Chapter Three

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN MALAYSIA -
THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

A Thousand Languages we may speak,
Could it be the same as the mother tongue?

Usman Awang

In many developing countries around the world, there is a great diversity of languages, and the local indigenous languages usually have only limited currency and do not serve as languages of wider communication. To enable the citizens to cope with education, employment and daily communication in shop and street, they become, out of necessity and compulsion, polyglots. They usually learn one or more other languages besides their mother-tongue.¹

There are more than seventy indigenous and non-indigenous languages in Malaysia. The indigenous languages belong to two different stocks - the peninsula orang asli (natives) speak about twenty different languages belonging to Austroasiatic stock; the linguistic variety in Sabah and Sarawak is of Austronesian stock. Numerous Chinese dialects, notably from South China - Hakka, Teochew, Hokkien, Cantonese and Hailam as well as Mandarin are spoken. Among the Indians, the most common language is Tamil but various other regional languages from the Indian sub-continent such as Gujarati, Punjabi, and Bengali are also spoken. There are also Thai-speaking people on the Malaysia-Thai border, who are either Thais in terms of ethnic origin or Malays, whose first language is Thai rather than Malay. This has come about through ethnic Malay assimilation to the Thai culture and way of life.²

The linguistic complexity is matched by the range of religious and cultural traditions within the Malaysian society. Language in Malaysia is seen as a very
important means of linking the nation together. Although Malay is the national medium of instruction in schools, English is widely used, especially among the elite.

One of the most important problems confronting a multi-lingual country like Malaysia is the development of a linguistic medium and a language policy which will be able to promote integration of its various peoples.

Language policy 'includes all measures taken in order to influence or control the linguistic situation or language usage within a society or any sector of society'. Governmental measures along with non-governmental institutions like newspapers, broad-casting, publishing houses, schools and universities, all kinds of commercial enterprises (all those functioning through mass communication) work as various manifestations of the language policy.

Malay, Chinese and Tamil schools, known as vernacular schools, where the medium of instruction was Malay, Chinese and Tamil respectively, had homogenous student populations; the Malay school was mostly attended by and taught by Malays, and so on. Their curricula were also significantly different and separate, each with its own specific emphasis and orientation. The Malay school curriculum was localized in nature; the Chinese one was oriented towards China and that of the Tamil schools towards India. Racial differentiation in a multi-cultural society will always exist as long as people identify themselves with one single 'racial' group as opposed to others. This type of schooling only encourages the divergent groups to be more marked, each group being an encasement of its own ethnicity, traditions and chauvinism. According to some political scientists, the Malaysian education policy has been developed as a leftover of the British colonial policy. Throughout the nineteenth century, the British colonial government was hardly concerned with the education of Malaysian people. They were more concerned about the maintenance of law and order and the exploitation of tin and rubber resources. It
was only at the turn of the 20th century that education in the four separate media of instruction Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil began to be developed. Nevertheless, the development of schools teaching through English received the undivided attention of the British colonial government at the expense of those other languages.6

During the Japanese occupation of Malaya, the Chinese school system underwent major changes with various bans on the subject matter and languages taught under the British rule.

In 1956, a 'liberal education policy' came about. The Razak Report emphasized the need for -

a national system of education acceptable to the people of the federation as a whole which will satisfy their needs and promote their culture, social, economic and political development as a nation having regard to the intention to make Malay the national language of the country whilst preserving and sustaining the growth of the language and culture of other communities living in the country.7

Five years after the Razak Report, the 1961 Education Act accepted the proposals of the Rahman Talib Report, and in respect of the secondary schools, the Report proposed:

For the sake of national unity, the objective must be to eliminate communal secondary schools from the national system of assisted schools and to ensure that pupils of all races shall attend both national and national-type secondary schools.8

Chinese secondary schools were forced to accept the change into national type schools or to forego subsidies and become independent schools.

The year 1969 (the year of the infamous racial riots) was an important watershed in Malaysia's education policy since it had to serve the objectives of the New Economy Policy. The 1971 Majid Ismaili Report proposed that the admission of students into local universities should be according to the ethnic proportion of the Malaysian population and not the students' academic results. This marked the
beginning of the university "quota" system, due to which the proportion of Malay students at the universities and colleges far exceeded the proportion of Malays in the total population. This system sparked off widespread discontent among non-Malay students and their parents. 9

In 1969, under the language policy of Malaysia the name of the language changed to Bahasa Melayu from Melayu, to stress the fact that it was a language belonging to Malaysians of all races.

According to a Malay saying, language is "the soul of the nation" (bahasa jiwa bangsa). The word bahasa which is etymologically Sanskrit means both "language" and "manners", so bahasa in effect is associated with "speech and breeding" or "speech as indicating breeding". 10 Bahasa has a universality among all classes of Malays, though most of the Malay writers have come from the subject class (as opposed to royalty and aristocracy) and share a common educational background, being mostly products of the Malay vernacular schools. Vernacular education brought literacy to the rural Malay masses, giving rise to the emergence of a native intelligentsia of teachers, journalists and writers. Education to them did not mean the attainment of socio-economic advancement but a means to moral and intellectual renovation, consistent with Islamic beliefs. The universalization of education in the Malay language reduced regional differences in language, making it possible to create among the Malays an awareness of a common cultural heritage and tradition. 11

