

## Silverfish New Writing Series: An Introduction to a New “Nationalism”

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**Abstract** The rise of a Malaysian literature since independence that saw the establishment of ASAS 50 before independence followed by GAPENA in the 1970s recognised the importance of literature’s role in promoting a unified people of a post-colonial rule. Nationalist claims that Malaysian literature must reflect the Malay identity with its values, institutions and symbols has been rewarded with the tremendous growth of literature written in Bahasa Melayu and the growing numbers of Malay authors. However, as we enter into the New Millenium and a global age where identity is often a miasme of multicultural experiences irrespective of country, distance, race or religion, a Malaysian literature which has outgrown its postcolonial *raison d’être* has to redefine its goals and *weltanschauung* that appears to have changed dramatically from its inception. A fine example can be found in the *Silverfish New Writing Series* which appears to be championing a “nationalism.” This is especially true of the short stories contributed by writers of the Malay descent in the first book of the series edited by Amir Muhammad.

**Keywords:** Malaysian, English, Literature, *Silverfish New Writing Series*, Malay, identity

**Abstrak** Peranan kesusasteraan sebagai penyatu masyarakat sebelum kemerdekaan telah diiktiraf dengan penubuhan ASAS 50 yang disusuli dengan GAPENA pada tahun 1970-an. Semangat tersebut menyebabkan kerajaan menggalakkan pemupukan identiti Melayu dalam bentuk nilai, institusi dan simbol telah membantu perkembangan kesusasteraan Melayu dan menentukan kelahiran penulis Melayu dengan pesatnya. Walau bagaimanapun, perubahan tanggapan atau “weltanschauung” masyarakat terhadap persepsi negara, jarak, ras dan agama dalam era millennia ini telah menyebabkan “raison d’être” pascakolonial seperti mana yang dinyatakan dianggap sudah tidak relevan. Kepengarangan Malaysia dan karya mereka yang mencerminkan kesedaran terhadap perubahan ini wujud dalam siri *Silverfish New Writing Series*. Koleksi tulisan cerpen, novel dan

*puisi ini ditulis oleh pengarang Melayu dalam Bahasa Inggeris dan diedit oleh Amir Muhammad, menunjukkan keinginan terhadap satu konsep baru, iaitu “nasionisme.”*

**Kata kunci:** *Malaysia, Inggeris, Kesusasteraan, Siri Penulisan Baru Silverfish, Melayu, identiti*

## INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian literary scene has seen the fruits of the post-independence move to establish a Malaysian Literature in Malay from the Generation 50 writers. Malaysian Literature in English however, having suffered the blows of marginalisation by national policies prompting some to call it “aimless literature” (*sastera kehilangan*) (Tham, 2001:53) has since flowered into a form of contemporary Malaysian Literature to be contended with. This is especially true with the publication of Tash Aw’s *The Harmony Silk Factory* which won the 2005 Whitbread First Novel and Commonwealth Writers Prize for best first novel. Although it is too soon to say, there appears to be a renaissance in the Malaysian English literary scene; the increase in the number of publications especially in creative fiction certainly suggests this possibility.

After Malaysia’s separation from Singapore, Malaysian Literature in English suffered flagging spurts of recognisance in the 1960s where only a handful of writers like Shirley Lim, Chuah Guat Eng, M. Shanmmulingam and Kee Thuan Chye were left under the banner of Malaysian writers while Edwin Thumboo and a host of others migrated across the causeway. Until then, literature in English was only produced by a small minority of elite, many of whom were previous graduates of University Malaya from different ethnic races.<sup>1</sup> In their introduction to the *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, Muhammad Quayum and Peter Wicks (2001) highlighted the small English-speaking community and the angst of Malaysian writers writing in English. They termed it as an inability to find a “common pool of consciousness” (p. xi) that many of the writers from the second generation of Malaysian English writers exploited in their works. Within the compilation, Wong Phui Nam’s (2001:102) personal perspective of a Malaysian English writer describes the dilemma as a “loss and absence of a pre-existing stable order” of values, culture and spirit. Ee Tiang Hong, Edwin Thumboo,

Shirley Lim, Chin Woon Ping, and Krishen Jit, to name a few, were all progenies of an era between the 1980s till the 1990s that was consumed by the incongruence of their existence and their emigrant identities.

