

Malay Characters in Lloyd Fernando's *Green is the Colour*

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Abstract

This essay focuses on how members of the Malay community are characterised in Lloyd Fernando's *Green is the Colour* (1993) by highlighting the complexities and nuances surrounding Malay identity. Fernando's characterisation of Malays puts focus on discourses of identity and belonging that continue to dominate imaginaries on personal and national levels. By putting the 1969 Sino-Malay Race Riots and the Islamic Revivalism of the 1980s into context, Fernando enables a discussion not only on the many aspects of being Malay, but at the same time address how these many facets of "Malay" identity inform and are informed by the Malaysian socio-political landscape.

Keywords

Malays, Islam, modernity, identity, Lloyd Fernando, Malaysian literature

In his blog entry commemorating Malaysia Day on 16 September 2014, Former Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi laments the decreasing tolerance and respect he is witnessing among Malaysians. Referring to some postings alluding to the 13 May riots in 1969, Tun Abdullah argues against the politicising of 13 May as a means to inculcate a sense of forced unity. He believes that Malaysians should instead learn from 13 May 1969. At the same time, however, he cautions that Malaysians should refrain from referring to the 13 May tragedy, stating that looking forward to the future is the step that Malaysians need to take. Tun Abdullah's comments on Malaysian unity echo similar comments made by Tun Mahathir Mohamad in his controversial book, *The Malay Dilemma* (1970). In an analysis of the problems of the Malaysian Malay community, Tun Mahathir suggests that when referring to the Malays and 13 May 1969 "it is useful to look back and analyse, and even apportion blame, if the past is to be a lesson for the future" (13).

Lloyd Fernando's second novel, *Green is the Colour*, embodies this need to establish a collective dialogue between the past and future. Using the 13 May riots to envision a dystopian Malaysia, the novel offers testimony to the fragility and inherent strength of Malaysian plurality. The 13 May 1969 riots have since

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become a repository for all the issues and contestations that still linger within Malaysian national narratives. Fernando's proposal for a "Bangsa Malaysia," or "Malaysian nation" in the text, can potentially point to a remedy for the existing fragmentation. This construction of a more inclusive national identity, however, is only achievable by rejecting the hierarchies enabled by totalitarian and exclusivist forms of nationalism (Quayum, "Imagining 'Bangsa Malaysia'" 6). The lasting impact of state policies such as the National Economic Policy (NEP), and changes to the language and cultural policies introduced in the aftermath of the riots have only served to drive the wedge deeper between the Malay-Muslim majority and the other cultural groups in Malaysia. The Malays, who represent the biggest cultural group in the country, are the focus of this analysis.

This essay provides an investigation of the Malay characters in Lloyd Fernando's *Green is the Colour*. In particular, it highlights the complexities and nuances accompanying the identification with a sense of "Malayness." Fernando's portrayal of Malays foregrounds the important debate about Malaysian multiculturalism that continues to dominate both the personal and national imagination. By contextualising the 1969 Race Riots and the Islamic Revivalism of the 1980s in his novel, Fernando enables a discussion of not only the many facets of being Malay and the sense of "Malayness," but at the same time addresses how "Malay" identity informs and can be informed by the Malaysian socio-cultural landscapes. The article concludes by looking at the ramifications of such representations in Fernando's text and analysing them within the current socio-political milieu of Malaysia.

Remarkably, Malaysian nationalism sits within a space that compresses the tension between an exclusive ethno-religious model of nationalism and cultural pluralism. In his influential book, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson observes that a nation is an imagined community in which the kinship members feel for their nation is developed by shared interests or similar identification to the country. The Malaysian model of nationalism however, reveals the conflicting interests and identities amongst Malaysians. Because it is more associated with a sense of "Malayness," the national narrative perpetuates the idea of assimilation rather than integration, which makes any attempt to shape a common identity challenging.

Even though calls for a shift towards a civic form of nationalism have been made, they have gone unheeded in the face of the ultra-Malay stance, and the Malay anxiety over the "Other." The Malay anxiety stems from a long colonial rule that witnessed the influx of migration, particularly miners and indentured labourers from China and the Indian subcontinent, into the Malay Peninsula. Members of other cultural groups posed a threat to Malay hegemony in Malaya, which was later acutely demonstrated by large Malay opposition to the Malayan Union in 1946 which gave equal citizenship rights and also saw a

decrease in the power of the Malay rulers. The opposition to the proposed Malayan Union became what Maznah Mohamad describes as “the first expression of Malay nationalism” (8), which subsequently resulted in the formation of a separate Malay identity.