During the colonial days and the early days after independence in 1957, many of the newspapers and journals were written in the Jawi script rather than in romanized script. The romanized script made the language acquisition easy and hence, readily acceptable by the people. 12 This was further encouraged by the media, which also tried to unify the citizens by showing programmes in various Malaysian languages. The three television channels namely RTM1; RTM2 and TV3
follow the patchwork type format where each channel accommodates various languages. RTM2 accommodates programmes, news bulletins, education and entertainment in all four languages namely in Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil. The television commercials are also done in the various languages but most educational programmes are in English and Malay. The patchwork format of RTM also encourages the different groups to respect one another's cultures. There are nowadays many non-Malays who enjoy television dramas and films in Malay, just as there are Malays who enjoy Chinese and Indian films. It is also common for non-Malay newsreaders to read the news in Bahasa Malaysia. For religious festivals and national day events, variety shows are hosted where many songs are sung in the national language by people of different ethnic groups to symbolize unity. Apparently, this encourages the philosophy of sharing.13

After the period of the Japanese Occupation, two trends manifested themselves in the Malay language policy. The conservative tended to stick to the traditional Riau norm, while others wanted to depart from the norm in order to develop Malay into a modern language. The two groups of language users were the Malay Language Institute (Lembaga Bahasa Melayu-LBM) consisting mainly of older people, especially teachers, publishers and writers, and, a more radical 1950's Generation of Writers (Angkatan Sasterawan 50-ASAS 50), consisting of more members, led by a group of young writers. Both groups were active in Singapore and were founded in 1950. They jointly sponsored three language conferences in the 1950s.14

In 1957, a new language institution, the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (D.B.P.) or the Language and Literary Agency, was established in Kuala Lumpur, following the recommendation made by the Abdul Razak Committee on Education in the Federation of Malaya in 1956.15 It was soon subordinated to the Ministry of
Education and is still the official language board of Malaysia. Two of its manifold tasks included the development and enrichment of the Malay language and the production of a standard dictionary. The Kamus Dewan (Dictionary) was published in 1970. The D.B.P. has also been very active in the coining of new terms. The most dominant source of new terms in Malaysia is obviously, English and the most frequently followed method was to adapt the spelling close to the Anglicized pronunciation. Some examples are: Ketelog, Saikoloji, Fakulti; Kolej. There are also several Arabic loan words, especially in the context of religion. Another way the D.B.P. coined new terms was by the contraction of word-compounds to single words, which in the 60s, was applied on a fairly large scale. For example, the term for subway in Malay is jalan bawah tanah (passage under ground) which has been contracted to jabana.16

On the wide usage of loan-words from the English language, or the habit of borrowing indiscriminately from English, Salleh Ben Joned says that the irony is that the "English-educated are not doing this, but the Malay educated, and especially those who make a lot of noise about the sanctity of the national language". He says further that English words are 'kidnapped' not because they (the kidnappers) are 'desperately poor in Bahasa Malaysia vocabulary but because they are desperately in need of ego-boosting for something with which to dress up the poverty of their ideas".17

It is true that all languages borrow from others, but the borrowing should be by necessity, not fashion, laziness, pretentiousness or any other self-indulgent motives.18

In a mixed multilingual situation, one is obliged to converse in some sort of a mixed hybridized language. Language is, anyway, full of imported idioms which eventually, and often quite quickly, become 'naturalized' and are taken as part of the
language standard. For that which develops of necessity, the linguistic potpourri is should not be regarded with contempt but appreciated for its natural evolution.

In defining Malay as the National language, Clause 152 of the Malaysian Constitution concurrently guarantees the right to use and develop the languages of all ethnic groups before Independence. In the struggle for Independence, Malaysian citizens of Chinese and Indian origins accepted Malay as the national and common language after they were assured that their mother-tongues could be learned (formally), used and developed freely. However, they continued to ask for the inclusion of Chinese and Tamil as the joint official languages with Malay and English as a sign of equality.

After the National Language Act was passed in 1967, declaring Bahasa Malaysia as the national language, came the question of a national literature.

In Malaysia's multi-ethnic society, literatures in various languages are available, yet, the national literature is defined as 'works written in the national language (that is Malay) and have Malaysian background'. Literatures which are scripted in other indigenous languages such as Bidayuh, Iban, Melanau, Chinese, Tamil and even English are classified as "Sastera Sukuan" or "Sectional literature."

While the Malay language and literary organizations pressed for greater institutionalization of the Malay languages, the debate over what actually constituted Malaysian literature began actively among writers and academics in the early 1960s. As mentioned earlier, most Malays stressed that Malaysian literature should be literature in Bahasa Malaysia based on Malaysian themes. Others believed that the medium should not be the main criterion, and given Malaysian cultural and linguistic pluralism, content should serve more as a criterion.

Literature in English in Malaysia was essentially a product of British colonialism and hence was difficult to accommodate because of its lack of cultural
or emotional affiliation. Two academics, Professors Taib Osman and Ismail Hussein supported literature in *Bahasa Malaysia* as the national literature of Malaysia based on the following reasons, among others: Malay which forms the basis of the national literature is understood by all Malaysians; it is also the language of the indigenous people of Malaysia; literatures in Chinese, Tamil or English are foreign literatures written in non-indigenous languages and that literature in Malay is non-elitist being broadly based socially and representing an antithesis to traditional court literature.

However, Professor Ismail Hussein's term 'Aimless Literature' given to Chinese and Tamil literatures which he feels cannot be used as a basis for national culture, is wholly unjustified and only shows his lack of understanding of the parameters of national unity as well as the cultural process itself.

