Identity in Contemporary Malaysian Literature: Diversities, Writers' Dilemma and Implications for Teaching

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Abstract

This article examines the construction of diverse identities in contemporary Malaysian literature. Using one literary text, "Neighbours" by Karim Raslan (1996), the analysis shows that the characters, particularly the ancillary male character, Kassim, possesses diverse identities with ethnic identity being foregrounded over other forms of identity that are based on age, social class, gender and sexuality. However, these other forms of identity exert influence over the realization of the characters' ethnic identity, thereby reinforcing the idea that social identities do not exist in isolation, but interact with each other in the process of identity formation and expression. This article also discusses the dilemmas and challenges that local writers face in constructing the identities of their characters and their own identities in the process, as well as the implications of using the writers' works to discuss issues related to identity in the literature classroom.

Keywords social identity, identity formation, Malaysian literature, writers' dilemma, literature classroom

INTRODUCTION

Identity has been and continues to be studied in various disciplines and fields. This is essentially attributed to the complex, contested, and malleable nature of identity which requires not only further research but also constant theorising and reflection by scholars and researchers alike. The need for these activities becomes even more crucial in today's highly technological and globalised world where identity requires further rethinking given the occurrences of recent identity-related phenomena such as "the liquidization of contemporary identity processes", "the arrival of a post-traditional process of identity-construction" and "the emergence of a "new individualism" (Eliot, 2013, p. xii).

Issues pertaining to identity have always been salient in people's everyday lives, especially in the lives of those living in ethnically and culturally plural nation states such as Malaysia. This is mainly because many Malaysians *and* non-Malaysians experience complex processes of identity formation and how these processes are influenced by a host of interacting factors and conditions (see Barlocco, 2014; Holst, 2102; Milner, Abdul Rahman Embong, & Tham, 2014). For instance, people's "primordial" or "deep psychic" attachments to their culture, language, ethnicity, religion, and regional origin exert a pervasive influence on their notions of personal, cultural and national identity (see Ibrahim Saad, 1980, Gill, 2013, Verma, 2002).

This can be observed in the presence of strong religious affiliation among many Malays in modern day Malaysia who identify themselves first as Muslim, Malaysian second, and Malay third (see Martinez, 2006).

Such self-identification is often seen in conflict with the government's grand, nationalist narrative of *Bangsa Malaysia* (i.e. Malaysian nation or race), partly because it "implies the *subordination* of ethnic identity within a national Malaysian identity, which asks citizens to see themselves as Malaysians before anything else" (Barlocco, 2014, p. 35; emphasis added).

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The complex processes of identity formation among many Malaysians *and* non-Malaysians are not only discussed in scholarly literature, but find expression in literary works produced by local writers. Studies have shown that contemporary or "modern Malaysian literature" (Muhammad Haji Salleh, 2009; xi) has become the avenue through which many local writers tackle various identity-related issues in a multicultural, pluralistic society by creating, among others, diverse identities of their characters and their own identities in the process. Hosking et al. (2012), for example, examined the construction of diverse identities of Malay characters in the works of Malaysian Malay writers in English and the ways in which language (English in particular) moulds the characters' views of their culture and what it means to be 'Malay'. However, many of these studies have focussed on examining specific identities using specific theories or theoretical frameworks. For example, Nasirin Abdillah, Mazni Muslim, and Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf (2010) examined the representation of Malay women in the works of Malay Muslim women writers using Islamic theoretical framework that focuses on Islamic principles of the Holy Quran, the Hadith, and the Sunnah as well as related scholarly writings by Muslim writers. Furthermore, very few studies have examined the *dilemma* that Malaysian writers experience in writing about the identities of their characters and their own identities in the process – a condition that may explain the construction of identities and the politics of representation in the writers' narratives (e.g. Who is represented? Whose identity is represented?). This dilemma becomes more acute when local writers continue to portray specific identities in their works, which not only contravenes the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* but runs counter to the reality of Malaysia's plurality and diversity. As Noritah Omar (2014) pointed out:

> One of the biggest challenges faced by writers of Modern Malay Literature is to depict multicultural reality of modern Malaysian life. This reality is rarely handled by these writers, with the majority of them choosing only to depict an *ethnocentric reality* populated with Malay characters, and issues that are seemingly of exclusive concern to the Malay community (p. 142; emphasis added).

