

## Lloyd Fernando's Circle: An Interview with Marie Fernando, Wife of Lloyd Fernando<sup>1</sup>

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I was departing Kuala Lumpur to return to the United States that night, but I had finally landed a coveted interview with none other than Lloyd and Marie T. Fernando. Marie graciously brought me into her home, and, later, graciously worked with me to fact-check names and dates we discussed in the interview. Armed with a stack of books from Marie, which I hand-carried from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore to Japan to San Francisco to Dallas, I found myself immersed in Lloyd's anthologies, and, perhaps, most notably, his *Cultures in Conflict*. Toward the end of this work, Lloyd powerfully captures the struggle of the artist to open his mind to another language, another culture:

Imagine that the writer is in an aeroplane which we can call his world, and he has jumped out, or been pushed or forced out. He leaves behind a one-dimensional world of language, religion and culture, and he falls free. Then he remembers to... pull the cord, and his parachute flutters open. The parachute is the English language.... He tugs at the language as best he can. He will probably tug according to the terrain over which he is and according to the winds that blow.<sup>3</sup>

Lloyd illustrates this method of parachuting over a new terrain with his discussion of what the Department of English at the University of Malaya (at that time) taught –

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<sup>1</sup> This interview was conducted at Lloyd Fernando's residence in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 9 August 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Pauline T. Newton was a Fulbright-Hays scholar during the summer of 2005 in Malaysia and Singapore. During this time she met Marie and Lloyd Fernando. She has a great interest in Southeast Asian literature and its authors. *Kunapipi* is publishing her article on Tash Aw's *Harmony Silk Factory*, and her extended biography on Shirley Geok-lin Lim will appear in volume one of *Modern Singaporean and Malaysian Literature in English* (Ed. Mohammad A. Quayum and Wong Phui Nam).

<sup>3</sup> Lloyd Fernando, *Cultures in Conflict: Essays on Literature and the English Language in South East Asia*. Singapore: Graham Brash, 1986: 85.

works by Chinua Achebe, V.S. Naipaul, and William Faulkner, all writers in English; such studies, Lloyd explains, “enable students to perceive something of the tremendous interflow of ideas and cultures taking place everywhere in the modern world to-day” (*Cultures in Conflict* 85). After hearing of Lloyd's passing, I thumbed through his books, remembering my own exposure during my travels to Malaysia and Singapore, where languages and cultures swirled around me on street corners and in authors' quiet living rooms.

PN: Marie, I'm sorry Lloyd is not feeling well, but thank you for agreeing to meet with me in your home. Can you first tell me about Lloyd Fernando's education?

MF: Yes. Lloyd joined the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur in 1960 as an assistant lecturer. Then he got a scholarship for an M.A. at Leeds University, UK which turned into a Ph.D. He came back with a Ph.D., and in 1967 he was appointed professor at the English Department of the University of Malaya, because the contract was up for a new English professor. He remained professor and head of the English Department of the University of Malaya, from 1967 to 1978. People retire here at 55, and so when it was time for him to retire, Lloyd didn't want to have to continue on a yearly contract, and not be certain of anything. He decided to take up law. He went to England and studied law at City University and then at Middle Temple, coming back with his law degrees. He joined a firm, and eventually started his own practice here, which he continued right up to the time he had a stroke, which was in December 1997.

PN: How old was he at that time?

MF: In 1997?

PN: I know it was a few years back, so I guess I shouldn't ask (LAUGHS).

Fernando: (LAUGHS) He was 71. Previous to all this, he had had his education in Singapore. He comes from Sri Lanka. The family emigrated to Singapore, just before the Second World War. His education was interrupted by the Japanese occupation. Due to his educational situation and the occupation, he did all kinds of jobs at that time to support himself. He continued his education at the University of Malaya in Singapore, and upon graduation, he taught at the Polytechnic in Singapore for some time – not very long. He then applied for a vacancy for assistant lecturer at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. I told you the rest from that time forward. Well, that was his education.

