Writing from the Fringe of a Multi-Cultural Society

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'Exile is marvellous homage to our origins.'
>   Carlos Fuentes
>   *Terra Nostra*, Penguin Books, 1977

If you're a writer in English in Malaysia, it isn't unusual to run into the following encounters or non-encounters:

'Where you work, ah?' the man behind the well-appointed, modish desk in a computer shop, says.

'Writer,' you say.

'Reporter for newspaper?'

'No, I write fiction.'

'Fishion?' he says, and suddenly becomes interested in arranging brochures and stationary on his desk.

Or your latest novel has been favourably reviewed in the leading English daily and you, also a lecturer in an English Department, walk into its corridors feeling, to say the least, mildly exhilarated, only to find your usually urbane colleagues suddenly greeting you with a dark and monumental silence.

Or you're invited as a panel member to a forum to present a paper on the topic, 'Towards a Definition of Malaysian Literature', the proceedings to be specifically conducted in English. The main speaker, a one-time highly respected figure in literary circles, speaks in Malay for an hour and concludes that only national literature can be Malaysian literature and that it has to be written in Malay. Malay, it must be noted, was until recently called Bahasa Malaysia or the National language, with the attendant hope

that it would be become a mother tongue to all; that it would not only nurture but also be nurtured by the linguistic resources available among the various communities in the country.

The above three incidents do in their ways exemplify what can be called the fringe situation. The first illustrates how writing, especially in English, is located as a newspaper activity; its larger roles either unknown to the computer-store man, the representative of the average Malaysian who is preoccupied with padding out a comfortable living, or are for him not worth taking the trouble to know.

The second is representative of a literary setting that may ratify the existence of a writer's work but doesn't, either from a lingering postcolonial attachment to the British canon or respect for national literary definitions, which perceive writing in English as sectional literature. And the third, of course, contains an attitude which doesn't want to see the existence of any writing in English. What is common to all these three incidents is that each of them contains what I would call, for want of a better expression, a turned-away attitude.

I would like to examine in this paper the causes of this attitude and its influences on a writer wishing to continue writing in his chosen language, in this case, the English language. This would necessitate an inquiry into the socio-political, cultural and literary situations in order to understand why Malaysian writers in the various languages haven't joined ranks if not through the quality of their output, then at least through the spirit of open inquiry and commitment writing should engender among them, the world brotherhood.

I hyphenate the word 'Multi-Cultural' in the title because it reflects, in a miniscule way, the nature and practice of multiculturalism in Malaysia, which, in turn, are responsible for the kinds of realities accessible to or constructed by the various races in the country.

The writer in general and the writer in English, in particular, in a postcolonial situation, is concerned with how he fits or doesn't fit into the only society he has known or can ever know. He is troubled by the persistent experiences of ostracism he is confronted by in Malaysia, which relegate his works to an almost non-existent literary fringe. The third

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incident, cited above, that of the forum intended to define a Malaysian literature, certainly indicates it is impossible for him to conceptualize a continuous literary spectrum in which his works occupy even a fringe position. The dramatization of a deeply entrenched ethnocentric, nationalistic attitude in that incident implies that he has to float about in a kind of fringelessness. This isn't only the experience of the writer but also that of the questioning, disenchanted Malaysian as the following quote illustrates:

> 'I have lived in this country all my life and I have come to accept minority status,' says Mahabratha, in a letter to the Sunday Star, 3 September 1995, and later comments, 'There is so much talk about national integration and racial unity but apart from the near Hollywood scale of productions of *Visit Malaysia Year* and the National Day celebrations, whose sole purpose, in my opinion, is to attract tourist dollars, one sees hardly any effort towards creating a *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian race).'

This writer's dissatisfaction with the socio-cultural and political situations in the country is presented by referring to the ruling class' statements of intention and a not-so-subtle diversion from that highly publicized ambition. His use of Mahabratha as a nom de plume not only signals his ethnicity but also his expectations of a full and deeply ramified inter-cultural landscape. However, what are delivered are images of display and consumerism, images that will be put away once the shows are over. The implication is here is that there is no continuous and urgent engagement with the real issues of evolving a *Bangsa Malaysia* or Malaysian race.

