



A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RACE RELATIONS IN LLOYD FERNANDO'S *GREEN IS THE COLOUR* AND YASMIN AHMAD'S "SEPET"

BY

NIK NASRAH BINTI NIK MOHD NASIR

INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

2008

"O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other"

(al-Hujurat:13).

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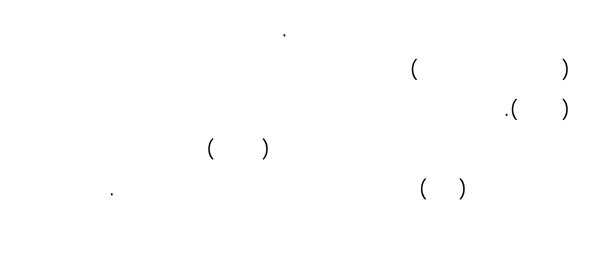
A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master of Human Sciences (English Literary Studies)

Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences International Islamic University Malaysia

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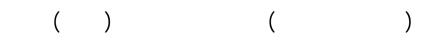
ABSTRACT

This study compares the treatment of race relations between the Malays and Chinese in Malaysia through discussions made of a selected novel and movie. The novel is by Lloyd Fernando *Green is the Colour* while the film is "Sepet" by Yasmin Ahmad. To lend further credence comparisons are made to examine if there are similarities and/or differences between what is portrayed in the written world (novel) and that in the visual world (movie) where race relations is concerned. The study also seeks to decipher perceptions of race relations by two writers of different gender. Issues relating to gender difference are also employed in an attempt to reinterpret literature from various perspectives regarding the issue of race relations. This comparative study is important to pave a new way of communicating and exploring cultural significance of race relations. The study provides some form of conclusion on Malay-Chinese race relations in Malaysia as portrayed by Fernando's *Green is the Colour* and Yasmin Ahmad's "Sepet". It is significant in the sense that not only does it attempt to explore this crucial subject in a new manner but also it brings in two different genres to enhance a better understanding of Malaysia as a multiracial nation.





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APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (English Literary Studies).

Nor Faridah Abd. Manaf Supervisor

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (English Literary Studies).

Umar Abdurrahman Examiner

This dissertation was submitted to the Department of English Language and Literature and is accepted as a partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (English Literary Studies).

> M.A. Quayum Head, Department of English Language and Literature

This dissertation was submitted to the Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences and is accepted as a partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (English Literary Studies).

> Hazizan Md. Noon Dean, Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Nik Nasrah Binti Nik Mohd Nasir

Signature.....

Date.....

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To my beloved parents, husband and family who are always by my side in my happy and hard times.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In our immediate circle, remarks such as "*Keling balik India*" You] Indians, go back to India"), "*Cina balik Tongsan*" ("[You] Chinese, go back to China") and "*Melayu balik kampong*" ("[You] Malays, go back to your village") were merely good humoured banter and not the taunts they could, and did, become in the context of street quarrels (Sheng, 2003, p.9).

Race is a signifier of identity, of who we are, where we are from and how we are recognized. It enables us to explore the ways in which ethnic relations are being defined and perceived by people; how they talk and think about their own group as well as other groups, and how particular world views are being maintained or contested. The significance of race relations to people can also be portrayed in the works of literature like novels and films. Fiction and motion picture, in recent years are often interrelated. For example novels such as *Lord of the Rings* (2002) and *Vanity Fair* (2004) have been made into films as part of popular culture and this phenomenon has encouraged most people to see movies and read works of literature. Clearly appreciation of the literary text can be enhanced through the study of visual arts such as films. Therefore films, as well as novels are interrelated and they can be as a medium to propagate ideology to a larger audience.

An important reason why this study is interested in race relations and nationalism is the fact that such a phenomenon has become so visible in many societies that it has become impossible to ignore them. According to Turner (1988), in the early twentieth century, issues of ethnicity and nationalism were expected to decrease in importance and eventually vanish as a result of modernisation,

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industrialisation and individualism. However, this never happened. On the contrary, ethnicity as well as race relations and nationalism have grown in political importance in the world. People are often proud of their heredity. The sense of superiority brought about by the whites in the history of humankind has its effect on politics of race relations. Hence, they consider themselves as leaders and dominate others of their interest. In this sense, race and political ideology of nation are interrelated.

Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to explore issues of race relations especially among Malays and Chinese in Malaysia. As pointed out by Turner, images, as well as words, carry connotations (Turner, 1988). For this reason, the study will focus on Lloyd Fernando *Green is the Colour* and Yasmin Ahmad's film "Sepet" on Malay-Chinese race relations. The study seeks to explore the relationship between these two major races in a comparative study through the medium of fiction and film because undoubtedly, they often offer different interpretations of the present reality. The study also seeks to decipher the development of two different media; the film and the novel and how the portrayal of race and gender is determined by gender oriented writing. In such instances, comparative film and fiction studies are used as a representation of issues of race relations. Film has been seen as a social process of making images, sounds, and signs, since it too like fiction has some bearing on culture and its audience. Fiction being part of the 'high' culture has generally less impact on society/culture than film which belongs to the medium of popular culture.

Through its methods of communication, film also acts as a significant message decoder on issues of race relations in society. Film in a way functions as an information feeder to cultural studies. It initially analyses the ways by which social meanings are generated through culture; society's way of life and system of values as revealed through such apparently ephemeral forms and practices as television, radio,

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sports, comics, film, music and fashion. As rightly pointed out by Turner (1988), 'culture' is seen as a manifestation of a 'way of life' as well as a system for producing meaning, sense, or consciousness, especially those systems and media of representation which give images their cultural significance. Such significance is what makes film, television and advertising the prime targets for research and 'textual analysis' (ibid, p.10). An analysis of *Green is the Colour* and "Sepet" will be made in light of post-colonial and gender studies as a way of communicating and exploring cultural significance on race relations issues.

Although Malaysia has gone through many changes after its Independence in 1957, its social and political conditions are not really conducive to racial unity. In *Racial Politics in Malaysia* (1989), Teik suggests that:

Malaysia's multiethnic society appears calm on the surface but, as the Malay proverb correctly cautions us, *jika air tenang, jangan sangka tiada buaya* (when the water looks calm, don't imagine there isn't any crocodile). Interethnic tension is still very much in existence in Malaysian society. Only a slight provocation is required to cause it erupt into the open (p. 7).

Fernando's main concern in *Green is the Colour* seems to be inevitably affected by the trauma of May 13, 1969 racial riots. Of Malaysia's nearly 20 million populations in 1997, Bumiputeras accounted for 61 per cent, the Chinese 30 per cent, and the Indians 8 per cent; other minor ethnic groups made up the remaining 1 percent (Gomez, 2004, pp.167-168). In *Tracing the Ethnic Divide: Race, Rights and Redistribution in Malaysia*, Gomez (2004) agrees that although ethnic tensions in Malaysia have normally been attributed to cultural factors, it has been perceived that the primary causes for such tension since the 1980's are economic factors, especially those particularly affecting the Bumiputeras (primarily the Malays) and the Chinese.

This view is supported by Rehman Rashid in his book, A Malaysian Journey (1998).

He is of the opinion that:

For the longest time it was considered to be mostly an economic thing, that eventually with the raising of economic standards, there would come an end to the idea that various races were divided or distinguished by what they did for the economy - the shopkeepers being Chinese, the farmers, the fishermen and peasantry being Malays, and the workers, the labourers and the plantation and estate workers being Indian. There has been this assiduous effort in social engineering to try and eliminate these differences between the races. It has happened to a great extent. There is now a new and burgeoning middle class in this country that didn't exist a generation or two ago. The trouble and difficulty we are facing here is of course that our political process is predicated upon these differences. So in a sense, the mechanisms, the systems and processes that we instituted in order to rise above these distinctions have now become something of a strait jacket (p.14).