As late as in 1976, the first President of GAPENA was using stereotypes to describe the non-Malay cultures and their literary traditions. He added that the Chinese in their cultural activities, still possess an immigrant mentality and do not make any attempt to absorb the culture and traditions of their adopted country. He also attacked Western culture as being the most dangerous challenge to the development of the national culture as such a culture was subscribed to by the educated and economically powerful.

Tham Seong Chee raises a question about what should qualify as national literature. He asks - 'In the context of Malaysian social and cultural pluralism would the work of a non-Malay who writes in Bahasa Malaysia but who makes an evaluation of his own society, be regarded as national literature?'. If that be the case then much of Malaysian Baba (Straits Chinese) literature must rightly be considered as national.
Ngugi believes that "the question of moving towards a pluralism of cultures, literatures and language is still important today as the world becomes increasingly one.\textsuperscript{26} To consider Goethe's view, as far back as at the beginning of last century, national literature means little now, the age of world literature has begun. World literature nowadays seem to be an amalgamation of national literatures. To quote Goethe again,

General world literature can develop when nations get to know all the relations among all the nations.\textsuperscript{27}

Malaysian literary enterprise included the establishment of various institutions, formation of certain groups and encouragement of writing through the awarding of literary prizes. In 1923, a Translation Bureau was set up by the government at the Sultan Idris Training College at Tanjung Malim, for the writing, translation and editing of educational, literary and governmental publications. Through this bureau, a certain uniformity of usage was achieved. The earliest translated works from English to Malay were of a literary nature, after which came academic translation. At this point of time, when the British ruled, translation was an essential part of the colonial enterprise.\textsuperscript{28}

In 1947, writer Jymy Asmara pioneered the formation of a group called "Pen Friends" club, comprising of Malay writers. However, because of the proclamation of Emergency laws in 1948, many of the writers migrated and resided in Singapore. The ASAS 50 comprised of two groups - the veteran writers included Harun Aminurrashid, Ahmad Bakhtiar, Abdullah Sidek, Ahmad Murad Nasraddin, Ahmad Lufti and Wijaya Mala; the young upcoming writers included Keris Mas, Adibah Amin, Hamzah, Ramaja Malaya, Jymy Asmara, Salleh Ghani, Rosmera and Belia Malaya. ASAS 50 was formed primarily to stimulate Malay literature by pooling the resources of young writers and to safeguard the writers' interest. The cause of ASAS'
50 was the fight of all language and literature lovers to treat political questions, social problems, language, and cultural matters to create an awareness that unity was crucial for freedom. Their slogan ‘art for society’ worked within the social-realist tradition where literature should be used as a tool for the betterment of society and as inspiration to political action. This literary ideology which challenged established, traditional values, dominated in the nation-building in the 1960s. The first attempts to foster literary development in the national language was initiated in 1958 through a novel writing competition. The most productive period of ASAS 50 was during the years between 1950 and 1954, when the members expounded their views through mass media (journals, newspaper, radio). Many of the members edited popular Malay publications, the Utusan Zaman and Mastika. Realism in novel came about at this time with A.Samad Said’s Salina and Salmi Manja’s Hari Mana Bulan Mana, which realistically represented social and political problems. There were members of the ASAS 50 like Hamzah who began advocating ‘Art for Art’s Sake’, proclaiming that

...our efforts should be directed to all fields of literature so as to enrich our literature. Now our literature has seen progress. We have writers who are realistic, romantic, escapist and naturalist.

In was during the seventies that writers were encouraged to experiment with new literary themes, particularly the theme of Islam, which had been absent from literary works. According to the Malay religious and political elites, a firm and strong Islamic identity and commitment was necessary to counteract forces of communism and undesirable western influences. The formation of the Federation of National Writers (Gabungan Penulis Nationalis or GAPENA) in 1970 encouraged activities which geared towards developing Malay literature and culture as the basis for the development of a national culture.
The English Language Situation

In Malaysia, with growing public consciousness of language as identity, an awareness of the polyglot strength of language is developing. English has always been a polyglot language, and a polyglot culture, able like a chameleon to adapt to and incorporate myriad influences in every corner of the globe.33

Whatever the situation, it is now accepted that English, despite being a ‘minority’ language in Malaysia is a link language. John McRae says that English is a universal language and no country or culture has the prerogative of holding the major claim on it, either as a language or as literature. By the same token it is true that any English with a voice mature enough to produce a literature ‘in its own context was welcome on to the world stage as a participant in, and a contributor to the even larger domain of world literatures in English.34

Sometimes, one needs to contemplate on why so much hue and cry is raised over the use of English in non-English nations. Whose English is it anyway? Malaysia’s pidgin, ungrammatical and colloquial English is rich in its social variants and it is not only necessary but a must for writers to use English in its local varieties with emphasis on local colour and images. The fundamental error of the first Malaysian English writers was to use the language because ‘it was convenient’ and because they were ‘in a hurry’. They were impatient to write Malayan poetry which they thought ‘only needed to consist of Malayan images and sentiments’.36

Such an opinion spilled over to the later decades.