It is relevant at this point to take note of what Homi K. Bhabha says in relation to this complex process of evolving a common nation in his **Liminal Negotiation of Cultural Difference**:

> It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.(2)'

It appears that in multi-cultural Malaysia, there has been no 'emergence of the interstices' between the various communities for there

to be 'collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value'. In other words, the inner and outer realities a Malaysian perceives do not come anywhere near a commonly accepted and comfortable reality, tempered by individual variations. Malaysians however do possess common goals such as economic security and materialistic success, and the desire for relatively high educational achievements, but there isn't a reality commonly accessible to the Malaysian Malay, Chinese and Indian. The various strategies that the ruling regime planned and executed to evolve a Malaysian identity once again originated from distracted versions of the realities of history.

The realities of history, I believe, can be and often are intercepted and interpreted in such a way as to accommodate the many fears, anxieties, and ambitions of cultures and societies. The cultural and social landscapes that emerge tend to display the desired image of man while glossing over his confrontational and complex position in a multi-cultural society. Can the more leisurely, meaning here, the time needed for the vital expression of an attitude or process, development of culture/cultures be interfered with? What kind of historical and literary perceptions in the communities of a particular country does such a self or community-dreamed conception of culture produce? How do the individual communities view each other in a multi-cultural situation?

One answer could be that the immediate post-Independence ambitions for an integrated Malaysian society got side-tracked or modified so that what was finally sought through these strategies and agendas was only sense of togetherness. The recognition behind all these moves, it could be interpreted, was that it was impossible to produce a common Malaysian identity because of the diversity of cultural attitudes and practices. Only a sense of togetherness could be generated among the multi-cultural population. What is this sense of togetherness? It is the feeling that the people of the country are living and working for common objectives; that they are seen to be living side by side, working side by side, achieving goals side by side; but that that side by side divide need not be eroded or removed. It becomes an acknowledged frontier, a necessary barrier. Once this divide is broken down, then the concept of purity goes.

This concept of purity can be defined as the isolation of the races – the several cultural solitudes – so that their cultural and religious territories will remain sacrosanct and unpenetrated. The various communities may come in contact with one another in the course of their daily lives but they must not leave any particular of their cultural sense or heritage behind them. This desire to retain the cultural purity of the various communities may have originated from the post-WW2 and pre-independence syndrome: the need to rediscover one's own cultural identity. The Japanese occupation of the country between 1942-1945 caused, among other consequences, what can be called a cultural disrobing and displacement among the various races. The enforced obeisance to the Japanese flag, Japanese visions and values (distorted under war conditions) would have obliterated, for a time, any sense of their cultural selves.

The return to their cultural shores after the war, however, produced an intense awareness in the major community of the fragile position it had been occupying in Malaysian society and history. The negotiations that were conducted in the post-WW2 and pre-Independence period were, I think, largely based on this sense of the vulnerable and the secure. In a recent meeting of the major component of the ruling party, this sentiment was expressed: if the party 'failed to carry out such reforms, Malays and bumiputras would be humiliated and have to submit to others again' (The Star, 11 October 1996). While one community moved in the direction of designing an unassailable cultural space, the other communities, in reaction to this fierce determination, which would produce a racially divided and volatile situation, settled for security. While this community drove relentlessly towards re-establishing its indigenous status, the other communities opted for economic security and a certain laizzez faire in religious and cultural matters. With the achievement of independence, these positions of the various races were ratified by the country's new constitution.

The post-Independence and, therefore, the postcolonial period saw a deeper entrenchment of this communal approach to life in Malaysia. From the minority point of view, it was felt that new adjustments had to be made to the concept of cultural and social structuring and organization. While it has to be recognized that in the postcolonial period, it was characteristic

that newly independent countries establish their presence through an emphasized nationalistic sense, one wonders at the continued need to be nationalistic forty years after independence. The much despised divide-and-rule policy of imperialistic ambition has, in fact, only reappeared under the guise of nationalism. Just as in colonial times the people were made to serve the colonialist's ambitions and dreams, so now, in the postcolonial period, the minorities are persuaded to serve the dominant community's visions of itself and its future.

