

Post-independence Malaysian short stories: A depiction of racial inflicted pain.

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This paper addresses pain and its endurance as portrayed in post-independence Malaysian short stories. After independence in 1957, the diverse races were forced to stay together in a young country that was constantly in turmoil of racial dissatisfactions and prejudice. Every race carried with them racial baggage that clouded efforts of togetherness and nation-building. In 1969 Malaysians bear witness to the bloody May 13 racial riot that took many lives and scarred the nation. The stories from 1966 to 1969 reveal poverty, inter-racial conflicts amongst Malaysians as writers reveals the continuous hardship, social and economic deprivation endured by the lower income Malays. Pain and enduring it is portrayed in terms of instances of conflicts experienced by the characters in the stories. The Malay stories *Pengabdian [Submission]* by Awang Had Salleh (1966) and *Gadis Tionghua di Daerah Pendalaman [The Chinese maiden from the remote district]* by Zaid Ahmad (1969) focus to conflicts about inter-racial love and Malay poverty. In these stories the Malays or indigenous people experienced pain when they saw their people deprived of the opportunity to develop economically via higher education. They endured the immense pain to a certain extent and retaliated by accusing the Chinese of being manipulators of opportunities in the new nation. They felt their people were deprived and felt intimidated at Chinese's economic success. The stories depicted anger and prejudice felt by the frustrated Malays towards the other races. In the young nation the ethnic groups suffered the pain of racial dissatisfaction during the early years of independence that blew out of proportion when their economic and social aspirations were constantly not met. There was a lot of suspicion and racial hatred that may have triggered the racial riot of 1969. Nation building in the country continued to be unattainable and blurred by constant turmoil.

## **Introduction**

Malaysia is a new nation with a plural society comprising Malays, Chinese, Indians and other ethnic minorities. The country achieved independence from the British in 1957 after having experienced colonialism like many other countries. The nation's history is shaped by that experience in one way or another. From 1957 to 1969, the new country with its diverse ethnic groups was striving to forge itself into a nation. On 13 May 1969, a bloody racial clash occurred. This racial conflict shook the country and left scars of social

strain and culture conflict in race relations which still exist now even though it has been independent for nearly 53 years.

In 1998, there was a racial clash at Kampung Rawa in Penang. On 24 March 1998, it was reported in the *New Straits Times* that the State Government had decided to cordon off a Hindu temple in Jalan Kampung Rawa following tension amongst residents. On 27 March 1998, the *New Straits Times* reported the Penang Chief Police Officer as saying the issue concerned the proximity of a Hindu temple to the Kampung Rawa mosque in Jalan Petani. In 2001, the country was shaken by the Kampung Medan racial riot in Jalan Klang Lama, Kuala Lumpur. When racial riots or conflicts broke out, the government quickly introduced efforts to foster better unity amongst the races. For instance, now Malaysians can enjoy the 'Open House' during the major festive celebrations like Hari Raya Aidil Fitri (Eid), Chinese New Year, Deepavali and Christmas. This is carried out on a large scale by the different selected states in Malaysia. The Prime Minister and his cabinet ministers get together with the people during these celebrations. The idea is to enable all races from all walks of life to celebrate every festival. Mahathir Mohamad in his speech 'Building a Malaysian Nation' at the ceremony for the Launching of the Programme on Socialisation, at Putra World Trade Centre, Kuala Lumpur, on 1 August 1988, said:

"We cannot deny that Malaysia is a multi-racial country. The authorities have no intention of wiping out the identity of any race. All races are free to perpetuate their own identity in their language, religion and culture".

Recently, the Malaysian government introduced a new slogan for ethnic unity called 1Malaysia. This is another new idea for contemporary Malaysia. One starts to wonder why the government produces such a slogan. Are Malaysians not as one after nearly 53 years of independence? Are Malaysians not united that we have to voice out 1 Malaysia lo and behold? Is 1 Malaysia the ultimate formula for unity and harmony amongst the different ethnic groups? The country is tested again in the midst of Malaysians trying to live up to the 1Malaysia expectation. This time the issue is the usage of the *Kalimah* ALLAH by the Christians. The Muslims protest to the usage of Allah by the Christians as stated in the Herald. Pain is felt by the Muslims and some take it too seriously causing uproar. A few churches are attacked in the country. Adding salt to the wound, a mosque was attacked with bricks causing the glass doors to break.

