

The Malaysian Albatross of May 13, 1969 Racial Riots

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Introduction

RACIAL riots in Malaysia are an uncommon phenomenon though there is a constant reminder and threat that the 13 May 1969 riots could recur. The 13 May, 1969 racial riots remains a deep scar in the nation's psyche even today and the fear of such a re-occurrence continues to loom especially when some unscrupulous Malay politicians remind the nation that such an eventuality is a possibility if the privileged position of Malays is threatened. Yet, Malaysia has prided itself as a model for multi-cultural and multi-racial harmony in its sixty over years of existence as a nation. However, its attempts at forging a Malaysian race of "Bangsa Malaysia" (Mahathir 1992: 1) has not been achieved. In recent post-colonial nations, especially in nations with mixed populations like Malaysia, a lot of effort is put into projecting a national culture or a national identity. This attempt to forge various races into a single cultural entity is an impossibility, and it is a misconception that there can be a single national culture. As Ahmad says, any nation comprises cultures not just one culture. He asserts that it is a mistaken notion that "each 'nation' of the 'Third World' has a 'culture' and a 'tradition'" (9).

This paper examines Malaysian writers' creative response in the English language to the 13 May, 1969 riots. It presents a brief historical context to the violent event and political response to the event which has resulted in the passing of various policies and laws that has impacted not only on the re-structuring of Malaysian society but also the management of the relationships among the multi-ethnic communities in the country. Andaya and Andaya state that, "Malaysia's post-independence history treats 1969 as a watershed that marks the beginning of a new era in the country's political, economic and social development" (301).

Composition of Malaysian Population

THE population of Malaysian citizens in 2018 was 29.1 million. The composition of Bumiputera ethnic groups accounted for 69.1% of total citizens. The composition of Chinese and Indians Department of Statistics Malaysia was 23.0% and 6.9%, respectively (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2018). Malaysia is among many contemporary nations with a multiracial population including “fairly large minorities” (Smith 1981: 9). It is “one of the most delicately balanced multi-racial societies” in Southeast Asia (Watson 19). In terms of population, Malaysia is a nation of indigenous races (Malays and aborigines) and immigrants (mostly Chinese, Indians and Eurasians) (Mohd. Taib 1973: 109). The Malays and the indigenous races are referred to as *bumiputera*, sons of the soil. There is a clear demarcation between the *bumiputera* and the *non-bumiputera* population, as the former’s privileged position is enshrined in the Malaysian Constitution (Rao & Ross-Larson, 1977; Wan, 1983). This broad categorisation is further sub-divided along racial or ethnic lines, as Malaysians are also identified according to essentialist labels (Hirschman 555). The term *bumiputera* can be traced back to the 1930s. It has become common usage since the 1970s with the increased preoccupation with Malay identity and the government's use of the term in its policies (Nagata 193).

Despite its mixed racial composition, Malaysia is perceived as a Malay country in Malay political thought (Rao & Ross-Larson 18). This is largely because it is generally accepted that the Malays came to the Malay peninsula before the Chinese or Thais and it is therefore recognised as a Malay homeland (Provencher 103; Rao & Ross-Larson 17). The Malaysian Constitutional (Amendment) Act 1971 has further reinforced the situation. This Act forbids any discussion on such sensitive constitutional issues as the national language (Article 152), the special position of Malays (Article 153), the sovereignty of the Malay rulers (Article 181) and the whole question of citizenship rights (Section III).

The 13 May 1969 Riots

THE 13 May 1969 riots have often been referred to Sino-Malay riots though it involved the other racial communities. The circumstances that led to this violence is closely linked to the celebratory rallies of the opposition parties after the 1969 general elections. There was a significant decline in the seats held by the government parties, the Alliance, from 89 to 67 seats in the Parliament. This resulted in a counter-rally by the Malays championed by United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) political leaders. The Malays felt threatened by this turn of events as they feared the position was being undermined. The violent clashes then erupted in the streets of Kuala Lumpur and in other major areas like Penang and Ipoh which resulted in loss of lives and property. A State of Emergency was declared and the Constitution was suspended (Andaya & Andaya 296-297).

The 13 May 1969 riots remain embedded in the Malaysian national psyche, a wound that is often reopened to create a sense of fear among the people. There was at

least one major racial riot in 1967 and a few after the 1969 riots. Just over a year before the May 13 incident, there was a riot that had the whole nation at a standstill: The Penang Hartal Riot of 1967. The first day alone five were killed and ninety-two injured during the riot. When all was over, twenty-nine were dead, over two hundred hurt and around 1300 arrested.

Since the 13 May 1969 riots, there have been at the least two racial riots involving mainly Malays and Indians. First, the 1998 Penang racial riots where no deaths were reports and again in 2001, the Kampung Medan Riots, in the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur which was from 4th to 13th March, resulting in over four hundred people detained, over a hundred injured and six deaths.

The Voice of Doomsday Politicians: The Threat of a Repeat of May 13, 1969

IT is becoming more common for Malay extremist nationalist groups to bandy the threat of a repeat of the 13 May, 1969 riots whenever it suits them. These threats are often openly announced in public and widely published in the Malaysian media. These political groups and individual politicians have used the threat to Islam, Malay rights and the monarchy as the basis to threaten violence. For instance, a collective of groups from Malaysia's ethnic-Malay majority warned of a repeat in sectarian violence that rocked the country in the 1960s, amid escalating tensions with a minority Indian-based NGO that purportedly questioned the rights of Muslims. The group said it had formed a new front to defend Islam against "rude and dominant" groups from other races. They added: "Because the effect of this can bring about untoward threats and we are worried the dark history of May 13, 1969, would recur" (Yiswaree, 2017).

