

The Race Dynamics and The Question of
Nationalism in Lloyd Fernando`s *Green is
The Colour*

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Abstract:

Green is the Colour (1993) sets in the post May 1969 interracial riots in Malaysia, it explores mutually exclusive view, religious conflicts and forced assimilation of races. Importantly, the novel is Fernando's pervasive vision of local history, culture, unity and future. His accurate observation can be noticed in the novel that how Fernando successfully deals with all conflicts that existed during 1969. So, Fernando's main concern in the novel is about the racial riot issue and depicted throughout the different three racial characters Malay, Chinese and Indian, in addition to their cultural, political and religious struggles.

Key words: race, Malaysia, religious issues, nationalism, conflict, culture

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Introduction:

The question of race and nationalism are not updated themes in Malaysian literature, it has been a uniquely matter to the subject since long time ago as the country being characterized by different races from different countries and rising up the slogan of nationalism in the country in order to keep peace. It is of the main concern throughout Malaysian literature: poetry, plays and more obviously in novels.

Malaysia is a multi racial country with a population of 26 millions: 66 % Malay , Chinese 26 % and Indian 8%. The country has been run by a coalition of political parties of the main races since the independence in 1957. Racial issues has taken into consideration ever since which is seen as a sensitive matter in the governing the country. According to Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, race relations in Malaysia are "fragile" and described the worsening relationship between the Muslim Malays and the minority ethnic Chinese and Indian communities as a "disease" which must be tackled openly. (Channel news asia report of 07 December 2006)

The aforementioned quotations denote that being a multi-racial country is not an easy issue to be dealt, leaders try their best to keep that fairness and equality for the sake of maintaining the country as it is. This leads us to a political view and Malaysian constitution: according to the constitution, all the Malays ought to be Muslim or else they are not legally Malay and they will lose their privileges. (Kuppuswamy: 2006)

A multi racial country brings another problematic element which is a multi religion; there is freedom for people to practice their own faiths such as Christian, Hindu and Buddhist. Kuppuswamy sees some instances of not allowing the practice of the freedom of religion and Fong Po Kuan as well , as a opposition MP castigates that " *There is a creeping Islamisation in our society and this isn't appropriate because we are a multi-religious, multi-racial country*" (BBC News 16-05-2006).

Touching upon a historical view and the Racial Riots 1969 serve paper more; detailing what happens, its consequences and impact on Malaysian people. History plays a significant role in elaborating the sense of race and nationalism, in general, in Malaysian literature because history can save the factual events and being an evidence for future.

The discussion is succinctly raised up in the Lloyd Fernando`s *Green is the Colour* (1993) starting from racial , political and historical views, furthermore; the result of it is seen

throughout the novel as a conflict amongst the Malay, Chinese and Indian characters and how they suffer from a miserable life.

Racial Riots May 1969

An outstanding violent event in May 1969 in Kuala Lumpur among the two main races: Malay and Chinese which plagues the country and leads a lot of killings and wounds, an event that cannot be forgotten in Malaysia. In fact, the conflict was between United Malays National Organization (UMNO) who tried to allow the Malay to gain upper hand in economy and the Chinese opposition. The opposition tried to react against Malay and having a lot of serious slogans such as "*Kuala Lumpur sekarang China punya*" (*Kuala Lumpur now belongs to the Chinese*), "*Orang Melayu balik kampung*" (*Malays go back to the villages*) of course, these words bring more anger and causes the bloody battle between them. Soong in his own analysis states that "*May 13 1969 racial riots in Malaysia by no means a spontaneous outburst of racial violence in a multi-ethnic society- these declassified documents clearly show that there was a plan to unleash the racial violence.*" (Soong: 2007)

There was a political plan to let Tunku down and being replaced by another political man. Tunku himself has stated "*You know Harun one of those – Harun , Mahatir, Ghazali Shafie- who were all working with Razak to oust me, to take over my place....*" (Soong) Whoever had planned it and whichever happened, the consequences are adequate and common roots have to pay the prize as Subky Latiff, a journalist, wrote in 1997:

"The May 13 Incident did not occur spontaneously. It was planned quickly and purposely. The identity of planners cannot be stated with accuracy. But whatever it was that happened, the May 13 Incident was a form of coup d`etat directed against Tunku Abdul Rahman. The Tunku`s power in fact ended from then onwards. Although he continued to be prime minister and president of UMNO, he was no more than a figurehead."