The dilemma affecting local writers, *in addition* to the need to examine the construction of diverse identities in contemporary Malaysian literature, is a gap in research and important to be addressed. This is so for the following reasons:

(1) People have different social identities and a particular identity may come to the fore under certain circumstances and settings while other identities are backgrounded but continue to exert an influence over the realization of that particular identity. Since social identity cannot exist in isolation, the interrelationships between them need to be studied in context (see Thompson, 2007)

(2) It *is* time to study the juxtaposition of social identities in the Malaysian setting because of the sociopolitical movements which suggest that there may be an alignment of identities compared to what is

previously known. For instance, the current phenomena of the rise of national consciousness brought about by the 1Malaysia campaign has diverse effects on some Malaysians – especially those who find themselves *marginalised* because of their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, political beliefs and affiliations and how this inclusive notion of national identity fails to encapsulate their sense of selfhood and nationhood (see Holst, 2012)

(3) Previous studies, as mentioned earlier, have examined specific identities using specific theories or theoretical frameworks for various reasons. Because of the increasingly complex relationship and crossover between social identities, there is a need for an interdisciplinary approach to studying diverse identities. Existing frameworks for analysing literary constructions of identity have yet to capture this given the multiple facets of people's identities in the ethnically and culturally plural nation states such as Malaysia.

This article investigates the above-mentioned gap in research by examining the construction of diverse identities in literary works produced by local writers and the implications of using these works in the literature classroom. It draws upon the findings of an ongoing research that attempts to develop a framework that can be used to analyse the construction of diverse identities in contemporary Malaysian literature.[1] This article begins with a brief review of literature in the field, followed by the methodology, the discussion of findings, and a brief conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As previously mentioned, contemporary Malaysian literature is not only known for its role in examining issues related to identity but is also acknowledged as a site where writers construct the identities of their characters and their own identity in the process. Identity, as Raihanah Mohd. Mydin (2009) maintained, continues to be one of the "vital preoccupations" of many local writers, particularly those who have produced their works in English. Such preoccupations are attributed to the sociopolitical and cultural conditions that have affected many aspects of the writers' lives, their crafts, professions, freedom of expression, and their sense of identity and belonging to the nation (see Quayum, 2009).

There is a growing body of literature dedicated to the study of issues related to identity in the works of contemporary Malaysian writers. Studies have shown that Malaysian literature in English functions as a site for the creation of both normative *and* non-normative sexual and gender identities despite the pervasiveness of sexual and gender normativities within the nation state. Noritah Omar and Washima Che Dan (2006), for instance, observed that many Malaysian Malay writers in English discuss issues pertaining to gender and sexuality in their works from the Islamic perspective which include "aspects of male-female relationships (polygamy, husband and wife relations), women's body (especially how women dress, femininity), and more recently and also most controversial, alternative sexuality" (p. 7). Furthermore, studies have highlighted the ways in which Malaysian women writers explore their own ideas and views about identities in their works (see Ruzy Suliza Hashim, Noraini Md Yusof, Raihanah Mohd. Mydin, & Imran Ho-Abdullah, 2011). Literary works produced by Malaysian women writers from 1940s to 1990s, for instance, address a variety of issues including their own notions of self and identity by "reflect[ing] on their female experiences/voices [and] also the conflicts of the world in which they live in" (Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf & Quayum, 2001).

However, as previously mentioned, many of these studies have focussed on examining specific identities using specific theories or theoretical frameworks. Siti Hawa Binti Muhamad and Zamila binti Abdul Rani (2014), for instance, examined the construction of multiple self-identities in the light of the female character, Sara, in Lloyd Fernando's "Green is the Colour" (1993) through the lens of postmodernism. They found that Sara is indeed a "postmodernist character with multiple self-identities" (p. 43) who does not adhere to the normative notion of being 'Malay' and a 'Malay woman' that is tied to cultural and religious values. Jeyathurai (2009), on the other hand, examined the "troubling" construction of national identity in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's "Joss and Gold" (2001) and K. S. Maniam's "The Return" (1981) through the lenses of ethnicity, history and language. She found that the Chinese and Indian communities in the writers' works not only experienced alienation, but also the exclusion from the Malay nationalist/elitist' narrative of national identity. Jerome (2013a, 2013b) investigated the construction of queer Malay identity in the works of

contemporary Malaysian writers in English. Using theories of ethnic and queer identity formation, he examined the creation of the said identity through the writers' use of narrative conventions and found that queer Malays in these works not only employed various identity markers and strategies in constructing their identities but experienced tensions and conflicts in asserting a Malay Muslim identity marked by sexual difference.

