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Going against the grain: Postcolonial writings and creative performance in Malaysia

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Abstract
In his essay, ‘Dilemma of a Dog Barking at a Mountain: Pragmatist-Idealist Dialectic and the Writer in Malaysia’, Kee Thuan Chye, Malaysia’s foremost playwright, critic and columnist, evaluates his position as an idealist-writer — one ‘who desires to write without fear or restraint, and to reassess it in relation to (his) willingness as a person to accept the consequences of (his) desire, no matter how adverse these consequences may be’ (67) — and as a pragmatist who also has to consider the ‘harsh realities’ in Malaysia as he is ‘subject to conditions peculiar to (Malaysian) society’. He confesses that this dilemma he is in has begun to raise ‘suspicions of (his) validity and self-worth’ and, as such, the pragmatist in him ‘is getting increasingly circumspect and sweaty under the collar’ (67).
Going against the Grain: Postcolonial Writings and Creative Performance in Malaysia

INTRODUCTION
In his essay, ‘Dilemma of a Dog Barking at a Mountain: Pragmatist-Idealist Dialectic and the Writer in Malaysia’, Kee Thuan Chye, Malaysia’s foremost playwright, critic and columnist, evaluates his position as an idealist-writer — one ‘who desires to write without fear or restraint, and to reassess it in relation to (his) willingness as a person to accept the consequences of (his) desire, no matter how adverse these consequences may be’ (67) — and as a pragmatist who also has to consider the ‘harsh realities’ in Malaysia as he is ‘subject to conditions peculiar to (Malaysian) society’. He confesses that this dilemma he is in has begun to raise ‘suspicions of (his) validity and self-worth’ and, as such, the pragmatist in him ‘is getting increasingly circumspect and sweaty under the collar’ (67).

Kee’s anxiety and sentiments are not unique to him — as they are shared by other postcolonial writers in Malaysia as well. These writers, namely, Lloyd Fernando, Che Husna Azhari, K.S. Maniam, Kee Thuan Chye, Shirley Lim, Amir Muhammad, Karim Raslan and Dina Zaman, question hegemonic and homogenising discourses in order to reveal the myopia of ethnic politics, the ills of corruption, feudalism, patriarchy, class snobbery, crass consumerism, hypocrisy and materialism assailing a newly independent multi-racial and multicultural Malaysia. In the process, they have also explored the tensions between tradition and modernity and dismantled barriers to inter-cultural understanding such as the use of gender, ethnic and cultural stereotypes, the latter two of which have been propagated by colonial discursive practices.

As Kee rightly points out, we are constantly reminded to exercise caution and self-censorship by ‘sweeping any dirt under the mengkuang mat’ (68) or to tiptoe around the thorny hibiscus tree as unbridled freedom of expression can tear the very fabric of our young, fragile multi-racial country with its inherent cultural and religious differences and sensitivities. In Malaysia, freedom of expression is curtailed by draconian laws such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act, the Official Secret Act/s and the Internal Security Act (a legacy of our colonial forefathers). These Acts, which have undergone several amendments over time, are considered restrictive because they empower the Home Minister to prohibit the printing, sale, import, distribution or possession of a publication, if and when
the Minister deems that the content of that publication can undermine the security of the country or if he considers the contents a threat to morality and public order. Indeed, as many argue, these are extremely severe laws as whatever decision is to be taken is considered final and not subject to judicial review (Zaharom & Mustafa, 15). Sad to say, the number of postcolonial writers, as mentioned above, who have the courage and conviction to challenge the establishment are few and far in between. Their writings, unfortunately, would only appeal to the ‘literature-literate, and these are few compared to the masses who read pulp, or don’t read at all’ (Kee 68). As Kee argues, the voice of these few writers are often drowned by the ‘idiot box’ whose images would appeal more than the ‘drab, black words on a page’ in many Malaysian households (68).