Shirley Lim argues that in a post-colonial world where exiles, refugees and immigrants form a sizeable part of its citizenry, language choice must increasingly be dissociated from racial origin and possession, a matter of descent and become associated with matters of economic, political, and material circumstances.38

With the introduction of Western education in countries under British domination, English literature has been an important subject of academic study in them. English literature, often taught by Englishmen, was being taught in non-
English cultural conditions. But wasn’t literature a commentary on everyday life? If that was so, what had Wordsworth’s shepherds and daffodils and Emily Bronte’s moors to do with Malaysian life? Malaysians were familiar with fishermen, hibiscus flowers, river and seas, but writers influenced by western education preferred transporting themselves for away, to Europe and its images. Until the discovery that their own literature which had not had much to do with their everyday life, there came about a sudden awareness of their tradition and social background. The impact of imperialism led to cultural hybridization which in turn brought about ethnic creativity in spoken and written English. Literature was made central to the cultural enterprise of Europe and excessive reference to the canon of the English tradition from Shakespeare to Henry James needed to be exorcised from the system. There has come about production of ‘literatures in English’ in diverse cultural and geographical settings throughout the world. Most of these literatures were challenging the Euro-centric base and beginning to assert their right to define themselves and their relationship to the universe from their own centres in Africa and Asia. Writers like Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad and Joyce Cary obviously responded to imperialism from a variety of ideological assumptions and attitudes. But, as Ngugi puts it:

they (Kipling, Joyce, Cary and others) could never have shifted the centre of vision because they were themselves bound by the European centre of their upbringing and experience’ which is precisely why when Conrad was aware of ‘the devastating effects of imperialism on subject peoples...’ he could not free himself from the Euro-centric basis of his vision.

Culturally speaking, insiders could feel that, the portraits of his culture by outsiders may more often than not, be hostile, or in rare cases, approving. Malay studies were clearly a creation of European imperialism. The philologists did not merely pioneer the study of Malay language and literature in the West, but also reshaped "classical" Malay literature and reintroduced it to the Malays. For a
traditionally radically oral manuscript culture, written composition was chanted and sung and the introduction of print literacy did not effect an immediate change in the general state of mind.43 ‘Malay studies’ encouraged the Malays to see their own literature through western eyes. And the problem of the writer was not how to interpret for westerners but how to avoid interpreting for them. There was a need of a reorientation of perspective in the production and reading of literary texts for, which according to Ngugi, ‘we need a base, a common sense as to who we are and what we seek to do’.44

As regards Malaysian creative writing in English, it was believed that it deserved attention, recognition and encouragement. It was primarily to promote this belief that the N.S.T. (New Straits Times) - Shell Short story competition 1989-1990 was created. The organizers, NST and Shell companies in Malaysia, felt that a competition would be a worthwhile step towards the generation of interest in literary writing as it would provide some reward and exposure to writers deserving encouragement. It would also be a good way to bring their work to Malaysian readers.45 NST also plays a primary role by focusing on issues and status of Malaysian writing in its weekly ‘Literary Page’.

The efforts of various groups and institutions in arranging conferences and seminars such as the Pan Asian writers’ Conference and LITCON 94 brought together various ethnic writers and scholars.

II

‘Malay’ Works

The Malay world had already possessed writing in Malay since the 7th century A.D., but the craft was almost entirely in the hands of the scribe.46
Malay literature developed along with the Malay language and one can clearly observe the language variations and style in Malay literature of different periods. The development of Malay literature can be divided into three distinct phases - traditional, transitional and the modern.

The literature of the traditional period was all literature produced before the contact with British literature in the 19th Century. This literature which developed around the royal court, displayed Indian and Muslim influences. Literature of the Indian period (first century A.D. to 13th-14th centuries) has survived only in jawi manuscripts. The pre-Islamic sources drew heavily from the Javanese cycle of Panji tales. These two major literary sources - Hindu and Muslim - brought about variant versions and elements assimilated from each other or from cultures through which they had passed. Malay epic tales which are formed from these two traditions blend Hindu and Muslim names, but follow a plot based on a Hindu theme. These tales were sometimes joined with a sejarah (local history of a sultanate). Muslim legends in the Islamic period (14th and 15th centuries) came from romances of such pre-Muslim heroes as Alexander the Great and King Solomon; stories of prophet Muhammad, adventures of characters somewhat fantastically related to the prophet, or tales concocted locally. Epics which were passed on through either written texts or by oral tradition had their structure and texture formalized by the 18th century. Two of the famous works of this period were the Sejarah Melayu and the Hikayat Hang Tuah.

The Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals) has been commended by critics as the finest literary work in the Malay language. This 15th century work gives a vivid account of medieval Malacca (the starting point of Malaysian history), 'draws form the oldest Malay romances and histories (genealogies of kings) and presents philosophic and ethical exhortations as the last words of dying heroes.' The literary
developments that followed the *Sejarah Melayu* were mostly chronologies of peninsula history.

The *Hikayat Hang Tuah* or the Adventures of Hang Tuah of 15th century history was what represented the first and only truly original Malay romance until the twentieth century. It relates the adventures of the historical figure Hang Tuah, who began as the Malacca Sultan’s bodyguard and rose to the rank of laksamana (admiral). Hang Tuah is presented as the perfect Malay hero – courageous, loyal to his Sultan, religiously devout, accomplished and romantically gallant.

The transitional period reflected a strong inclination towards the Arab Muslim world and included all work produced after the beginning of the British rule until the outbreak of the Second World War. An autobiographical work, *Hikayat Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munshi* written in the 19th century marks the beginning of modern Malay literature.