A prominent Malay politician Sharizat Abdul Jalil, at her party's general assembly warned that the May 13 tragedy might be repeated should UMNO become weak and unable to overcome its challenges (Koon, 2012). And yet another Malay politician, Jamal Yunos, well-known for his antics and controversial public (mis)behaviour announced in his Facebook: "I vow that the May 13 tragedy will be repeated and parang will fly if Bersih 5 is held at the same time, date and place as the #BERSIH5 rally scheduled on November 19. Long live the Malays!" ("IGP: Police will probe Jamal's alleged May 13 remarks," 2016). The Inspector-General of Police (IGP) Khalid Abu Bakar was reported in saying that the police will act against Red Shirts leader Jamal Yunos for allegedly threatening a repeat of the May 13 race riot.

A more recent threat of the repeat of the May 13, 1969 riots emerged when the government discussed ratifying the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). It was reported in the national media that Ahmad Farouk Musa, a Muslim activist said "This kind of sudden departure from the commitment was expected because it seems that right-wing Malay groups, especially like Gagasan Kuasa 3, were trying to incite racial hatred and bloodshed by invoking memories of the May 13 riots" ("No choice but to axe ICERD after unrest threats, says activist," 2018).

Illusions of Cultural Integration

FROM Independence till the riots in May 1969, there were no clear government policies or initiatives in terms of a national ideology to move the people in the direction of Malaysian nationalism. There was concern for national unity; the need for a sense of Malaysianness was articulated by Tan Siew Sin, a Cabinet Minister and the then President of the Malaysian Chinese Association:

Before we can establish a really united nation, the major racial groups in the country must gradually come closer and closer together. The Malays must be less Malay in their outlook, the Chinese must be less Chinese, the Indians must be less Indian and so on, so that eventually we shall regard ourselves as Malaysian rather than as Malays, Chinese or Indians. (qtd. in Solehah 1)

Though the people were called upon to shed some of their cultural distinctiveness to consider themselves “Malaysians,” little was said on what one had to acquire to achieve this and there was no clear idea of what was meant by the term “Malaysian culture” (Ratnam 136). In the late 1960s, at least two Malay(sian) leaders believed that they had succeeded in creating a “Malaysian” culture. First, the then Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak, in 1967, indicated this when he proclaimed:

We have drawn from the richness of our multi-racial heritage and have built a Malaysian culture with an identity of its own. We no longer speak of a Chinese, Indian or Malay culture. We now speak of a Malaysian culture. (qtd. in Solehah 6)

Second, in April 1969, just a month before the violent racial riots in Malaysia, Tuanku Abdul Rahman, the Prime Minister, expressed his belief in the “fusion of the cultures of all our people into a Malaysian cultural identity” (qtd. in Solehah 6). Both the leaders were to be proved wrong. The May 1969 riots revealed that “the facade of multi-racial co-existence lasted until the by-elections [*sic*] of 1969 when sweeping Chinese victories threatened to upset Malay political hegemony” (Solehah 7). It took Mahathir Mohamad to acknowledge the actual state of affairs in Malaysia:

Looking back through the years, one of the startling facts which must be admitted was that there was never true racial harmony. There was a lack of inter-racial strife. There was tolerance. There was accommodation. But there was no harmony. (Mahathir 4-5)

Mahathir Mohamad accurately sums up the pre-1969 Malaysian situation. There was some accommodation but no integration as Tun Abdul Razak and Tuanku Abdul Rahman had believed.

The Move Towards a National Culture

THE Malayan government from the time of independence emphasized that “Malayan culture must be indigenously based” (Wan 56). However, it was only after the May

1969 riots that the basic characteristics of the nation began to be clearly defined. Malay culture was to be the basis of national culture, the Malay rulers the symbols of sovereignty, the Malay language the national language and official language, and Islam the state religion (Wan 57).

Non-bumiputera Malaysians are led to believe that one way they could be assimilated into Malaysian society is through the acquiring of Malaysian national cultural identity. However, I believe that the Malay(sian) notion of a national Malaysian culture problematises the concept of being Malaysian.

The National Cultural Congress was instituted to clear up earlier ambiguities of what constituted Malaysian culture. Solehah Ishak presents the three main conclusions reached by the Congress:

First, that the “principle that is used to shape national culture should be based on Malay culture.” Second, since Islam was chosen as the “religion of the Federation,” it was only natural that the National Cultural Congress should also make Islam an important element in the promotion of this “national identity.” Third, to show that the other races have not been ignored, the Congress stipulated that the cultures of the Chinese and the Indians, where suitable and appropriate, “should be incorporated in the promulgation of a cultural identity.” but the basic principle remains: Malaysian culture has to be based on the culture of the Malays. (Solehah 14)

This notion of Malaysian culture was reiterated by the then Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, “Malaysian culture must be based on the culture of the indigenous people of this region. I want this to be properly understood so that there will be no more doubts or anxiety. It is important that we integrate suitable elements of culture and arts from the various cultures from this country [...]” (qtd. in Davies 209).