Compared to the works of the sixties and seventies that were largely influenced by the retreating colonials, the literary largesse that emerged had partially left the colonial influence behind. Lloyd Fernando (2001:35) called the literary works that exhibited colonial and local flavours as an "international style." Self-conscious as it was demonstrated by Wong Phui Nam's (2001) *Remembering Grandma* and Shirley Lim's (1994) foreword piece in *Monsoon History* entitled "Learning English," the lament of the "lack of" has ironically produced a hybrid identity which when compounded served as a hybrid pool of consciousness. Despite dissenters like Wong (2001) who continued to deplore the absence of consciousness in the likes of Grecian or the Chinese ancient classics and Koh Tai Ann's (2001:112) insistence on the mythical claims of poets who have physically emigrated away from their homeland, the hybrid identity has nevertheless aligned and enhanced the focus of emerging writers such as Beth Yahp<sup>2</sup> and the later works of existing poets like Ee Tiang Hong, Shirley Lim and Chin Woon Ping.<sup>3</sup> The dominant thematic concern in these writers' works was identity and the disparity between the land, the language and their consciousness that was a mix of the local and the colonial. Wong (2001:106) described the migrant milieu that was prevalent in the works as "the horror of the brute unadorned physicality of existence" which drove some like Ee, Lim<sup>4</sup> and Chin to migrate.

However, the new works that emerged in the early twentieth century, including Wong's (2002) own *Ways of Exile*, K.S. Maniam's (2003) *In a Far Country* and Shirley Lim's (2001) novel *Joss and Gold*, testified to a physical departure merely to distance themselves to recoup, reassess and refocus. It is these works that exemplified the uncovering or the discovery of hybridity that explained the celebration of the multiple identities or metaphors of different countries, variety of influences, different spiritualisms and most importantly, individual pasts in each of the works. Beth Yahp (1993), an early Malaysian migrant to Australia in the eighties and her novel *Crocodile Fury*, demonstrates the stirring of new beginnings that began as early as the eighties for Malaysian writer's writing in English or in exile. The works that materialised in greater numbers in the late nineties and early twenty-first century celebrated the rich collage of the Malaysian identity that was not

only unique, but well-timed to receive the advent of postcolonial[ity] and postmodernism into the Malaysian academic scene.

The physically-exiled writer and the writer writing in another language no longer despaired of their apparent destitution as the interest in the postcolonial condition exposed a common milieu evidenced in the many voices that erupted around the world. The transformation of the prevalent destitution in the previous works to a growing pride in diversity appeared to be the impetus writings in English needed. According to Mohammad Quayum (2003:182), there were only seven major Malaysian writers in English from the 1940s–1990s, with the exception of those who wrote sporadically. Now it would seem, just the numbers have almost doubled. There are journalists cum writers like Rehman Rashid, Karim Raslan and the playwrights like Huzir Sulaiman and Jit Murad, political academics like Syed Husin Ali and housewives like Lydia Teh and Yvonne Lee. A glimpse of the number of anthologies of poetry, novels or plays in the Silverfishbooks website as well as the MPH (Malaysia Publishing House) website confirms the growth of Malaysian literature in English. Moving across gender, genre and race, these works serve as evidence of the changes to the status and roles of writers as well. The posturing of early postcolonial writers is missing from the frank and, at times, brutally honest accounts or depictions of life in the metropolitan centre. The diverse racial, economic, political and educational backgrounds of these new writers have created for themselves an obscure tag of “metropolitan writers.”

The gradual drift from abrogations of postcoloniality to postmodern representations of identity is a phenomenon that has caused increased literary activity across the globe. The themes of freedom and anti-hegemonic as well as anti-establishment philosophies of a postmodern culture has prompted the marginalised, neglected, ostracised and alienated to discourse on their hybrid experiences. Hybrid identities that expunge ontological expressions of identity thrived on the tangential representations. Malaysian writers discover that they are free to indulge in transformations and transcendence that afford greater creative grounds for writing in another language. The preoccupation of the writers with the lack of a common pool of consciousness as dramatised in their poems from the sixties to the eighties has receded. The writers in the late nineties and early twenty-first century shared a larger “pool of consciousness” with all postcolonial and postmodern writers from commonwealth countries and previous colonies.