Furthermore, very few studies have examined the dilemma that Malaysian writers experience in writing about the identities of their characters and their own identities in the process. If Noritah Omar (2014) highlighted the challenges faced by many writers of Modern Malay Literature in presenting the multicultural reality of Malaysia in their works because of their own ethnocentric preoccupations with "Malay characters" and "Malay issues", the same can be said of the writers of Modern Malaysian Literature in English – many of whom face the challenges of writing about Malaysia's plurality and diversity as the result of their own ethnocentric preoccupations with characters from their respective ethnic communities and the issues affecting them. Another major challenge these writers face is to continue producing their works in English given the sociopolitical conditions affecting their crafts as well as the rigid and exclusive policies pertaining to "national language" and "national literature" that have relegated Malaysian literature in English to a marginal status in the country (see Quayum, 2008). The study that comes closest to looking at the dilemma facing Malaysian writers in writing about the identities of their characters and their own identity in the process is by Raihanah Mohd. Mydin (2009) who explained the difficulties experienced by these writers in portraying diverse identities in their works due to their preoccupations with issues relating to self, ethnicity, and the nation within a multicultural nation state such as Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

As mentioned earlier, this article presents the findings of an ongoing research that attempts to develop a framework for analysing diverse identities in contemporary Malaysia literature. The research, among others, set out to analyse a number of literary works by Malaysian writers in English from diverse backgrounds. The selection criteria are based on (1) the fact that these writers address complex issues affecting their characters' sense of identity and belonging and (2) the presence of diverse identities such as ethnic, gender, and national identities, to name a few, in the writers' portrayal of their characters. The units of analysis, among others, are the characters' diverse identities which are created through the writers' use of narrative conventions, namely, fictional discourse (e.g. series of utterances, dialogues, and monologues), setting, and characterization. For example, the interior monologue uttered by the protagonist in Karim Raslan's story, "Go East" (1996), makes clear reference to his identity and the underlying issues affecting his sense of identity and belonging to his ethnic community: "There's something nice about not having too many Melayu about; they're always so disapproving" (Karim Raslan, 1996, p. 105). References to or mention of designated places or spaces that represent the characters' diverse identities are considered for analysis (e.g. *kampong*, *estet*). The identities portrayed in the texts and the issues related to them are discussed using theories of identity formation. The research aims to put together the results of analysis and thereon develop a multiple identity literary analysis framework which is formulated through literary and social theories and refined with input from readers, writers, scholars, and community leaders who are familiar with the ethnic and national culture in which these identities are lived out daily. Given the current status of the research, this article presents the researchers' analysis of one of the selected texts, "Neighbours" by Karim Raslan (1996).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The story, "Neighbours" (1996), revolves around Datin Sarina's encounter with her new neighbours, Kassim and his wife. Narrated mainly from Datin Sarina's perspective, the story not only offers a glimpse into the life of a lonely housewife but also the details of Kassim's public and private lives. Prior to the discovery of Kassim's and his wife's 'true' selves, Datin Sarina admits of being instantly infatuated with Kassim the first

time she laid her eyes on him. As she recalls the tremor of excitement upon seeing her new neighbour:

> He was almost six feet tall. Somehow she had known he'd be tall. He was ramrod straight, smooth shaven, golf-tanned and smiling. . . He couldn't have been more than thirty-five years old and was well-dressed . . . her new neighbour was so very good-looking" (p. 121)

Datin Sarina's excitement is further intensified *–albeit with a tinge of jealousy–*by Kassim's revelation of a familial tie between herself and his wife. As the two indulge in courteous conversation over tea at Datin's Sarina's place:

> Datin Sarina: Encik Kassim, I do hope that your wife will do me the pleasure of calling on me when the family has settled in. Please don't be afraid to ask for any help. I understand how very tiring it is to be moving house.
>
> Kassim: I will tell her . . . actually my mother says she is related to you, Datin; her mother is Datin's cousin (p. 124)

It is evident that the characters in this story possess diverse identities. The ancillary male character, Kassim, for instance, constructs and express various identities with ethnic identity (i.e. *Malay*) being foregrounded over other forms of identity that are organized around age, social class, gender, and sexuality (i.e. *heterosexual, young-middle-aged, middle-class, educated male*). The realization of Kassim's ethnic identity is further enhanced by the evidence of his religious faith, especially when Islam is an essential component of Malay ethnicity in Malaysia. This is evident in Kassim's discussion of matters concerning religion and faith with Datin Sarina's husband, Datuk Mus:

> Kassim: Datuk, these people, they say that it's our duty to intervene and direct those who are transgressing the Koran. Well, I think that's wrong. Islam brings all men together under the guidance of Allah. We are beholden to Him to live closely as we can within the dictates of the Koran. That doesn't mean that we should force the unwilling (p. 122).