Solehah Ishak suggests that the Malaysian government’s attempts at promoting Malaysian National Culture were a “juggling act [...] which can be read as accommodating the extremist Malays, moderate Malays and other Malaysians.” She adds that, although goodwill among the races has been a concern, “the rules it is played by are Malay-based” (36).

Malaysian National Culture was not to develop as some like Ryan (Ryan xi) rather naively believed: that a Malaysian culture would evolve based on the civilisations of those people who make up the population of the country, a culture which will be the result of compromise, fusion and synthesis. It was clearly to be based and centred on Malay culture (Wan, 1983; Solehah, 1987).

Initiatives Towards a National Identity

AT the time when Malaysian National Culture was being engineered (after the May 1969 riots), the National Consultative Council was set up to “establish positive and practical guidelines for inter-racial cooperation and social integration” (Milne 573). This Council worked out the new national ideology, or the Rukun Negara. It was

designed to ensure acceptance of the existing Constitution and also promote nation-building and overcome existing primordial loyalties (Milne 573).

In July 1969, Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie announced that Malaysia was to have a national ideology, suggesting a new approach to the ethnic problems in the country (Milne 563). The national ideology was called the Rukun Negara. Besides being aimed at integrating and uniting the people, it was to be used as a means to strengthen the political status quo. The five principles of the Rukun Negara are:

Belief in God
Loyalty to King and Country
Upholding the Constitution
Rule of Law
Good Behaviour and Morality
(Wan 90)

The Rukun Negara as an ideology was intended to serve as a means to bind the different racial groups in Malaysia and help individual citizens integrate into Malaysian society. As an ideology, it was to help in “domesticating primordialism” and serve the Malay-dominated government as a means of achieving political consensus and legitimising its authority. More importantly, it was to help establish Malay political hegemony in the country. Its implementation also categorically destroyed all hopes of *non-bumiputera* Malaysians who preferred cultural pluralism to assimilation into the dominant Malay culture of establishing a Malaysian-Malaysia (Wan 73-94).

In accepting this ideology, non-Malays were submitting to the legitimacy of the Malay regime (Milne 567). The government’s policy towards national unity was generally viewed as a means of destroying the distinct cultural elements of the immigrant communities and replacing them with something which is distinctly Malaysian (McGee, 1964; Selvaratnam, 1974; Wan, 1983).

Malaysian playwright, Kee Thuan Chye, succinctly presents Malaysian life after the 13 May 1969 riots to Mohammad Quayum in an interview:

[Before the riots] we had lived together harmoniously [...] There had been no sign of antagonism. Of course, the factor of “Otherness” was there in our interactions but we were familiar with each other [...] We never felt, “Ugh, he’s Malay (or Chinese or Indian) so better not have anything to do with him.” We played together, we laughed together [...] we had no idea that the [event] would radically change the whole pattern of life in the country and negatively intensify the idea of “Otherness” in all of us. To this day, relations between Malays and non-Malays have never been the same. (Mohammad A. Quayum 2005: 135)

Kee’s statements reveal the divided nation that Malaysia had become as a result of the May 13, 1969 riots and also the challenges lay ahead for Bangsa Malaysia or Malaysian race to become a reality.

Representation of May 13, 1969 Riots in Malaysian Literature in English

MALAYSIAN literature in English, a legacy of British colonialism, and emerging in the 1940s, is very much a product of the English education system (both at school and university levels). The Malaysian writer in English is a late arrival in a nation with a long classical literary tradition in the Malay language which dates back to the 15th century (Mohd. Taib 1986: 19) and a fast-developing modern Malay literary tradition which is said to have begun in the 18th century (Mohd Taib 1986: 21). As such, the presence of the Malaysian writer in English has not been not greeted with great enthusiasm.

The Malaysian political agenda openly places Malaysian writers writing in English outside the mainstream Malaysian society as writing in a language which is not considered part of the national literary tradition. Brewster's comment on the dilemma of writing in a colonial language applies accurately to Malaysian writers using English as their literary medium. She states, "Just as the colonized writer is ironically aware of his hegemonic marginalization in the colonial context, so post-colonial writers are aware of the hegemony of nationalism" (142).

In relation to this, Simms also posits that in Malaysia,

insofar as the government speaks for the nation, English is an intrusion to be tolerated only in the most private and domestic situations, a threat not merely of past colonial sensibilities but an overt challenge by the mercantile community of Chinese and sometimes Indian minorities; and so for the English poet (this will include all writers in English) in Malaysia his language alienates him from the public life and from the spiritual richness of the community as a whole. (9)

Despite the uncongenial environment for writing in English the number of Malaysians writing in English has been on the rise. And these Malaysian writers who write in English are very aware of the restrictions placed on all writers in this country. Malaysian writer, K.S. Maniam is acutely aware of the restrictions placed upon a writer. In an interview with Kee Thuan Chye (1986), Kee expresses his concern, which is representative for all Malaysian writers

We can't describe things as openly as we want to. There are so many subjects here that are called "sensitive issues." In literature, these sensitive issues make a bigger list than in politics. And you also can't describe personal obsessions or personal fantasies which have to do with sex unless you sugar-coat it. (1992: 15)

Maniam reiterates his concern for the restrictions imposed on him, as a writer, which often conflict with his desire to write honestly. He states:

The underlying implication is that there are issues that cannot be approached directly so as not to offend any community or authority. (171)