But the concern of this paper is the inclusion of Malay writers among the writers writing in English. There were only three major Malay writers writing in English between the seventies and eighties. They are Muhammad Haji Salleh, Adibah Amin and Salleh Ben Joned. After the decree that established Bahasa Melayu as the official language of Malaysian education in 1967, these writers chose different recourses to their literary career. According to Muhammad Quayum (2003a:p. xv), Salleh Ben Joned<sup>5</sup> and Adibah Amin<sup>6</sup> continued to write bilingually as evidenced in their collection of poems or articles and novels in both languages. However, Muhammad Haji Salleh, who started writing poetry in English, abandoned the language creatively and never turned back.<sup>7</sup> For the Malay writers writing in English, the larger issue of writing in English was the implications and connotations attached to the language itself. They were the “sons or daughters of the earth” who wrote in the colonial language at the turn of independence. It takes a lot of courage to continue and turn against one’s own mother-tongue as the African writers Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Tiong Ho (Ismail 2002:109) continuously underline through their fictional works in English or their own mother tongue. While Achebe chose to continue to write in English as a means of defeating the “enemy” (colonial) in their own language, Ngugi felt that the only way to defeat the colonial influence was to withdraw from all aspects of the colonial rule, including their language (p. 110).

#### CHANGING SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

But the significance and the signification of the English Language have changed in these postcolonial and postmodern settings. After independence, the English Language stood for the remnants of colonial rule<sup>8</sup> which had to be renounced from a political perspective in regards to the tenuous relationship between literature and politics. The formation of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 1959, after the evocation by the Third Congress on Malay Language and Malay Letters in 1956 organised by Angkatan Sasterawan, or ASAS 50, had cemented the efforts to establish Malaysian independence through Malay literary endeavours (Tham, 2001:40). The supremacy of Bahasa Melayu was sealed with the passing of the National Language Bill in 1969 which necessitated all national schools to use Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction (Syed Husin, 2008:163). The martyr[isation] of the English Language in the name of nation building and nationalism that provoked a debate between those who felt that Malaysian literature should be

in the Malay Language and those who supported a pluralistic interpretation of Malaysian Literature quickly deteriorated into a racial debate between the Malays and the non-Malays. Tham (2001) in his article entitled “The Politics of Literary Development in Malaysia,” observed that the different views stemmed from J.A. Fishman’s (1968) conclusions of “Nationalism” and “Nationism.”

“Nationalism” he claims is infused with the romantic and traditional notions of one culture and one language regardless of plurality while “Nationism” is interested in “the maintenance of the existing socio-cultural *status quo*” across a plural setting through a sharing of cultural and political identities (Tham, 2001:101). The institutionalisation of Bahasa Melayu and the subsequent marginalisation of the English Language accounted for the small output and lamentations by the writer’s writing in English during the seventies and eighties. The Congress of National Culture in August 1971 emphasised the necessity for Bahasa Melayu to be the language of a national literature through the three points outlined in the cultural policy (Tham 2001:51). For nationalism to take hold, the “national culture must be based on the culture of the indigenous communities of Malaysia.” Only aspects of “other cultures that is found appropriate may be incorporated into the national culture,” but most importantly, “Islam must be an important element in the development of the national culture” (p. 51). Bahasa Melayu became the bonding agent of cultural and national integration for the “rakyat” that was affirmed in the eight points outlined by Professor Taib Osman and to justify the promotion of Bahasa Melayu. Among the eight reasons provided by Professor Taib Osman and Ismail Hussein, the first and perhaps the strongest justification is that it is understood by all Malaysians who have undergone national education. Tham concludes that the rest of the seven reasons, which includes the language being the language spoken by the majority of indigenous races and being the language of the *bumiputera*, led to suggestions that these reasons hinged on the Malay political legitimacy of *bumiputera* status.

With the arrival of globalisation in the late nineties, the need to reassess these reasons and the implications of the education policy becomes imminent. The previously neglected and marginalised English Language that had been labelled “colonial language,” is now the language of economic globalisation and internationalisation. Chinua Achebe argues that the English Language is important for national development as has been recognised

by India and Nigeria (Ismail, 2002:109). Even certain quarters of the Malaysian government has recognised the importance of the language not as an appendage to colonisation, but a bridge for better communication and global understanding. Issues related to the weak command of the English<sup>9</sup> Language such as the large numbers of unemployment amongst the local graduates and the need to learn Mathematics and Science in English has become the priority of Malaysian leaders who want to make Malaysians competitive in the global economic market. Most importantly, the shift in views of the English Language is reflected in the pursuits of Malaysian writers in the literary field.

### SILVERFISHBOOKS

Literature in English has seen a spurt of growth in terms of quantity and quality. The increase in the number of writings and the emergence of new writers also indicate a new paradigm of writing in the Malaysian English literary canon pointed out by Amir Muhammad (2001), the editor of *Silverfish 1* in his foreword. *Silverfish 1*, like the other collections in the Silverfish collection which numbers seven at the moment, is a publication that represents the best of professional and non-professional Malaysian writers writing in English. It is a product of Silverfish publisher's managing director Raman Krishnan's (*The Star*, 2 May 2007:N17) initiative to publish an anthology of short stories which led to a call for entries, published in the newspapers in 2001, which resulted in over 200 entries from Malaysia, Singapore and abroad (Silverfishbooks, 2009).

