

Fictionalized History: Signifying Changes to the Malaysian Nation and Identity

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Abstract

As one of the cornerstones of fiction, writers often use and confront history in their claim to “reality” and “identity” in their writing. Linda Hutcheon’s claim for “a postmodern concern for the multiplicity and dispersion of truth(s); truth(s) relative to the specificity of place and culture” (1988, p. 108) is relevant to the use of history in recent Malaysian literature. The multiple and varied claims of truth(s) as reflected through the fictionalizing of Malaysian history is the focus of the analysis in this article, which aims to expose the social, economic, and political implications of the Malaysian identity. The analysis of three current works of fictionalized Malaysian history from the different fictional genres of comic series, children’s history, and occidental history, represents a cross section of genres that challenge the supremacy of history’s ontological claim over identity. The deliberate contestation of received Malaysian history in fictional modes acknowledges the peripheral identity structures of race, religion, and economics that are sensitive in a multiracial country such as Malaysia.

Key words: Fiction, History, Malaysia, national identity

Fictionalizing Malaysian History

“Fictionalized history” refers to creative projections of history that are wont to project unsanctioned or at times unverified facts not acknowledged by those in authority. Undeniably, fictional work that challenges history generates interest especially in the interrelations between

genres and the socio-political significance they generate. The presentation of Malaysian history in fiction implies an anti-establishment agenda intending to provide an “other” perspective of Malaysian history writing against the versions in Malaysian school text books. The “fictionality” of these works provides immunity to the authors of these histories, leaving a platform open for suggestions, accusations, and implications, which remain unverified. Such reinterpretations further suggest unsanctioned versions of a history that has yet to be uncovered, providing the “real” truth behind the varnished facts found in official versions of school history text books. Furthermore, these works are representative of a postmodern endeavour to interrogate the past by interrogating it through rewriting and re-presenting (Hutcheon 1988, p. 127). In postmodern discourse, such counter-discursive works are recognized as “historiographic metafiction.”

In describing the contents of “historiographic metafiction,” Hutcheon observes the following:

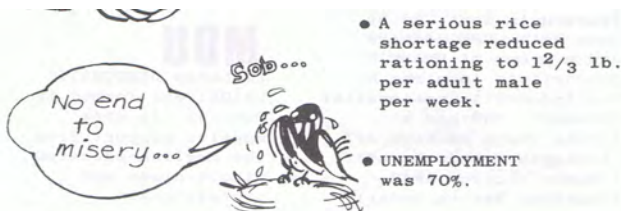
They [fiction and history] have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. (1988, p. 105)

According to Hutcheon, fiction and history are similar in relation to multiple “truths” and conventions with similar strategies of interrogating the past. It is this perspective that is levelled upon a few chosen representations of historiographic metafiction by Malaysian authors who have appeared in circulation, evoking various speculations on its significance on contemporary Malaysian identity. Asserting history as fiction and vice versa renders the factual aspect of history suspect while highlighting the potential for history to be imaginative and creative. Current Malaysian authors who have fictionalized history, such as Tunku Halim and his version of Malaysian history as

children's literature entitled *A Children's History of Malaysia* (2003), Musimgrafik's projection of Malaysian history through a collection of visual comic form entitled *Where Monsoons Meet* (2007), and Farish Noor's *The Other Malaysia* (2005), have more than sociological reasons for fictionalizing history. While established historical accounts of Malaysia begin with Parameswara (1400) (Masariah 2006; Ahmad 2009, p. 47), in the visual comic representation of *Where Monsoons Meet*, the authors choose to go back to a genesis of Malaya in prehistoric times (2,500-300 BC). The deliberate assertion of the "orang asli's" earliest presence at the beginning of Malayan History suggests the intention to "fill in the gaps" of what is accepted "truth" about Malaysian history. This manner of introducing information, albeit unverified, is part of a method of interrogating the very fundamentals of nation and identity. Similarly, Tunku Halim inserts the legend of the *Three Magical Princes* (13) into his historical fiction entitled *A Children's History of Malaysia* (2003), which is a well known folktale that provides hearsay background of Parameswara, a prince from Palembang. In *The Other Malaysia*, Farish Noor (2005) does not even pretend to follow the epochal style of traditional historical writing but prefers to project Malaysia through a number of royal and unsung heroes, offering an "other" version of nation building. These three versions of Malaysian history are by no means the only types of "fictionalized history" available in the Malaysian market but are representative of a new postmodern approach to interpreting history that is significant to contemporary Malaysian identity. Combining different narrative genres together to represent individual perceptions and projections, these works are "distinguished by their frames [formally identified as] 'historiographic metafiction' that first establishes and then crosses, positing both the generic contract of fiction and of history" (Smith 1978, p. 109).