PN: One of the things that I'm curious to know is who are some of the people who are familiar with his work who might be interested in contributing to a *festschrift*?

MF: A number of people at universities in Malaysia have written about Lloyd – most prolifically, Professor M.A. Quayum of International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur. Prior to teaching there, Quayum had a year off in New York, where he taught at the State University of New York at Binghamton for one year on Malaysian-Singaporean literature in English and Indian literature in English. Here is his website: <http://www.quayum.net> .

I have for you one important article that he wrote on Lloyd. This article, "Imagining 'Bangsa Malaysia:' Race, Religion and Gender in Lloyd Fernando's *Green is the Colour*," appeared in *World Literature Written in English*. He also teaches Lloyd's novel, *Green is the Colour*. You don't have a copy of that, do you?

PN: I have a copy of *Scorpion Orchid*, but no, not that one.

MF: *Scorpion Orchid* was Lloyd's first novel. So you don't have *Green is the Colour*? This is the edition that came out in 2004. The first edition was published in 1993. And then Landmark Books stepped down. I'm afraid there are some errors in the second edition, particularly in the glossary, so if you want to have a copy, you can. In fact, I will give you all these books and articles. Some of these were published at an earlier time, while others came out more recently. These two articles include some literary analysis of *Green is the Colour*. And here are the books which I intended to give you, because we got complimentary copies.

PN: Oh, how nice of you.

MF: This one – *Cultures in Conflict* – is out of print. It is a collection of most of his literary writings up to 1986, prepared for the many conferences he had attended abroad and at home. He had collected many of the papers in *Cultures in Conflict*, which came out in 1986. It's out of print, unfortunately. I happen to have some copies, so I really can give you one if you're really interested (LAUGH). It's a very good source for anyone who wants to do a *festschrift*. Readers ought to know about Lloyd's literary output, and a lot of it is in here.

PN: Well I don't want to take your copy. I can go to the library and try to get...

MF: No, because it is absolutely out of print, and it's hard to print academic work here. So, scholars on Lloyd – Professor Quayum, certainly. Then there's Wong Soak Koon. She was an associate professor at University Sains Malaysia in Penang, and has written on Lloyd. See, this is one of the articles I'm giving you: "Unveiling

Malaysian Modernity and Ethnicity: Lloyd Fernando's *Green is the Colour*." She has also taught his book, and often referred to it.

PN: I've heard this name.

MF: She went on a Fulbright Fellowship to the University of California, Santa Barbara some years ago.

PN: With Shirley Lim. She knows Shirley.

MF: Oh yes. And Sumit K. Mandal, of the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, makes prominent note of Lloyd in an article he wrote for the journal, *Third World Quarterly*, entitled "Reconsidering Cultural Globalization: The English Language in Malaysia." Mandal's article – and those by Wong Soak Koon and Professor Quayum – are more like social/political analyses of Lloyd's novels and work, rather than literary criticism. As for literary criticism, there have been a number of articles. I can point you to this one by Bernard Wilson, from *Kunapipi, the Journal of Post-Colonial Writing*. Do you know this journal? It's printed in Australia. The article is, "'Do You Wish to Join This Society or Not?': The Paradox of Nationhood in Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid*."

There's Koh Tai Ann, who teaches at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Her article, "The Empires' Orphans: Stayers and Quitters in *A Bend in the River* and *Scorpion Orchid*," appeared again in the collection of critical works, *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, edited by Quayum and Peter Wicks. These are a few of the literary and political criticisms, and literary reviews.

PN: What about K.S. Maniam?

MF: Oh yes, he is a writer in his own right. He writes very eloquently about the Indian immigrant community. His works include novels, short story collections and plays, some of which have been staged by the well-known theatre director, Krishen Jit.

PN: We had a lecture, and the speaker mentioned him, and the speaker lectured a lot about writing in English, and its relation to Indian culture here, and I thought it was interesting, as I'd never read any of Maniam's work.

