

PORTRAYAL OF THE MALAY IN NOVELS  
IN ENGLISH WRITTEN BY MALAYSIAN AND  
SINGAPOREAN WRITERS

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Very few Malays live in the noveldom of Malaysia and Singapore, and they certainly don't inherit its earth. Some writers ignore their existence altogether and can fill 260 pages with every local colour of the land under the sun except its brown natives.<sup>1</sup> Others contrive to include token figures for local window-dressing. All in all, the Malays are very seldom, if at all, an important part of the society of our fiction. This social scenario on the printed pages does not reflect the true image of our society past or present. It is a fact of history and sociology that the Malays have always figured largely in all matters of the land, including population statistics. Past Malaysian census has put the Malay homo sapiens in the Peninsula at 49.8% in 1957, 53% in 1970 and 56% in 1980.<sup>2</sup> This should make their homo fictus cousins a rare species indeed. More important than the figures is the fact that in a multiracial context like ours which appears to be the setting for the stories, we must have crossed paths many times in our long and chequered journey in this land. To overlook this point surely is to fall short of authenticity and realism, and certainly does not, in a literary sense, enrich the literary reproduction of that life, especially in what appears to be realistic fiction.<sup>3</sup>

The Malay characters are not just few in number: most of them are faceless, nameless, voiceless and characterless. Some are there just to make up the crowd, a village community, a group of drivers, the Armed Forces, or are simply figures in kampung scenes. Some live for only one line, some mercifully survive a paragraph or a page, others walk in and out of the narrative, as your meter-reader or postman does in your life, and leave no impression behind. Neither the plot nor they themselves change as a result of their incursions.

It is true a few characters do have things to say, bits of action to perform, but they do this at the perimeter of the plot and neither their word nor their action affects the centre in any significant way. For example, Aminah, the servant in the Toh household in *The Serpents Tooth*<sup>4</sup> may cry and whine about sundry misfortunes for a few pages, but her antics remain in the backquarters, not in the living quarters where the action is, and, together with the rice-cooker and the food-processor, she merely makes up a feature of modern house keeping. Mariam the prostitute in *The Long White Sands*<sup>5</sup> may be given more exposure than her sisters in other novels, who are no more definable than the shadows of their natural habitat, but she remains a forgettable episode in the life of the protagonist.

E.M. Forster has a name for such characters.<sup>6</sup> He calls them flat because they are constructed round a single idea or quality and are not changed by events around

them. Our novels abound with flat Malay characters — the brave guerillas, the corrupt policemen, the whining servants, the simple-minded kampung elders. To be sure there are flat characters that threaten to curve round. Sobri of *Run Tiger Run* by Johnny Ong, for instance, is more than the protagonist's boozing partner; he is many other things besides, including a loyal friend, a party-goer, a party-giver and an amateur writer to boot. Characters like Sobri can be or do many things, none of which may change the main course of the action in the plot, or themselves for that matter. The only Malay characters that manage to curl up somewhat from this state of flatness to display some semblance or roundness are Rahim of Mohd. Tajuddin's creation in *The Price Has Been High* and Sabran of Lloyd Fernando's imagination in *Scorpion Orchid*.

It is not difficult to guess the reasons behind this sad state of affairs. It is natural for novelists to exploit materials most familiar to them, taken from their own cultural backyard so that they have full control of their reproduction into the fictional world. To venture into alien territory of which they know very little can be a hazardous undertaking. That is why each novelist spins his own cultural cocoon and hatches creatures of his own kind. A Malay character is difficult material for non-Malay writers to handle because it requires an understanding of the whole socio-cultural world that produces such a character. And since it is the non-Malay writers who constitute almost the entire membership of this exclusive club, we must expect the Malay characters to continue to remain in the background, or worse still, become quite extinct.