The dominant realization of Kassim's ethnic identity is also enhanced through his portrayal as a heterosexual, married Malay man *–at least in Datin Sarina's and Datuk Mus's eyes prior to the former's shocking discovery of the Kassims–* who has fulfilled the requirements necessary to become a full-fledged member of the Malay ethnic community by entering into marriage and becoming a husband and the head of his household (see Peletz, 1996). However, Kassim's other forms of identity which are backgrounded in the first half the story come to fore as the story unfolds, to the extent that they exert a pervasive influence on the realization of his ethnic identity. In other words, Kassim's ethnic identity does not exist in isolation mainly because "[it] interacts with other facets of identity such as class, gender and religion. Articulations of identity emerge 'out of multiple social positionings and the interplay of these positionings in the formations of selves' (Ryan, 2014, p. 56). Kassim's ethnic identity and his sense of self are realized through the interaction of diverse identities that lay out the different roles he plays and the social positions he holds in relation to others.

However, Kassim's and his wife's 'true' selves are revealed towards the end of the story when Datin Sarina, despite her hesitance, spies on the couple's lovemaking through their bedroom window:

> Seductively and slowly, the wife let her sarung fall to the floor. It slipped off her slim thighs and gathered in a pile at her ankles. Sarina swolled hard; her mouth went dry. The woman's belly didn't taper off into a mound as her own did. The woman, or at least what she thought was a woman, had a penis of her own, a penis that was also erect. It was a *pondan*. She mouthed the word silently, a *pondan* (p. 130)

Although this incident has put Datin Sarina to shame for prying into her neighbours' privacy, the 'shocking' revelation shows, among others, the complex processes of identity formation and how these processes are influenced by a host of interacting factors and conditions. The interaction of diverse identities and how these identities are constructed through the interplay of factors such as race, class, gender, and

sexuality influences Kassim's sense of self and belonging. This is shown when Kassim takes on a heterosexual (public) identity as a way of portraying and positioning himself in relation to others (particularly Datin Sarina and Datuk Mus, and most probably his heteronormative ethnic community). Furthermore, Kassim maintains a (private) homosexual identity (which is open to debate since there no clear mention of Kassim's sexuality in the narrative) and a conjugal relationship with a male-to-female transsexual as a way of being and belonging in both private (i.e. home) and non-heteronormative/queer space (i.e. gay and transsexual communities). It is not inaccurate to say that Kassim does not simply adopt a (public) heterosexual persona as a means to resolve the tension as a means of, among others, the tensions which arise from social and pressures for marriage. This is because Kassim is able to construct his sense of self and belonging to the communities around him by asserting an ethnic identity that interacts and inflects with other forms of identity. It can be said that what is means to be 'Malay' for Kassim, is not strictly configured and sustained through ethnicity, religion, language, and culture, but is created and continually moulded by the realization of other forms of identity that are organized around his gender and sexuality.

The analysis shows that the protagonist possesses various identities with Malay identity being foregrounded while other forms of identity are backgrounded throughout the story. The analysis also shows that these other forms of identity exert influence on the realization of the protagonist' Malay identity, as evidenced by Datin Sarina's shocking discovery of her neighbours' 'true' selves.

Since the analysis focuses primarily on the construction of diverse identities in Karim Raslan's story, more needs to be known about the dilemmas or challenges that he may have faced or encountered in constructing the identities of his characters. Some readers may want to know the reason why Karim Raslan's created diverse identities in the story, particularly those that are based on "tabooed" homosexual practices within the Malay-Muslim community. One the other hand, Karim Raslan's portrayal of Kassim (despite the diverse identities the latter possesses) may be seen by some readers as being prompted by his own ethnocentric preoccupations with "Malay characters" and "Malay issues" and, hence, his *inability* to present the multicultural reality of Malaysia in his story "Neighbours" (1996). There are two probable answers to these queries. Firstly, the Malaysian community and, the Malay community, in particular, have always been the focal point of his work mainly because these communities are his "world" and that he has done his best to write about the people he knows: ". . . And even in my short stories which always is [sic] about the Malaysian community, I write about what they say *bangsawan orang Melayu* (Malay noble people) . . . They are my world. You write about what you know (Karim Raslan, 2006, p. 53). Secondly, Karim Raslan believes that it is his duty as a writer to write about "the complexity of [being] Malaysia[n]" by acknowledging "all cultural differences" and things that are "hidden" and "difficult". (Karim Raslan, 2006, p. 53). He made this point clear in his address during a seminar in Jakarta where he gave an insightful, personal observation on Malaysian government's restrictive, moralistic definition of national identity and its impact on what it means to be 'Malaysian':