Kee Thuan Chye, a Malaysian, expresses similar concerns as Maniam. He states:

a writer must write with the courage of his conviction. He must brook no compromise and he must not fear the consequence. He must be prepared to sacrifice his own comfort and safety if it is demanded of him. (2001: 67)

Kee says this fully aware of the Malaysian stringent censorship laws. Salleh ben Joned is one of the better-known Malaysian writers who attempts test the limits of these laws and criticises the writer who practice self-censorship either consciously or unconsciously. He states:

If self-censorship is bad for the general intellectual development of the country, it's worse for the development of its literature [...] But as it involves creative writers, this self-censorship can be so ingrained in certain areas of thinking and feeling (that involve religion, say or race) that it no longer appears like self-censorship. It operates at the level of the unconscious, even before the imagination can produce the germ of an idea or perception. (Salleh 52-53)

Ee Tiang Hong captures these restrictions and the forced self-censorship writers and the general public have to adhere to in his poem, "Nospeak" (1978):

In that (unmentionable) country
it's against the law to speak
about certain things.

Everyone is free, however,
to suggest ways and means
to improve these very things,

subject to only one condition —
no one shall question
the status of these things,

which are sacred that's why
it's against the law
to speak against the things.

(1985: 10)

Lee Joo For's Dark Humour in the Treatment of Cross-Cultural Violence

LEE Joo For's play "The Happening in the Bungalow" was written in 1969 and performed in 1970. It was written in the year of the 13 May riots. Though the main focus of the play revolves around the main character Birch, a fictional descendent of the British Resident murdered in Perak in 1875. The plot revolves around Birch's revenge for the murder of his ancestor, by attempting to rape his Malay secretary, Rozni. Humour runs through the play until towards the end with the mention of crowd violence and killings, none of it on stage, except for Birch accidentally shooting and killing his Malay servant, Boy.

In "The Happening in the Bungalow," Lee Joo For draws from two historical moments from Malaysian history. First, the killing of a British Resident in 1875 which led to the British intervention to the Malay states and second, the 13 May 1969 riots. The May riot is a significant backdrop for this play. Birch's servant, Boy, describes the commotion he had witnessed and has run back to the bungalow:

BOY: You know, Che' Rozni, there's plenty of trouble outside in the kampungs, villages and streets [...] I see some and hear some. People fighting people, people killing people, people burning houses, police coming and shooting, soldiers coming and shooting, then the police and soldiers go away and then people come out and fight again. (Fernando 1972:140)

On discovering that he had unintentionally shot and killed Boy, Birch walks out into the violent crowd, carrying the dead Boy. The stage directions indicate that the crowd sets upon Birch and kill him. The play has a rather ambivalent ending. Outside, the people are shouting:

OUTSIDE VOICES:

(1) Kill-kill-kill the other kind of people!

(2) Fight back! Kill the others! Blood for blood! Kill! Kill! Kill!

But on stage:

ROZNI: Cheng, I'm going to break a custom. I'm going to tell you—
with all my heart I love you!

[They embrace again.] (Fernando 1972:143)

The ending of the play with the violence outside is contrasted with the love scene between a Malay and Chinese character inside, on stage. The audience are left to ponder on the May riots which are still fresh in their minds. Of Lee's treatment of the race riots, Fernando states: "The humour serves as a balm over a more serious problem of culture-conflict hinted at by the play, but which Lee, however, has not the resources to cope with it yet" (Fernando 1972: xv).

The Burden and Disillusionment of Malaysian Nation in Ee Tiang Hong's Poems

THE next two works discussed are poems by Ee Tiang Hong published in 1976. Ee left Malaysia and go on a self-exile in 1975. He became an Australian and live in there till his death in 1990. The turn of events in Malaysia from 13 May 1969 weighed heavily upon him. Kirpal Singh describes Ee's poetry:

[a] manifest testimony to the burden he carried— both external and, more significantly, internal. Much of what he articulates in his poems about history, especially the convoluted history of Malaya becoming Malaysia and becoming a nation, is uncomfortable. The trauma of internalised realisation of what history was doing to his beloved country, how history was unfolding before his very eyes, how, indeed, history was being made and manufactured (that is, how history was being distorted/modified/communicated en masse/altered/edited) so as to fit the times and the morals, as he ruefully put it in one of his poems. (25)

Two of Ee's poems, "Kuala Lumpur, May 1969" (1985) and "Requiem" (1976) make direct reference to the violence and impact of 13 May, 1969 riots on Malaysians. In 'Kuala Lumpur, May 1969' the persona narrates how the family counted itself lucky away from the violence and safe. In the second stanza, there is mention how the government-controlled media presents the incident:

On black-and-white tv
spasmodic national bulletins.
discrete shots of charred wreckage,
soldiers in leopard-spot uniform, barbed barricade,
ministerial explanations of the causes of the riots,
reasons for the curfew. (29)

The final stanza in the poem brings out the poet's sense of sorrow and loss with the passing of time:

As now more and more distant,
bitterness, recrimination day by day subside,
ashes on flower, leaf and shoot
in the sparse valley of a memory. (29)

Ee's prayerful poem "Requiem" recalls the catastrophic event. The survivors now have a choice to remember the "the lessons of May 13" or forget the deaths of their loved ones:

Tell your children to remember
The lessons of May 13,
Or tell them to forget

The friends or relatives who died,
It makes no difference,
Sun and moon will rise tomorrow
Sun and moon will set

For all our sorrows. (55)

Twenty-five years after the May 13 riots, in 1994, Ee's disillusionment with Malaysia's continued preoccupation with race, language, religion and birthplace is evident in his poem, 'Some New Perspectives'(1994):

Race, language, religion, birthplace —
the categories do not satisfy:
what do they say of you and me.
the space, the silences between? (10)

The country has not moved forward and Ee wants it to be recognised that these are failed concepts and in the last two lines of the poem Ee calls for something more inclusive:

a world view,
the twentieth century's, ours. (10)

Ee's poems address directly the issues of race, belonging and moving beyond the race. These are sad poems and they also raise questions Malaysian need to address to come to terms, the choose to accept and stay or like him find them unacceptable and leave.