Soong summarizes that May 1969 was a means for the capitalist class to control over National Operation Council "*It was an evident that old aristocratic class under the Tunku had been eclipsed by the new Malay elite under the leadership of Razak.*"

So, Fernando`s main concern in the novel *Green is the Colour* (1993) is about the racial riot issue and depicted throughout the different three racial characters Malay, Chinese and Indian, in addition to their cultural , political and religious struggles.

Discussion

Green is the Colour (1993) sets in the post May 1969 interracial riots in Malaysia, it explores mutually exclusive view, religious conflicts and forced assimilation of races (Quayum: 1995). Importantly, the novel is Fernando`s pervasive vision of local history, culture, unity and future. His accurate observation can be noticed in the novel that how Fernando successfully deals with all conflicts that existed during 1969. As a matter of historical fact, May 1963 was a threatening for the country`s future by dividing it into three zone as it is seen in the novel and that creates a huge animosity among all the races. Its consequences of the violence are shown on a small of multi-cultural friends. Quayum confirms that "*In the midst of the on-going and apocalyptic tension, the writer suggests how Malaysia could form a collective identity of "Bangsa Malaysia " or (Malaysian Nation) by rejecting all totalitarian and exclusivist models of nationalism that allow hierarchies in the dominant discourses of race, religion ,and gender, for one that is inclusive, dialectical and multicultural , and encourages mutuality , tolerance and harmony between its various groups."*

The novel begins right after three days of the battle, Fernando purposely captures reader`s attention directly to the main concern of the novel. Lots of quotations appear amongst the races Omar and Sara who are representative of Malay in the novel, Yun Ming - portrayal of Chinese race, Gita , represents Indian race. Dahlan can stand by itself because he represents western culture and he tries to evaluate core invaluable things referring to western culture; as a result he is seen as a barrier in front of other characters especially with Yun Ming and Sara.

Sara said, "I mean we`ve got to use our own ways. We have used other people`s ways long enough. That`s what the seminar was driving at. " (2-3) Sara tells Dahlan that there are a number of means and each one said by someone else, so Dahlan replies her and shows his disagreement. "So you passed a number of resolutions and now you are going to force us to observe them." Or when Panglima talks and some sort of insult given about Dahlan "Dahlan is a decadent ;" he was saying ."We must stop his influence at all costs. Look at his name Harry

Dahlan. He likes their way of thinking so much that he does not know how much he has lost."
(35)

Dahlan has his own philosophy and nobility: he is Harry Dahlan. Yun Ming says "It was easy for him to talk. Just attack everything. Just like the mat sallehs. Everything they want to say about us, you say for them. There was no originality in him. He was just an imitation radical. A colonial product to the end." (7) Also, he wants people to follow and apply his methods of ongoing and the other characters as well. Furthermore, Dahlan is a sociable one and has a hand for everyone particularly in burying Fatima. The characters cannot understand each other, there is not a sense of mutuality amongst them, each takes his own path to live. The main problem is that being unable to accept each other; that is what Fernando tries to convey to readers that there is an undeniable fact – reality should be seen as they are and seeing things as they are not should be.