Malay identity is contingent on two things: the idea of the *Bumiputera* and Islam. The *Bumiputera* (trans. as “sons of the soil”) is a widely-used Malay term that represents a cultural category that includes the Malays and other indigenous groups of Southeast Asia. Being a member of the *Bumiputera* gives a person some economic, academic and political privileges that are not granted to Malaysians from other ethnic groups. One of the most important documents that defines who the Malays are, is the Malaysian Federal Constitution. Aside from the issue of birth place and domicile, Article 160 of the Federal Constitution defines a Malay as someone who professes the Muslim faith, speaks the Malay language and habitually observes Malay customs. Judging from these criteria, religion, custom and language are the only identifiers which separate a Malay from a non-Malay. Rather than ethnicity, Islam is arguably the most important signifier of Malay identity in Malaysia. Hence, the Malay identity in Malaysia is more of an ethno-religious identity than just an ethnic or cultural one. This interplay between cultural and religious identities highlights the core of Malay subjectivity.

Recently, there has been an increase in literary works written in English which explore the issue of Malay agency and subjectivity. English-language writers and poets such as Dina Zaman, Che Husna Azhari, Karim Raslan, Kam Raslan and Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf are all contributing to the developing discussion on the complexities, paradoxes and ambiguities of Malay identity through their work. Although the theme of Malay subjectivity has always been at the root of Malaysian writing in the Malay language (as demonstrated in the works of Malay writers such as Shahnun Ahmad, Keris Mas, Usman Awang and A. Samad Said), this has not been always the case with Malaysian writing in English. John McLaren, in his work on Malay images in Singapore and Malaysian writing in English, notes that Chinese and Tamil writers in Malaysia, to a certain degree, tend to overlook the Malay community in their writing, while Malay writers prefer to write in Malay (1). This tendency, notes McLaren, problematises readings of Malay subjectivity in literary works, especially for those like himself, who wish to study Malays in literary works but have not acquired the Malay language. McLaren, in his extensive review of the topic, however, did not include Lloyd Fernando’s work in his analysis.

In her article “Malay Characters in Malaysian Novels in English,” Zawiah Yahya argues that Malay characters have not only been under-represented, but in the texts she has examined, she discovered that Malays have also been poorly characterised. She, however, credits Lloyd Fernando’s Malay characters in his first novel, *Scorpion Orchid* as one of the rare exceptions. Andrew Hock Soon Ng

explores the relationship between Islam and modernity in the works of Che Husna Azhari and Karim Raslan. He argues that contemporary Malay writers who are Western-educated and have been aided by the NEP often reveal an identity crisis. This crisis, Ng notes, shows the confluence between Islamic traditionalism and modernisation (Ng 128). While there is a growing body of literary criticism focusing on configurations of “Malayness” and Malay identity in Malaysian and Singaporean literature, much of the focus has been on writers who identify with a Malay identity. Instead, I want to focus on a perspective that is not just from an observer of Malay identity politics, but also from someone who has lived through the politicising of Malay-Muslim identity in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. Lloyd Fernando’s second novel, *Green is the Colour*, is a way to explore this approach.

As one of the most prominent English-language writers and critics in Malaysia, Lloyd Fernando (1926-2008) was deeply concerned with the relationship between the various cultural groups in the country. This concern is highlighted in his two published novels. His first novel, *Scorpion Orchid*, tells of a political upheaval in 1950s Singapore, and how it affects the lives of four close friends. Fernando’s second novel, *Green is the Colour*, published seventeen years after *Scorpion Orchid*, explicitly addresses issues explored in his first novel, especially multiculturalism, ethnicity, religion and belonging, but entirely in the post-independence Malaysian context.