These incidents demonstrated the intense pain felt by the different races as they stand by their religions and identity.

The issue of religion is undeniably very sensitive in a country like Malaysia with its diverse population. Values and norms are adhered to although they stand to the test of time and modernization. To exemplify, as time went on, certain value diminished amongst some Malays. S. Husin Ali (1981: 42) notices the different degrees of conformity to Islam amongst the Malays:

We have seen many Malays, who seldom pray or fast as required by Islam, but become emotionally upset when Islam is criticized, especially by a non-Muslim. At the same time there are Malays who may not know even the “ABC’s” of Islam, who literally live in sin, but who when asked about their faith, will proudly say, “I am a Muslim”.

This explains the sentiment and frustrations that the Malays feel when their religion is put to the test. The same goes for the non-Malays who practice other religions. Intense pain is endured by the people as they strive to live in a very much diverse populace.

### **Racial Inflicted Pain**

Skevington (1995:109) says that a schema integrates information about pain, which may be elaborated as a person continues to experience pain. Reader’s Digest (2001:360) states that stress is an emotional pain and is developed when there is any change in our lives. The change can be physical or emotional. Health Psychology (1997:68). states that the experience of pain is the end result of a number of physiological, psychological, social and cultural factors Handbook of the sociology of emotions (2006) states that McCall and Simmons’s(1978) view of identity theory as when emotions emerge when a prominent identity is challenged in interaction, as when others do not support one’s identity performance. Hence, racial inflicted pain is endured as a result of disjunctions and dissatisfactions felt the races.

### **Portrayal of pain in the stories**

The stories are analysed using Turk's Pluralistic Conflict Theory. Pain is portrayed in the short stories as instances of conflicts occur. These instances are:

Conflict 1 - Ongoing struggle in a heterogeneous society (crime and deviance)

Conflict 2 - Inter-group struggle for dominance in politics

Conflict 3 - Negative reaction from one group as a result of being provoked by another group's behaviour, cultural meaning, and significance.

Hamlin, J. (2005). Conflict theory. Sociological theories of deviance .  
<http://www.d.umn.edu/~jhamlin/conflict/html> (16 September 2005).

The stories (text 1 and Text 2 ) from 1966 to 1969 reveal poverty, inter-racial conflicts amongst Malaysians as writers reveals the continuous hardship, social and economic deprivation endured by the lower income Malays. Pain and enduring it is portrayed in terms of instances of conflicts experienced by the characters in the stories. The Malaysian stories *Pengabdian [Submission]* by Awang Had Salleh (1966) (Text 1) and *Gadis Tionghua di Daerah Pendalaman [The Chinese maiden from the remote district]* by Zaid Ahmad (1969) (Text 2) focus on conflicts about inter-racial love and Malay poverty. Racial Inflicted pain is endured in the stories.

### **Conflict 1 - Ongoing struggle in a heterogeneous society (crime and deviance)**

A conflict is exemplified when the narrator describes Fee Fong supporting Kamal's convictions to eradicate poverty amongst the Malays. The conflict is exemplified in Fee Fong's words,

"[By] doing that, I feel I devote myself to his race, the Malay race. But, this does not mean I am a traitor to mine, because I hope this devotion will lessen the tension between the two races." (*Awang Had Salleh 1966:99*).

Fee Fong's wishes indicate her conflict which in this situation seems to result from a sense of loss in the new world; poverty, backwardness, and displacement. Fee Fong's values and experience of living in the Chinese community force her to be loyal to her people. She endures the conflict that is the effect of an inter-racial issue. She feels the conflict of an ongoing struggle in a heterogeneous society (crime and deviance) as she loves a man out of her own race. Fee Fong endures the conflict when she supports Kamal's convictions of eradicating poverty amongst the Malay university students. She feels the conflict as she conforms to her Chinese value system of communal, clan

allegiance and dignity. Fee Fong endures the emotional racial inflicted pain caused by the conflict as she must stay loyal to her race and at the same time support the Malays. The conflict that arises is acute and perhaps the result of the young Chinese people's anxiety of ensuring peace in the country for their identity, existence and survival. The races in Malaya were required to live together and they brought along racial baggage and discontent. Another instance of this conflict is evident where the narrator illustrates conflict in depicting Fee Fong feeling deeply sad and frustrated at Kamal's ego when she gives him the books. The narrator demonstrates this:

“[He] receives the books without showing defeat. At that time, I am actually acting and pretending.” (*Awang Had Salleh* 1966:104).