Some potentially controversial issues have also been explored in the field of performing arts through the staging of children’s street performances by local theatre groups such as the Zao Xin Chang Theatre Group and Ombak-Ombak ARTStudio (previously known as Teater Muda or Young Theatre Group), a non-formal collective of multi-ethnic artists and producers who stage contemporary performances (apart from festivals and exhibitions) which project a distinct postcolonial Malaysian identity and creativity. The children’s street performances are collaborative efforts between local creative artists such as Janet Pillai, Tan Sooi Beng, Aida Reza (the former two are academics from the School of Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia and the latter a renowned Malaysian dance choreographer), students from the School of Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia and the wider public, in particular primary and secondary school students. Performances produced by this collective, among others, include the Red and Gold Shoe (2001), Hen or Rooster (2005), Ronggeng Merdeka (2007), Ko-Tai Penang (2009/10), and River Meets Light (2011). This performing arts collective works in tandem with Anak-Anak Kota (AAK, or Children of the City), a young people’s heritage education programme which was launched in 2000 to ‘complement the conservation efforts taken up by the concerned citizens and heritage groups’ of the community (Pillai 242). Essentially, the programme aims to empower young urban residents of the inner city of George Town, aged 12–18, to investigate, document, reflect and interpret their history and cultural environment through ‘intergenerational and cross-cultural interaction with the residents of the community’ (242). It is hoped that this will help enhance the children’s ‘appreciation of multicultural situations’ and to forge ‘links between personal and family history with community and regional history’ (242). The programme employs an engaged art pedagogical model which accords the young participants agency by changing them into ‘subjects, actors and artists, as opposed to (being) passive consumers or spectators’ (243). Engaged arts is used as a learning tool as it enables the young participants to explore changing personal and community identities, lived cultural realities and to negotiate preconceived or dominant ideas of gender, culture, religion, age etc.

Using concepts drawn from postcolonial and feminist theories, the paper makes a modest attempt to show how postcolonial writings and creative performance
in Malaysia have explored potentially controversial or sensitive issues as they foregrounded the complexities and complications facing a young postcolonial nation such as Malaysia. To achieve this objective, I analyse Che Husna Azhari’s story ‘Ustazah Inayah’ taken from her collection, Melor in Perspective, Lloyd Fernando’s Green is the Colour and two children’s street performances Hen or Rooster¹ and Ronggeng Merdeka.²

I choose to analyse Che Husna Azhari’s short story as she is one of Malaysia’s younger generation of writers who is unafraid of revealing the intra-ethnic tensions and conflicts faced by her own Malay-Muslim community, their hypocrisy, class snobbery and materialism. In addition, she also unravels their hybridised and fragmented Malay-Muslim identity as a result of migration for public consumption. These are issues which are considered sensitive and are rarely scrutinised by Malay writers writing in the Malay or national language as they may be accused of casting unnecessary aspersions on the ethnic purity of the Malay community. ‘Ustazah Inayah’ is an interesting story as it grants Inayah, a young, highly educated, upper-class, Malay-Muslim woman, agency and voice to challenge subtly the dominant discourses of gender, tradition, religion and politics which try to define her and other Malay-Muslim women in modern day Malaysia. The story is exceptional as such Malay-Muslim women’s voices are rarely articulated in literary texts written in the national language.

Che Husna Azhari’s Melor in Perspective

Che Husna Azhari, an engineering Professor, is also a prolific writer of fiction, especially short stories. Melor in Perspective, one of her collections of short stories, documents the ‘nuances and peculiarities’ (ix) of people from Melor, a village-town in Kelantan (one of the states in Malaysia). In order to enable the reader to understand the factors that have shaped the cultural and political identity of the present generation of Kelantanese, the author embarks on her narrative journey by first providing a brief political and cultural history of Kelantan. The author traces the Kelantan people’s genealogy to the Kabulis, the Islamic merchants of Afghanistan, as well as the Islamic clerics from India and the Middle-East who were responsible for disseminating Islamic knowledge in the Nusantara world. This is then followed by a probe into Kelantan’s recent past, in particular colonial rule, the friction between the Kaum Muda and Kaum Tua, the younger and older group of Muslim intelligentsia, and the schism between UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) and PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia), two main contending political parties in Malaysia. Probing the collective memory or consciousness of the Kelantanese people is also crucial as it helps to explain the psychological make-up of Kelantan men and women in regard to their ‘relationships and domestic power hierarchy’ (35).

The recounting of the folktale surrounding the semi-mythical Queens, Cik Siti Wan Kembang and Puteri Saadong, shows Kelantanese men’s psychological
acceptance of the assertive role of their women, especially in trade and commerce in Kelantan. This foray into Kelantan’s rich political, historical and cultural past helps to unravel the ‘hybridised’, complicated and conflicting cultural identities of the Malays, in particular the women from Kelantan. These women characters in Che Husna’s narratives such as Ustazah Inayah (Ustazah is an honorific title given to a female Islamic teacher) and Wan Asmah, re-negotiate adat (custom, habit or conventions that are commonly known or accepted), patriarchy and Islam as they make attempts to dismantle the traditional notion of womanhood.

