

All The Trees Are Falling Down: Environmental Concern of A Malaysian Poet

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INTRODUCTION

Literature shares a similarity with other disciplines in the social sciences since it looks into the social, political and economics aspects of human society. Literature creatively highlights pertinent issues in society, and portrays human feelings in interactions in family and community life. According to the Malaysian National Laureate, Shahnon Ahmad, literature is viewed as life's seismograph. Literary works like the novel, short story and poetry have the characteristics of a seismograph, an instrument in geological studies which records about earthquakes. A seismograph only records earthquakes as a natural disaster whereas literary works register and analyze 'earthquakes' of life. These 'earthquakes' refer to all types of obstacles and challenges in man's life for instance the hardship faced by the poor and destitute. (Shahnon 1994: 3). Similarly the poems selected for discussion in this essay would serve as a seismograph which records and highlight environmental issues.

Literary works written in Malaysia since independence are abound with relevant issues of the particular era. For instance, a novel, *Scorpion Orchid* (1992) by Llyod Fernando dwelled on the problems of race relations and nation building. Ee Tiang Hong's poem, 'Exile' shows the 'linguistic exile' which refers to the poet's protest and dissatisfaction with government bureaucracy and political institutions. (Kirpal Singh 2001: 227). A Malay poet, Muhammad Haji Salleh, in his anthology, *Rowing Down Two Rivers* (2000), focuses on the Malay identity and voices out his feelings of discontentment in the issue of Malay poverty and economic inequality.

This essay shall focus on a number of poems with environmental and ecological concern selected from the anthology 'Rags and Ragas' (2000) written by a Malaysian poet, Cecil Rajendra. He has contributed to the growth of poetry in Malaysian literature in English, from the 1970's to the 1990's. However, there is a uniqueness in his poems, in contrast to other local poets. He focused on issues, some of which might be sensitive to the powers that be, such as politics and government policies in Malaysia. Although similar issues have been touched on by other poets before him, it was done subtly as compared to his poems which criticize and lambast directly. As discussed earlier in the themes preferred by Malaysian poets, it can be said that Malaysian poets in English

worked only on communal themes based on the ethnicity of the poet. For instance Malay poets focused on rural life and patriotism while the descendants of the Chinese or Indian immigrants would look into matters of identity, alienation, ambivalence and their associations with their parent country. On the contrary, the predominant themes in the works of Cecil Rajendra are no more issues of pre-independence and post-independence days such as ethnicity, but are more Malaysian in character with a wider universal appeal. He has dealt with matters of concern for every Malaysian for instance, human rights, justice and equality.

Cecil Rajendra is a lawyer by profession and is an active member of the Malaysian Bar Council. As such he is not a full-time poet. Nevertheless he is committed in using literary works such as poetry as a tool for criticism of society's follies. He is much involved in voluntary service such as providing free legal aid to poor fishermen and factory workers in his home state, Penang. During his sojourn in London, he was involved with Third World writers and poets. He was the first Malaysian poet to gain recognition by the national Poetry Secretariat of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. His poems, mostly of Third World concern, have been published and broadcasted in over thirty-six countries and also translated into other languages (Rajendra 1989: 1-2). He has been a prolific poet with not less than thirteen anthologies of his poems published since 1965.

Most of his poetry collections deal with issues of war, poverty, inequality and social injustice. Nevertheless, one of his favourite concerns is environmental issues, particularly in matters of forest conservation and ecological balance. Ecological ruin such as indiscriminate tree felling, land clearing, emission of hazardous gases and the like are some of the themes in his poems (Fadillah et. al 2004: 90). He has presented these themes through irony and satire in his poems.

Satire

Satire and irony are profound in his poems. This is a peculiar characteristic of most of his poems in this analysis. Rajendra makes use of satire as a means of criticism to voice out his sentiments or disagreement against society or personalities. Some of the poems in the analysis contain elements of humour. It can be seen that Rajendra has used satire as a tool of ridicule or cynicism against others. According to Abrams (1999: 275) satire is a literary art that is derogatory of others. It amuses but also insults and evokes feelings of contempt and scorn for man's follies. Satire is a device in literary works which exposes the failings of individuals, institutions and societies to ridicule and scorn (Baldick 2001: 228). In short, it is a deliberate attempt of criticizing anything in an amusing way - be it an institution, people, a system, etc. which exposes their follies. The aim of these criticisms is to make man realize their mistakes and wrongdoings and bring about a change for the better, which in Rajendra's poems, a change in the attitude towards environmentalism.

