacher Training College and worked with Radio Singapore as a newsreader, for experience but also to help pay his way through university. In 1960, he joined University Malaya in Kuala Lumpur as assistant lecturer and returned to the same post four years later upon completion of his Ph.D. in English at Leeds University, UK. His M.A. thesis with Professor Norman Jeffers was upgraded to a Ph.D.

In 1967 Fernando was elevated to Professor and Head of English at University Malaya, and it is during this period that he earned his recognition as a leading writer and intellectual in the country. His first edited volume of short stories, *Twenty-Two Malaysian Short Stories*, and two edited volumes of drama, *New Drama One* and *New Drama Two*, came out soon after, in 1968 and 1972 respectively (both the collections of drama were published in the same year).

Fernando's first breakthrough as a writer came with his first novel, *Scorpion Orchid*. He began writing the novel in the 60s but it took him several years to

complete the work because, he explained to me, “I didn’t have a shape for it and didn’t know enough of the cultures of the Chinese, Indians and Malays.... I wanted to get behind the façade.” However, to his credit, the novel was written and published during the most difficult period for English in the country. When Malaysia became independent in 1957, a provision was introduced in the constitution that after ten years Malay would become the sole official language. Accordingly, a Language Act was passed in parliament in 1967 making Malay (renamed Bahasa Malaysia) as the country’s national language. In 1971, a further amendment was introduced in the act which made it illegal or seditious to dispute this new status of the language. It is in the face of these measures, which left English in the lurch and the hopes of many aspiring writers in the language thwarted, that Fernando led the way with his first novel.

*Scorpion Orchid* is the first serious, extended work of fiction in English by a Malaysian writer. The tradition of English poetry in the country goes back to the fifties and sixties, with pioneering poets such as Wang Gangu, Edwin Thumboo, Ee Tiang Hong and Wong Phui Nam having made their marks in various literary magazines and anthologies, but writers were rather slow to experiment with fiction, probably because of its more demanding nature and the difficulty of narrating local experience in a language that had its roots elsewhere.

A political and historical novel, interlaced with certain autobiographical elements, *Scorpion Orchid* addresses the difficulties and prospects of harmonising disparate cultures in an emerging post-colonial nation. Set in Singapore in the 1950s (when Singapore and Malaysia were still together as part of British Malaya), it deals with the politically volatile situation in the years before independence, when a newfound awareness of British vincibility following the Japanese Occupation brought confidence in the local people to stand up against their colonial masters and seek freedom, but could not harness their aspirations to a cohesive force owing to deep-seated racial divides, resulting in widespread violence and unrest. The novel focuses on a group of university students representing the four major races in the country – Sabran (Malay), Santi (Indian), Guan Kheng (Chinese) and Peter (Eurasian) – and shows how their friendship was tested by the changing political circumstance and proved inadequate for forming a single society or a new and stable nation.

In the novel, Ethel Turner, a member of the white community in Singapore, explains to Ellman, a relative newcomer:

You see, they have nothing in common. If we left tomorrow, there’d be such a lovely bit of mayhem that we’d have to come back and keep the peace. No, I’m afraid we have to grin and bear it – the white man’s burden.... (89)

Fernando challenges this colonial view, which became a mantra during its moribund years, by urging Singaporeans (and by extension Malaysians and Malaysians) to overcome their differences through mutual tolerance and trust, and a dialogic process that would enable them to forge a common political identity in their cultural divergence. Fernando sees the violence more as an unavoidable birth pang and insists that hope is not lost yet as long as the people are prepared to dig deep and look upon their history of mingling in a positive way. It is with this view that he quotes passages from several Malay classics, such as *Sejarah Melayu* and *Hikayat Abdullah*, interspersing his principle narrative, which establish the interactive history of the three major races in the country even before the arrival of the British.

For example, there is a passage from *Hikayat Abdullah* towards the beginning of the novel in which there is a description of an ancient rock, “Allah alone knows how many thousands years old” (18). The rock is covered with chiselled inscription that has become illegible “because of extensive scouring by water” but which reads like Hindi script to Indians, Chinese to the Chinese and Malay to the Malays. Nobody could read the writing on the stone successfully; however, unfortunately, it was later broken by an Englishman, Mr. Coleman, “prompted perhaps by his own thoughtfulness and folly” (19). This brief passage and several others in the novel show that the Malays, Chinese and Indians have been living together in the Malayan peninsula much longer than the colonial history, and that it is the British who have wilfully sought to erase that evidence and create animosity between the races through a policy of divide-and-rule for their national self-aggrandisement.

Another technique used to destabilise the cultural fixity among the races and show how illusive the differences are – or to ease, in Fernando’s famous phrase, the “detrribalisation anxiety” among Malaysians after independence – is the creation of such characters as Tok Said and Sally-Salmah, who have multiple identities so that nobody can pin them down to a single race. Tok Said is a *bomoh*, a medicine man, who is supposedly creating the unrest that we witness in the novel by spreading rumours, but he remains racially an allusive figure because Sally, Santi and Sabran who have met him at different places in the Malayan Federation, respectively think that he is an Indian, Malay and Chinese. Same with Sally-Salmah, a “prostitute” who helps to further cement the bond between the four friends by extending her love and sexual favours to each of them – and who is possibly identified with the land – but whose identity remains a mystery to the end because nobody can be sure whether she is Malay or Chinese. These are attempts to create a spirit of accommodation and fellowship among people by cultivating “monogenism” and the notion of plasticity in the concept of race, which are essential for the formation of a wholesome and holistic identity for an emerging post-colonial nation.