In comparison with the other short stories in this collection, I find ‘Ustazah Inayah’ is the most interesting as it becomes the site for the contestation and dialogic interaction of a number of discourses, in particular that of adat, patriarchy, Islam, feudalism, tradition, modernity, urbanism, materialism and individualism (Wong Aliran Monthly). It also reveals the various tensions and conflicts faced by Malay women like Inayah in her attempts to deal with all the above discourses that help to define her. Inayah, struggles between the numerous roles that people like her are expected to play: she is a modern-educated urbanised Malay woman, a successful economist, a politician, a loving and devoted wife and mother, a dutiful daughter and grand-daughter of a respectable and well-to-do family. Although she performed well academically, she was not allowed to pursue an engineering degree in the university as that would diminish her chances of getting married. She is resigned to follow tradition by agreeing to marry her cousin, Nik Ahmed Kamil Wariya, even though she is highly educated. Che Husna’s Inayah is no passive victim of patriarchal norms and tradition; she is a highly astute, intelligent and far-sighted woman who is critical of ‘petty cultural mores’. Even so, she is not a cultural rebel, as she is not going to contest these traditions in a direct manner, being a devoted daughter and an upholder of tradition.

For instance, when she is harassed by her mother to marry, as it was culturally expected for women at that time to marry at a younger age, she decides to be betrothed instead to her cousin, Nik Ahmed Kamil Wiraya and not any other man. This is because she knows that, being family, he will not divorce her if she develops herself professionally and intellectually. She is quite right, as he turns out to be an extremely supportive husband. In this story, Che Husna also provides a critique of the snobbery and feudal mentality of upper class Kelantanese Malay society, particularly their penchant for names and titles such as ‘Nik’, ‘Che’ or ‘Datuk’ as these imply aristocratic genealogy and lineage. Che Husna also satirises this society by showing the ridiculous means taken by some of them to procure such names and titles. For instance, Dato Yeh, Inayah’s grandfather, a commoner ‘from some godforsaken village’ (149), obtained his ‘Datoship’, the much-coveted title of ‘Datuk Gurindam Setia Loka’, after contributing a boat in the shape of a water goose to the Sultan during the latter’s annual birthday celebrations. In this regard, Che Husna reveals the ills of corruption that are so prevalent in this society and Malaysian society as well, with particular regard to the return of favours.
In charting Inayah’s meteoric rise in politics, Che Husna criticises the greed, hypocrisy, materialism and individualism of upper-class women politicians such as Datin Nik Rahimah and her ilk who appear to be predominantly interested in flaunting their latest material acquisitions, and contrasts them with the poorer women in her constituency, those who lack the resources for basic child-care facilities and opportunities to better themselves (Wong 150). In doing so, Che Husna reveals the social and economic inequalities in this feudal, class-based society, and shows the failure of the State to provide basic amenities to the poor. Consequently, her criticism is also directed at party politics, as the deprived in Molo society are those who ‘stubbornly voted PIF’ (Parti Islam Fundamentalist/Fundamentalist Islamic Party), the opposition-led party. Women such as Datin Nik Rahimah enter politics not for altruistic reasons but for the sake of promoting their own vested interests.

Che Husna registers Inayah’s disillusionment with the women politicians and the party’s extravagance and improper priorities — the party seeming much more interested in using the allocated funds for developing ‘spiralling towers’ and golf courses than crèches and a Women’s Centre (150). Her disappointment stems mainly from the party’s decision to shelve the above women’s project as the money was siphoned off to finance other ‘developmental projects’. This is not exactly a strange and bizarre happening as this kind of improper prioritising is a direct result of developmentalism and crass consumerism that have taken over Molo society and contemporary Malaysian politics. As Inayah remarks, ‘the financing of the women’s project would cost less than the bathroom fittings in a posh luxury hotel. It seemed, though, that when it came to priorities, the toilet users had more rights than the women in her constituency’ (169).