> . . .the government's ideas control the definition of identity. What it means to be Malaysia [sic] and even being Chinese in Malaysia. . . But in fact, the Malaysian community is very different. There are Arabic Malaysian, Indian Malaysian, Minangkabau Malaysian, Bugis Malaysian, etc. but the government doesn't like that. They want everyone to be just Malaysian. They try to deny all cultural differences because they want to strengthen national identity. It's a good idea. But we pay the cost of losing the sense of our personal identity… Now to be Malaysian also means to be very moralistic. All people and all Malaysian [sic] never commit anything immoral. There are no Malaysian prostitutes, no Malaysian homosexuals, and no Malaysian drug takers. So, we always deny things that are not good and that are not beautiful, although they still exist. They are only hidden. The task and responsibility of a writer are to write difficult things (Karim Raslan, 2006, p. 53).

From the above discussion, it is not entirely wrong to say that there may, indeed, be a variety of reasons behind other local writers' decisions in creating the identities of their characters – an aspect worthy of investigation given that these decisions may be influenced by the dilemmas or challenges they face in constructing the identities of their characters (e.g. whether to allow dominant identities to come to the fore while backgrounding other forms of identity, or allow multiple identities to interact with each other in defining and constructing their sense of self and belonging to their community and country). Such dilemma is observed by Raihanah Mohd Mydin (2009) as she highlights the problem of "multiple identifications"

that many local writers encounter in creating the identities of their characters:

> Nonetheless, multiple identifications can be problematic to the writer as he attempts to represent them in literature. For instance, when a communal outlook takes precedence over and above a national one, the writer, like the nation, faces a significant test of identity. How does one construct identity in one's narrative? Does one focus on the person, the ethnic community or the nation? Or does one consider all three constructs, and if so, what problems might one face in taking up such an endeavour? (p. 45)

While such problem illuminates the fact that many Malaysians and non-Malaysians experience complex processes of identity formation and how these processes are influenced by a host of interacting factors and conditions, *in addition* to the above mentioned constructs, another related aspect worthy of examination is the challenges one might face in using "Neighbours" (Karim Raslan, 1996) and other literary works by local writers in the literature classroom. For example, some students may find it difficult to understand why certain identities are foregrounded over others in the texts and why some identities are textually under/misrepresented. In her study on the representations of national identity in Malaysian children's literature in English, Desai (2006) discovers that while many of the works produced by local writers in this genre acknowledge Malaysia' ethnically diverse societies, some of these texts *tactfully* affirm the dominance of Malay identity and community over others.

> The didactic lessons in these stories leave little doubt the authors would like to promote unity, allegiance, and virtue, under Malay leadership. The attempt is unlikely to be successful, however, as long as segments of the population (minorities) are represented as not quite belonging, others (such as women) are misrepresented; while still others (lower classes, indigenous and immigrant groups) are left out of the literature altogether. As long as these images persist in the literature, readers will receive a mixed message about who really belongs and who doesn't (p. 19)

On the other hand, some students may face difficulty understanding the texts especially when they are required to, among others, *deconstruct* the characters' identities. One way to tackle the above-mentioned challenges is to address and redress fixed notions of identity. This can be achieved by highlighting the fluidity and complexity of identity and drawing on knowledge of various forms of identity from other literary texts and sources. Another method involves using identity-related questions that are guided by the principles of poststructuralism/deconstruction:

(1) How does the work undermine or contradict generally accepted truths (*about the characters' identities*)?
(2) How does the author (or a character) omit, change, or reconstruct memory and identity?
(3) What ideology (*pertaining to identity*) does the text seem to promote?
(4) What is left out of the text that if included might undermine the goal of the work (*e.g. over-, under- or misrepresenting certain identities*)?
(5) If we changed the point of view of the text – say from one character to another, or multiple characters – how would the story change? Whose story (*or identity*) is not told in the text? Who is (*and whose identity is*) left out and why might the author have omitted this character's tale (*and identity*)? (*Literary Theory,* 2015; notes added in italics)

CONCLUSION

Understanding a community of varying ethnicities and identities can be a daunting exercise. The issue is even more pertinent for authors when he attempts to put pen to paper. Bearing the above points in mind, the ongoing research must now take into account the writers' input on the challenges they face in producing their works and the implications of using these works in the literature classroom in its quest to develop a framework for analysing the construction of diverse, intersecting identities in contemporary Malaysian literature.

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