MF: He is one of the best known writers of Malaysian literature in English. In fact, he helped to prepare the two anthologies and to arrange the launch for the reprint of these two landmark books – the anthologies of Malaysian writing in English that Lloyd edited. This one, *Twenty-Two Malaysian Stories*, was first published in 1968 with an introduction by Lloyd. And the other one, *Malaysian Short Stories*, came out

in 1981. They are both collections of short stories, short fiction, written by Malaysian writers in English.

The first one is very interesting because when Lloyd became Head of the English Department, the department offered a very traditional syllabus and Lloyd introduced some very important courses, which really expanded the curriculum. He included American literature for the first time. Yes. And at that time, the English Department was very lucky to have professors coming in from – what's that scholarship that you have?

PN: The Fulbright.

MF: Ah, yes, Fulbright lecturers and professors came to teach. He also introduced a course on commonwealth literature. At the time, there was great interest in commonwealth writing. The former colonies of Britain were producing their own writers. He also introduced one on creative writing. In fact, many of the best short stories from the creative writing course were collected into these anthologies that I just mentioned. Some of the writers represented here were really the students. They were young people in their twenties, but some were already established writers like Lee Kok Liang. Have you heard of him? He's a well-known writer of short stories.

PN: No.

MF: He was based in Penang but is now deceased. He published collections of his short stories, which also have been anthologised in Lloyd's two anthologies. Another person who knows Lloyd who may be of interest to you is Edwin Thumboo. Do you know Edwin Thumboo?

PN: I've heard of him. He's a poet.

MF: Edwin Thumboo and Lloyd were contemporaries at the University in Singapore in the 1950s. He is a poet and has published collections of his own poetry. He also has edited collections of other poets' work, and has organised books of conference papers. He no longer heads the National University of Singapore Centre for the Arts. The other poets I mentioned who were Lloyd's contemporaries, too, are Wong Phui Nam, considered one of the best poets in Malaysia. Lloyd also wrote critiques of his poetry. Ee Tiang Hong who is now deceased, is another. Lloyd had written a critique of the first volume of his poems entitled *I of the Many Faces*. He later emigrated to Australia. Among contemporary writers is Kee Thuan Chye whom you met, didn't you? He's a dramatist and has had many of his plays produced over the years.

PN: I didn't meet him, but I know who he is. He writes for *The Star*, an English language newspaper.

MF: There are of course many new writers and poets, and the ones I've mentioned are the vanguard and pioneers so to speak. I also should mention Lim Chee Seng, who was formerly a student of Lloyd's. He later became Head of the English Department. He still lectures there and, I believe, is preparing a book of essays in honour of Lloyd. Siti Rohaini, also a former student of Lloyd's, who is now Deputy Dean of the Arts Faculty, gave the citation at the ceremony awarding Lloyd the title of Professor Emeritus. I should also mention here two others who were sometime lecturers in the department: Edward Dorall, playwright, and Salleh Ben Joned, poet and sharp commentator of the literary and social scene. In 1972, Lloyd published two volumes of plays, including those of Dorall entitled *New Drama One* and *New Drama Two*.

PN: Does the book on Lloyd consist of essays about his writing or is it a collection of his work?

MF: I have no idea what it's going to be.

PN: This looks like a great list to start with.

MF: Also, you should know that Lloyd converted his novel, *Scorpion Orchid*, into a play, which was first produced in Singapore in 1994. In the next year, 1995, the play had its premiere in Kuala Lumpur. It was first anthologised by the Singapore Institute of Management for the Open University in a collection of poems, short stories and plays by Singaporean and Malaysian writers, meant only for student consumption, and, therefore, was not for sale. Later, it was included in an anthology edited by Quayum, *Petals of Hibiscus: A Representative Anthology of Malaysian Literature in English*. And this is the little book I prepared. It was meant to coincide with the launch of the republication of *Green is the Colour*. I just compiled some old articles which people had written on Lloyd, not to mention a few new ones and two of his own articles. It is a kind of tribute, or, as the title says, "A Celebration of His Life." It is just being given to people, to friends. I sent one to Shirley. This other article is something I put together, which is partly from the celebration piece and partly from that online article by Professor Quayum. Quayum had also written, at the same time, an article on Shirley Lim. Both were written for an American book that was to be published in the U.S. So, this was really meant to go together with the CV, which was very recently compiled by my daughter and myself, based on Lloyd's older versions. I also gave these to Siti Rohaini, who was preparing for the oration.