Environmentalism

Environmentalism is a philosophical concept which stresses on the influence of all the elements in the environment on the life and activities of the people (Clark 1990: 105).

The poems in the anthology have an environmental or ecological theme since they touch on the issues of man and nature. For instance, man's worst fears of the negative effect of this imbalanced relationship, would be the annihilation of nature.

Rapid industrialization has a heavy price to pay since it affects the ecological system and the natural environment. Some of the maladies afflicting the developed world and also the third world countries are deforestation, air and water pollution and a host of other environmentally related problems.

However there are voices of concern from those who are aware of the grave consequences of industrialization and urbanization. The Rio Earth Summit was held in 1992 to call for measures to be taken to save the yet undamaged ecosystems around the globe. According to Tansey (1995: 85-86) this Summit is an example of environmentalism being a form of political doctrine and movement. It can be seen as a radical and oppositional ideology since it is opposed to many contemporary practices such as industrial and economic growth. This concern for the environment is shared by the poet in his poems.

The Poet's Concern

"A Prescription for Development" is a poem that lambast the authorities in developing or Third World countries for being insensitive to the environment in pursuing the status of a developed nation. In trying to keep up with the Joneses (in reference to the developed Western nations) the President and his General National Assembly have decided to embark on a crash programme of industrialization and urbanization. They set up a commission which recommends massive deforestation, importation of western culture such as fast-food chains and also nuclear reactors. Pollution is to be the hallmark of development. The President is satisfied that finally the Western media declared the country "The Developing nation of the Year".

What Rajendra has presented in the poem is a ridicule of the government's development policies which have sidelined nature. His poem is cynical and satirizes the whole scenario of materialistic development without moral and aesthetical values. He shows his protest, paradoxically and ironically as in stanza 4:

What you have here, sir
are too many green hills -
a surfeit of lush vegetation.

Tree are fine but unproductive
And hills are an impediment

(*Rags and Ragas* 10)

The above stanza portrays an example of the capitalistic attitude of the authorities in pursuing development to the detriment of the environment. He shows here their dilemma in the paradox 'trees are fine but they are unproductive'. The trees are unproductive unless they are felled and become valuable timber. Rajendra also criticizes the vile intentions of the authorities and the developers in the line/And hills are an impediment/ to show that what they have on their minds is to develop at a faster pace and gather material wealth at the expense of the 'hills'.

In stanzas 9 and 10, Rajendra presents the paradox of development:

So what we recommend, sir-
for your race to development
is first massive deforestation
followed by massive importation

You need juggernauts, bull-
dozers and belching factories
condos and fast-food chains
and hordes of snooping tourists

(Rags and Ragas 11)

What has been described in this stanza is a reality, especially in the Malaysian context. For instance, incidences of flash floods in urban centres and in areas that were once not flood prone, occurrences of landslides and slope failure, rising temperatures on hill resorts and haze. These are some indications of uncontrolled development such as a high rate of tree felling to meet the demands of rapid development. It is also a critique on the spread of capitalism, fetishism and commodification of things globally, affecting most developing countries.

In Malaysia, it refers to development without considering the ecological balance. The end result would definitely be a loss to the developing country since in its effort to emulate the advanced countries, the environment and the people will suffer. The irony here is that development is not for the nation's progress but for the sake of the leadership. In pursuit for glory and power, the leaders have resorted to the Machiavellian concept of 'the ends justify the means'. Whatever may be the consequences of their policies, especially to the environment, are not in their consideration:

We beg your pardon, but pollution
is the hallmark of development.
To qualify as an advanced country
you have to boost a proper degree
of noise/smog/dumps & derangement.