This first book of the series is important not only because of its honoured inaugural position, but also because of the contributors and their contributions which provide a glimpse of a new *oeuvre* of literary works to come. What marks *Silverfish 1* as different from any other anthology of short stories is the great number of Malay writers' contributions. Muslin Abdullah Hamid, Noraini Md Yusof, the late Shahril Morat, Ridzwan Othman, Karim Raslan, Ruhayat, Huzir Sulaiman and Singaporean Kaysidayat Ishak who together with 19 others from Indian Punjabis, Chinese and one or two contributions from abroad make up the list of contributors short listed by Amir Muhammad. Apart from expressing his skepticism on the profitability of this venture, he also considered it a coincidence that the selected stories are demographically representative of Malaysia.



But it is the contents of the short stories that excite the reader for two reasons. Gone is the preoccupation with identity and country that the previous writers were obsessed with. In its place is a myriad of new imageries, symbolisms and concerns that has been influenced by a new *weltanschauung*, courtesy of the late modern and new millennium influences. This is especially true of the present representation of modern Malaysians writing in English which includes writers of the Malay descent. Their inclusion and subsequent multiplication in the field of literature in English lead to new perspectives toward Malaysian Literature in English and the English Language itself. This paper is interested in the implications of their inclusion on the development of literature in English and the transient role of English. The changes detected in the artistic approaches and concerns as compared to the conventional expectations suggest a change in a larger framework of language and literature in English.

Amir Muhammad (2001:5), in his foreword of *Silverfish 1*, admits that “English is now very much a Malaysian and Singaporean language.” He also agrees that the stories in the collection hint at a “restlessness and contradiction” of a “Malaysia . . . till in progress” (p. 5). In the *Silverfish* short stories collection, there are 15 Malay writers from Malaysia while the remaining are made up of Chinese, Indians and Singaporean Malays and Chinese as well as Malaysian writers writing from abroad. Although the editors, Amir Muhammad, Satendra Nanden, Dina Zaman, Professor Mohammed Quayum, Satendra Nair, Robert Raymer, Dipika Mukherjee, Ashraf Jamal and Shanti Moorthy, deny any attempts at a deliberate demographic representation as one of their criteria of the collections, the works that are featured in the series are racial, gender and age conscious. However, as the stories themselves attest to, the author’s age and background do not dictate the type of short stories that is produced. Mohammad Mohammad-Sharin’s (2004) traditionally conventional “The Sandal Thief” does not reflect his American education or interest in chemistry, neither does Julia Shamsul’s (2003) years of involvement in information technology stop her from expressing herself as a mother and a woman in her touching short story entitled “Mama’s Decision.” This leaves the argument of the influence of social background, career, knowledge and education of the author to rest.



## NEW DISCOURSES OF MALAY WRITERS WRITING IN ENGLISH

Clearly evident in the Silverfish collection of short stories is the artistic quality and tremendous talent that are demonstrated on paper by these Malay authors in a language not their own. Among the 15 contributions, there are those that fall into the "traditional" category, while the others appear to be conveying a new *weltanschauung* that is contingent to the metropolitan Malay centre. Although these authors never indicate the reasons for writing in English rather than their mother tongue Bahasa Melayu, the brief background provided of each author in the Silverfish collection suggests a confidence in a language gained at tertiary level abroad or exposure through interactions with the English-speaking elite community in the metropolitan area like Kuala Lumpur and its active English literary scene. Under education policies that sent the brightest of the Malay students abroad to further their education and the continuous economic attractions of the metropolises, the changes in the Malay perception of life is imminent and is implied and projected through their artistic output. The purpose of this paper is to trace these changes through an analysis of artistic expression in the short stories written by authors of the Malay descent in a microscopic representation that is the seven Silverfish short stories series. And in the process, assess the impact on the language and literature in English.