Feeling partly responsible for this state of affairs, Inayah soon leaves the party and decides to wear a kain kelubung (headscarf worn by some Muslim women). This causes great concern to all as many believe that it is a sign that she has decided to become a member of the opposition party, the PIF, a party that is supposed to be much more Islamic than the dominant PMMK (Persatuan Melayu Merdeka Kelantan/Society of Independent Kelantanese Malays). Inayah, however, is uncertain about her future political intentions and inclinations. Her donning of the veil provides the catalyst for the PIF to court her, and soon the Chief of the Majlis Muslimat (Muslim Council), Wan Asmah, calls on her to persuade her to join PIF. Inayah is equally disappointed with the PIF as Wan Asmah’s ready conferment of the title of ‘Ustazah’, an honorific title, on Inayah, is an act that is reflective of the ‘accreditation disease’ (176) that has afflicted Molo’s society, especially the members of the PMMK. One senses Che Husna’s biting criticism of the PMMK and the PIF in their obsession with titles, an obsession that is a manifestation of feudalism. Che Husna’s critique is mostly observed in her portrayal of women characters such as Datin Nik Salmo, Inayah’s grandmother, who goes to great lengths to conceal her children’s common patrilineal ancestry. The Datin does
this by reconstructing a whole new identity for her family by linking it to the aristocratic or bangsawan class. This is, indeed, ironical as Datin Nik Salmo is married to a commoner whose forefathers were tok bagehs or evil spirit chasers and tukang karuts (concocters of stories) of yore.

Like Che Husna Azhari’s ‘Ustazah Inayah’, Lloyd Fernando also investigates a rather thorny and sensitive issue in his novel *Green is the Colour*. Here, he boldly questions the implementation of the one-language, one culture policy (Malay language and Malay culture) of the government soon after the tragic race riots of 1969. This assimilationist policy which was formulated to achieve national unity and national development has the potential of threatening the continued survival of individual ethnic and cultural identities. In this text, Fernando captures the views and perspectives of the ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse peoples of Malaysia to contest and re-negotiate this official discourse of nation in order to enable them to construct alternative visions of nationhood and cultural identities. In the process, he is also able to deconstruct certain preconceived and dominant ideas of nation, ethnicity and gender as he crosses borders in order to break all kinds of barriers that impede inter-cultural understanding. *Green is the Colour* is a remarkable text as it shows how cultural identities are not static as they are in a perpetual state of flux. Importantly, the text is able to reflect the pluralism and the ‘totality of Malaysian life with its multicultural ambience’ (Quayum and Wicks xii) as the writer, Fernando, in capturing the diverse voices, has successfully ‘risen above the psychological and cultural moorings’ (xii) of his own Sri-Lankan community to speak to a multicultural audience.

**Lloyd Fernando’s *Green is the Colour***

Lloyd Fernando is a Sri-Lankan born writer and a pioneer of creative writings and theatre in Malaysia. He was also an academic and later a lawyer and he made significant contributions to the development of Malaysian literature and drama in English through his creative output. Written in 1993, *Green is the Colour* journeys into the past to invoke people’s memories of the race riots of 1969 that literally tore asunder the newly independent country of Malaysia. Essentially, it is a novel that reveals the pitfalls of ‘ethnic politics’ (Saravanamuttu 89) and divisive socio-economic policies suffered by a country with racial, linguistic, cultural and religious differences and sensitivities. Malaysia comprises a number of ethnically diverse people, the majority being Malays, Chinese and Indians. Malay is the official language of the country but Mandarin or Hokkien and Tamil are widely spoken and English is used as an effective second language. Although Islam is the official religion of the country, the Malaysian constitution grants religious freedom to its citizens, a number of whom practise Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism.