The Failure of Social Engineering: Ghulam Sarwar Yousuf, "May 13, 1969"

ANOTHER poet, Ghulam Sarwar Yousuf, in his poem "May 13, 1969" (1982) addresses the government's failed attempt to bring a cohesiveness in Malaysian society:

the surgical expedient
of a decade or more
though hopeful apparently
was no skin-graft
or socio-cultural
alchemy (34)

He recognises that social engineering did not work. But is hopeful that the society will heal and recover from this calamity:

but the flesh will heal
in its own good time
souls will graft
their own curious way. (34)

Ghulam Sarwar Yousuf's concerns about a unified Malaysian society resonates with what Homi Bhabha describes as containment in cultural diversity. Malaysia's attempt at bringing together the different races reflects what Homi Bhabha posits:

A transparent norm is constituted, a norm given by the host society or dominant culture, which says that these other cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid. (208)

Bhabha, too, acknowledges that "it is actually very difficult, even impossible and counterproductive, to try and fit together different forms of culture and to pretend that they can easily coexist" (209). He, however, goes on to assert that

all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity. But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third space emerges, rather hybridity to me is the "third space" which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it and sets up a new structure of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. (211)

Bhabha's notion of the "third space" can be linked with the Malay(sian) notion of a national culture. However, there is only one common point. Both recognise the merging of cultures into a hybrid culture. There are contrasting views on the means of achieving this hybrid culture and how the results of the merging are to be perceived.

Bhabha perceives the process of hybridity as a consequence of the merging of cultures, unengineered or planned. The importance of this hybridity lies "in not to be able to trace two original moments" (211). Bhabha's sense of a hybrid culture seems an idealized form, where the original cultures remain untraceable. In reality, no matter how tightly cultures become interwoven and distilled, their roots are rarely completely obliterated. The Malay(sian) attempts at national unity, on the other hand, is both deliberate and planned. It is a conscious attempt to create a national culture which continues to give importance to the original culture from which it had been grafted.

As such, and as indicated by Solehah Ishak (1987), Malaysian culture remains very much Malay culture and contrasts with Bhabha's notion of the process of hybridity which should result in "something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (Bhabha 211). The very nature of cultural engineering in Malaysia is to give continued pre-eminence to Malay culture in the hybrid Malaysian culture.

Malaysian Novelists Treatment of May 13, 1969 Riots

It is an interesting point to note that prose writers discussed in this paper with regards to the portrayal of the May 13, 1969 riots, be it of novels, short stories, or plays, the protagonists are from the same race as the writers, the only exception being Lloyd

Fernando, whose main characters are primarily Malays. In Lloyd Fernando's novel, *Green is the Colour* (1993), Dahlan and Sara are the main characters with Yun Min a Chinese character.

Green is the Colour deals with the violence and its aftermath on characters from different ethnic groups. It begins immediately after the violent riots in a tensed atmosphere: "Everybody spoke a different language, everybody used different words, everyone was hurt and angry that the others did not understand them" (Fernando 1993: 59). Sara's thoughts on 13 May, 1969 are presented as follows:

Nobody could get May sixty-nine right, she thought. It was hopeless to pretend you could be objective about it. Speaking even to someone close to you, you were careful for fear the person might unwittingly quote you to others. If a third person was present, it was worse, you spoke for that person's benefit. If he was Malay you spoke one way, Chinese another way, Indian another. Even if he wasn't listening. In the end the spun tissue, like an unsightly scab, become your vision of what happened: the wound beneath continued to run pus. (Fernando 1993: 93)

Mohammad A. Quayum states that Fernando uses this dystopian environment after the riots "to embark on his soul-searching process for the nation: how could this dreadful ordeal be overcome and peace be found in the future, or how could the country attain unity and homogeneity in spite of its racial and cultural diversity" (2007: 73-74)? Different characters have their own vision of Malaysia. Panglima's is a Malay Malaysia while Omar's is an Islamic Malaysia. Siti Sarah, Dahlan and Yun Ming have an inclusive vision of Malaysia, which includes all the different races. Yun Ming is of the view that Malaysians should "understand one another" (Fernando 1993: 69) and he refuses to go to either his wife and child in England or with his brother in Australia.