This statement indicates Fee Fong's intense displeasure at Kamal's aloofness. Fee Fong endures the conflict as a consequence of an inter-racial issue that is her tolerance towards the other races. This is due to her association with them at the university. Fee Fong still cares for Kamal's welfare despite his arrogance and feels deeply hurt by his egoistic behaviour. This type of conflict indicates the situation of an ongoing struggle in a heterogeneous society (crime and deviance). In this story, Fee Fong and Kamal exhibit the conflict as both are pretentious, indicating the conflict of an ongoing struggle in a heterogeneous society. They still feel the pain as the issue of race contributes to their breakup. The different races in the sixties brought with them racial baggage and dissatisfaction when they were forced to live together.

In this story (text 1), again conflict is largely offered when Kamal tells Fee Fong that the Chinese really make use of the chances given to them unlike the Malays, who are not given the chances. The narrator enhances this:

“[The] Chinese really make use of the opportunities given to them. The Malays are not utilizing the opportunities to develop, because the opportunities are not given to them. They are only given negligence and suppression.” (*Awang Had Salleh* 1966:98).

Undeniably, there exists deep discontent in Kamal when he compares the economic success of the Chinese compared with his poor Malay people. He feels the

conflict as a result of an inter-racial issue that is his acceptance of the other races' better way of life. Perhaps, his association with the other races and his education make him lose some of his traditional Malay values. Kamal compares the opportunities given to the Malays and Chinese by the government and this hurts Fee Fong deeply. Fee Fong experiences the pain. Kamal too endures the pain resulting from the conflict when he sees his race deprived of the opportunity to develop and he becomes a deviant when he accuses the Chinese of getting more. In the sixties, the Malays were poor and uneducated.

Another example of inter-racial conflicts resulting from an ongoing struggle in a heterogeneous society (crime and deviance), is mentioned below:

- i) When Fee Fong feels very upset and concerned with Kamal's speeches that are intentionally trying to evoke the Malays' anger and prejudice at the other races, "[They] become angry at others, who all along have profited more than them." (*Awang Had Salleh* 1966:100).

An instance of the conflict is evident in the story *Gadis Tionghua di Daerah Pendalaman* [*The Chinese maiden from the remote district*] by Zaid Ahmad (1969). Here, the narrator illustrates conflict depicting *Tuan* Lee, the estate manager telling Hairi, who teaches his daughter, Nancy, English, that he supports the Malays and Chinese living peacefully together.

"[Isn't] it nice if the Chinese live peacefully with the Malays like us now?" *Mana Sikana* 1987:65).

In this story (text 2), *Tuan* Lee, Nancy's father apparently has positive thoughts about inter-racial issues. Yet, he does not condone his daughter's love for Kamal. *Tuan* Lee experiences the conflict as a result of his daughter's tolerance of the other races. She loves Kamal deeply but *Tuan* Lee does not approve. He cleverly makes Hairi feel that he supports the Malays and Chinese living peacefully. This type of conflict indicates an ongoing struggle in a heterogeneous society (crime and deviance). *Tuan* Lee endures the conflict when he sees ill sentiments and prejudice still existing amongst the races. In the sixties, racial gap existed amongst the races. In this story, *Tuan* Lee tells Hairi of his desire to see the Malays and Chinese living harmoniously together despite the difference in religion and foods,

“[You] just think. Why must we fight with the Malays? The Malays don’t eat pork. But, why worry? We live together peacefully as we work.” (*Mana Sikana* 1987:65).

However, the story extends the ideas of values and beliefs amongst the Chinese. This is highlighted by Nancy’s daring confession of love for Hairi, a Malay man, who teaches her English at her home,

“[You] mustn’t hide anymore! You mustn’t hide anymore! ” (*Mana Sikana* 1987:65).

Again a sense of dissatisfaction is expressed through the characters’ inability to cope with the utter demands and expectations of the Chinese community. While Nancy sees Hairi’s concealment and denial of his feelings for her as unnecessary, we can also read Hairi’s intentions as one of being cautious in a race-related matter of love. Nancy endures the conflict of an ongoing struggle in a heterogeneous society when Hairi is discreet about his feelings for her. Hairi tries to avoid conflict as he conforms to the Malay values of being communal, neighbourliness, courtesy, good manners and dignity. Hairi and Nancy endure the racial inflicted pain as a result of the conflicts.