Before discussing the novel, it is important to provide a brief historical context of British Malaya and the factors leading up to the 1969 racial crisis. Malaya (the country was renamed Malaysia after achieving independence in 1957) was
colonised by the British from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. The ‘divide-and-rule’ policy administered by the British in Malaya before independence resulted in the formation of a plural society that was racially divided as the various ethnic groups were kept separate in their own socio-economic domains. The Malays who worked as rice farmers and fishermen in the relatively undeveloped rural sector remained poor as the British concentrated on the development of trade and industry in the urban sector. On the other hand, the Chinese who were migrant workers mainly employed in the tin mines, dominated the more developed and economically viable urban sectors. Unlike the Chinese, the Indians who were also migrant workers led an impoverished life working in the rubber estates and plantations. No attempts were undertaken by the British to enforce a fair and equitable policy to help reduce inter-ethnic socio-economic disparities. Neither were there attempts to create a ‘common vision’ or national aspiration to unite the three major groups of people at that time. This resulted in the promotion of an idea of nationalism, prior to independence, that was ‘communalistic’ in character as ethnicity became a significant factor in the various sections’ articulation of nationalism. As a consequence, it triggered the formation of Malay nationalism, Chinese nationalism and Indian nationalism. Three major political parties, namely UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), MCA (Malayan Chinese Association) and MIC (Malayan Indian Congress) were established, each representing a major ethnic community. In 1952, these three parties united and called themselves the Alliance party. The party was headed by Tunku Abdul Rahman, UMNO’s President, and it formed the ruling government when Malaysia achieved its independence in 1957. Tunku Abdu Rahman became the first Prime Minister of Malaysia.

The Alliance party instituted a form of political system known as ‘consociationalism’, a system that is dependent on the leadership to ‘authoritatively bargain for the interests of that (particular ethnic) community’ and negotiate dealings with the ruling government in order to ‘secure compliance and legitimacy’ for various bargains (Means 2). Essentially, the ‘political bargains’ that were mutually agreed upon by the three parties concerned the maintenance of certain Malay traditions, namely, the position of the Malay rulers, Islam as the official religion, the recognition of the Malay language as the official and national language by 1967, and the ‘special position’, rights and privileges to be accorded to the Malays in all sectors of the economy to enable them to compete with the other groups on an equal footing. In return, the Chinese and Indians successfully bargained for better citizenship provisions and to be allowed to play a dominant role in trade and industry. The 1969 racial riots signified the failure of this ‘political bargain’ — the Alliance party failed to capture the majority of seats in the general elections as there was growing discontent about the granting of ‘special rights’ to the Malays (Malaysia 1–2). Scholars such as Kahn and Loh (1992) contend that the system failed because of the arrival of the middle class
and their attempts to delegitimise the ‘cultural vision’ of the ruling government. This resulted in a major shift in governance as the ruling elites became more ‘authoritative’ by implementing draconian laws such as the Internal Security Act (1960), the Societies Act (1966), the Sedition Act (1970), The Universities and the University Colleges Act (1971), the Official Secrets Acts (1972), and the Printing Presses and Publications Act (1988) (Kahn and Loh 1) to maintain their status quo.

Such repressive laws make it difficult for contestations of official policy to take place and alternative views to be disseminated to the wider public. In this sense, Fernando goes against the grain as he provides the much needed space for marginalised and repressed voices to challenge the official one-language, one-culture homogenising policy of the ruling government, one that favours the dominant race of the country. The text stages the interaction of varied voices and discourses as they dialogue with each other to reveal cracks and fissures in the linear historical narrative of nation that has been presented as being unproblematic and reiterated in official discourses and history textbooks. It is worth noting that the text does not depict the various ethnic groups in a homogenous manner as not all Malays support the one-language, one-culture national policy and neither do all the Chinese disagree with it. For example, Panglima (who becomes a Malay after his conversion to Islam when he marries a local Malay-Muslim woman), is part and parcel of the political machinery of the country, and he endorses this policy but other Malays such as Dahlan, Lebai Hanafiah and Sara have reservations about it. Omar, Sara’s husband, wants to go back to his roots and seeks spiritual redemption and salvation in the village amongst other religious Muslims as he finds modern life ‘corrupt’ and ‘godless’ as ‘[e]verywhere people were chasing money, living immoral lives (38).

To Omar, the root cause of the racial riots is religion and this is clearly shown when he says to Sara, ‘[i]f we were all of the same faith, it would be a different matter’ (45). Suspicions are rife in this multicultural country and this is shown through Omar’s tense relationship with Yun Ming. Omar does not trust the Chinese as he believes that ‘[t]hey wanted something in return. Honours, opportunities, contracts…’ (94). He finds them hypocritical as he considers them to be quite selfish because they are not willing to share their wealth with anyone. Sara challenges his ethnic chauvinism when she says that ‘[m]any ordinary people (non Malays) show respect and understanding’ (92) towards Malays and therefore Malays should not regard them with suspicion. Omar also adopts a ‘holier-than-thou’ attitude and is critical of other Malay-Muslims who are much more liberal, Westernised and secular. It is through characters such as Omar that Fernando manages to capture and reveal intra-ethnic tensions and divisions as well. This disunity is reflective of the ever widening gulf between UMNO, the dominant Malay party, and the opposition Islamic party, PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia) which has, over time, fragmented the Malay community. PAS was formed to
mobilise Muslims to adhere to the fundamental ideals of the religion and to check the secular ideological leanings of UMNO (Shakila 2008 155).