The Islamic movement which introduced modern Egyptian literature greatly influenced Malay literature. According to some historians, Syed Al-Hady, connected with the journal *Al-Iman*, adapted the first Egyptian novel, *Faridah Hanum* into Malay in 1926. With this, the novel as a literary was introduced to the Malay in the form of a fictional story about an ordinary man in contemporary life.

Around the year 1925, most literary writings, primarily short stories, were first published in the newspapers. Mainly social and religious moral themes were worked on by Malay writers while some English educated writers emphasized political themes.

The modern period included those works produced since the war. During the Japanese occupation of Malaya, there was very little literary activity.

In terms of form, modern Malay literature is largely influenced by the West. All the genres – poetry, the short story, modern drama and the novel are western
in origin. Short stories were patronized by the papers as far back as the early 1900's. In 1920, Nor Ibrahim's short story, "Kecelakan Malam" (The Cursed Night) was published in the magazine Pengasuh. From the 1950s through the 1960s, social and political problems were realistically represented. A common feature in the short stories was of protest against immorality, inhumanity, political opportunism, hypocrisy and so on. In the 1960s, more autobiographical writings came about. Many novels which were originally published only in Jawi, were republished in the romanized script. It was during this period that talented Malay writers of diverse educational and economic backgrounds began experimenting with new styles and techniques in short-story writing. Their works were about the interaction between the races (a domain earlier left almost unexplored). In the 1970s, some writers adopted the 'stream of consciousness' and 'internal monologue' techniques. The 'long short' story was something new attempted by Fakurdabakia in 1976. Writers like Samad Said freely explored and searched for innovations in short-story writing – he explored the inner aspects of the squatters and his sensitivity was flavoured with satire and humour. S.Othman Kelantan dealt with Malaysia's multi-racial society; Fatimah Busu used 'smooth and casual dialogues' in her stories. Anwar Ridhwan, in 'After The War And Other Stories' writes about a variety of backgrounds - from rural villages to cosmopolitan cities to far off foreign locales.

A large body of Malay Verse are in both written and oral form. Loose rhythmical patterns characterized early verse, the vestiges of which can be traced back to old Tamil verse found in parts of the prose text of the Hikayat Raja Raja Pasai (Royal Annals of the Kingdom of Pasai). There has always been in Malay oral recitation a wealth of proverbial sayings. Some of the proverbs appear in the form of a pantun (a brief poem) underlying a moral. The Pantun, which is similar to a
folk-ditty, is one of the most cherished literary heritages of the Malays. *Pantuns* are heard at Malay special occasions - at weddings, festivals and during courtship. These quatrains are designed not for recitation, but to be sung by a chorus, with a choral refrain at the end of each line (during which the audience has time to think over the meaning). *Pantun* contests are held in rural areas. *Pantuns* constitute a formal and informal element of Malay literature. The *pantun* and the *Shair* continued to be the most popular poetic forms through the 19th century. Poetry in the 1940s, during the Japanese occupation of Malaya, was used as a tool for the struggle of the Malay peoples. Personal poems with religious themes gave way to the spirit of patriotism and nationalism. Postwar poetic expression rejected traditional verse forms, choosing instead to write in free verse. These poems were increasingly concerned with socio-political issues.

The development of drama in the history of modern Malay literature (in written and published script) began only in 1951 with the publication of *Megat Terawis* by Macmillan publishers in London. The playwright Teh Fatimah binti Abdul Wahab took as its theme the rule of Sultan Mansur Syah of Perak. Usman Awang's *Malam Kemerdekan* (The Night of Independence) published locally in 1959 introduced the drawing room concept and the one-act dramatic mode.

In the 1960's historical and realistic plays sowed seeds. Shaharom Husain's historical play *Si Bongkok Janjung Puteri* (1961) questions the meaning of absolute independence. There were dances and songs-replete with poetry, quatrain and proverbs. Then came the realistic play of which Kala Dewata is considered the pioneer. He combined literary skills (writing drama, script) and stage craft (the structure and techniques of modern staging). He began the form of a continuous play with a realistic setting and a dialogue that was to be memorized and understood by all actors. His *Manusia Hina* (Abominable Man) was published in 1966. A. Samad
Said’s *Di Mana Bulan Selalu Retak* (1965) stressed the problems of unemployment and the psychological effect on the unemployed. His *Wira Bukit* (*Hero of the Hill*) has the theme of protest, in which a former soldier feels trapped in a time frame.\(^{50}\)

Another way of presenting Malay epics, romances and dramas is the *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet shows) whose origins are Javanese. Instead of human actors, the shadows of leather and wood puppets are cast by light on to a screen which separates the audience from the performers.\(^{51}\)

**Malaysian English Works**

Works in English by Malaysians did not appear until after the Second World War and the few which appeared were not really impressive. The World War and the simultaneous occupation of Malay by the Japanese ‘stimulated several interesting but highly autobiographical works’ such as Gurchan Singh’s *Senja - The Lion of Malaya* in 1946 and Chin Kee Onn’s *The Silent Army* in 1952.\(^{52}\) Besides, mostly non-Malays were writing in English since the Malays were strongly rooted in their language and culture and wrote usually in their mother-tongue. However, Malaysian (and Singaporean) literature in English which was consciously created by the first undergraduates in the university of Malaya, generally disappointed the public. Poetry was the dominant genre of the period. Wang Gungwu, whose collection of poems called *Pulse* was the first to appear in Malaysia, had said that his contemporaries lay emphasis on an ideal of a new Malaysian consciousness.