### **Conflict 2 - Inter-group struggle for dominance in politics**

The stories (text 1 and Text 2) reveal no instance of this conflict.

### **Conflict 3 - Negative reaction from one group as a result of being provoked by another group’s behaviour, cultural meaning, and significance**

An instance of this conflict is evident where the narrator illustrates conflict depicting Fee Fong justifying her breakup with Kamal. The narrator highlights this in the following way:

“[Now] I have to leave Kamal. If I am still with him, I am with the people who speak badly of my own race.” (*Awang Had Salleh* 1966:101).

This statement indicates the existence of a sense of dissatisfaction in Fee Fong. This episode highlights a change in Chinese values which appear to move back to the traditional sense of community, clan allegiance, perseverance, risk-taking, respect for elders, filial piety and dignity (face-saving). Fee Fong endures the conflict as a consequence of an inter-racial issue that is her tolerance of the other races. She

pledges allegiance to her race and is willing to leave Kamal, the man she loves. Hence, she feels the pain as she endures the conflict. This indicates the situation of an individual (Fee Fong) who feels the negative reaction from one group (Kamal accusing her Chinese people) as a result of being provoked by the Chinese's success in their endeavours. In the sixties, the races experienced racial tension as they lived in compulsion with racial baggage and dissatisfaction. In Text 1, there are other examples of inter-racial conflicts resulting from negative reaction from one group as a result of being provoked by another group's behaviour, cultural meaning, and significance and due to a sense of loss in the new world; poverty, backwardness and displacement :

- When Kamal tells Fee Fong that the Malay driver is her father's status symbol,
- "[I] feel that the Malay driver is your father's status symbol." (*Awang Had Salleh* 1966:97).
- When Fee Fong feels provoked and angry by Hairi's accusation, "[We] Chinese suppressed them?" I become angry. (*Awang Had Salleh* 1966:97).
- When Fee Fong becomes even more hurt by Hairi's accusatory speeches, ("[I] resent this. I am so hurt. It seems that my Malay friends scold and hate other people who are more fortunate and use this as escapism." *Awang Had Salleh* 1966:100 – 101).
- When Fee Fong expresses her regret and pain to Kamal via a letter, "[But], you are using another track now: you spark the fire of anger between our two races. Obviously, I cannot follow that track." (*Awang Had Salleh* 1966:101).
- When Kamal says the Malays are made poor because they are abandoned and extorted. The conflict is exemplified in his words, "[But] they are made poor. Abandoned. Suppressed." (*Awang Had Salleh* 1966:98).
- When Kamal also accuses the colonials for causing the Malays to be backward, "[Then], with instigating and damaging words he blames the colonials for the Malays' backwardness" (*Awang Had Salleh* 1966:100).

In the sixties, the Malays began to compare their devastated lives to the other races' and felt challenged and embarrassed when their people worked as drivers to rich Chinese people. Malays in the sixties were very proud of their status as the indigenous people. Hence, they aspired after better living and eradication of their prolonged poverty.

**Conclusion**

The issues in the stories (text 1 and 2) are consequences of inter-racial problems. The races are subjected to inter-racial love, relationships, acquaintanceship but matters of the heart are not easy to materialize. The racial dissatisfaction, bigotry and suspicion blur any effort to unite the different races in matrimony and these innocent people suffer immensely. The educated young Malays feel the conflict as they watch their uneducated people deprived of a better life and they are determined to see their people pull through the poverty. They demonstrate envy and jealousy of the other races that benefit much living in this country while they continue to suffer in hardship. They aspire after better life and higher education for their Malay people. The conflicts experienced by the ethnic groups during the early years of independence blew out of proportion when their economic and social aspirations were constantly not met. There was a lot of suspicion and racial hatred that actually led to the racial riot of 1969. Nation building and national identity continued to be unattainable and blurred by the turmoil in the new nation. The intensity of the conflicts felt by the races jeopardizes efforts of nation building and identity formation. The conflicts are cyclical and they continue to exist in contemporary Malaysia. If unattended, nation and identity formation will irrefutably be at risk. The conflicts endured by the people in this melting pot offer sound evidence of race-related problems that hinder nation formation and national identity. This racial inflicted pain must be treated as soon as possible.

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