## WRITERS AND ISLAM

As expected, not all the author's exhibited new perspectives of life is congruent to the traditional source of creativity which is the rural Malay past and the Muslim religion in these modern Malay fiction. Admittedly, there are "traditional approaches" to the short story which refer to stories that feature a backdrop of the "Malay Village" and "wooden houses" in Norliza Baharom's timeless piece entitled "The Old Bicycle" in *Silverfish 6*, Mohammed Mohammed-Sharin's "The Sandal Thief" (*Silverfish 4*) set in the mosque and the moving piece from Noraini Md Yusof entitled "Till Their Blood Ran Dry" in *Silverfish 1*. Perhaps the most traditional is Noraini's (2001) piece which tells about the ironies of life for the Malays who are caught in an unforgiving past and a present that threatens to overwhelm them. Noraini presents her thematic concern through the conventional projection of the differences between the younger and older generation of father and son. This is reiterated by Mohamad Mohamad-Sharin's (2004)

depiction of the sandal thief and his parents who piously lynched their son for a similar crime unconsciously committed by the mother as well. However, the relationship with God and Islam is perceived and projected with a difference in Nurul Ikhlas Abdul Hadi's (2008) "Sitting on the Fence" (*Silverfish* 7). The "I" persona indicates that she perceives her relationship with God as an individual experience that has nothing to do with mandatory moral works that accompany her beliefs that includes going for prayers or finishing her homework as dictated and expected by customs and tradition. The persona prefers to metaphorically "sit[ing] on the fence" as experiencing an intimate moment with God on her own terms (p.75). Whether it is in criticism of or in praise of Islam, works by these writers would direct their criticism to individuals and never at Islam. Each of the above-mentioned short stories touched on their faith either as unconscious appendages to the moral message imparted by the muslim authors like Norliza Baharom's "The Old Bicycle" and Noraini Yusof's "Till their Blood Ran Dry" or in implied gestures as demonstrated in Mohamad-Sharin's "The Sandal Thief." As Amin Malak (2005:11) suggests in his book entitled *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English*, the Muslim writers who write in a "language with a perceived hostile history toward Islam" as with the English Language has not brought dishonour to themselves, but has in fact rendered their creative work as "a site of encounter for cultures and peoples on equal terms." The problem faced by Malaysian writers writing in English of Malay descent is the danger of being perceived as radical or deliberately anarchistic which is not too far from the truth with the controversial play by Huzir Sulaiman entitled "Election Day" and the provocative "Lebih Kecoh" by the multiracial group AKSHEN.

The writers generally display a fearless analysis of the history of racial relations, religion and political inclinations when writing in English. They challenge the borders of social, religious and political propriety with their creative styles incorporating new images and metaphors to convey their ideas and perspectives. This is best seen in Huzir's play entitled "Election Day" (*Silverfish* 1) and "Lebih Kecoh" (*Silverfish* 1) by AKSHEN. Offensive language, crude and dirty images of cadavers and the evocation of environmental pollution in "Election Day" forcefully implies the reality of distrust, ignorance and secrecy that prevail over the governance of the country. To silence the condemnation of the lost generation of modern Malaysian who do not cherish or have any knowledge of Malaysia's fight

for Independence, AKSHEN, a multiracial group of youths, fictionalise the events that run up to Independence in their play entitled "Lebih Kecoh" (*Silverfish 1*). In it, they question the validity of the May 13th racial riot through the various accounts given of the events that led to its culmination and the myths of "the lazy Malay," the "money-minded Chinese" and the "smelly kling" by tagging these events as "experimental theatre" (*Silverfish 1*) with the colonial as director. The element of protest and the relative freedom in which these authors feel demonstrated through the lack of restraint in the types of issues that are raised when writing in English suggests that English is fast becoming a language of protest for the Malays writing in English.

### COLONISING THE COLONIAL

With half the world adapting their own version of English to their daily communication, English is no longer a perpetuation of British colonialism as feared by the pre- and post-Independence policy makers. Perhaps the contentiousness that was linked to the use of English in national literature should consider with gravity African writer Achebe's arguments about learning the language in order to defeat the enemy on his territory (Ismail, 2002:5). Karim Raslan's (2001:40) excerpt from his novel "*The Anarchist*"<sup>10</sup> that is included in *Silverfish 1* is a testimony of the possibilities of delving into and creating characters of a different race, culture and country by a Malaysian author. Authors from abroad like Arthur Golden (2005) and his *Memoirs of a Geisha* is but one of many who has succeeded across culture and gender. Karim's attempt at writing about Victorian England through the eyes of a restless young English gentleman can be perceived as anarchy against British traditions, identity, country and novel writing. Nevertheless, the British has lost its claim to the spoken or written English in its past colonies evidenced in the emergence of Singlish and Manglish.<sup>11</sup> T.J. Cribb (1999:119) once declared that because it is so easily accessible, it no longer belongs to any particular country, descent or race.