While many young poets were busy imitating poems written in the English tradition, Wang was attempting consciously to break away from imitation and producing an authentic voice. Having no model or earlier tradition to refer to, Wang experimented and innovated, using local references and images as much as he could. His poems express the confusing admixture of a multicultural society, not only in the rich sensory fullness of smells, sights, sounds and movements but in social
attitudes and relationships'. Lloyd Fernando, Malaysian writer believed that enrichment in literature had to come from one's own place, not from outside.

Wong Phui is another poet of distinction whose collection *How The Hills Are Distant* depicts an internal exile. Shirley Lim, has become part of a diaspora of Chinese women from Malaysia who have settled in the west and she writes about memories of growing up and gender issues. Her books of poetry include *Crossing the Peninsula* (1980), which has won the 1980 Commonwealth Poetry Prize, *No Man's Grove* (1985) and *Modern Secrets* (1989). Mohammad Salleh Ben Joned, Mohammad Haji Salleh and Cecil Rajendra are other Malaysian poets who write in English.

In the 1960s, an optimistic political and linguistic atmosphere precipitated the emergence of a spate of original plays in English which were 'aimed at challenging the predominantly colonial theatre culture'. The 1987 takeover of the Malaysian Arts Theatre Group from the British expatriates saw the replacement of the ubiquitous Shakespeare and G.B. Shaw plays by original local plays in English. Syed Alwi's *Going North* was an evocation of the politically turbulent 1950s. Other well-known English plays of this period were Lee Joo For's *The Son of Zen* (1968) which incidentally has been performed in New York's off-off-Broadway and Edward Dorall's *The House of the Dog*. K.S. Maniam's, *The Cord* (1984) deals sensitively with issues of Indian religion and identity. Ramli Ibrahim is one playwright of Malay origin who has embodied in himself and in his thinking the assimilation of all cultures in Malaysia. He writes in English and Malay and his play 'In the Name of Love - An Insight in Three Flushes' is actually an insight into the emotions and preoccupations of women of three different races. One of the most controversial and talked about plays is Kee Thuan Chye's *We Could **** You, Mr. Birch* (1994) which is an iconoclastic play based on the assassination of James Birch, the first British resident in colonial Malaya. The writer himself says that the Birch episode can be
regarded as the episode in which nationalism was awakened in the Malaysian consciousness.\footnote{57} He has also written \textit{1984\textendash Here And Now} which is an Orwellian vision of Malaysia's future. It has the distinction of being the first agitprop drama in English to be written and performed in Malaysia.\footnote{58}

During the 50s and 60s decades, playwrights used the dramatic medium to portray issues which were pertinent to a country trying to gain freedom from colonialism. In the late 80's and early 90s, playwrights were reverting to history to reevaluate what \textit{merdeka} (independence) has done to the Malaysian nation. These days, there seems to be a revisioning of Malaysian history.

Wang Gungwu's collection, \textit{Pulse} in generally referred to as marking the beginning of Malaysian writing in English. But Ee Tiang Hong was the first poet who discovered a distinctly Malaysian voice. An acute sense of marginalization despite a rich Baba heritage, left him disillusioned. His poetry include \textit{I of the Many Faces} (1990); \textit{Myths for a Wilderness} (1976) and \textit{Tranquerah} (1985) in which he protests against injustice and oppression.\footnote{59}

Short stories in English were mostly published by students of University of Malaya in undergraduate magazines. Most of these stories aimed to express a Malayan identity in idiom, context and viewpoint.

In the late 1970's and the 1980's, novels such as Lee Kok Liang's \textit{Flowers in the Sky}, Lloyd Fernando's \textit{Scorpion Orchid} and K.S. Maniam's \textit{The Return} appeared. This group of prose works indicated a move in the region from poetry to fiction. The novels sought to counteract western-influenced alienation by returning to the original moral values of their cultures. In \textit{Flowers in the Sky}, Malaysian life is portrayed as 'bifurcated fragmented and sometimes even atomized'. The novel tries to provide a coherent picture, of Malaysian society structured in an artistic manner.\footnote{60} Earlier, stories and essays were written by Europeans-some of the writers,
who as members of the Malaysian Civil Service had an intimate knowledge of the country.

In recent times questions of identity are repeated from individual, economic, moral, spiritual, national viewpoints. Words like 'exile' 'diaspora' are now important and ever present in literature in English - these are basically subjectivities, a sense of cultural displacement or unbelonging, a search for an identity.

OTHER LITERATURES

There are also works in Tamil and Chinese, many of which can receive a wide readership only if and when translations are available. The Chinese and Tamil communities emphasize past traditions and have always shown a greater interest in and inclination towards drama and poetry rather than in contemporary short stories and novels. Tamil stories of Malaysia are of two kinds; the first dealing with the problems that the Tamil plantation workers face on the plantations - that of problems of citizenship, living conditions and so on. They often portray the love for their country, India. The second type is about inter-racial communication which usually has a moral lesson to be learnt. One particular Tamil short story writer is B.S. Vadivelu, whose story 'Tiruvalar Cinnakkannu' (1957) is about a certain plantation worker, Mr. Chinnakkannu from India who after the Japanese occupation is upset and insecure with government rule. It also portrays a man trapped within the closed society of the rubber plantations with no interaction whatsoever with the native speakers. The protagonist says:

...now Malaya is independent. People say we must know the Malay language for obtaining a citizenship certificate. How can it be learned? Even the Chinese shopkeeper I buy my ration from speaks with me in Tamil. I do not know with whom I can converse in Malay. I only know about rubber trees...
Vadivelu also ventured into another cultural field in his 1981 story 'Kong Hee Fatt Choy' (Chinese New Year) in which he writes about a Chinese family during the year of the Monkey.