Fernando’s second book and his first volume of criticism, “*New Women*” in *Late Victorian Fiction*, came out in 1977. It was his doctoral thesis converted into a

book. In 1973 Fernando went to the Pennsylvania State University as Fulbright Visiting Professor for a year and probably this created the links for him to later publish the work with Pennsylvania State University Press. In 1978, at the peak of his career and two years before his mandatory retirement, Fernando surprised everyone by stepping down from his position at University Malaya and entering the City University, UK for a diploma in Law. He did this so as not to stop working or depend on anyone for handouts. In 1979, he was admitted as Barrister in Law, Middle Temple, and the following year as Advocate and Solicitor of the High court of Malaysia. This shift in career did not, however, diminish his interest in literature but rather it turned him into an “amphibiotic” person oscillating between his dual interests in literature and law.

Fernando’s second novel, *Green is the Colour*, was published in 1993. The two novels are very similar in theme, scope and technique, as both are polemical and written in the vein of an imaginative historian, and both address the problems and prospects of forming a “rainbow” nation in a culturally heterogeneous society, battered by a dehumanising, exploitative and oppressive colonial rule. The focus of this novel is the mayhem in the wake of the race riots in Malaysia, on 13 May 1969, which threatened the country’s future by dividing it into three “zones” and creating widespread distrust and hostility between the races. The writer shows the effect of this violent event, again, on a small group of multicultural friends: Omar (Malay), Sabapathy (Indian), Yun Ming (Chinese), Gita (Indian), Dahalan (Malay) and Siti Sara (Malay). In the midst of the on-going and apocalyptic tension, the writer suggests how Malaysia could form a collective identity of “Bangsa Malaysia” (or Malaysian nation) by rejecting all totalitarian and exclusivist models of nationalism that allow hierarchies in the dominant discourses of race, religion and gender, for one that is inclusive, dialectical and multilateral, and encourages mutuality, tolerance and harmony between its various groups.

At the heart of the novel are the biracial love relationships between Dahalan and Gita and Siti Sara and Yun Ming. Dahalan is a Malay political activist who preaches racial sympathy and altruism and spurns privileges accorded to *bumiputras*. He marries an Indian woman, Gita, but never asks her to convert to Islam. This is a bold unifying symbol floated by the writer, especially given the cultural requirement in Malaysia for a non-Malay to embrace Islam before exchanging marriage vows with a Malay person. The relationship between Siti Sara (Omar’s wife and a university lecturer in Kuala Lumpur) and Yun Ming (a top civil servant whose English wife has deserted him with their only child but without divorce) is also an enabling signifier of cultural dialogism and dialecticism in a society that is locked in a racial and religious feud. The relationship is no doubt problematic to many Malay readers since Siti Sara is a married woman and Yun Ming is a “kafir” or a non-believer. Yet the writer has taken the risk of creating such a metaphor of union as it opens up possibilities of cultural cross-fertilisation

through the dismantling of existing polarities and the healing of fissures in a polycultural and polyglossic country. Fernando's embracing sense of nationalism in the novel is most potently expressed in the following statement of Lebai Hanafiah, Siti Sara's father and a teacher of the holy Qur'an for over forty years:

There are so many who want to force you to follow the right path. Each one's right path is the only one. I am tired of seeing the folly spread in the name of such right paths. I fear those who seek to come between me and love for all humanity. They are the source of hate and destruction. (116)

Such a view of nationalism stems from a sublime humanism that requires individuals to rise above the taints of pride and prejudice and, in spite of all biological and cultural differences, consider each other as equals. It is a consciousness that is attainable by shedding all monolithic and unitary models of nationalism for one that is inclusive, multilateral and culturally synergic. Thus Fernando argued, "My two novels intend to show how writing in English can shed the heavy layers of the colonial era and racial prejudice and pretence of superiority over one's fellows."

Fernando's only play, *Scorpion Orchid, the Play*, which is a dramatic rendition of his first novel, premiered at the Victoria Hall, Singapore in 1994 and The Actors Studio, Kuala Lumpur, in 1995. The play was later included in *Petals of Hibiscus: A Representative Anthology of Malaysian Literature in English*, which I edited in 2003. Fernando has also left behind an unfinished novel, "Letters from Fifth River Island," which is based on an actual law case he became interested in, about a woman who lives in Pulau Ketam, whose husband is a deceased drug addict, and she got arrested because of the presence of drugs in their house.

In 1997 Fernando unexpectedly suffered a stroke which left him confined to a wheelchair, with his thinking and speech abilities severely impaired. But his will was strong and he continued to fight his illness, aided by his loving wife and daughters. He never gave up hope that he would be able to return to his daily life again and complete his unfinished work. And one thing he never lost was his sense of humour. The last time I met him at his home in a suburb of Kuala Lumpur, he sounded as jovial as ever although a part of his memory was lost, the left side of his body was paralysed and he could speak only with a slur. Such was the energy, intensity and love of life in Fernando. He was strong enough to accept the challenges of life without ever asking "Why me?" His energy and vision has influenced many, and he will be remembered for his generosity, his love and empathy for fellow human beings despite caste, class or colour, his dynamic and progressive vision for Malaysia and, above all, the contributions he made and the opportunities he created for writers and writings in the English language in Malaysia, against many odds. Let me conclude with a poem by Kazi Nazrul Islam, the national poet of Bangladesh, translated from the original Bengali by Kabir





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