In fact, the kind of English that is used in daily communication in the metropolitan centre of Malaysia as clearly projected in "Election Day" (*Silverfish 1*:82) bears little resemblance to the Queen's English that was much touted in the colonial days. The banter between Francis and Dedric on their journey to the voting center attests to it:

“Francis, how much do you know about Fozi?”  
“Enough, what. He’s a nice f’ler. What are you asking?”  
“What do you know about Fozi history?”  
“What you know, lah . . . .”

(*Silverfish 1*, 84)

The abbreviation of “fellow” to “f’ler,” the question tag “what” hovering as subject at the end of the reply and the interjections of “lah” give this exchange an unmistakable Malaysian twang. This is evidence of a language that has been colonised rather than colonising. Writing in English, especially in the creative field can no longer be misconstrued as an act of perpetrating colonial agenda.

#### THEMATIC CONCERNS, LANDSCAPES AND PERSPECTIVES

The choice of language is not the only unconventionality exhibited by the Malay writers. Some writers have abandoned the sentimentality of the past to depict what they perceive as the reality of the present. For instance, in “Calculator” (*Silverfish 1*) by Ridzwan Othman (2001), the cold callous and unpretentious machine is the compass that decides the fate of the lovers Jane and Suleiman. While Jane hopes for a more compassionate treatment toward the cost of marriage to Suleiman on her part which is to embrace Islam, Suleiman sees it all in terms of money. Her confidence in the marriage and her future is reduced to numbers on a calculator. The dominant motive used across the short stories no longer harks back to the sentimentality of a past that refuses to relinquish its hold on the present but the lure of materialism and money. This is reiterated in Juliah Shamsul’s (2003) “Mama’s Decision” (*Silverfish 3*:72) which tells of a young mother succumbing to her husband’s plea to abort her baby on the flimsy excuse that it would hamper their life style and stunt their career prospects.

However, the thematic concerns of the short stories are still “traditional” and “conventional” in their concern with human fallibility and their objective to bring about change to circumstances beyond the control of poor rural folk. The metaphor of the old bicycle in the short story with the same title (*Silverfish 6*) is the typical image used to symbolise the conventional resilience of the Malay community of a *kampong* that is committed to improving their economic conditions through sheer honest

hardwork. The sentimental image of old folks with creases on their foreheads chewing betel nut or riding an old bicycle to ferry their grandchildren to school is nostalgic convention. The objective being the endorsement of the culture of simplicity and communal harmony found in the past but absent in the present. Noraini's (2001) use of the rubber trees in "Till Their Blood Ran Dry" (*Silverfish 1:67*) reiterates the conventional use of rural Malay folks as the protagonists of her story to deliver the message of destructive urbanity. It is to be expected that Malay writers would draw on their cultural pool of consciousness that non-Malay writers would not be privileged with. The parochialism of their short stories like Mohamad Mohamad-Sharin's (2004) unobtrusive sandal in "The Sandal Thief" (*Silverfish 4:40*) is contingent to local knowledge of the problems and challenges faced by the Malay race pertaining to their faith and culture that remains not only as a source of their creativity but a clear mark of Malay writers writing either in English or the Malay Language. Clearly the language has not denuded the short stories of their cultural or spiritual mark that identifies them as Malaysian works.

However, there are signs that a new paradigm is emerging as mentioned earlier. These established "traditions" and "conventions" of Malays are what some of the Malay writers contradict. For example, the tropes of marriage and romance which are traditional stalwarts in Malay literature are treated with cynical shabbiness in "Butterfly" by Doreen M. Nor (2004) (*Silverfish 4*). It charts the changes in Nina as an 18-year-old innocent on her first disastrous date with Rashid, the boy of her dreams. Hers is a painful journey from innocence to experience that is almost deliberately depicted as a violation of the spirit. She receives a spiritual baptism into the real world through the smearing of animal blood from the cat Rashid accidentally hits. The change in the projection of loss is evident from the type of persona to the emotional degradation Nina suffered at the hands of Rashid and his friends. The loss of innocence is not slathered with emotional or physical abuse that is normally linked to teenagers and romances, but Doreen has conjured an equally profound loss that readers of any age can relate to. Another novelty is Amir Hafizi's (2003) mentally challenged persona in "Hedgehog's Dilemma" (*Silverfish 3*) who hates the insensitive world of the normal people preferring suicide rather than life in a world he perceives as brutal. For him, romance is experienced only in movies and children means more expenses that parents can ill afford. Humanism is not celebrated with images of the wise father, loving mother

and sanctimonious religion. Instead, it is a patriarchal society that has no vision except to inflict violence upon mankind through *jihad* because of the racial tensions between the different races. The real and the imaginary world of hate of the persona gradually cease to be different. These criticisms are aimed at humanity on a universal level and add another dimension to traditional perspectives. Amir's negative projection of modern life is echoed in Doreen's (2004) *bildungsroman* that introduces a new form of modern gothic horror where people are the monsters and fear is generated from the common and daily practices of human lives. The negativity suggests a cynicism and the authors' objective which is to rebuke and chastise through the horror that is generated from each piece of work.