(Rags and Ragas 11)

This is the propaganda of the leaders that Rajendra scoffs at. Excuses are created, such as pollution cannot be avoided in order to progress and it can be contained by emulating the procedures taken by the advanced Western nations. Industrialization would create more job and income opportunities and expand the export-oriented market. Therefore, the above stanza is actually an irony presented by Rajendra. Development is of course needed but it cannot be pursued at breakneck speed just to gain the status of an advanced country at the risk of polluting and damaging the environment.

Cecil Rajendra has conveyed in this poem the anxieties and fears of concerned individuals and NGO's of the negative effects of 'development' in emulating the rich countries of the west. According to SM Mohamed Idris, this philosophy of

'development' and modernization similar to New York or London would result in the displacement of communities in rural and urban areas:

"To get more export earnings, big industries were set up and millions of acres of forests were chopped down. *Padi* and vegetable farmers had to make way for the factories, and many thousands of people living in communities near the forests had to endure soil erosion, pollution of water and loss of forest, all caused by logging. ...Countries like Malaysia have built up this modern infrastructure. We can "boast" of the highest building, the longest bridges, the heaviest industries. But this pattern of development is increasingly challenged all over the Third World, by groups and people who think it has placed too much importance on material things and neglected the interests of the vast majority of people. ...What kind of "development" is it then? Can it be called "development" at all? It shouldn't, because development is meant to benefit the people, not make them victims."

(S.M. Mohamed Idris n.d.: 45-46)

"Death of a Village" is another poem that describes the disastrous effect of uncontrolled development as stated in the first stanza:

Here
intimations of death
hang
heavy in the air
Everywhere
there is the stench
of decay and despair

(*Rags and Ragas* 23)

Consisting of seven stanzas, the verse starts off with lamenting the effect of pollution from industries by the river that runs through a village. Here Rajendra has used metaphors effectively to criticize the negative effect of industrialization such as /exigencies of industrialization/, /progress's vomit/ and /progress's excrement/. The excessive metaphors help to drive home the point that such uncontrolled development seems a foul and dirty act as it has caused the 'death of a village'.

In the sixth stanza, Rajendra has used the term 'mammon' as a metaphor of development together with 'high-priests' to refer to leaders obsessed with material development:

To that mammon
DEVELOPMENT
our high-priests

sacrifice
our customs
our culture

the

our traditions
and environment
and nobody cares

(*Rags and Ragas 24*)

Development has become a sort of god to the leaders as similar as priests who revere their gods and are willing to sacrifice for them. In the last stanza, Rajendra has unexpectedly include an amusing parody from the nursery rhyme 'Three Blind Mice'.

We blind mice
We blind mice
see what we've done
see what we've done
we all ran after
Progress's
She cut off our heads
with development's
have you ever seen
such fools in you
as we blind mice?

(*Rags and Ragas 24*)

led

The parody is a ridicule of the senseless act of pursuing development at the cost of the environment. The continuity of the discourse is disrupted and contradicted by sudden swerves of tone or style. This erratic style of the poet reveals his anger and protest against the authorities for in their haste to develop, the livelihood of the people and the ecosystem have to be sacrificed.

Rajendra's next poem "Retribution" looks at another aspect of environmentalism that is excessive felling of trees for development projects. Retribution is a severe punishment for doing something wrong. The most feared of would be divine retribution from God. The writer has chosen this concept as the title for this poem since it has a connotation that man will suffer for the wrongs they have done. In this aspect, the environment suffers from man's greed. In reference to the flourishing of condominiums at the expense of the green lungs of cities, Rajendra questions the economic viability of such projects:

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Despite the developer's
Cut-price discount offers
Suites remain untenanted

(*Rags and Ragas 28*)

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In the first stanza, the poet is skeptical since the price of condominiums is unaffordable to the local population. The roving spirits, previously living in the jungle before they were evicted to make way for the construction of the condominiums, occupies the vacant lots as seen in the lines of the second stanza ../ghosts stalk the corridors/ of these condominiums/ and in the fifth stanza ../what could they do/ /these uprooted spirits/ /but inhabit/ /the man's condominium/.

