

Delving into Multiracial Community in Scorpion Orchid

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ABSTRACT

Lloyd Fernando describes writing as taking snapshots of the society and showing the reality without being sentimental. True enough it is clearly portrayed in his first novel *Scorpion Orchid*, a postcolonial novel that consciously moves the knowledge of culture and history to bring a sense of community. *Scorpion Orchid* tells of the chaotic relationship between four young people of different racial backgrounds as they struggle to come to terms with their identity and cultural heritage. This paper employs qualitative method appropriate for use in conducting text-analysis research. The aim of this study is to see how each race has its way of coming to a consensus on nationalism that is based on the previous colonization in this novel. This study involves close and careful reading of the novel to extract important events and incidences, which lead to the portrayal of the changes and problems encountered by the people from multiracial community and how they cope with this environment. The analysis of the novel helps the society at large to be extra cautious of the sensitive issues within the multiracial community. This study identifies the combination of historically real with the imagined in Lloyd Fernando's writing.

Keywords-*Multiracial Community; Nationalism; Relationship*

Introduction

Scorpion Orchid has been categorised as a novel that deals heavily on the theme of nationalism. The novel revolves around multiracial community. The main characters of the different racial background take different perspectives in life. Feelings of negativity towards each other fill their friendship due to the various contributing factors. Even though it has been years of friendship, the novel proves that interracial conflict slows down and hinders the development of a nation.

Some background information of the author, Lloyd Fernando. He was born in Sri Lanka on 31 May 1926. His family moved to Singapore. He was raised there. His parents returned to Sri Lanka when he was 16 years old, but he decided not to follow them. Fernando worked as a labourer, trishaw rider and an apprentice mechanic in order to pursue his study. He even worked part time jobs as a radio broadcasting assistant and newsreader. He became successful when he graduated in English and Philosophy from the University of Singapore with double honours degrees. He completed his PhD at the University of Leeds.

He began writing at the age of 15. He starts his writing routine as early as 8am, and stops for a short while just for his meals. [1] This is Fernando's own writing style as he writes in a disciplined manner. He considers the act as creating a habit, so his writing skills can be sharpened since he writes regularly. He travels locally and internationally in order to be able to write based on his personal encounters and turns them into fiction. Today, most universities that offer courses dealing with Singaporean and Malaysian writing would use the regular set text of *Scorpion Orchid*.

Literature Review

Commonwealth literature was a term literary critics began to use from the 1950s to describe literatures in English emerging from a selection of countries with a history of colonialism. In 1964, some scholars met and then Commonwealth Literature starts [2]. From Commonwealth Literature, then New writings in English, then followed by postcolonialism, they are all the same. The name changes due to the process of evolution, the writers wanted to define themselves differently.

In the twentieth century, the British Empire covered a vast area of the earth that included parts of Africa, Asia, Australasia, Canada, the Caribbean and Ireland. In the twenty-first century, there remain a small number of British colonies. The phrase 'the British Empire' is most commonly used today in the past tense, signifying the historical period and set of relationships which are no longer current.

Actually, the twentieth century has been the century of colonial demise and of decolonization for millions of people who were once subject to the authority of the British crown [3]. Postcolonial literatures in English are produced by writers who either come from, or have an ancestral purchase upon, countries with a history of colonialism. Lloyed Fernando Many new concepts will help readers to build and develop their readings of the range of literatures which preoccupy postcolonialism.

Beginnings are exciting things, inviting readers to explore that which we may not have previously visited, but they also expose us to the unfamiliarity and inevitable disorientation of doing something new, this includes the beginning of postcolonialism [2]. Postcolonialism challenges readers to think again and question some of the assumptions that underpin both what readers read and how readers read. Though the relationship between post-colonialism and nationalism is not straightforward, but most post-colonial authors are critical of nationalism [4]. Thus, it is of great importance to include nationalism in this study.

Nation refers "both to the modern nation-state and to something more ancient and nebulous – the *natio* – a local community, domicile, family, condition of belonging" [5]. Meanwhile nationalism refers to an ideology, a sentiment, a form of culture, or a social movement that focuses on the nation. It is important to think about nations fundamentally as fabrications. Gellner said "nations are not inscribed into the nature of things" [6].

Nationalism is also defined as the desire by a group of people of the same race, origin, language to form an independent country or love for your own country and the belief that it is better than any other country. [7] Meanwhile, Partha Chatterjee said nationalism sought to demonstrate the falsity of the colonial claim that the backward peoples were culturally incapable of ruling themselves in the

conditions of the modern world. Nationalism denied the alleged inferiority of the colonised people; it also asserted that a backward nation could 'modernise' itself while retaining its cultural identity. It thus produced a discourse in which, even as it challenged the colonial claim to political domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of 'modernity' on which colonial domination was based [8].

Mauzy states that "The Federation of Malaya gained its independence in 1957. Singapore and the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak joined Malaya in 1963 to make the new country of Malaysia." [9] In examining the fundamental changes which have affected the people through the characters in *Scorpion Orchid*, it is important to look at the diversity of the people, including the political, cultural, and religious situations displayed by the people during the difficult years shortly before Singapore and Malaysia became independent.

Methodology

This paper examines multiracial community or plural society as one of the aspects related to nationalism, how is it inter-related among the characters in Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* at length. The focus is placed upon the ways each race coming together as a nation in the novel. Among others, it aims to highlight the difficulties and issues faced by the people. On a broader view, I would like to study the struggle to survive in dealing with the problems of identity, both individual and national in the face of social and political pressures.