Visual Comic Parodies, Where Monsoons Meet

Comic strips, caricatures, and editorial comics have often played a role in expressing the values, perceptions or beliefs of a particular culture. In the context of French and British post-war editorials, Pierre Purseigle studies the impact of different types of comic visual representation on a society that has experienced the violence and ugliness of war (Purseigle 2001). In the USA, James Eric Black analyses the role of comic visual media as an expression of social and political dissent in America in the 1950s (Black 2009). In particular, the latter study speaks to the comic representation of Malaysian history. The comic series entitled *Where Monsoons Meet* (2007), written by a group of students who call themselves Musinggrafik, describes its attempt to comprehend historical events from an economic and political viewpoint as a “postmodern venture of questioning established history” (2007, Preface). Thus delineated, the comic representations are hailed as “facts and figures, episodes and anecdotes that illustrate how each of the three major ethnic groups—the Malays, Chinese, and the Indians—has contributed to the building of the Malaysian nation” (ibid). Packaging the “story” of Malaysia in the *penglipurlara*, the traditional Malay story-teller, lends a mythical element to national history. Through myth, the text provides ambivalence of interpretation of Malaysian history, which in turn provides both cover and a creative platform for the authors to



voice their opinions. Another nod to cultural tradition is the cartoon figure of a black bird who often acts as a commentator (See figure above). Similarly, a storyteller who appears to be

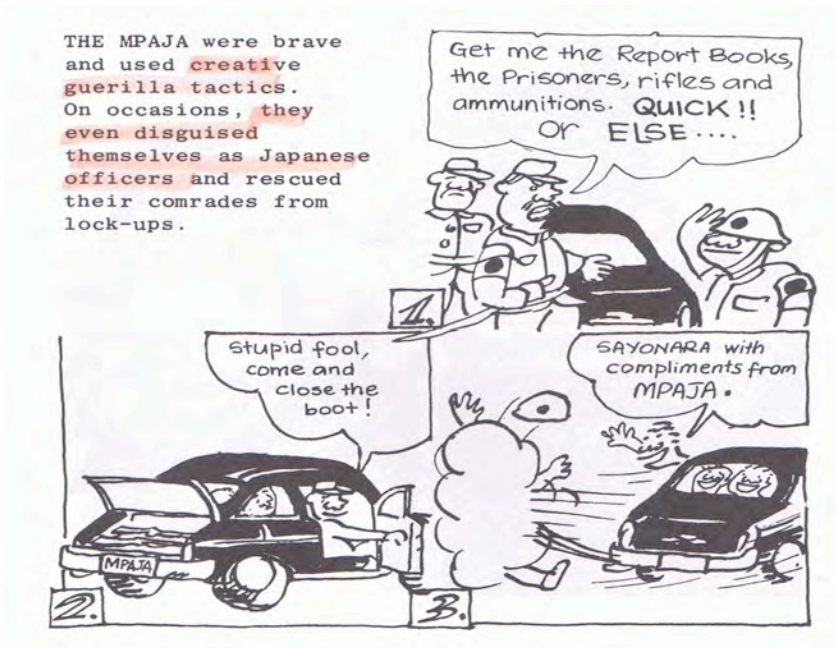
narrating to a group of children, provides the voice of the authors (See figure below). The storyteller



character in his Malay traditional clothes typically roots the youngsters gathered around him in Malaysian culture and identity. He is not only a narrator but also a tool who binds together the genre of comic cartoon and folklore to Malaysian history and identity that is ironically presented in a fictitious genre which feels both real and authentic.