The creation of a multi-ethnic society in Malaysia, and the nexus between ethnic problems and economic as well as political issues, is largely a legacy of British colonialism from the late 18th century to 1957, when Independence was granted (Gomez, 2004). However, according to W. Montgomery Watt (1961), in his book *Islam and the Integration of Society*, Islam is able to unite people of different races and social traditions:

In most societies, however, there are important differences of economic status or class and even of race. It is one of the noteworthy achievements of Islam that it has united in a great society, men of different races and social traditions (p.125).

Hence, the complexity of a plural society can be overcome if there is mutual respect

for one another.

The British and Japanese did manipulate race relations for their ulterior motives. Teik (1989) again exposes the colonial factor as an influence on race relation (Malay-Chinese) matters:

The Japanese did try to prop up the Malays and, to some extent, the Indians and to suppress the Chinese as much as they could. Consequently they wrecked the rapport that had existed, particularly between the Malays and the Chinese. The British were also ambivalent towards the races. When the Japanese armies were still occupying the country, they contacted the Chinese through Force 136 and hinted that the Chinese community would be rewarded politically for their services. After the Japanese surrendered and Force 136's disillusioned Chinese allies revolted, they shifted to the Malays for support and backed their demands for the abolition of the Malayan Union (pp. 29-30).

Even though race relations during the colonial time did contribute to the prevailing social and economic imbalance, works of literature like *Green is the Colour* and films like "Sepet" seem to reveal one's ulterior hope to see Malaysia as a harmonious multiracial nation. Besides issues of Malay-Chinese race relations, this study also focuses on the need to understand, love and value this relation in order for Malaysia to move forward as a strong nation. Issues relating to love and loyalty to one's nation regardless of race, gender and belief are raised in both *Green is the Colour* and "Sepet".

In the words of Yasmin Ahmad, the director of "Sepet", the film is about Malaysia as a whole. Conflicts appear when we do not try to understand and ascertain the cause of the conflict. As Keong, a character in "Sepet" says: I never really liked the Malays. It's not that I dislike them; it's just that I never really thought about them. But now I do because of Oked.

In other words, Keong is saying that it is when he met Oked that he started to like Malays. It is not because he hated them but he did not bother to know about them. *Green is the Colour* and "Sepet" give us a picture of the multiplicity of the Malaysian community and that despite the differences, Malaysians are able to understand and live together as a truly harmonious society.

Rehman Rashid, "Special Report On Race and Ethnicity", <www.http//MALAYSIA Special report on race and ethnicity.htm> (accessed June 6,

2005) in referring to Malay and Chinese social inconsistency stated that the conflict is no longer cultural and economic:

There is this wrestling between ancestors, between culture and religion, what we call ethnicities. Because of the historical roots that go deep into this we have this sense of apartness, of difference between the various races and religions that make up this country. But for 50 years at least now, we have confronted the idea that there is something over-arching that means Malaysia, that is an amalgam, a blending of these things - the influences and mingling of cultures that has taken place here has definitely over the past couple of generations has generated something that is uniquely ours.

After years of Independence, race relations in Malaysia have gone through many phases; from distrust to tolerance. There is still space and time to correct the mistakes of the past and to take responsibility to strengthen these racial ties. We should not have racial prejudice. Islam propagates brotherhood and it teaches humankind to treat one another as equals and they are also seen as equals in the sight of God regardless of race (Zamani, 2003). This is mentioned in Surah Al-Hujurat verse 13:

Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).

Green is the Colour and "Sepet" manifest the aim to build stronger racial integration despite an old aged racial conflict between the Malays and the Chinese in Malaysia. Surely the races can co-exist on the relative strength of each group (Zamani, 2003). The study attempts to explore these racial relationships in both genres and analyse possible cause.