PN: Looking at the CV reminds me that I did not know about the law degree that you mentioned earlier. I thought that was interesting. I thought that he was just a professor. So did he do any writing for the law?

MF: Since 1997, he has not been able to continue either with his law practice or his writing. The stroke was a pretty major one which happened in December of 1997, but in 1998, he was able to write an answer to a questionnaire by Daizal Samad who was a lecturer at the time at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Lloyd wrote some very interesting things about his work and his life for this particular piece, something he had never done before. In 1998, just a year after the stroke, he was able to write coherently, and he was, in fact, working on a third novel previous to that. But he just couldn't pick up the threads of the story again. He tried very hard, but he just couldn't do it. So, he has the first three chapters of it, but it's hardly completed and he had to stop.

PN: One of the things that I'm curious to know about is his whole discussion about using English in the classroom. As you know, math and science are taught in English now, whereas they had recently only been taught in Malay. I know he had nothing to do with this more recent debate, but what are your reflections on the wish to write in English as opposed to Malay or Indian?

MF: Oh, he had nothing to do with this (LAUGH). You have to get the background. The 1960s and 1970s were a great period of nationalism. We had these racial riots in 1969. That was the kind of turning point for the country, because up to this point... Oh dear....

PN: I'm familiar with the riots. I don't know much about them, but I remember that Shirley Lim came to the United States during that particular time. She just wanted to leave.

MF: Before the riots, all the education was taking place in English. And people from the rural areas – the Malays particularly – felt that Malay, the national language, was being sidelined. And, in fact, the best educated people, at that time, spoke English. This was a policy of the British colonial government, which wanted to raise a class of civil servants proficient in English. So there were the English schools. Some were run by the government. Some were run by missionaries who did a lot of work setting up schools in those early days. But few people from the rural areas were included in this plan for various reasons, including poverty. So those affected by the English influence tended to be the middle class group. After the riots occurred, it was, as I said, a turning point in the history of the country because you just felt that you could no longer carry on this policy and you had to include people from the rural areas of Malaysia into the mainstream education system. The government then brought about

this language policy in which the medium of teaching should be in Malay. It took place in stages. But unfortunately for us, it happened just at the time our first daughter entered primary school in 1971. By that time, all the teaching was being done in Malay. Poor child – she was raised in an English-speaking home. She was very lost. Also many of the teachers actually had not mastered the language well enough to teach entirely in Malay. But everything – the textbooks, for one – were converted to Malay. Of course, English was carried on, but only in a few class periods. So they had to study, and, basically, to grasp the language at the same time. So the education of both our daughters, Eva and Sunetra, was in *bahasa* right up to form five. But because we spoke English at home, our daughters became proficient in English as well. I think, at that time, English literature was still being offered, but less and less. After that, we sent both of them away to do their tertiary education – one to Australia, and the other to Britain.

Lloyd *was* very much engaged in the language issue at the time. An important article of his, based on his inaugural lecture when he became professor in 1967, influenced a particular researcher, Sumit K. Mandal. It appears in *Cultures in Conflict*. In it he advocates a policy of bilingualism. There were many people who were rather resentful of that policy, as they felt that everything should convert into Malay. Lloyd felt that Malay should take its proper place, in the scheme of things in Malaysia, but that English should not be neglected. So, he became very involved in this language issue. The nationalists didn't like the idea, as English was seen as a colonial language.

PN: Yes, it is.