Shirley Geok-Lin Lim's *Joss and Gold* (2001) is set about a year before the riot till the day of the riots and spans a period of thirteen years. The novel presents Malaysian life on a broader canvas, set in three places, Kuala Lumpur, New York and Singapore, from 1968 to 1981, and how the May 13, 1969 riots continue to haunt its characters. The characters in novel can be seen in two racial camps, the Malay and non-Malays (Indian and Chinese). In Book 1 of *Joss and Gold* Lim presents the conflicting views held by these characters. The May 13, 1969 riots seem raw and the races are still divided. The Malay characters, Abdullah and Samad, see Li An, Ellen, and Gina as "other" because of their ethnic differences. For Abdullah and Samad, Malaysia is the country of the Malays and if anyone disputes that view, they "should be imprisoned or sent back to China or India" (Lim 78). Abdullah expects the other races to assimilate into Malay culture: "We need a single set of values to keep us together" (Lim 182).

Li An, on the other hand, believes in Bangsa Malaysia. Unlike Abdullah and Samad, she believes Indians and Chinese are Malaysians. She wants a more inclusive Malaysia where the different races co-exist in equality. For Li An, "[e]verything in Malaysia is champor-champor, mixed, rojak. A little Malay, a little Chinese, a little Indian, a little English. Malaysian means rojak, and if mixed right, it will be delicious"

(45). She goes on to add: “Give us a few more years and we’ll be a totally new nation. No more Malay, Chinese, Indian, but all one people” (45).

Li An goes to the extent of rejecting her own Chinese identity and affirms in a conversation with her husband, “I am not Chinese. I’m Malaysian” (Lim 71). Later she writes in her diary: “All this talk about Chinese rights makes me sick too. Malay rights, Chinese rights. No one talks about Malaysian rights. I am a Malaysian. I don’t exist” (90).

As in the case of the characters in Fernando’s novel *Green is the Colour*, in Lim’s *Joss and Gold* we see characters holding opposing views about a shared Malaysia. Those holding a more inclusive Malaysia will have to contend with those who see a Malay Malaysia.

In Preeta Samarasan’s novel, *Evening is the Whole Day* (2008), the May 13, 1969 riots are seen through the lived experience of a Malaysian Indian family. The novel begins in September 6, 1980 and closes on August 29, 1980. Between these dates, the novel moves in a series of flashbacks, the May 13, 1969 riots are given a full chapter entitled, “Power Struggles” (Samarasan 110-135). The immediacy of the riots is captured in the novel as the characters get caught up in the actual events. Samarasan’s treatment of the riots is both stylised and matter of fact in its portrayal. Samarasan presents the imagined threat and fear among the races as a fatal dance between “Rumor” and “Fact” which then erupted into violence and mayhem on the streets of Kuala Lumpur:

Impossible to say, but three days after the election, Rumor and Fact burst forth into noonday Kuala Lumpur heat, Rumor in a red dress, Fact in coat and tails, and together they began a salacious tango in the streets. (Samarasan 120)

In the following paragraph the narrator asks:

Was it Rumour or Fact that ragged crowds of Indians and Chinese had trailed through Malay settlements with promises and suggestions? *Your turn to lick our boots! Talk about ketuaan Malayu, now we’ll see who’s tuan! Kuala Lumpur belongs the Chinese. Balek Kampung! Go back to your backwater villages. Go home. Go back where you came from.* (Samarasan 121)

Samarasan follows this up by presenting a Malaysian Pandora clad in a sarong donning a hibiscus behind her ear, the national flower of the country, to open her box releasing the complications of Malaysian racial strife:

These words fluttered blackly out, and in no time it ceased to matter whether they had really been spoken or not. They were real and here to stay. They burst into flames; they blazed plain in view and brought tears to unprotected eyes. Anyone could say those words now. A could spit them to B, B to C, and C could turn around and spit them back to A. Because really, in this country, that *go home* cry could be

directed—delicately or not so delicately—at just about anyone.
(Samarasan 121-122)

This “go home” call hurled at Indians and Chinese continues to be a contentious issue in Malaysia. In Bernice Chauly’s poem “Still” there is now a desire for the call to be hurled back at the Malays:

And where will this take us?
It is easy to burn pictures
It is easy to torch churches
It is easy to say “Allah is for us”
It is easy to say “Go home, back to India”
[...]
We want to say “Babi, you go home”
We want to say “What is Malay?”
We want to say “What is Malaysian?” (7)

The poem highlights the problem of belonging and identity, for Malaysians. The “us” in line 1 could refer to all the races or the other races besides the Malay while “we” in the three lines certainly excludes the Malay. The notion of the Other remains unresolved even after forty-four years, when this poem was published, and it still remains fifty years on at the time of writing this paper.

The most recent novel examined in this paper is a young adult novel by Hanna Alkaf, entitled, *The Weight of Our Sky* (2019). In an interview by Terence Toh (2019), published in a Malaysian English language national newspaper, Hanna Alkaf says the following are the reasons why she wrote this young adult now:

I had always been fascinated by the May 13 riots. We know they happened, and we’re threatened by the spectre of it every once in a while by some politician. But we never really hear about what actually happened.

In our textbooks, it’s just a couple of paragraphs, and it’s really sterile. I wanted to know what it felt like, what people actually went through,” says the KL-born author.

I had never seen it (May 13) reflected in our literature, especially literature targeted at young people.

And I was worried that, even in my generation, we don’t really know about it. The further we get away from it, the less that young people know, and the less people will remember it.

If we gloss over the worst parts of our history and we don’t make an effort to preserve it, we run the risk of repeating it. We have to learn from it. (Toh, n. pag)

Hanna Alkaf raises most of the issues that continue to plague Malaysian society about the May 13, 1969 riots. She highlights how little is really known by Malaysian on the riots and how it is still used by politicians to intimidate Malaysians.