This is recognized even by writers coming from the dominant community. Here is Usman Awang, one of the national laureates, lamenting the fact in *Sahabatku (My Friend, dedicated to Dr.M.K.Rajakumar), 1979/ 1983* [qtd in the **Sunday Star**, 8 October 1996]:

> ...Dear Friend
> The one, free
> nation we imagined,
> Remains a distant truth,
> My anger becomes bitterness,
> When we are forced apart,
> The distance ever wider,
> Now that I am proclaimed "bumiputra"
> and you are not.

It would appear then that there is a utopian Malaysia and a real Malaysia; utopian Malaysia is the ideal that is the subject of political talk and media presentations while the real Malaysia is the country where the individual has to struggle for some kind of self-realization.

How are subjects (to quote once again from Homi Bhabha) formed 'in-between', or in excess of, the sum of the 'parts' of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable? (2)[2]

In the Malaysian context, these questions are not even addressed, let alone answered. Even the disturbing and catastrophic 1969 May 13 racial riots in the country did not produce a deeply concerned and diagnostic attitude towards a society bursting at its seams – if there were seams at all in the first place – and only instilled fear in the various communities. Once again they returned to their turned-away attitude, I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, and refined it into a pragmatic philosophy of tolerance for living in a multi-cultural society.

At its most constructive level, this philosophy of pragmatic tolerance has generated a guarded mutual respect between the various races and love for peace and stability among them. The Malaysian, whether he is Malay, Chinese or Indian, has benefitted from this sense of respect; it has nurtured the stability needed for a sustained economic growth and, subsequently, the opportunity to be economically secure. But this has also meant that each community remain within its cultural territory and not transgress into the cultural domains of the other communities.

Embedded in this philosophy of pragmatic tolerance is the belief, however false, that the three communities have experienced history, particularly its colonial aspects, in different ways and that this would fashion different attitudes among them. The Chinese and Indian communities, being migrant communities, so it is glibly assumed, would view life from a materialistic sense of ambition while the indigenous community would view life as being more closely bound to and being always engaged in developing a cultural intimacy with the land.

Though writing in English may be relegated to less than a fringe position and its 'ideas, values, and imaginative worlds...erased from the official national canon'[3], nevertheless it is the writing that can explore or call the cultural loyalist's attention to the 'subjects formed 'in-between', or in excess of, the sum of the 'parts' of difference [and] the competing claims of communities....'[4] As Salman Rushdie explains: 'those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it – assisted by the English language's enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers'.[5]

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My own experience with writing in English over the last thirty years or so informs me that I have moved away from the imperialistically-tainted language I was taught in school in the 1950s. Besides that, my engagement with writing in Malay in the 1980s tells me that I will be paddling in shallow pools and encroaching on the sensitivities of linguistic purists all the time. I was accused of Tamilizing the Malay language because I translated my play, **The Cord**, originally written in English, into Malay! These purists advocate 'a closed Malay-language/Malay-cultural base...which is conceptualize[d] as "tradition," "roots," and "the strength of the race."'[6]

Such a linguistic attitude has led its followers to make absurd and horrifying claims, as the following quote exemplifies:

> (The previous letter writer) also says that "anyone who hopes to evaluate Malay literature has to have the perception and imagination of the Malays ...[;] one has to talk, think, dream and even procreate in that language." I can safely assume that (the previous writer) is not an Englishman and I dare him to claim that he has the perception and imagination of Englishmen. From his letter, I doubt that he thinks or dreams, let alone procreate, in English. Yet he presumes to show that Shakespeare writes badly.[7]

My own response to such circumscribed marking out of cultural and literary boundaries has been to go along with Salman Rushdie to claim 'large territories [and] frontiers' in my writing. The following excerpt from my short story, *Haunting the Tiger*, illuminates:

"I know what's wrong,' Zulkifli says. "There's something foreign to the tiger's nose. He won't show himself until the smells are gone."

"What smells?" he says.

"Mind and body smells,' Zulkifli says.

Muthu is offended and turns away from him.

"Not in the way you can't go near a person," Zulkifli says, confronting Muthu. "The clothes you wear, the thoughts you think. Where do they come from?"

"They're just clothes and ideas," Muthu says.