Gothic horror precludes the usual sightings of unidentified amorphous beings in the likes of "hantu(s)," "lembaga(s)" and "Pontianak(s)." In its place is the decrepit grandfather in Ruhayat's (2001) "Hall of Shadows" whose betrayal is avenged symbolically through the killing of patriarchy and the past by the grandsons and granddaughters who perceive freedom as a smothering of the past. But it is Muslin Abdul Hamid's (2001a) "This Evening Pilgrim" that touches a cord in readers who again, like the rest of the writers, is concerned about the insensitivities of society which reduces a prostitute to the likes of a beast. The cold recipe for suicide in "Plat du Jour" also by Muslin Abdul Hamid (2001b) underlines with chilling clarity the materialism and disassociation of the living. Presented as a recipe of death, the lack of plot, hero and heroine, or feelings aptly conveys the disparate lives of modern living. But perhaps the most radical depiction of love that demonstrates the changes in the Malay perspectives is "From the Journals of Azlan Mohammad" by Abdul Aziz (2003). The story begins with Azlan declaring his acceptance of his homosexuality and finally falling in love with a stranger in a seedy bar. The triumph of romance and love is no longer an exclusive sphere between genders as there is equality between the sexes.

The feminist perspective that has already found its footing in Malay Literature, most especially with the women writers, is also evident in the writers writing in English. In "Mama's Decision" (*Silverfish 3*), the protagonist begins to hate her husband after the abortion while NF Abdul Manaf's (2002) protagonist hides her shame and pain of being the illegitimate child of a Pakistani father behind a violent streak that culminates in a gruesome murder of her maid to prevent the shame, a secret, from

emerging. While NF warns of taking the feminist bandwagon too far with "Woman from Hell" (*Silverfish 2*), Julia Shamsul (2003) urges woman to be in control of herself and her body. Even humour is tinged with a darkness that is demonstrated by Sharil Morat's (2001) "My Chicken Story" where the wife of a farmer is brutally killed by her husband who assumes the chicken on his bed is not his wife.

It is clear that despite additional thematic concerns and new perspectives, the objectives of the Malay writers writing in English still remains "traditional" as before which is to improve the quality of life and the living. However, the landscape in which they write about has changed from the poverty stricken backdrop of a rubber plantation or *kampung* to the metropolitan centers of nice cars, fancy houses, prostitution, gay bars and parties. The objectives of the literary works have expended to include the improvement of the conditions of living in a sterile, amoral, materialistic and violent world of the metropolitan society. This is congruent to the economic improvements of the Malays which have seen thousands migrating from rural areas to urban cities. According to the Household Income survey conducted by the Department of Statistics in 1999 and 2004, the average growth rate from the years 2000 to 2004 for the Malays/Bumiputera is 4.9 percent, which is among the highest when compared to other races (Syed Husin Ali, 2008:209).

## IMPLICATIONS

The inclusion of Malay authors in the act of writing in English shifts the literature from the periphery to the center. Whether as a language of protest or in the interest of addressing postcolonial perspectives, the Malay writers writing in English do not appear to be drawing from outside of their conventional pool of consciousness, but adding to it to create a new *weltanschauung*. Through their dedication to the shocking techniques, the new modern imageries, symbolisms, personas or protagonists and thematic concerns, the writers attempt to create provocative, taunting stories to initiate change in a society that is becoming increasingly frightening as the modern gothic horror suggests. The disparateness of the many "I" personas also testifies to an increase in the withdrawal of the individual to a personal world that has no links with reality. Previously, the emphasis on sociological and political themes in aid of developing a nationalistic fervour



of “Art for Society” in Malay Literature appears to have taken a diabolical twist (Tham, 2001:43).