The ghosts and the spirits in “Retribution” are metaphors of the environment. The punishment meted to the developers and the authorities for indiscriminate clearing off hill slopes for prestigious projects is symbolized by the presence of spirits. The poem is a criticism of uncontrolled development in Malaysia and the failure of the authorities to monitor development projects. The message of the poem is logical but the aspect of ghost and spirits would be irrational in this modern world. Nevertheless he has voiced his concern over excessive development through this symbolism.

The next poem is a pastiche of a popular nursery rhyme, London Bridge is Falling Down. A pastiche is a literary work created from elements borrowed from other writers or from an earlier author. (Baldick 2001: 185) Rajendra has renamed it “All the Trees are Falling Down” to suit his theme of environmentalism. The elements of satire, parody and playfulness are present in this poem. The changes the poet made to the original nursery rhyme transforms this poem into an amusing, yet sarcastic allusion to the contemporary issue of environmental degradation. Efforts to stop excessive logging through legal means as seen in the second stanza /stop the logging with civil laws/ is futile as indicated in the third stanza /Civil laws they bend and break/ /With hush money/. It is a critique on the issue of bribery and cronyism among politicians and civil servants, especially those responsible for safeguarding the environment.

Without legal resort, the local population and also the natives have to act on their own as seen in the fourth stanza /Stop the loggers with barricades/ and in the fifth stanza / Just what the natives did/ /in our own country/. The natives’ actions against the loggers have incurred the wrath of the authorities and the natives have to pay a price, as in the last stanza /Now the natives are behind bars/ /End of story!/ It is also a parody of a few incidents especially in the heavily forested states of Sarawak, Sabah and Pahang where the aborigines have demonstrated and opposed logging activities which affect their homes and livelihood. They have even set up blockades on access roads in their settlements. On the contrary, the government has acted harshly by imprisoning the poor natives!

The next poem on the environment is also a pastiche of the nursery rhyme Hey! Diddle! Diddle! Rajendra has named it “Hey! Sizzle, Griddle!”. Within two short verses, this poem shows concern for the future of the world if rainforests are depleted. It would cause the global warming phenomenon and desertification:

Hey! Sizzle, griddle!
 With that rainforest fiddle
 Earth feels like an overheated cocoon

But no one will laugh
 On that day when
 Our planet becomes barren as the moon.

(*Rags and Ragas* 58)

The simile of earth like an overheated cocoon shows the seriousness of the issue. Global warming and other related natural disaster would occur with man’s “fiddling” with nature, such as logging activities. The irony is imminent in this, the fiddle is a musical instrument in the original rhyme whereas the ‘fiddle’ in this pastiche is a verb, referring to man’s irresponsible actions.

“Jack & Jill” is another pastiche, copying the traditional nursery rhyme, Jack and Jill. Originally a simple two-verse rhyme, about two children who fell down a hill while trying to get a pail of water. In Rajendra’s new modern version, Jack and Jill went up the hill they found /..it bare/ /stripped of all vegetation/. This is an allusion to deforestation. In the second stanza, it alludes to modern day maladies:

With no protection
From the sun’s radiation

Jack contracted skin cancer
Jill followed soon thereafter

(*Rags and Ragas* 60)

Rajendra’s poems have portrayed a bleak picture of the impending disaster that would occur if steps are not taken to stop man’s exploitation of nature. The disaster would be in the form of global warming and a direct penetration of the sun’s rays due to the depletion of the ozone layer. Global warming would lead to the melting of the ice cap and a sudden rise of the sea level. These are the repercussions of tampering with the environment without considering the consequences. Rajendra has expressed his apprehension for this imminent tragedy in the future if environmental awareness is lacking. His cynical and satirical remarks as evident in the poems show the intensity of the issues concerning the environment. It is an indication that these issues should be taken seriously by everyone concerned for the sake of the future generations.

Appendix

A PRESCRIPTION FOR DEVELOPMENT

Our National General Assembly
was in deep mortification.
An insensitive journalist
(from some northern region)
had branded our country
a model of Underdevelopment.

How to gain recognition
as a developed nation.
pondered our President.
The answer? – Commision
a group of technocrats
to study, possible remedy
this intolerable situation.
Months and seminars later
they outlined their prescription.