Results and Findings

The novel deals stirringly with some of the events of the 1950s that led up to Singapore's independence, a period of social conflict while the British were still in control of Malaya and Singapore. It tells of the chaotic relationship between four young people of different racial backgrounds as they struggle to come to terms with their identity and cultural heritage. They are former schoolmates and now undergraduate students at the University of Malaya in Singapore.

The novel announces its intention to stop the colonial power at first. The main characters, each representing one of the main races, Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian, which make up modern Singapore sung the British national anthem on Empire Day. However, the reality is it leads to rejection rather than unity. The power of the colonizer at the same time both recognized and lessens. The novel also expresses the unavoidable awareness of the uncertainties and weaknesses of the victims themselves in the whole process of territory.

The four friends develop an upsetting personal catastrophe that reproduces a terrifying turmoil, as they start to doubt each other. They fail to save a woman and that is the most excruciating vivid appearance of the situation. Their failure is a symbol of their inability and lack of strength in preserving their beloved country.

Their friendship is no longer the same in the final year of university. They lead their own way. Somehow, it successfully displays the fragility of relationship in encountering the problems of racial identity. Although the novel has a happy ending when Peter mentions his desire to return home after

staying for two years in England, however, it is also sad to see the relationship among the friends cherished since their university years come to an end [10].

The novel examines the causes of the turmoil and their effects on the multiracial community at large and suggests ways of overcoming them in future and it is the author's attempt at identifying the roots of the problems and his suggested remedies for those social and natural predicaments that we encounter his social and cultural philosophy for the nation [11].

Discussions

Multiracial community or plural society is a community that has two or more elements or social levels side by side, but do not blend. These elements live in a political unit. According to Abdul Rahman, plural society was first used to refer to the society's development in the countries colonized by the Western power [12]. The colonizer took in immigrants. They were obedient towards the colonial ruler. In the end, plural society came into the picture as they live with each other, but separated. Plural society means a society which consists of various races.

Lloyd Fernando portrays national imagination as he clearly displays the interlocking of the past to generate a symbolic field of emotions and experiences, the concept of a national symbolic field. The concept emerges in Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* as an image of a perfect national identity [13].

In Singapore and Malaysia, plural society involves the Malay, Chinese, Indian, Eurasian, and other races which have different religion, language, and culture from one another. These races live in a country, but their lives are separated from one race to another. This is clearly shown in *Scorpion Orchid* through the main characters, Sabran, Guan Kheng, Santinathan, and Peter. Their social interaction is limited and their relationship stops at only educational matters since they are in their university years. The novel creatively illustrates the nature of the people, the multi-racial group, their strengths and weaknesses, their struggles and aspirations.

The main characteristics of this plural society are conflict, discrepancy, and force. They do not have common will. Even in reality, people in multiracial community hardly take common action, especially to face problems in the country. The population of the Indian and Chinese grows in Singapore and Malaya each day. Based on the percentage, it is likely to experience conflict among races. Racial issue is the main thing in plural society. Ethnic loyalty does matter as one of the important factors as it is the basic of strong unity and unstoppable. Furthermore, racial issue is a threat to the country. Lloyd Fernando successfully displays nationalism in his novel in this sense as Singapore belongs to Malaya at one point of time. He plants the sense of belonging to a country with his own creativity.

Even though the depiction of racial riot is vague in *Scorpion Orchid* as there is no attempt has been made by Lloyd Fernando to portray the causes underlying the violence which is the major event in the novel, but the implication of the riot that took place in Malaysia and Singapore because of the racial sentiment is strong. At that time, the Malays were not satisfied with the government policy which was regarded as discriminating the Malays. The Malay extremists distributed brochures on

anti-Chinese. The riot between the Malay and the Chinese spread to other places. Religious sentiment had been further worsened by the racial sentiment.

The construction of national identity in Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* is obvious. This novel is a postcolonial novel that consciously moves the knowledge of culture and history to bring a sense of community. Lloyd Fernando creates the image of a multiracial community. *Scorpion Orchid* carefully provides examples of some of the basic mechanics of nation formation. The different interpretation of each postcolonial writer on experiences of nationalism has given rise to much evaluation and criticism.

As the political situation struggles to find its way, the relationship between the four is tested to the limits. Social perfection is taken away as they are exposed to issues, which lead to their racial prejudices. Their interest for individual survival fails their nationalist sentiments.

Meanwhile, the existence of the two British lecturers and their colonial attitudes towards the local affairs are served with obvious description. After all, the colonial power regards the Malays as lazy people. British imperialism exerts their control and authority over the people, to their economic, strategic, and political advantage.

Scorpion Orchid is very powerful, though Lloyd Fernando is not a well-known writer of fiction. The novel is outstanding for its influential style in merging the Western and Asian characteristics.

Limitations and Future Studies

The limitation of this study is the lack of previous research studies on the novel, especially discussing on multiracial community. Different writer leads to different way of thinking about individual and racial identities. It is hoped that a study of this nature would assist researchers to greater study on the hard truth of multiracial community or plural society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, after a close and careful reading of the novel, the author successfully displays his ability to portray the multiracial identity of Malaya and Singapore by combining reality with fiction. One of the possible reasons is to show to the world the challenges and difficulties faced by the people who have to go through the conflict in a country with plural society since each race has their own personal perspectives of different aspects of life.

Acknowledgement

Thank you to my co-authors for countless contributions in making this paper possible. Besides that, I am grateful that Universiti Teknologi MARA, Cawangan Pulau Pinang has been supporting and motivating us in writing this paper.

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