The conflict is not only at different thoughts; Malaysia is a multi-racial and multi-religious as well. The reason that it is too difficult to make a relationship with two races basically again in Malaysia due to religion. Sara falls in love with Yin Ming after she has left Omar, yet they cannot be mixed because of their religious belief. Being a multiracial country leads more problematic issues and Fernando's emblematic novel deals with these struggles that exist in Malaysian community. Another instance, the relation between Gita and Dahlan leads nowhere again. Gita as a independent religious figure far from Dahlan's religious thoughts. The struggle is recreated again by Yun Ming when he refers to Dahlan's talk in the seminar. Yun Ming said "some people love to hear him, others hate his guts. He talks about racial matters , religion – have you heard of him speak on religion ? the seminar some months ago, were you here ? My God, he really made people angry." (13)

Fernando indirectly tells readers that to be in a multi-racial country is difficult despite the fact that there is no glimpse of hope under the union slogan because each of whom is culturally, politically and religiously different. The separation of Sara, a representation of an Islamic women, and Yun Ming , Dahlan and Gita are all exemplary in the novel. However, Fernando brings another serious matter concerning races: Sara and Omar are Malay which means same race; still they cannot live for good together as Sara wants to be a liberal woman and no more

accepting traditionality. She wants to throw off her traditional old cover and starting new life as a free woman in the society. She thinks being attached with unchangeable background as she tells Yun Ming "This is the only way to dress. See how I pray and love God, this is only way to do such holy things. You have nothing, you must follow me, do as I do. Live as I do."

Sara thinks rejecting own culture and tradition is easy in such away she commits adultery with Yun Ming, even though the racial different still exists and that is not a means to leave within a cultural frame and be mixed with another race. That relationship with Yun Ming leads nowhere at the end of the novel. Despite the racial concerns here, religious issues are found; it is likewise a chain following another. The time Dahlan wants to get married with Gita, she is not asked to convert to Islam as this is being a rule in Malaysian constitution. This leads another issue in the novel, nevertheless Fernando leaves that for the readers and how they can manage it. These puzzles are suspension for readers to realise that if that kind of biracial marriage succeeds or not and what will be the results in the society.

Throughout depicting racial issues in the novel, accusation could be seen in one way or another that each race addresses the other , Fernando astutely denotes the indirect and hidden sense of accusation in the novel. For instance, Omar calls Sara for being "filthy" and dirty as she has been in love with a Chinese man , Yun Ming. When Dahlan accuses Yun Ming and vice versa through the dialogism as to strengthen each one`s impact of the words. In a crucial quotation when Omar dwells on Yun Ming and thinks that he cannot be trusted in the society. "I doubt if they are sincere. Even those who seem to be trying, like Yun Ming – they cannot be trusted." Moreover, Omar, as the novel goes on, generalizes and creates the whole image of Chinese people for not being helpful and kind. "The Chinese had those things in the past and never shared with anyone, now they must share. At that time many young men were like me : Chinese – all Chinese are rich and I envied them."

Meanwhile, fearfulness can be noticed on each of race`s face as they surrounded by a political unstablity and racial riot during that time. There are senses of mistrust, doubt, accusation and separation throughout the novel, although having a beam of hope to recreate a union country

for the future, disappointedly all the characters are fed up with their current situation and as one can see it at the end of the novel, giving up soon without accomplishing their goals and dreams.

There is one significant instance whereby clarifying that sameness –or uniqueness – cannot be accomplished easily within a polycultural and ployglossic country. Panglima tells Sara "I saw how the so-called modern values have led us to the situation we are now in. the people divided, so many religions, real rojak, partitioned not into two parts but many parts. We need a single set of values to keep us together." Here, the slogan "sameness" is false and cannot be practiced, as Yun Ming tells the readers , pursuing Panglima, at the very beginning of the novel that "Chinese and Indians need to forget where they come from and follow one way of life , have one way of doing things. He caught himself in time before being swept into saying they should have one religion." (21) Here is the risk, mixing up the historical, cultural and religious uniquely belief , identity becomes fathomless.