The study enhances a new perspective regarding the issues of race relations using a different approach and medium for people to think as one nation, to be better in their understanding of hybridity and multiculturalism in Malaysia.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Since Independence, Malaysians irrespective of race, culture and religion have contributed much to the development of the nation. However, studies on race relations, especially between the Malays and Chinese, are always seen as sensitive and hence, left unexplored. In an attempt to examine race relations and multiethnicity in Malaysia, it is essential to study works like *Green is the Colour* and "Sepet". The author Fernando, and filmmaker Yasmin manifest Malaysian nationhood in its truest sense on issues of race and multiculturalism through their representations of multiethnic characters. As an aftermath of May 13 riots, there was a massive social and economic restructuring. Race relations in Malaysia was deeply challenged and its economic difference caused by British colonization had put social integration at stake. It is issues such as these which are to be carefully examined and critically analysed in this thesis.

Hence, there is a need to compare the work of a writer and a filmmaker to see how race relations are addressed in works by Malaysians using different mediums. This thesis is also interested in exploring aspects of gendering race relations. It is vital to determine the main concerns of two prominent figures in two diverse fields particularly on race relations as illustrated in both the novel and film mentioned above. Lloyd Fernando's *Green is the Colour* depicts Malaysia in post May 13 environment. The film "Sepet" by Yasmin Ahmad addresses the Malay-Chinese relationship through its exploration of love, which revolves around two different people from different backgrounds. As Jason, one of the leading characters in "Sepet" said: "I think we've known each other for a long time. I remember you but I don't remember you". Yasmin's "Sepet" invites people to see the 'other' as part of them, as one entity, instead of a single individual different from one another. It is hoped that the findings obtained will trace any similarities and/ or differences in the writer's treatment of issues of race relations among the Malays and the Chinese.

The study argues that in spite of differences amongst races in Malaysia, colonialism, cultural, religious diversity and racial harmony can be cultivated. It is also to give a picture that Malay and Chinese are able to mingle and co-operate with each other without conflict or racial barriers. The harmonious relationships between Oked and Jason in "Sepet" and Siti Sara and Yun Ming in *Green is the Colour* are some indicators that differences between races can be bridged.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study of race relations in Malaysia is often viewed with so much sensitivity that students usually shy away from exploring the subject. This thesis is significant in the sense that not only does it attempt to explore this crucial subject but it also brings in two different mediums (both contemporary and recent works by Malaysians) to enhance a better understanding of Malaysia as a multiracial nation.

The exploration of themes and character representations on race relations will therefore reflect the struggle Malaysia faces as a multiracial nation. This representation is illustrated through comparative literary devices, such as the novel and film. Through an elaborate and thorough critical analysis of the selected texts, the thesis hopes to identify key issues in relation to race relations in Malaysia. *Green is the Colour*, a novel which depicts post-May 13 Malaysia, is an essential illustration of race relations especially between the Malays and Chinese. "Sepet", a contemporary film on Malay-Chinese race relations is compared to the novel to find whether both writers have similar or different approaches to the subject. It is also to see whether their perspectives on race relations are influenced by time, gender and genre.

Different approaches on issues of race relations are used because of the potential to educate people and to convey messages on such issues which relate to the culture and social well-being of a community. Thus, the film and the novel in this sense can act as 'cultural interpreters' of a society in order to build wider understanding of racial integration through its specificity as a medium. According to Turner (1988), film is a distinct social practice:

Although film studies are established in institutions around the world, we are now at a crucial stage in their development. Now film is revealed as not so much a separate discipline as a set of distinct social practices, a set of languages, and an industry. The current approaches to film come from a wide range of disciplines-linguistics, psychology, anthropology, literary criticism, and history-and serve a range of political positions-Marxism, feminism and nationalism. But it has become clear that we want to examine film at all is because it is a source of pleasure and significance for so many in our culture. The relations which make this possible-between the image and the viewer, the industry and the audience, narrative and culture, form and ideology-are the ones now isolated for examination by film studies (p.39).

The narrative in novel and film is done in a different way of telling a story and at the same time conveying a message. Film is a social practice for its makers and its audiences; in its narratives and meanings we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself (Turner, 1989). Meanwhile, Cohen and Mast (1985) state that:

The question-- which need not to be answered--reinforces the notion that there are two distinct formal dimensions to narrative utterances: a presentational which is immediate (language, gesture, etc), and a represented form which, is at one remove from the level of performance itself. In a novel, for instance there is the language of the author at one level, and the representation of character, situation, and even at another. In a play, there is a language of the author, the performance of the actor, and the deeds of the character to consider: three easily discerned levels at which form is perceptible. And film adds at least one level to these, just through the processes of photography itself: camera- angle, lighting, focus, etc (pp.391-392).