More than twenty years after its publication, *Green is the Colour* remains a relevant literary text in which to examine the relationship between the various cultural groups in Malaysia today – one which has always been precarious and fragile. The novel’s underlying message of accepting differences is even more relevant than it was before, especially when Malaysia is currently witnessing a flux and shift in its socio-political and cultural landscapes. While it seems likely that there is a stronger sense of togetherness among Malaysians, at the same time the tension still permeates Malaysian society as cultural boundaries are also being reinforced. M.A. Quayum in his critique of the text, comments that inherent within *Green is the Colour* is Fernando’s proposal for a “Bangsa Malaysia,” which is a term that denotes a holistic and inclusive national identity that relinquishes ethnic and cultural delineations. “Fernando,” Quayum comments, “dismisses a monocular view of identity and coercive view of national commitment for dialogism, consensual unity and cultural synergy” (32). It is this vision of Malaysia’s potential that drives the narrative power within Fernando’s text. Hence, Fernando’s contribution to the Malaysian literary scene through his acute understanding of the nation’s complex socio-cultural climate cannot be underestimated or remain unacknowledged. Instead, it should be used as a source of reference.

Being a non-Malay, Fernando’s portrayal of Malay characters in the novel leads to an interesting examination because of his subject position as observer.

M.M. Raihanah explains that Fernando “raises awareness of the complexities of being a member of a multi-ethnic, multicultural society where inter- and intra-racial dialectic is a known reality” (58). Fernando’s re-imagination of 13 May 1969 gives insight into this known reality and into the inter-racial relationships that are at the centre of Malaysian society, particularly the socio-cultural underpinnings of Malay identity.

The lives of the Malay characters in *Green is the Colour* highlight not only the multiple forms of “Malayness,” but they also illustrate the complexities and paradoxes surrounding Malay identity. Malay identity in Malaysia is an identity that is constantly in a state of flux. It is an entanglement of differing and overlapping constructs that revolve around ideas of custom and religion as demonstrated by Article 160 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution. The different notions of “Malayness” that appear in the novel are problematised by the tension created by differing notions of what it means to be Malay, Muslim, Modern and Malaysian.

Malay identity has become so synonymous with Islam that at times, being Malay and being Muslim can be perceived as one and the same thing. While at other times, being Malay and being Muslim pose a significant conflict with one another due to the differences in ideology – “Malayness” being particular, while Islam is universal (Frith 117). This conflict is further complicated by the growing presence of modernity and Westernisation, particularly between the 1970s and the 1990s. Many of the characters in *Green is the Colour* demonstrate the tension between ethnic, religious, modern and national identities in a myriad ways.

Some characters, such as Omar and the Panglima, are confined within the “comfort” of the Malay-Muslim nationalist space. Omar, who is a civil servant working for the Ministry of Trade, demonstrates a strong reaction against threats to the Malay-Muslim hegemony. After witnessing the violence of 13 May 1969, and after having returned from a trip to the Middle East with friends, Omar develops a sense of disillusionment with Malaysian society and starts to exhibit a strong religious zeal. When readers first encounter Omar, he talks about moving into a secluded religious commune in Jerangau headed by a spiritual leader called Tok Guru Bahaudin. He hopes that Tok Guru Bahaudin, a shadowy figure that readers never encounter in the novel, would “help redeem his life” (35) from the threat of modern living. Omar, however, is not alone in this sudden turn to religion. His wife, Siti Sara comments that many people have

... joined communities designed to pursue the ideal life strictly. They took their children out of schools, they collected together their meagre savings, they sold their belongings and went into the wilderness to build a good life away from the pollutions of modern living. And what was wrong with

that? Why, nothing. That too was a way of reasserting what was native and true. (36-37)

His insistence on the move to Jerangau to live a simple and uncomplicated life as a way of “reasserting what was native and true” demonstrates what Judith Nagata has observed about the symbols of “Malayness.” Nagata comments that the erosion of language and custom, two important signifiers of Malaysian Malay identity, ‘has left only one effective distinguishing feature, Islam’ (409). Nagata’s comment can be used to refer to Omar’s reaction to the turmoil within Malaysian society. He blames Westernisation, modernisation and the non-Malays (hence, non-Muslims), as the source of the complications in Malaysia. He then turns to religion as a source of, not necessarily comfort, but as a means to reassure himself of his place in a turbulent Malaysian society. To this end, he begins to believe that a singular and homogenous Malaysia would resolve all the challenges and violence. “If we were all of the same faith,” he says, “it would be a different matter” (43).