Writers like Chin Kee Onn, Ewe Phaik Leong & Johnny Ong have tried using Malay characters without much success. Certainly, a superficial knowledge of the Malay world and the Malay world-view cannot create a convincing and credible portrait. Most of their Malay characters suffer from lack of personal details and a socio-cultural context, and they display none of the manifestations of the Malay way of life except for clichéd references to their kampung origin and their religion. The following example will show how unconvincing a Malay character can be in the hands of a novelist who is not familiar with his material. Halisamat, driver to slain tin miner, is quoted as saying in *Maraiee*:

"By my Holy Prophet, and by my Holy Koran, I swear that as long as I live I will be faithful to this company. I also swear to take revenge for my towkay."<sup>7</sup>

This passionate pledge of loyalty to an individual of another race is rather hard to swallow; Malays are usually passionate about their country, religion and sultans — a Chinese towkay somehow does not quite belong to that category. Also, Malays seldom swear by their Holy Prophet and Holy Quran except over matters of the greatest religious import and moral gravity, least of all for the purpose of revenge for a non-believer.

I suspect Lloyd Fernando's knowledge of the Malay world is as superficial as any other novelists. Yet he manages to avoid their pitfalls by side-stepping the socio-cultural hurdles and concentrating on the psychological and intellectual explorations of his character instead.

Thus, even though Sabran is not shown to be living the Malay way of life in his urban setting, his mentality is definitely Malay in essence. His urge to go back to help his family and serve his kampung (reminiscent of Kassim Ahmad's "A Common Story"<sup>8</sup>), his great social concern, his defence of the Malay Language the pride of belonging to his country, his resentment of his non-malay friend's lack of patriotism and social commitment – these accurately mirror the Malay consciousness and the Malay intellect of his time. His psychological and intellectual dimensions make up for what is lost in socio-cultural details. Here is a truly round character who undergoes a metamorphosis from innocence to experience, from ignorance to knowledge and self-awareness. He strives to achieve ideals through social commitment and friendship, but finds that he cannot weather the storm on both fronts and has to accept limitations and make adjustments.

By right, it is Ahmad Tajuddin's novel that should have the greatest opportunity to develop its Malay characters. It has the right setting, the right atmosphere, the right people, and the right story-teller. Yet his characters are warrior stereotypes, engaged in straight physical combat, with concrete enemies, in a series of offensives, not men emotionally and psychologically at odds with themselves or life's complexities, fighting enemies from within. Tajuddin has painted the Malay world right, but he has little of Lloyd Fernando's psychological strokes and sweeps to give life to his characters. Fortunately his protagonist Rahim is spared the literary fate of his comrades. In the beginning, he threatens to be a stereotype, a carbon copy of Hang Tuah in *Sejarah Melayu*.<sup>9</sup> But later he is seen to be struggling with his idealism about human lives on one hand and the harsh realities of war on the other, and this saves his character from being flat.

Admittedly, it takes more than knowing your materials to write a good story or create living characters. Good materials in mediocre hands will still produce mediocre work. Only good craftsmanship of the type symbolised by William Blake's blacksmith in his "Tiger, tiger, burning bright" poem can forge them into a work of art. However, a certain amount of research into the world the writer is going to reproduce in his work will go a long way towards making him a better craftsman and a more convincing maker of his creatures.

So much for the literary image of the Malay. Now let me reconstruct the sociological image as I find it on the printed pages of our fiction.

The first thing you notice about the Malay characters is their poverty. We meet rich Chinese tin miners, rubber tycoons, and other assorted entrepreneurs in our fiction, but the Shaws and the Lees of the Malay World are obviously not yet born or made. As far as I can see, the only Malay-owned business around is the cake-selling venture of Pak Tam's family in *The Price Has Been High* – but a few "kuehs" in a rattan basket left to sell at a dilapidated kampung stall by a tottering old man on a ramshackle of a bicycle is not exactly Kentucky Fried Chicken no matter how finger-licking good they are.

The most popular background figures in our fiction are the sea-tossed fisherman and the toil – worn padi-planter. They are an inevitable fixture in a kampung scene, and a sorry sight to see, indeed. Sabran's parents have to bend double over

ten acres of rice land they had to mortgage to pay for his university education in Singapore. Aziz in *If We Dream Too Long* becomes a driver despite his MCE qualification because his fisherman father finds it tough to make ends meet. Others less inclined to fight the fierce elements of nature take to less risky jobs which bring meagre but steady incomes. Some join the Armed Forces. Some sit behind the wheels of the rich and the distinguished. The women wash other people's clothes, clean other people's homes, cook other people's meals, deliver or abort other people's babies by fair means or foul, and if they have the right equipment, peddle their own flesh.