For this reason, this study deals with its specificity of medium related to race relations issues and examines how film functions to produce such significance on serious issues such as race relations. The central issue of such a line of inquiry is not film itself but film's relationships' to its culture and its consumers-- the way film shapes or reflects cultural attitudes, reinforces or rejects the dominant modes of cultural thinking, stimulates or frustrates the needs and drives of the psyche (Cohen and Mast, 1985).

The novel on the other hand, illustrates the issues of race relations through the representation of characters and the writer's concerns are conveyed through the written text. The delivery of message regarding such issues is indeed different but they move towards the same goal that is to see a seemingly fragmented nation grow into one nation, united in its dreams for the future.

This study on race relations is also significant in that it compares a woman's (Yasmin) perspective on the topic with that of a man (Fernando). It is interested in exploring similarities and differences (if any) portrayed by two writers of different gender.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The thesis aims to fulfil several objectives. They are:

 to explore the projection of Malaysian society in a novel and a film especially on the issues of race relations;

- 2. to contribute to the body of knowledge, especially on comparative literature, since not many researches have been done in this area using different mediums of expressions, such as those of film and literary text;
- to examine gender and post-colonial perspectives on the issues of race relations and explore whether gender difference affects the theme and concerns on nationalism and racial integration;
- 4. to consider the texts in light of Islamic teaching as Islam always propagates unity and equality of brotherhood irrespective of race, gender and belief.

The study attempts to investigate Malay-Chinese race relations through the representation of characters in *Green is the Colour*; a novel by Lloyd Fernando, and Yasmin Ahmad's film "Sepet".

A study on race relations is significant because it informs racial tension as encountered but often silenced in Malaysia. This is often explained by the small number of literary texts on this subject. The study seeks to explore whether this racial elements portrayed in both novel and film can offer a better understanding of Malaysia as a multiracial nation.

The study also addresses questions like:

- a) How is the term 'multiculturalism' presented in *Green is the Colour* and "Sepet"?
- b) To what extent fictional representations of both genres reflect a realistic picture of contemporary Malaysia?
- c) How does gender affect interpretations of race relations in Malaysia?
- d) How can race relations portrayed in both the novel and the film foster a better understanding of the concept of 'nation' or 'nationhood'?

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e) How does the significance of comparative literature, as in this case a comparative study of a novel and a film, educate people on issues of race relations and help understand one another in a conducive manner?

This study on racial issues gives written and visual arts a vital role propagating racial integration among races in Malaysia. It is also to promote sustained and meaningful interaction among groups of different races towards the goal of being a truly harmonious '*Bangsa Malaysia*'.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although various aspects of Malaysian race relations have been studied and discussed, not many researches attempt to study and analyse essential issues like race relations comparatively or contrast it with other mediums. For example, a general study in local newspapers has been done on "Sepet", a recent Malaysian movie on love relations between a Malay girl and a Chinese boy, which speaks on the theme of interracial love but within a universal scope that promotes social integration and what multiculturalism is all about. While other studies tend to focus on racial conflicts and tension among races, "Sepet" and *Green is the Colour* have reached a focal point on the concerns of how we can be united regardless of cultural diversity towards a better Malaysian nationhood (Bangsa Malaysia). The following literature reviews will highlight the length and depth of discussion on race relations in Malaysia:

1. Nur Nina Zuhra. 1996. The Healing Art: A Comparative Study in Interracial Relations in Recent Malaysian and American Literature. Ins. Fadillah Merican et al. (edit.). A View of Our Own, Ethnocentric Perspective in Literature: 269-283. Bangi: UKM.

In the article, "The Healing Art: A Comparative Study in Interracial Relations in Recent Malaysian and American Literature", Nur Nina Zuhra