Omar’s religious form of ethno-nationalism is not only internalised but also complicates his relationship with other people, Malays and non-Malays alike. He blames Siti Sara’s reluctance to move to Jerangau on her Western education and accuses her of forgetting her “heritage” (37). Omar’s use of the word, “heritage,” is interesting as it reveals the ambivalence between tradition and religion. Which heritage is Omar referring to? Is it Malay, Muslim, or both? When Siti Sara decides to wear the *sarong kebaya* (38), which is a form of traditional Malay attire, she believes that within his newfound religiosity, Omar would find the attire offensive and immodest. There are times throughout the novel when Omar seems to imply Muslim and Malay as the same identity, although he seems to reject some elements of Malay culture.

Their move to Jerangau to “rediscover the beauty of... religion” (81) reveals that the commune is nothing more than a physical reaction of people’s fears and anxieties following 13 May and their means of avoiding confronting reality. Fernando also alludes to the fact that the commune is militant and highly political, as exemplified by the internal strife between Tok Guru Bahaudin and another leader, Pak Zaki, as well as the recordings which Omar and Siti Sara listen to upon their arrival. This shows that even amongst themselves, politics and “otherness” still permeate the small commune, justifying Siti Sara’s claim that “It’s the same story of madness. If people were alike, there were always some who said some were not” (103).

The novel also examines the politicising of Malay-Muslim identity in Malaysia as a means to justify the claim over cultural hegemony and power. A character such as the Panglima demonstrates this capitalisation of collective identity politics in order to gain power within the Malay majority. The Panglima is perhaps, Fernando’s most negative representation of a Malay character in the

novel. As a corrupt senior government official working for the Minister of Home Affairs, the Panglima fits a Machiavellian archetype. He is shrewd, manipulative and antagonistic towards other people, including the Malays who reside in the *kampung* areas. “Panglima” is a Malay title, which means “commander” in English. The title is usually conferred on people who have done great deeds or have contributed to society in their field. Fernando’s use of the title highlights the masquerade of false leadership as the Panglima has not officially been bestowed the title. Instead, the Panglima is named as such by the people in the Malay villages because, “after the British re-occupation, he spoke often on the revival of religious values and of the cultural decay which the West had spread to the countries of South East Asia” (31). It is this kind of rhetoric that gives the Panglima so much power.

His call for tolerance and cultural understanding is betrayed by his call that non-Malays should accept the position of the Malays as *Bumiputera*. The Panglima understands the “power that came from standing up for religious belief” (95) and he uses this knowledge to gain leverage in a fragmented and volatile society by appropriating Malay-Muslim nationalism. He welcomes the disorder and suspicion that is spilling over into the villages, stating that “now it’s a good thing that groups are on edge with each other. That way when we send a directive, everyone has to obey” (19). He uses Yun Ming, an officer working in his department, as a means to project this façade of racial tolerance and to portray himself as a reasonable man. He speaks of how he “trusts” Yun Ming just as he trusts his “own people” (34). The Panglima’s attempt to have control over Siti Sara’s body later in the novel highlights what Quayum notes as a “site of patriarchal control” (34); a symbolic view of the struggle between the coloniser and the colonised, the “Us” and the “Other.” He therefore represents the racialised and gendered image of the coloniser in the narrative.

While Omar subscribes to a religious sense of ethno-nationalism, and the Panglima capitalises on such affiliations, characters such as Dahlan and Siti Sara represent a more open attitude towards ethnicity, religion and nationhood. Rather than focusing on ideas of nationalism, both Dahlan and Siti Sara are more patriotic. The approach of these two characters, however, differs. Dahlan represents an aggressive image of the new Malay. Dahlan is a “small town boy who made good” (51) – referring to the newly-emerging and successful urban Malays. As an outspoken lawyer, he openly calls for more social and religious equality for non-Malays and non-Muslims. He is one of the few figures who openly rejects the highly politicised Malay-Muslim hegemony in the novel’s narrative. To demonstrate this, Dahlan goes against the cultural expectations of the Malay-Muslim society through his actions. He argues that:

All of us must make amends. Each and every one of us has to make an individual effort. Words are not enough. We must show by individual actions that we will not tolerate bigotry and racial hatred. (62)

Dahlan openly rejects “the opportunities given to *bumiputras*, for making it on his own” (59). His marriage to Gita, a Hindu woman, also exemplifies his disregard for any boundaries and categorical limitations, despite the risk it poses to his social standing and freedom. His advocacy for the right of non-Muslims to practise their religion and his demand for Neelambigai @ Siti Fatimah binti Abdullah to receive a proper burial echo Raymond Lee and Susan Ackerman, who state in *Sacred Tensions: Modernity and Religious Transformation in Malaysia* that the dominance of Islam in the Malaysian sphere has “raised much apprehension among non-Muslims about the future of their religious traditions, particularly the scope of their rights in continuing the practice of their faiths” (24). In this context, Dahlan believes that his actions will “give people heart” (63) even though his actions lead him to be accused of being the dreaded *kafir* (62), a term referring to non-Muslims that is pejoratively used by Malays quite frequently.

If Dahlan's call for equality and justice is a good thing, his approach, however, is troubling. His friend, Yun Ming, believes that Dahlan's tendency to “attack everything” is reminiscent of how the British used to rule, and hence, he believes that Dahlan is “a colonial product to the end” (7). Until his death at the hands of the Panglima's hired thugs, Dahlan does not back away from his cause – to demand equality and justice for every Malaysian, notwithstanding race, religion or language.

Out of all the Malay characters to be found in the novel Siti Sara best represents the underlying theme of the novel because she embodies the allegorical figure of the “Bangsa Malaysia.” As a lecturer at a local university and a United States college graduate, Siti Sara, like Omar and Dahlan, is well-educated and seems to represent the growing urban Malay middle-class population. Acutely aware of and sensitive to the turmoils of the nation, she is perhaps the only person who recognises that all roads leading from 13 May 1969 were fraught with error. “Nobody,” she laments, “could get May sixty-nine right”; she says that “it was hopeless to pretend you could be objective about it” (87).

Much like Dahlan, Siti Sara has faith in the strength of the plurality of Malaysian society. In a scene where she recalls an argument she had with her American friends over 13 May, Siti Sara states that:

We are building a new country, we were working out our own future and we will solve our own problems as they arise. She developed and clung to the use of the plural personal pronoun because they soothed her: they stirred

feelings of patriotism, of love for fellow citizens whether Malay, Chinese, Indian or Eurasian. (76-77)

Through her relationship with Yun Ming, Siti Sara is reminded “of a wider world that she has dreamt of” (41), a world she acknowledges as “smashed” (42). The fragmentation of society due to the ongoing violence and the climate of fear and suspicion has made her increasingly ambivalent about the direction the nation is taking.

In the world illustrated in the novel, post-May 1969 is often framed not only around ethno-religious relations, but also on gender relations. I would like to draw attention to Siti Sara’s representation as a character entrapped not only by cultural and religious boundaries but also because of her position as a female in a mostly phallogocentric environment. Although she is privileged as Malay, Siti Sara is a marginalised figure. Being a Malay woman, Siti Sara seems to understand the inadequacy of some of the nation-building discourses that take place as she herself experiences a sense of alienation. Her relationship with her husband, Omar, and her place in the Malay-Muslim space are primary examples of how being female has rendered her as “Other.” Omar and the Panglima in particular, view her as a commodity rather than an equal, and society seems to put Siti Sara and other women within a separate sphere. Siti Sara realises how misogynistic the Malay culture has become. In Jerangau, she voices her dissatisfaction to Omar when she realises that men and women are being segregated during a religious sermon, demanding to know where in the Quran does it mention that women and men need to be separated.

Sen and Stivens in their examination of gendered images, argue that gendered images have become fundamental in the debate about being Malay, Muslim and modern. Despite being called *sundal* and *jalang* (both pejorative terms meaning whore or loose woman) by her husband who says: “answer me, sundal” (92), and by the Panglima who comments, “You’re a *sundal*, you make yourself cheap with a *kafir*” (167) and “you’re just a common *jalang*” (168), Siti Sara represents a strong female Malay character. She is highly intelligent and outspoken, and despite the misogynist underpinnings of society, she eventually takes the risks to be free from the world that is becoming increasingly small; one that is racialised, gendered and classed. This risk would eventually end in disappointment for Siti Sara, just as it did for Dahlan.