"They must fit into the place where the tiger lives."

"Why must they fit in?" Muthu says. "I only want to break out from my father's hold on me."

"So you brought a purpose with you?" Zulkifli says. "And a way of thinking. How can you get into the tiger's stripes and spirit?"

"I can make the leap," Muthu says, thinking of the chameleon.[8]

I've made this journey that Zulkifli, the Malay, and Muthu, the descendent of a migrant, make into the interior of the land deeply symbolic in the hope of reflecting the hidden fears and ambitions of the bumiputra and the non-bumiputra. If you analyse the behaviour and thoughts of these two characters, you discover that the bumiputra, acting from within a centre of self-assurance, speaks through the rhetoric of empowerment. When this rhetoric of empowerment is also given the characteristics of a ritual needed to enter into the spirit of the land, then it becomes overwhelmingly powerful. But the response that Muthu makes to this seductive, comforting and almost spiritual exercise is surprising because he seems not to want to be reassured. He subconsciously compares Zulkifli with his father who represents, in an earlier section of the story, all that is in cultural decline. It is remembering his father's authoritative injunctions, as he listens to Zulkifli's reassuring and confident voice that he thinks of the chameleon.

The chameleon, as opposed to the tiger, is a small and almost insignificant creature; Muthu has had an epiphanic experience of identifying with it in one of his earlier self-discovery rambles in the jungles of dream landscape:

His tail unclasps and as he hurtles through the changing hues of the foliage and sees the red, dark earth rush up to him, he screams, 'I'll possess! I'll possess!'

He wakes up trying to wipe out the words but the dream continues into his wakefulness. He sees himself as the chameleon, now landed on the ground matted with leaves, and the blood pulsing through veins carried beyond the centuries.[9]

The tiger is a fully realized symbol of nationhood and sense of belonging; but it can also lend itself as an intimidating rhetorical device to those who unquestioningly surrender to its powers. It reflects a rhetoric full of closures whereas Muthu, embracing the spirit of the chameleon, wants an approach that covers a wider spectrum of man's memories, struggles and achievements that transcend self-dreamed and nationally-envisioned boundaries.

The novel *In A Far Country*, where another version of this tiger-chameleon episode is located, as one critic comments, 'take[s] us with vigour and imagination into the difficult subject of a man's attempt to traverse repeatedly psychic, ethnic, temporal and spatial boundaries. Breaking out of the insularity created by shaping influences on the self, Rajan, [the protagonist and an epigone of Muthu], promises to "go back again and again" to make fresh discoveries and to apprehend a humane continuity which embraces all men regardless of race or class.'[10]

My experience of writing in English in multi-cultural Malaysia suggests that the writer has to cease worrying about whether he is located on the fringe or in the centre of an artificially created literary paradigm; he has to accept being an exile in a land that continually denies him a sense of belonging. This sense of homelessness in a land you have always treated as your home gives you, in unexpected ways, the courage of the chameleon, rather than the reassuring and circumscribing strength of the tiger, to continually and creatively discover the marvellous and even metaphysical nature of your origins.

Notes and References

1 Homi K. Bhabha: the Liminal Negotiation of Cultural Difference, file:///E|/BHABHA~2.HTML.
2 Ibid.
3 Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, 'Crossroads and Crossed Words', in Hena Maeselinek et al ed. A Talent(ed) Digger, Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi B.V.,1996, p.347.
4 Homi K. Bhabha: the Liminal Negotiation of Cultural Difference, file:///E|BHABHA~2.HTML.
5 Span number 34-5 'Diasporas' Maria Degabriele, http://kali.murdoch.edu.au/cntinuum/litserv/SPAN/34/Degabriele.html.
6 Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, ibid, p.345.
7 New Straits Times, Literary section, 10 January 1996, p.9.
8 Haunting the Tiger: Contemporary Stories from Malaysia. London: Skoob Books Publishing, 1996, p.45.
9 Ibid., p.42.
10 Wong Soak Koon, 'Journeying into K.S.Maniam's *In A Far Country*' in Lim Chee Seng ed. Challenges of Reading the New and the Old, Kuala Lumpur: Department of English in association with MACLALS, 1995, pp.106-7.

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