'Mahua' or 'Chinese' stories, written by Malaysian Chinese depict more of Chinese culture, geography, history, and myths. Their limited inter-racial communication is obvious as many of them do not easily mix with the non-Chinese.61

The indigenous groups in East Malaysia such as the Land Dayaks have a tradition of long unwritten narratives in poetic form. These also serve as chronologies and genealogies and perform a semi-religious function. The Kadazan short stories use Christian names (most of them are Christian converts). They write mostly about their own tribal group.62

Many of these so-called ' Minority Literatures' (English, Tamil, Chinese, indigenous) have come about as a result of the need to express themselves and could best do so through literature.

Another very interesting literature is that of the Straits Chinese. The distinct categories include fictional essays, translations of Chinese and English works into Baba Malay (the patois spoken by the Babas), Classical Malay and Indonesian plays, biographies, anecdotal works, newspapers and magazines.63

Social conditions did not encourage the emergence of a literary profession. Literature was viewed purely in commercial terms, for in all cases the people had other business, political, social, and professional interests outside of literature.

**THE NOVEL IN MALAYSIA**

The novel as a genre was introduced to Malay society for the first time in the early twentieth century. However, it was by no means the first form of narrative fiction to appear in Malay. The traditional hikayat is a prose narrative of
considerable length. The first prose fiction to resemble a novel appeared in the 1920s and this form grew increasingly popular throughout the pre-second World War period. The fiction of this period was clearly an influence of the Islamic reform movement from Egypt. The writers were the Malays who were educated in religions tradition.

The two writers who left their mark on Malay novel writing were Syed Syeikh al Hadi (1867-1934) and Ahmad Rashid Talu (1889-1939). Their stories communicated Islamic reformist ideas. Syed Syeikh al Hadi’s novel *Hikayat Setia Asyik Kepada Maksyukrya* (Tale of Love to a Beloved) popularly known also as *Farida Hanum*, published in 1925-1926, though set in Egypt and populated by Egyptian characters, marks the take-off point of the Malay novel. Although this novel was a romance about idealized characters, the problems treated were contemporary, its main concerns being emancipation and education of women, premarital relations and patriotism. Ahmad Rashid Talu’s two major novels included *Kawan Benar* (A True Friend) and *Iakah Salmah?* (Is She Salmah?), published in 1927 and 1928/29 respectively. These novels were regarded as the first real novels in Malay literature for they were set in Malaya, peopled by Malay characters and dealt with Malay issues and the author was seen as a genuine pioneer of the authentic Malay novel.

In the late thirties, there emerged a group of politically conscious writers who took up political themes, such as British oppression of Malay society. Ishak Haji Muhammad expressed resentment towards British rule and propagated a sense of nationalism in his two novels, *Putera Gunung Tahan* (Prince of Gunung Tahan) (1937) and *Anak Mat Lela Gila* (The Mad Son of Mat Lela), published n 1941.

Among the representative writers of the initial post world war period was Ahmad Lufti who wrote in the tradition of al-Hady.
The late fifties saw the blossoming of pioneering works like *Salina* by A. Samad Said, a member of the Generation 50 Writers. *Salina* was an unconventional idea in a sense that it centred around a prostitute with a heart of gold where traditionally works focused on upper class heroes and characters of blameless reputation. Technical innovations such as dreams, flashbacks and interior monologue were also new.

The years 1946-1979 produced a public who were critical readers who read seriously for the sake of criticism and research. Novels came to be categorized as social, historical and war novels and all of them dealt themes ranging from moral and religious decadence, suppression of women to independence and freedom. War novels dealt with issues related to the second World War and the Japanese Occupation of Malaya. Some novels of this type are Keris Mas' *Pahlawan Rimba Malaya* (1946) and (Jungle Warrior of Malaya) Ahmad Lufti's *Balik Dari Medan Perjuangan* (Back From the Battle-field) (1948). Harun Aminurrashid wrote *Panglima Awang*, which is considered a historical novel, to cultivate the spirit of nationalism in the Malay people.

Novel writing in the Malay language reached its peak in the sixties. The establishment of various literary institutions and the official acceptance of ‘Malay’ as the national language, and various changes in the economic, political and social aspects of the nation created an impetus for novel writing. Between 1958 and 1979, three novel-writing competitions were held. Many writers associations mushroomed, the most active among them being *Pena* or the National Association of Writes. A literary journal *Penulis (Writer)* was also published. Three popular novels of this period were Samad Said's *Salina* (191), Arena Wati's *Lingkaran* (1965) and Shahnon Ahmad's *Interlok*. These novels dealt mainly with social evils and highlighted poverty, a sense of alienation and the clash of cultures.
Although some researchers are of the opinion that the seventies saw a decline in novel writing, others are of the opinion that the writers became more disciplined in their writing. Anwar Ridhwan's *Hari Hari Terakhir Seorang Seniman* (The Last Days of an Artist) (1979) was written in a new perspective – it tells the tale of storyteller who spins old yarns. A Talib Hasan's *Saga* (1976) dealing with the conflict of characters tilted towards psychology.