In a study of Malay families, women and body politics, Aihwa Ong examines how state policies in the late 1980s negotiated ideals of family and womanhood. Ong argues that Islamic revivalism is in fact created by the Malay middle-class which is then institutionalised by state-policies. Ong’s argument is significant to the situation of Siti Sara as the men claiming to be custodians of her culture and her religion regulate her sense of womanhood. What is interesting in Ong’s study is the revelation that in the past, Malay custom,

coupled with Islamic and local beliefs, has shaped practices concerning kinship, residence and property. "Although men," she states, "traditionally enjoyed prerogatives in religion and property, women were neither confined to the household nor totally dependent on men for economic survival" (260). However, Ong notes that the post-independence period saw a drastic change in gender relations. From her role as wife at home and her status in the religious commune, we can see that gender relations have affected Siti Sara, who had a more independent life during her childhood in Sayong.

It is also important to mention the symbolic value of the *kampung* in the shaping of Malay identity. Between the 1970s and the 1990s, negativity surrounding the idea of the *kampung* took shape. Tun Mahathir, in *The Malay Dilemma*, and also in his writings under the pen name C.H.E. Det, attacked the backwardness of the *kampung* as a site of Malay struggle. He was not alone. In fact, many urban Malays subscribed to the same idea. Eric C. Thompson, in his examination of rural villages in Malaysia as socially urban spaces, comments that within the politics of memory, the *kampung* is significant because it is a site that highlights the idea of Malay nostalgia. The *kampung* is deeply embedded within the discourses of the emerging Malay bourgeois elite concerning middle-class subjectivities. However, Thompson also concurs that the image of the *kampung* is also associated with ideas of backwardness, under-development and tradition that articulates the tension between the rural Malays and the new emerging urban Malay population. Today, to say that someone has *kampung* characteristics is to allude to the person's lack of refinement and culture.

Despite the negativity surrounding the image of the *kampung*, Fernando capitalises on this idea of nostalgia to invert this negative image by bringing to the forefront the beauty of the landscape and the simplicity of life. The image of the *kampung* is then juxtaposed with the violence and fear that seem to envelop life in urban landscapes. In the novel, Sayong is portrayed as the last bastion of simplicity and civility, although early signs of the struggles outside of its borders are slowly creeping in. The image of the green paddy fields being infected by the "*penyakit merah*," or "red disease" (25) is a metaphorical allusion to the advent of trouble in the *kampung*. All of these images evoke a sense of nostalgic memory for Siti Sara, whose life in the city is anything but calm and peaceful. In Sayong, she sheds all her other associations to become only the Siti Sara that she knows. Even though the Panglima tries to re-assert his sense of kinship by reminding her of their shared *kampung*, her image of her *kampung* remains untainted.

At the end of the novel, having been abused, tortured and having lost her father to the violence, Siti Sara no longer looks at the *kampung* in the same way. Her ambivalence grows, and in the end, she experiences a sense of loss and emptiness that is difficult to remedy, even with Yun Ming's presence. Like Dahlan, Siti Sara attempted to fight against the current, almost in vain.

Representation of Malay characters in *Green is the Colour* draws attention to the confluence between Islamic and Malay identities, as well as the reaction to ideas of modernisation and Westernisation. From what is observed through this close examination of the Malay characters in *Green is the Colour*, it is clear that they embody fragmented and differing views as to what constitutes Malay identity and how Malaysia should develop as a nation post-1969. It has been revealed that ideas of Malay identity have been used as a political tool by examining the character of the Panglima, who manipulates cultural hegemony for personal gain. Yet, through people like Dahlan and Siti Sara, Malay characterisation goes beyond simple internal ethno-nationalist perspectives. These characters encapsulate the idea that to achieve unity and harmony in Malaysia, Malaysians need to do more than just tolerate one another – acceptance of each other's differences is a step in the right direction. As Siti Sara reveals in the novel, if this climate of suspicion and anxiety continues, the “wound beneath [would] continue to run pus” (87).

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