This young adult novel, *The Weight of Our Sky*, has appeared on the Malaysian literary landscape at an appropriate time, fifty years after the riots, when the May 13, 1969 riots still looms as a backdrop to scare Malaysians into submitting into racist politicians' agendas. Though the characters in this novel are caught up in the violence of the riots, this is presented without any gore. Melati witnesses her best friend, Safiyah, being taken away from her for being a Malay and her death seems inevitable at the hands of the Chinese mob and is finally confirmed at the end of the novel. Melati escapes a similar fate, having been rescued by a Chinese woman who says that Melati is a Eurasian. The death of her friend then becomes a guilt she has to bear, for being alive while Safiyah had died.

Despite the instances of racial strife, the attempts to provide help by characters of the different races to one another gives hope for a nation struggling to find a way to co-exist in harmony. The number of people killed at the end of the riots remains unclear. The figures released by the government is in doubt.

Melati's mother, a nurse who works in the government hospital says, "I saw the bodies with my own eyes" and adds "No way there were only one hundred ninety-six, No way. She was referring to the government report that only 196 had been killed during the riots. Her observation receives this response: "Must save face mah," Uncle Chong, said quietly" (Hanna 274-275).

The four novelists discussed in this paper, have examined the portrayal of violent riots that shook the very core of the nation in 1969. These novels were published from 1993 to 2019, the first appearing 26 years after the riots and the latest on the 50th anniversary of the riots. The writers comprise, two Indians, a Chinese and a Malay. Their characters all grapple with what it means to be Malaysian. Race and religion appear as major obstacles and struggles for the characters to move forward towards a unified and peaceful nation. The novelists have no easy solution to offer though some of their characters want a more inclusive Malaysia with equality for all.

Malay Guilt and the May 13, 1969 Riots

THE treatment of the 13 May, 1969 riots by two Malay writers present an interesting phenomenon of guilt in the protagonists in a short story and in a play. In Karim Raslan's short story, "Heroes" (1997), a daughter harasses her aging seventy-eight year old father to reveal the truth about the handicapped Nazrin, a man, she has seen coming to their home in a taxi and her father giving him money. She insists:

I want to know about that boy—Nazrin. He used to visit the house all the time in those days. I want to why you were so kind to him. Mak used to say you were very courageous and brave in those months.
(Karim 27)

Fariza, the daughter, then asks her father to write about the past as he seems unable to speak about it, and he reluctantly agrees to do so. Karim Raslan presents the father's thoughts on what his daughter wants to know, informing the reader about the father's view on the May 13, 1969 riots:

When she says "the past," I know what she really means. She wants me to write an account of May '69—as if the events of those bloody weeks explain the decades that followed. I've been trying to tell her the past isn't just '69. 1969 is an aberration, a ghastly aberration and nothing more. (Karim 30)

In his last journal entry, Fariza's father describes the role he had played as an important and faithful government servant, having to work with other political parties. His work required him to travel the Peninsula, for the "preservation of the Malay race" (Karim Raslan 33). An incident while on the road involving Nazrin becomes a dark secret her father has had to carry for the rest of his life. The car that the father was travelling in hits a Chinese woman and they are soon set upon by a Chinese mob, reminding Fariza's father of what had happened in Chow Kit and Kampung Baru. Completely overwhelmed by his fear for their lives, he instructs the driver to leave the scene of the accident, his mission still in the forefront of his mind. Nazrin, his young assistant, is nowhere near them and is abandoned to his fate. The father is full of remorse for his actions:

Had I, in releasing the handbrake, been responsible for it all, for Nazrin's terrible injuries, his crippled state, my fears, and my disgrace?

I had witnessed my own 'fall': lived through it. I had seen myself at my worst. Nothing I could ever do, would match this failure. (Karim 47)

Fariza, meanwhile finds Nazrin and discovers the truth for herself. Nazrin does not blame her father for his injury. Still, Fariza blames her father, "What happened? Ayah, you're my hero. You let me down" (Karim 36).

The discovery of the truth tears them apart and he says to her: "Fariza, the truth isn't always worth knowing" (Karim 36). Despite what he says to his daughter, he is still haunted by the past and his cowardice of which he laments: "We ran like dogs with our tails between our legs" (Karim 49).

In Jit Murad's play *Spilt Gravy on Rice* (first copyright in 2002, revised in 2003 and published in 2017) one of the issues that another Malay father deals with is his own demon which is also linked to May 13, 1969 riots. There are a few references to the riots and a young man, Nordin, the father had brought into their household in this play. In Scene 10 of the play, one of the siblings, Zakaria brings up Nordin's name to Kalsom and his involvement in the violence of the 13 May riots:

Zakaria: Som, Do you remember Nordin? Wonder what happened to him? Bapak's adopted son?

Kalsom: Wasn't like that. He was the driver. [...] Bapak felt responsible for him. You always feel responsible for the orang kampung in your household.

Zakaria: Whatever. Do you remember anything of May 13?

Kalsom: (freezes a beat) I was a kid, but I remember the, uh, tension at home.

Zakaria: Remember when Nordin came back late one night?

Kalsom: Stop, Zak.

Zakaria: He said he and his "uniformed friends" had set up a roadblock on the Federal Highway, stopping cars all day.

Kalsom: What're you doing, you bastard? Nobody wants to hear this!