The short stories in English by the Malay writers lean toward postmodern disassociation, disparateness and a deracination which is similar to the migrant angst first lamented by Malaysian writer’s writing abroad. They appear to have broken free of the moral realism and aesthetic criteria they were encouraged to foster in order to protest against inhumanity, insincerity, political opportunism, irreligiosity and hypocrisy (Tham, 2001:43). Some of the darkness felt in the stories of humour, horror and unconventional romance insinuate a disillusionment with the exterior world outside their psyche that has instigated the disassociation from the familiar and disparateness between individuals along with a deracination from the nation that was once bound by nationalism. Aside from a small number of stories with “traditional” and “conventional” orientation, the majority of the authors demonstrate an evaluative framework that fearlessly raise sensitive thematic concerns like pluralism, racism and gender to emerge with cross-cultural relevance that suggests a move away for the *weltanschauung* of the rural Malay. The question of urbanity and lost traditions are not the central concern of majority of the stories that appear to reflect an individual perception of a society peopled by only a semblance of humanity. But, despite their unconventional approach, the writers have not erred from Tun Razak’s initial call for Malayan literature to record the political and emotional changes of a particular time and place in Malaysian history (Tham, 2001:44).

It is only a matter of time that the political itinerary that supported literature in Bahasa Melayu ceases to be relevant to a pluralistic society in which the Malay is no longer insecure about their political legitimacy unless provoked.<sup>12</sup> The effects of a globalising economy demands that literature produced by a nation is competitive or else suffer the threat of dying completely through limited circulation and parochial indulgence. Writing in English for the Malays transcend communal identities as demonstrated by African writers like Es’kia Mphahlele, English has consolidated the multitudinous tribes in Africa (Ismail, 2002:7). Malaysian Literature in English can no longer play a marginal role in the light of increasing numbers of publication and Malay authors who are keen to explore new techniques,<sup>13</sup> wider reading audience, new imageries and thematic concerns that truly reflect their existence without the sacrifice of identity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mohammad Quayum differentiated the three early phases in Malaysian literature in English as the era of those who were representatives of imperial power followed by production by natives with imperial license and finally the emergence of modern post-colonial literatures which he borrowed from Fadillah Merican's article "Postcolonialism: Caught in a Time Warp?" published in *A View of Our Own: Ethnocentric Perspectives in Literature*.

<sup>2</sup> Beth Yahp, a Malaysian who has emigrated to Sydney Australia, has been prolifically producing literary works about her Malaysian past since 1984. Her works have garnered the attention of Australia and won awards such as the Victorian Premier's Prize for First Fiction and the Ethnic Affairs Commission Award for her novel entitled *The Crocodile Fury* (1992).

<sup>3</sup> Though small in numbers, the major writers wrote from between the 80's and 90's were prolific. Shirley Lim has four volumes of poetry, three volumes of short stories and a novel to her credit. K.S. Maniam has three novels, four short stories compilation and four plays while Kee Thuan Chye has three plays, two volumes of prose, a few poems and now a novel.

<sup>4</sup> Ee Tiang Hong migrated to Australia, Shirley Lim left for the USA in 1969 (Muhammad Quayum: xvi).

<sup>5</sup> Salleh Ben Joned published *Sajak-sajak Salleh: Poems sacred and profane* in 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Adibah Amin published her *News Straits Times* articles in compilations entitled *As I Was Passing* Vol. 1 (1976) & 2 (1978).

<sup>7</sup> His subsequent literary publications and compilations of poems entitled *Sebuah Unggun di Tepi Danau* (1996) and *Aksara Usia* (1998) won him the title of *Sasterawan Negara* (1991).

<sup>8</sup> The main challenge of writing in English in Malaysia as observed by Prof. Mohammad Quayum (2003:xvii) is not only its colonial connection, but its inability to lay claims on local culture because of language policies.

<sup>9</sup> "Smoother Path to English," *News Straits Times*, 28 June 2002: Quake. "All about language in Maths and Science," *News Straits Times*, 21 December 2008: Education. "Maths and Science in English: Keep or Scrap," *News Straits Times*, 24 January 2009: Nation.

<sup>10</sup> It is claimed to be an excerpt from Karim Raslan's incomplete novel.

<sup>11</sup> Lee Su Kim's book entitled *Malaysian English at Its Wackiest* (2000) has marked the type of English spoken and written by Malaysians as belonging to Malaysians. It is also common knowledge that all Singaporeans speak "singlish" or a mixture of Hokkien and pidgin English.

<sup>12</sup> The issue involving the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English that has hopefully been resolved with the results of studies conducted on the SPM exams as reported in *NST* since 28 June 2002, 16 April 2006, 21 December 2008

and 24 January 2009, crops up every time there is an election or a contention for leadership around the corner.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, NF Abdul Manaf, an Associate Professor of English Language and Literature who has won prizes for her fiction in Malay has also turned to writing creatively and academically in English.

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