Money is always short. But life has to go on, mouths have to be fed. As a result, they buy things on credit at the village shop, sometimes faster than they can pay, much to the exasperation of shopkeepers like Tan Kok Seng in *Man of Malaysia*<sup>10</sup> who subsequently takes tough measures to recover his money by refusing them further purchases on credit. This, incidentally, achieves varied results. Some plead. Some become shadows. Others threaten with parangs. Most don't pay. The policemen, Tan Kok Seng also tells you, have their own answers to their money problems. It is not mere coincidence that he has included two episodes in which the arm of the law finds its way into his wallet. Sometimes money is so badly needed that our fictional Malays put aside their moral scruples and get on with the business of surviving. How many times have we heard the families of prostitutes moan about the shame brought upon them by wayward members, yet use the ill-gotten money sent home to live their own self-righteous lives.

As workers, the Malays are seldom portrayed to be committed to their vocation or competent in what they do, that is, not counting Salmah the prostitute whose honourable vocation in life it is to love all mankind. We have a teacher who is drunk more often than he is sober. We have drivers who play poker under the trees in complete self-abandon. But by far the Armed Forces are portrayed to be the worst kind. We never meet a single decent policeman in Tan Kok Seng's three novels. They ignore his summonses for help, they terrorize and manhandle crowds, they don't do his accident report properly, and they harrass him for operating his vendor business without a licence. As for Ewe Paik Leong's twelve "brave, honest guards" in *Bandit*,<sup>11</sup> we see them armed with sten guns, pistols and knives as they patrol the planter's grounds, yet three grenades are thrown in by bandits, twenty bullets are pumped into the planter and no bandit is caught or injured. Johnny Ong's policeman blissfully closes one eye to street gambling activities and drowsily sleeps with the other.<sup>12</sup> Chin Kee Onn's constables in *The Grand Illusion*<sup>13</sup> indulge in sexual fantasies while on serious duty. I don't know what to make of all these. But I do know they certainly don't add up to a nice picture.

By far the most dedicated Malays are the guerillas. Their bravery and unquestioning loyalty to cause, country and comrade, no matter on which side they fight, does not go unnoticed by even the non-Malay writers. Needless to say Mohd. Tajuddin goes completely overboard in his eulogy. His heroes declare their love for their land in loud melodramatic speeches and slogans, not unlike some politicians we know. Their exit from the story is always spectacularly heroic and overdone.

This penchant for the melodramatic seems to come naturally to the Malay characters. Zam Amat rolls a bloody human head to show the fate that awaits a traitor.<sup>14</sup> Pak Tam plays the clown and overacts his part of a diarrhoe victim so the Japanese will no longer employ him.<sup>15</sup> Salmah the prostitute gives the performance of her life from the hospital bed, ranting philosophies on love and other abstractions.<sup>16</sup> Aminah the servant dissolves into tears at the slightest hint of misfortune. I personally have yet to get over the theatrical rantings on loneliness from Hassan, the guerilla leader who has otherwise displayed the stability of a rock.

It seems the Malay characters are ruled more by their heart than their head, by their passion more than their reason. Revenge and hate goad them to kill the Japanese soldiers. Anger provokes them to attack a motorist who nearly runs down a kampung boy. Frustration probably pushes them to resort to threats and violence when credit on daily provisions is denied them. But not all passions are bad. In human and personal relationships, they forge the strongest bonds. Many lasting and intense friendships are formed in our fiction — between Zam Amat and Kung Li, (*The Grand Illusion*), Jaafar and Rahim (*The Price Has Been High*), Sobri and Kim (*Run Tiger Run*) and between Sabran and his multi-racial friends (*Scorpion Orchid*). Not that the voice of reason is totally silent in the Malay world. Rahim and Hassan are, on most occasions, reasonable leaders guided by their own rationale in their leadership. Sabran fills the pages of *Scorpion Orchid* not so much with his actions as with his thoughts and perceptive analysis of things. The prostitutes pragmatic approach to survival has its own peculiar logic. In short, as with any other society, there are men who easily lose their heads and there are those who keep them squarely on their shoulders.