Zakaria: Remember how his eyes were wild and he couldn't stop laughing? Like he didn't notice that he was drenched in blood.

(Jit 347)

Nordin's laughter can be linked to the hysteria of the violence he had committed. Nordin, as seen through the eyes of Bapak, was a kampung boy who was not quite ready for the city. This explains Nordin being led by the city boys and his involvement in the violence on the Federal Highway. Bapak had also misjudged Nordin, entrusting the family to him and also the household matters. Bapak sees Nordin's betrayal when he finds out that Zakaria had been sexually abused by Nordin, something Zaitun had also discovered. Still, Nordin wasn't sent away but allowed to remain as the family's driver. Nordin, Bapak's failed portege, was violently involved in the May 13 Riots and he had sexually abused Zakaria but Bapak's guilt makes it impossible for him to sever his bonds with the miscreant.

Both Karim Raslan and Jit Murad explore the complexities of responsibility and betrayal experienced by their Malay characters, during the 13 May riots. Their personal lives are forever changed either by their own actions or those they had trusted.

May 13, 1969 Riots A Memory

OVER time, the 13 May, 1969 riots become a moment in Malaysian history, a part of an individual's memory of a violent event in the past. Two Malaysian writers give evidence of this. Paul Ganaselvam, in his short story, "A Journey's End" (2013), gives a single line reference to the May 13, 1969 riots. The story revolves around the life of Queen Mary, a young 17-year old Indian bride, who leaves her homeland in 1939. The story spans over thirty years to 1970. Towards the end of the story, the narrator highlights the landmark events of Queen Mary and her husband's lives and how they had survived it all, "the invading Japanese, and the racial riots on [sic] May 1969" (Gnanaselvam 2013: 21).

A similar treatment of the May 13, 1969 riots is seen in Malachi Edwin Vethamani's poem, "Still Brickfields" (2016). The poet examines the gentrification of an area known as Brickfields in Kuala Lumpur. The persona in the poem bemoans how various events had contributed to the loss of his home and village. The May riots was one of these events:

The river bank is concrete
the lalang and weeds gone.
The river wears
a monsoon drain mask.

There I once caught fish
and saw floating corpses
during the May riots
that undid us.

The "corpses" refer to the victims of the May 13 riots whose bodies floated down the Klang river. In this poem, the riots become one of the many events that have brought about changes to the villages in Brickfields. It is treated in a matter of fact manner, another event in the history of Malaysia and how it impinges on the lives of ordinary people.

Conclusion

MALAYSIAN writers in the English language address many issues and events that are important to Malaysia, though their presence continues to be marginalised in the country. The May 13, 1969 riots has been the subject of the works of many of these writers. It continues to remain a violent historical moment, a wound with a visible scar that is still seen and felt after fifty years. It is often hung around the necks of Malaysians like an albatross, a curse that will weigh heavy on the people, as its recurrence is often reiterated by unscrupulous politicians. The Malaysian writers, however, have treated this event with caution and sensitivity, not because of the censorship laws but because they write to come to terms with it and to see ways forward for the nation to heal from this wound.

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I will examine how Malaysians who write in the English language explore the incident that has a strong psyche scarring on this nation. The May 13, 1969 riots appear in many of the works in Malaysian writing in English. The inter-racial violence resulted in deaths and damage to property in many parts of Malaysia 50 years ago this year. The consequences of the incident have been far-reaching and have resulted in the passing of various policies and laws which has impacted not only on the re-structuring of Malaysian society but also the management of the relationships among the multi-ethnic communities in the country. They include the National Economic Policy, the National Ideology (the Rukun Negara), the National Culture Policy and the further strengthening of the International Security Act. These policies and legislation have been further accentuated by the emphasis on the racial dichotomy of bumiputera (the Malays and other indigenous people) and non-bumiputera (all other ethnic groups of immigrant descent, especially, Chinese and Indians). Though the Malaysian creative writers have touched on the incident with both caution and sensitivity, Malaysian politicians continue to blatantly use it as a threat for their propaganda of instilling fear in the non-Malay populace. A range of creative writings in English from as early as 1970 till 2019 and critical writings on the 13 May 1969 are discussed in this paper.

Keywords: May 13th Incident, Malaysian English writings, guilt

一九六九年五月十三日種族暴亂：馬來西亞的歷史創傷

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摘 要

本文旨在探討馬來西亞英文作家如何看待對國家造成嚴重心靈創傷的五一三事件。一九六九年的五一三騷亂情況，呈現在許多馬英作品之中。五十年前的這一天，許多人因這場暴力衝突而傷亡和財產損失。這起事件的後果深遠，導致各種政策和法律的制訂與施行，左右了馬來西亞社會的重構，也影響了國內多元民族社會關係的處理方式。這些政策和法律包括「新經濟政策」、「國家原則」(Rukun Negara)、「國家文化政策」，政府加強以「內部安全法令」控管言論。同時由於土著(馬來人與其他原主民)與非土著(其他族羣，特別是華人和印度人)的種族二分法，結果進一步撕裂族羣關係。雖然馬來西亞的創作者多以謹慎和敏感的態度去處理這個事件，但政治人物卻繼續公然將其作為威脅，以達到他們向非馬來民眾灌輸恐懼的宣傳目的。本文討論了從一九七〇年至二〇一九年間涉及五一三事件的馬英文學作品和評論。

關鍵詞：五一三事件、馬來西亞英文文學、罪愆

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