What you have here , Sir
are too many green hills –

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a surfeit of lush vegetation.
Trees are fine but unproductive
and hills are an impediment.
There are too many canefields
and too many plantations.
We do not know what development
is, but an agricultural economy
is the badge of underdevelopment.

Your beaches are beautiful, Sir
but lack utilization;
there are no tourists, hotels
or any high-rise apartments.

Your streets are traffic free
and your towns too quiet;
your people seem stress free
and a trifle too contented.

They eat fruits and vegetable
and drink natural water
which we're shocked to discover
is indecently clean and pure.

So what we recommend, sir—
for your race to development—
is first massive deforestation
followed by massive importation.

You need juggernauts, bull-
dozers and belching factories
condos and fast-food chains
and hordes of snooping tourists.

You must import mineral water
and a medium-sized nuclear reactor;
and a score of foreign psychiatrists
to service your expat industrialists.

We beg your pardon, but pollution
is the hallmark of development.
To qualify as an advanced country
you have to boast a proper degree
of noise/smog/dumps & derangement.
With no hesitation, our President
embraced their recommendation.
In earmuffs he now sits
in a haze-shrouded apartment.

High above, but not quite beyond
the city's teeming shout and bustle;

with a glass of Perrier water
he pops tranquilizers by the bottle.
He has a direct open line
to his Swiss psychiatrist;
keeps an emergency canister
of oxygen taped to his wrist.

But grinning from ear to ear
as he chomps on his hamburger
Mr President is now all glee
For that damned foreign journalist
has just declared our country,
"The Developing Nation of the year"

(Rajendra 2000: 10)

DEATH OF A VILLAGE

Here
intimations of death
hang
heavy in the air
Everywhere
there is the stench
of decay and despair

The river
strangled by
exigencies
of industrialization
is dying...
and nobody cares

The fish
in the river
poisoned by
progress's vomit
are dying...
and nobody cares

The birds
that feed on the fish
in the river
poisoned by
progress's excrement
are dying...
and nobody cares

And so
a once-proud village

sustained
for centuries
by the richness
of this river dies...
and nobody cares

To that mammon
DEVELOPMENT
our high-priests
sacrifice
our customs
our culture
our traditions
and environment
and nobody cares

We blind mice
We blind mice
see what we've done
see what we've done
we all ran after
Progress's wife
she cut off our heads
with Development's knife
have you ever seen
such fools in your life
as we blind mice?

(Rajendra 2000: 23)

RETRIBUTION

Despite the developer's
cut-price discount offers
suites remain untenanted.

There is a rumour
that in the rainy season
ghosts stalk the corridors
of these condominiums.
And is it any wonder...
Decades before bulldozers

muscled their territory
a family of raintrees
camped these foothills.

Limb by limb torn
from their land

stripped and decapitated
their grounds cemented
what could they do
these uprooted spirits
but inhabit
the man's condominium.

And now, in the rainy season
we have a rumour...
in the nightwind you can hear
the trees howling their dispossession.

(Rajendra 2000: 28)

ALL THE TREES ARE FALLING DOWN

All the trees are falling down
Falling down, falling down.
All the trees are falling down,
Not fair, lady!

Stop the logging with civil laws
Civil laws, civil laws.
Stop the logging with civil laws
You cry baby!

Civil laws they bend and break
Bend and break, bend and break.
Civil laws they bend and break
With hush money.

Stop the loggers with barricades
Barricades, barricades.
Stop the loggers with barricades
Nice and easy.

Just what the natives did
Natives did, natives did.
Just what the natives did
In our country.
Now the natives are behind bars
behind bars, behind bars.
Now the natives are behind bars
End of story!

(Rajendra 2000: 56)

HEY! SIZZLE, GRIDDLE!

Hey! Sizzle, griddle!
With that rainforest fiddle
Earth feels like an overheated cocoon.

But no one will laugh
On that day when
Our planet becomes barren as the moon.

(Rajendra 2000: 58)

JACK & JILL

Jack and Jill
went up the hill.
When they got there
hey found it bare.
Stripped of all vegetation.

With no protection
From the sun's radiation
Jack contracted skin cancer
Jill followed soon thereafter.

(Rajendra 2000: 60)

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