Lacking cooperation among these races is also invoked in the text; when Panglima is told that Dahlan and Yun Ming are arrested in an unknown zone in the country. Panglima seems to delay in helping the release of two young men. It is worth noting that Panglima and Dahlan are both Malay ; but even one cannot see the real sense of brotherhood and evaluating same nationhood is ignored. Panglima does not care for what had happened to Dahlan and Chinese young man Yun Ming. This traces that the novel even lacks of nationalism of certain reasons: First, Fernando fails in creating a sense of nationalism throughout the novel because he mainly focuses on the racial fact and picturing the three race-figures in the novel unconsciously and embracing the real matter inevitably among these races till the end of the story ; yet the aforementioned hints confirm that these do not have a role in establishing nationalism for instance, accusation among the three races: each sees himself better than others and being proud of it; moreover marital issues between Sara and Yun Ming and their failure for making a union and live together as two affective races in the society, besides having no mature understanding among the races.

Secondly, to achieve an ideal world of nationalism is difficult, it seems like the view is ceded into the novel. Fernando seems to be intending to find a union, and overwhelming the racial issues by providing a comprehensive tool, understanding and accepting each one`s opinion at the aim of reunifying the country under the slogan of one identity. However , nationalism is there in Fernando`s mind and it should be for causes such as rebringing these races into one

union and aiming at revealing the consequences of the riots and its influence on the Malaysian society.

As a result, there is only one quotation given by the author that is regarded as Fernando's concern on nationalism because Fernando's conscious is more on historical thoughts and racial issues, by which he gives the completion of real story as it is with an exception of one quotation said by Lebai Hanafiah, Sara's father, "There are so many who want to force you to follow the right path. Each one's right path is the only one. I am tired of seeing the folly spread in the name of such right paths. I fear those who seek to come between me and love for all humanity. They are the source of hate and destruction." (116) This is a humanitarian belief: a piece of righteous speech in which it strongly encourages people to overwhelm pride and accusation; to that great extent seeing each other as equals- if not, creating the belief of equality among the all individual of the country regardless to racial and cultural differences, yet this sense of equality and humbleness is not seen among the characters in *Green is the Colour* (1993). Quayum has confirmed that *"Such a view of nationalism stems from a sublime humanism that requires individuals to rise above the taints of pride and prejudice and, in spite of all biological and cultural differences, consider each other as equals. It is a consciousness that is attainable by shedding all monolithic and unitary models of nationalism for that is inclusive, multilateral and culturally synergic. Thus Fernando said "My two novels intend to show how writing in English can shed the heavy layers of the colonial era and racial prejudice and pretence of superiority over the one's fellows"."*

Conclusion:

Fernando's talent of writing is invaluable in Malaysian literature as he concerns more to do with historical stories, and within that touching a bit on social, cultural and religious issues as prominent thoughts among people in Malaysia. Race and nationalism are the fundamental themes in Malaysian literature where most writers including Lloyd Fernando give a hint to the topic. The novel traces a conflict among the races in Malaysia and historically referring to the riots May 1969, unforgettable one-off unlucky event that agitates the whole country.

Fernando brings the same image of the racial differences by creating some figure-head of each race Malay, Chinese and Indian and depicting the struggles in front of each race. There is no a common feeling and/or accepting each other, as a result conflicts arise thus they suffer. People see others throughout their own thoughts and culture; some try to bring Western ideas and develop it into the country. Some try to be Malay and applying Malayness on to people, in spite the fact that there is no beam of hope of creating a union among all the races under the shade of uniqueness. These are serious factors that make the author incapable of bringing or imaging a sense of nationalism in the novel; as these races try to chase each other and showed victory one over another. Accusation and making problems do not let augment sense of cooperation and building a new nation under peace and prosperity.

Being a multiracial country is difficult in getting nationalism as Fernando fails as well in so doing. One can state that to achieve something in piece of literary work, factors are needed; yet in case of Fernando`s novel these factors are vanished and they make themselves away in bringing a precise image of nationalism. To sum up, Fernando does his best in giving a vivid image of the races and the conflicts that they involve in the novel, what is left to the readers is how can they view this kind of battle and competition from one race to another.

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