Yun Ming, a Malaysian Chinese who works for the government strongly believes that a one-language, one-culture policy system can function as an effective integrative tool. Yun Ming is willing to assimilate and to sacrifice his Chinese-ness in order to prove his loyalty and patriotic feelings for the country. As Panglima tells his superior,

‘…the Chinese and the Indians had to forget where they came from. They must 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… Everything was for the country and for the nation’. (21)

Selfless and self-sacrificing, he delivered goods by van to Malay areas at the height of the racial riots, a time when everyone was more concerned about their own safety. He speaks fluent Malay and chooses to stay on in Malaysia even though it means a separation from his English wife, Phyllis, and his son. Myths and stereotypes that have been propagated about the Chinese since colonial times, especially with regard to their money-mindedness and selfish attitude, are dispelled by Fernando through Yun Ming’s actions. However, Yun Ming’s sincerity is questioned as his ethnic origin dogs him. As intimated earlier, people like Omar will forever doubt his motives. This said, not all Chinese are seen to feel the same way as Yun Ming’s rich towkay father, a migrant from China who detaches himself from the politics of the country, and is more concerned about making money and becoming rich and prosperous. His brother, Chris, chooses an easy way out by migrating to Australia with his family. In this text, Fernando manages to provide opportunities for the various characters to redefine and renegotiate their identities in order to show that each ethnic community is not monolithic or homogenous.

In a multicultural country such as Malaysia, it is indeed important to educate the young about its multiethnic traditions and to inculcate in them the need to question cultural stereotypes and to cross ethnic borders that hinder inter-cultural understanding. In this sense, the discussion of the creative arts scene in Penang, in particular the children’s street performances of *Hen and Rooster* and *Ronggeng Merdeka* (see below) dovetails nicely with the discussion of Che Husna Azhari’s ‘Ustazah Inayah’ and Fernando’s *Green is the Colour*. Thematically, these texts are similar as they question worn-out cultural stereotypes and dominant ideas of nation, gender and ethnicity which together obstruct cross-cultural understanding and interaction. As intimated earlier on, the Young Theatre Group, a collective of multiethnic and arts practitioners in Penang, has initiated a multi-arts project to enable children of different class and ethnic backgrounds to ‘experiment with traditional and contemporary arts media to create a relevant and accessible form of theatre that can express children’s experiences’ (Tan 2010 230). Combining music, dance, drama, puppetry and the visual arts, this theatre group truly embraces the
Going against the Grain

performance concept of ‘total theatre’. Stories, music, games, dance, imagery and props are drawn from diverse traditional sources and collective improvisation used by the children on stage rather than the written source. Before staging the performances (dance-dramas), the young participants undergo about six months of training in ‘improvisation, role-play, mime, movement, visual arts as well as selected traditional music, dance and theatre’ (230). The young participants are also expected to go on field trips to the inner city of George Town in order to observe movements and sounds of specific people, animals and the environment at specific locations’ which are then put together to form a story taken or adapted from traditional or folk sources (230–31). Multiculturalism is experienced through cross-cultural mergings in terms of dance movements, the use of musical instruments and costumes drawn from Asian and Western traditions.

CHILDREN’S CREATIVE PERFORMANCE

The tradition of street performances widely enjoyed by various multi-ethnic communities some decades ago was recreated recently through the staging of two children’s musical dramas, namely, Hen or Rooster and Ronggeng Merdeka, at various open air community spaces in Penang. The staging of Hen or Rooster was a collaborative effort between two theatre groups: the Zao Xin Chang Theatre Group (ZXC) and Young Theatre Penang Group. It was staged in 2005 and was directed by a creative crew comprising leading children’s theatre practitioner Janet Pillai, ethnomusicologist-cum-composer Tan Sooi Beng, visual artist Liew Kung Yu and choreographer Eng Hee Ling.