It comes as no surprise that it is the men who dominate the Malay world in fiction (and out) not only by sheer number but more importantly by the authority bestowed upon them by religion, custom, tradition and, more often than not, by themselves. The servants in *The Serpent's Tooth tremble at the very mention of* their lord and master at home. Even Mohd. Tajuddin's wholesome heroes have their women where they want them — on all fours serving them hand and foot — and they put themselves where they like best — on a pedestal! The women, whether a willing party or not, are often reduced to a state of servitude. Good men, like those in Mohd. Tajuddin's novel, reciprocate with kindness, love and respect. Bad men, like Aminah's extremely virile husband and other men in the prostitutes' past and present, use them badly, for their own pleasure. We know that Lloyd Fernando's prostitute Salmah suffers from an acute case of manhandling both in the bedroom and out in the streets, leaving her in the end with permanent psychological bruises and scars. Sharifah the servant in *The Serpents' Tooth* flees from her lascivious, incestuous father into the safe arms of equally lustful men in some brothel. As far as I can remember, the only man wronged by a woman is Hassan whose wife leaves him for another man, but he is getting just desserts for deserting her so soon after the wedding and leaving no word, for whatever reason.<sup>18</sup>

Another related feature of the Malay world is the distinct sex roles the characters play. The general rule is that men provide, woman reproduce. Men work to earn a

living or fight a war, women stay home and look after their brood. Under special circumstances, as when the men's income is inadequate or when the women are left alone to fend for themselves, they are only allowed to work in areas traditionally associated with women — as servants, midwives etc. If they want to break this time and man-honoured tradition, they have to convince the chauvinists at the helm and prove themselves, as Mariam the guerilla does.<sup>19</sup> She does not want to work; she wants to fight instead. For this she has to make a strong case, and argue with the aggressiveness of a lawyer in court and the bra-burning spirit of women's — libbers. Even so, logic alone may not have swayed the partisan male listeners. I suspect the strong male support from her far-sighted boyfriend has a lot to do with the final verdict.

Here, then, is the image of the Malays as you see it in our novels. And here seems to be the right place to end this portrait with the hope that some sociologist with a literary bent may take up where I leave to see if our writers have drawn a true picture or a bad reproduction.

#### NOTES

- 1/ Specifically Lim Thean Soo, *Ricky Star*, Singapore: Pan Pacific Book Distributors, 1978, but there are many others.
- 2/ Department of Statistics Malaysia 1983, *General Report of the Population Census 1980*, Vol. 1, P. 17.
- 3/ Robert Stanton, *An Introduction to Fiction*, U.S.A.: Holt, Rinehart and Wiston, 1965, P. 57. "Realistic fiction preserves verisimilitude, that is, the appearance of factual truth."
- 4/ Catherine Lim, *The Serpents' Tooth*, Singapore: Times Book International, 1982, PP — 64, 139 — 40, 158.
- 5/ Johnny Ong, *The Long White Sands*, Kuala Lumpur: Pesake, 1977, PP. 54, 55—6, 58—9.
- 6/ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1962, PP. 75—85.
- 7/ Chin Kee Onn, *Maraiee*, Singapore: Eastern Univ. Press, 1982, P. 73.
- 8/ Lloyd Fernando, ed. *22 Malaysian Stories*, Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann, 1968, PP 24—30.
- 9/ Brown, C.C. *Sejarah Melayu — Malay Annals*, Kuala Lumpur: O.U.P., 1976.
- 10/ Tan Kok Seng, *Man of Malaysia*, Singapore: Heinemann, 1974, P. 106.
- 11/ Ewe Paik Leong, *Bandits*, Singapore: Times Book International, 1980, P. 2.
- 12/ Johnny Ong, *Run Tiger Run* Kuala Lumpur: Eastern Univ. Press, 1975, P. 108.
- 13/ Chin Kee Onn, *The Grand Illusion*, Kuala Lumpur: Aspatra Quest, 1984, PP 160—1.
- 14/ *Ibid.*, P. 49.
- 15/ Mohd. Tajuddin Samsuddin, *The Price Has Been High*, Kuala Lumpur: Arenabuku, 1984, pp. 142 — 3.
- 16/ Lloyd Fernando, *Scorpion Orchid*, Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann, 1976, PP. 74—78.
- 17/ Mohd. Tajuddin Samsuddin, P. 110 — 1.
- 18/ *Ibid.*, P. 52.
- 19/ *Ibid.*, P. 74.

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