In recent years, translations of Malay novels into English have become popular. The writers of the sixties still produced various works like Samad Said's *Hujan Pagi* (The Morning Post) in 1987 and Shahnon Ahmad's *Rantau Sepanjang Jalan* (No Harvest But a Thorn). A generation of young writers is also beginning to be active in this field.

Malaysian writing in English has a fairly recent history, and the number of fictional works is relatively little. But the few that do exist, deal with local life and situations, and like the Malay novels, they deal with the traumatic experiences of the war, the Japanese Occupation and the 1969 riots. The English language like the other local languages of Chinese and Tamil, is considered a minority language and literature in these languages is termed 'sectional'. Since there has never been a strong and continuous tradition of writing in English, some earlier writers consciously created a Malaysian English with varying degrees of success. Literature in English has been dominated by poetry - writing and in 1980 the Malaysian novel, *The Return* appeared. Another novel, *Scorpion Orchid* by Lloyd Fernando also marked a significant entry in Malaysian literature, wherein Fernando 'counters widely accepted Eurocentric perceptions of the history and the literature of the region and provides a localized sense of literary and historical tradition. It tells of the story of four undergraduates of different ethnic backgrounds who become 'embroiled in political action against the state.' Another novelist of calibre was the straits Chinese Lee
Kok Liang whose *Flowers in the Sky* has been ‘one of the finest novels to come out of the region.’\(^6^7\) It has been seen that no event in Malaysia has inspired so abundant a literature as the Pacific War. A vivid tale of revenge and resistance to the Japanese, Mohammad Tajuddin Samsudin’s first novel *The Price Has Been High* (1984) is set in the latter days of the Japanese Occupation.\(^6^8\) The Communist Insurgency which lasted for more than a decade (1948-1960) has inspired Chin Kee Onn to write about guerrilla warfare in *The Grand Illusion* (1961).\(^6^9\)

Many novels in English have been written by those who have had a ‘strong impulse to represent local colour and characters and to chronicle the present or a dramatic past’, resulting in straightforward social narratives. These contain more often than not, ‘stereotyped characters, melodramatic plots and moralistic conclusions.’\(^7^0\) The novels that fall into this category are Johnny Ong’s *Sugar and Salt* (1964), *Run tiger Run* (1965) and *The Long White Sands* (1977) and Yeap Joo Kims *Moon Above Malaya* (1991).\(^7^1\) These novels are family stories or stories of individuals braving all kinds of odds to emerge the winner.

Koh Tai Ann, literary critic, has noted that it is socio-politically and culturally significant that, besides the rare short story, all Malaysian fiction in English are written mostly by writers of Chinese and Tamil ethnic origin. The novels also tend to centre on the experiences of these communities.\(^7^2\) The immigrant experience is a popular theme.

It is generally believed that despite the few novels in English to have been written by Malaysians, it is Lloyd Fernando, Lee Kok Liang and K.S. Maniam who actually stood at the fore of novel writing in Malaysia.\(^7^3\)

As Malaysians continue to write fiction, they continue to look for answers to what actually makes the true Malaysian novel.
Notes


4. Lars Vikor 47.

5. Lars Vikor 47.


8. Kua 271.


14. Svensson 64.


16. Svensson 64.


20 Kua 267.


22 Tham 'The Politics of Literary Development' 234-235.

23 Tham, 'The Politics of Literary Development' 235.

24 Tham, 'The Politics of Literary Development' 240.


28 Svensson 64, Asmah Haji Omar 26.


32 Tham, The Politics of Literary Development 221.


34 John McRae, *South East Asia Writes Back* 4, 15.


37 Shirley Lim, *Writing Southeast Asia in English - Against the Grain-Focus on Asia English Language Literature* (London: Skoob, 1994) 47.

120

Fadillah Merican’s article on the reading of Literary Texts in The Sunday Star 4 December 1994.

Ngugi, Moving the Centre 198.

Ngugi, Moving the Centre 200.


Amin Sweeney 2.

Fadillah Merican.


Joned 181.

Area Handbook 200-201; See also Ahmad K. Abdullah 130-202.

Area Handbook 201-203; Tham 253.

See the chapter on ‘Drama’ in Ahmad K. Abdullah 252-328.

Area Handbook 206.

Area Handbook 203.

Shirley Lim, ‘Finding a Native Voice’ 85.


Eugene Benson, Vol.1 386-387.

Eugene Benson, Vol.1 387.

Chan Yuen Li, ‘Here they come again’, Mr. Birch’, Sunday Star (Plus) (Malaysia) 6 November 1994.

59 ‘Ee Tiang Hong’ in Encyclopedia of Post colonial Literatures in English, Vol.1 435.


61 Seen A. Rahim Abdullah, Tema Hubungan Kaum Dalam Karya Sastera Di Malaysia (The Theme of Community Contact in Malaysian Creative Literature), (Kuala Lumpur: Davan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1990) 4-60.

62 Area Handbook, 203; see aso A. Rahim Abdullah.


66 S. Lim, ‘Writing Southeast Asia’ 143.

67 S. Lim, ‘Writing Southeast Asia’ 152.

68 Eugene Benson, Vol.2 1636.

69 Eugene Benson, Vol.2 1636.

70 Eugene Benson, Vol.2 1135-36.

71 Eugene Benson, Vol.2 1136.

72 Eugene Benson, Vol.2 1135.

73 Eugene Benson, Vol.2 958.