MF: But I mean it's no longer colonial. You can't call it colonial anymore. It's been taken over by all the different countries in which English was left as a legacy. You have Indian English, and West Indian English, U.S. English and all the other varieties of English. So, it no longer just belongs to England. Mandal handles this issue. Lloyd's ideas were seminal at the time. He was promoting this idea of bilingualism; people in Malaysia should know at least two languages, i.e. Malay and English, well. By the 1990s the government was beginning to see that its policies were leading to a generation of people – of students – who were really ignorant of English and who could not communicate. Thus, since the 1990s, there has been a slow reversal process in the sense that the government is realising that you can't do without English. It's important; it's a global language, after all. It's used in the economy, in international meetings, in science, in everything. But according to Mandal, the problem is that we want to promote it simply as a utilitarian language, just for communication. Whereas, Lloyd, has all along been maintaining that you have to know a language more deeply. A language does not just consist of words. It has a whole history and culture behind it. A whole history of ideas. And you can't just clean that out. And the best way to master English and the globalisation that is

taking place, is not to reject English or to use it merely as a utilitarian tool, but to understand its cultural roots and its creativity best experienced in its literature. In the same way, of course, Lloyd keeps on maintaining that people who live here ought to know the national language as well. You see? This is the kind of issue that occurs not just in Malaysia, but also in many post-colonial countries. As Mandal and Lloyd say, some creative writers have even gone to the extent of giving up writing in English and are just writing in Malay as did some writers in former colonial countries. But a great debate is still going on about the cultural legacy left by the English on the native peoples. How do you handle it? How is it justified? Do you just remain resentful and reject it? Or do you try to make it your own just as much as your own native language?

PN: It's an issue on which Malaysia seems to go back and forth, as you say; the debate continues today...

MF: Yes, and I think it's complicated, because Malaysia is multiracial. We don't just have Malays and English-speaking people. Many Malays are English-speaking, but here you have Malays, Chinese, Indians, and others as well. I come under "others" unfortunately. I'm Eurasian.

PN: Oh you're Eurasian?

MF: Lloyd comes from Sri Lanka; he's Singhalese. In Sri Lanka, you have the Singhalese and the Tamils, and the great fight going on between them. There are so many different mixtures of races in Malaysia. As I said, Lloyd comes from Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), but he was brought up in an English-speaking family and they emigrated here to Singapore just before the war. Malaysia and Singapore, at that time, were under British rule. And, in my case, I'm Eurasian, but the roots, again, are very complicated. My father was half-Italian and half Vietnamese. On my mother's side, her family goes back to Portuguese Malacca.

PN: We visited the Portuguese settlement in Malacca.

MF: Yes, that's right; her ancestors came from there, as did her husband, my grandfather. And then I met Lloyd in Singapore. We got married when he was doing his Ph.D. in Leeds, England. So you find people are just tremendous mixtures. It's quite amazing. And, in fact, Lloyd mentions this. You have to read those introductions to the anthologies of short stories he edited because they are very good. In fact, I think his literary criticism is really very much to the point. He also wrote articles and reviews of plays and books for newspapers. He used to write continually, actually. So his literary output includes novels, papers for conferences he attended abroad and at home and articles and reviews of books and plays for the newspapers.

He helped to found the Malaysian chapter of the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies. And, interestingly, he practiced what he preached. He learned to speak Malay. He taught himself with the help of friends long before it became the national policy to do so, because he really believed that people ought to be bilingual in this country. He wrote a number of articles on Malay writers, especially in the 1960s and 1970s – these were people like Shahnnon Ahmad, Osman Awang and Syed Alwi, the playwright. Lloyd's Malay was so good that he even became a judge for the Hadiah Sastera, an award for the Best Creative Writing in *Bahasa Melayu* in the early 1970s. He had to read stories and poems in Malay. And when he became a lawyer, he was able to conduct cases in court in Malay. So he really practiced what he preached.

PN: You answered most of my questions. This was very helpful, because I really get a better sense of Lloyd's history and your history too, which I find interesting. But I suppose that's another story. Thank you.

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