Performed in the style of a semi-musical drama, this children’s play captivated the hearts, minds and imagination of children and adults alike. The play is visually stunning as all the ‘chicken’ characters wore brightly coloured floor rugs which were made from local patchwork material and their pants consisted of colourful dhotis (a rectangular piece of loose cloth draped around the waist and upper legs of men in the Indian subcontinent); and it courageously explores issues pertaining to gender, sexuality and cultural identity — issues that are normally treated in a gingerly manner in Muslim-majority Malaysia. Hen or Rooster is an adaptation of the Asian folk tale ‘Roosters and Hens’ by Alejandro R. Roces. Gender was not actually an issue explored in the original story line by Roces but it was incorporated into the performance as the theatre group thought that it was important to question stereotyped behaviour by reversing male and female roles. They felt that the dismantling of gender stereotypes was timely as they were tirelessly reinforced in the media and in school textbooks. Some parents in the audience were not too pleased at this experimentation as they felt that the blurring of gender boundaries may leave the young children more confused than ever. Others felt that it was ‘educational’ as the performance conveyed the idea that everyone had an important role to play in society, regardless of gender. In this play, gender roles are toyed with mainly to show how they help create ambiguous and alternative identities. Characters swap roles as it is the mother who rides a
motorbike and the father who loves to cook. The play also dismantles people’s understanding of masculinity and femininity through the use of costumes. The biker-mother is clad in black leather jacket, tight leggings and boots, evoking the image of a ‘masculinised’ female. The father, on the other hand, is ‘feminised’ as he dons an apron. Gender is also questioned through the capture of a ‘transgendered chicken’ by two children, a boy and a girl. In determining whether the chicken is a hen or rooster, they enter the chicken in a cock fight.

The cockfight scene between the transgendered chicken and a macho-looking rooster becomes the site for the blurring of gender identities. Through this blurring, the play challenges the idea that gender distinction is ‘natural’ and that masculinity and femininity are acquired from birth. Whilst fighting, the chicken shakes its bottom and hyperbolises and parodies feminine traits by performing a seductive bollywood dance to the beat of the soft and delicate *joget gamelan* music, provoking much laughter from the young audience. Spellbound, the rooster reciprocates by performing a love dance, the *joget gamelan* dance. Sensing its vulnerable state, the chicken attacks the rooster mercilessly and kills it. The play also embodies an interesting fusion of local traditions, language and cultural practices. Performers happily code-switched and code-mixed in Malay, English, Mandarin and Hokkien, a linguistic behaviour which is so typical of multicultural Malaysia.

Different languages were spoken in order to make the play accessible to the young audience. Lines were not memorised as the performers worked on a loose script, and so they transcended linguistic and cultural borders. Most of the time, they had to translate lines and jokes from one language to another on the spot. The play thereby demonstrates the linguistic versatility of the various ethnic communities in Malaysia. More importantly, it shows that they are not linguistically homogenous and that their cultural identity is not fixed, unitary or unchanging. Performers, regardless of their ethnic origin could speak in a variety of local languages. In Malaysia, there are Malays who can speak Hokkien, the local Chinese dialect, and there are Chinese who may not be able to converse in Hokkien but only in Malay or English. Likewise, there are Chinese who may speak Tamil but Indians who can only communicate in Malay.

*Ronggeng Merdeka* was staged at five open air community spaces in Penang and on the mainland in 2007. It was organised by *Ombak-Ombak ARTStudio* in co-operation with the School of Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia and Penang Heritage Trust. The play journeys into Penang’s rich historical past and reveals the trials and tribulations of its people from the 1930s through the Japanese Occupation up to the period of Malaysia’s independence. The community spaces became the site for all kinds of border crossings and cross-cultural exchange: it had a multi-ethnic cast from all age groups. Songs that were sung included Malay, Hokkien and English words and the musical ensemble comprised the *Malay gamelan* and wayang kulit (shadow puppet) instruments together with the Chinese *erhu* and
shigu and the Western violin and flute. Dances integrated the cha-cha, rumba, Malay dance numbers such as the inang and zapin and the Indian Bharatnatyam. The play provided agency and voice to the Ronggeng girls to counter views that had maligned them, many of whom were Malay-Muslims. Ronggeng is a social dance performed by young lower class women who invited men to dance with them on stage in entertainment parks and club houses in exchange for tips. It was a popular dance form and activity before independence and in the ’60s and ’70s. Currently, it has been recreated and transformed into a national dance form and has attracted performers from all ethnic groups (Tan 2005 287). The Ronggeng girls then had been castigated by the religious authorities before and soon after independence for parading on stage in their figure hugging kebayas (a traditional blouse-dress costume worn by Malay women in Malaysia) and inviting men to dance with them. The girls were paid money for each dance that they had with the men. Worried about deteriorating morals amongst the girls, Malay newspapers criticised their lifestyle and livelihood. Undeterred, the Ronggeng girls carried on to eke out a living. They were accomplished singers and dancers and the job provided them with a steady source of income. In the day time, they attended to household chores and became Ronggeng girls at night. This is clearly revealed in the second verse of their theme song:

Kami Penghuni Malaya
Melayu, India dan Cina,
Waktu siang kerja rumah
Waktu malam keluar berniaga
Menghibur semua di taman
Beronggeng-ronggeng ka tua se kai

(We residents of Malaya
Malays, Indians and Chinese
Morning we attend to our chores
At night we do business
Entertaining all in the park
Perform the ronggeng dance in the tua se ka kai)

It is interesting to note is that these Ronggeng girls are like other women, then and now. They had several identities: they were not just someone’s wife, mother or daughter but were also working women who contributed significantly to the family’s household income and the state. Like other women, they were also used, controlled, oppressed and subjugated by patriarchy and men as conveyed in the lyrics of their songs which they parodied on stage:

Lelaki balik rumah, ceduk nasi, macam tak ada tangan
Kasut pun kena pakai untuk dia
Even the cloth we have to choose for them
Lengkuk badan, abang
Tiap-tiap hari tunggu kat rumah
This trousers will do, abang
Abang nak kasut inikah?
Dia pun kerja, kita pun kerja.

(Men return home, we have to ladle the rice for them, as though they have no hands of their own,
We have to put on the shoes for them,
Even the cloth we have to choose for them
Sway your body, abang [an endearing and respectful term to refer to their husbands]
Every day we wait for them at home
This trousers will do, abang
Abang, would you like this pair of shoes?
He goes to work, so do we)

In the musical drama, the Ronggeng was performed by 16–18 year old girls who had also used the occasion to relate to the audience their pain and suffering during the Japanese Occupation and their struggle towards independence. The war had changed their lives as they had to bury their kebayas and smear their faces with charcoal to look unattractive to the Japanese soldiers. Whilst the men fought in the war, the Ronggeng girls had to look after their homes and family. The audience, especially the senior citizens, who had experienced first-hand the Japanese occupation, were visibly moved, as they swayed their bodies to the music and songs of the 1940s and 1950s. Seated on four-legged stools in the open-air community space, the senior citizens nodded in agreement to statements made, clapped and raised their hands. The scenes could have rekindled their memories of bygone days and their experiences at the tua se kai or entertainment outlets such as the Penang Wembley theatre and the Great World park of yesteryears. Some were choked with emotions when they witnessed the re-enactment of the Sook Ching scene, the massacre of the Chinese by the Japanese during the Japanese Occupation.

CONCLUSION

Driven by the commitment to truth and justice, many writers, creative people and artists such as the ones that have been discussed above, are inclined to look for fissures and contradictions in society where in their own peculiar ways they can test the waters as well as push the envelope. By doing so, they inevitably challenge not only conventional wisdom but also the establishment, particularly the kind that is arrogantly authoritarian. Additionally, it is in the very realm of culture that these writers, creative people and artists seek and find space to offer critical messages, alternative ideas and raise consciousness among the general populace. In other words, the short stories, novels, staged plays, songs and music become a convenient ideological vehicle for these creative people to share their sentiments and views which may go against the grain with the rest of society. As such, I would like to be a tad more optimistic than Kee as these ‘ideal’ creative artists have tried and are trying in their own little way to push boundaries and to show a ‘firm commitment to truth’ by opposing ‘anything that seeks to oppress, injure, or destroy humanity’ (Kee 67).
NOTES

1 For a detailed discussion of this play, refer to Shakila Abdul Manan ‘Why did the Chicken Cross the Border’, *Aliran Monthly*, 8, 2005. *Hen or Rooster* is an adaptation of the Asian folk tale ‘Roosters and Hens’ by Alejandro R. Roces.


WORKS CITED