As a literary genre, comics are an economical shortcut to generating meaning in that they present multiple concepts through sparse use of key words and highly metonymical images. Readers from different cultures, races, countries, and often languages are free to interpret differently. As an example of multiple readings, the initial 86 pages of *Where Monsoons Meet* can be read as examples of European colonial supremacy in the art of war and cunning diplomacy. It can also be a testimony to the weakness of the Malay sultanate or disunity amongst the Malay rulers, which is not reported in great detail in official versions of Malaysian history. In portraying interactions between local Malays, the pages also give an ethnographic overview of the issues faced by locals throughout this

period. The elements of creativity and freedom involved in generating prevalent points in history or introducing new perspectives is successfully embodied through a comic depiction of Malaysian history. Musimgrafik's alternative history includes revering enemies of the establishment. For example, members of the left-wing Communist Parti Malaysia (CPM), who founded the first organized resistance against both Japanese during World War II and British colonialists after the war, are presented as unsung heroes. Similarly, the brave attempt by the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) is celebrated as the first to organize and lead the people to fight the invaders (See figure below).



Largely ignored in established Malaysian history, the role of trade unions in organizing strikes across the country to peacefully demonstrate against British re-occupation of Malaya after the war is also

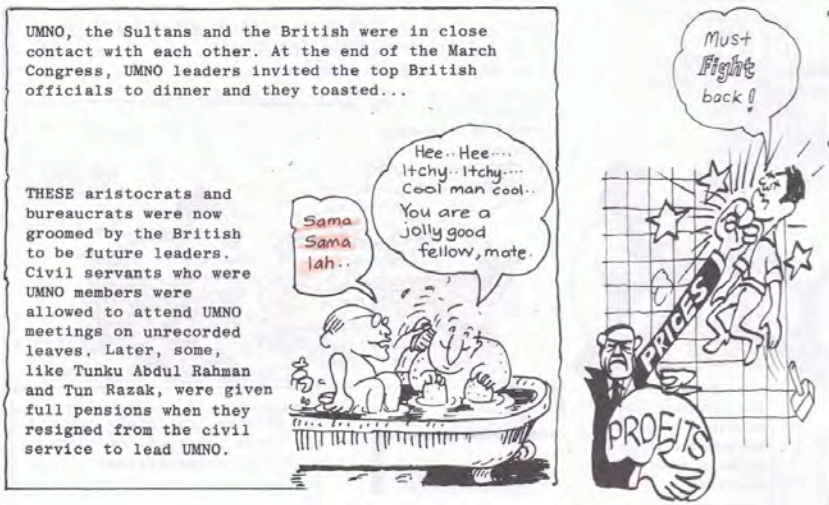
visually acknowledged in this version. Individuals such as Ibrahim Yacob, the left-wing leader of Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM) is hailed as the first to aspire to an independent Malaya while it is stated that some who are perceived to have negotiated with the British for independence had neo-colonial intentions with the objective to benefit only an elite group of people (Musimgrafik 2007, p. 92).

Among the structural differences between a formal depiction of Malaysian history as established in school text books and comics are the time-periods, events, and historical personae selected for emphasis or focus. The Form one history text book (Ahmad Fawzi 2009) portrays the rise and fall of the Malay Sultanates in each state arranged chronologically, beginning with Parameswara and ending with the tragic heroism of the Johor sultanate. Similarly, the colonial upheaval and subsequent uprisings against European colonization and Japanese occupation is also highlighted chronologically in the Form two text (Masariah binti Mispari 2006). The Form three history text book (Ramlah Adam 2004) however, carries politically selective episodes that project a united and free Malaysia due to the efforts of the people and at the behest of UMNO (United Malays National Organization). By contrast *Where Monsoons Meet* divides the centuries into a time line associated with economic oppression. Deliberately beginning on a similar trajectory as that found in the school text books, (feudalistic Malacca in the 1500s is followed closely by the oppression of British colonials leading to the Japanese occupation), the comic series overlays this with the satirical depiction of greedy national bureaucrats. The visual depiction of a local character declaring his enslavement began not with the colonials but by their bondage to the Sultans; a poor farmer discussing with his fellow crop grower the famine that they experienced when the British colonized *Tanah Melayu* is further joined by the caricature of six men, each representing a state, carrying an English gentleman on a bamboo chair. The irony of the situation, brought across by the poor, bullied,

fearful, and harassed locals in all these scenes, is further compounded by the culpability of those who perpetrated it, officials who have sworn to protect the locals (See figures below).



The criticism levelled at all the heads of constituencies and heads of state is clearly depicted in an image of early bureaucrats of UMNO, Sultans and British colonials sharing a bathtub together. Greedy officials are also pictured increasing their profits by driving the normal prices up and literally “knocking” the normal man from the market (See figures below).



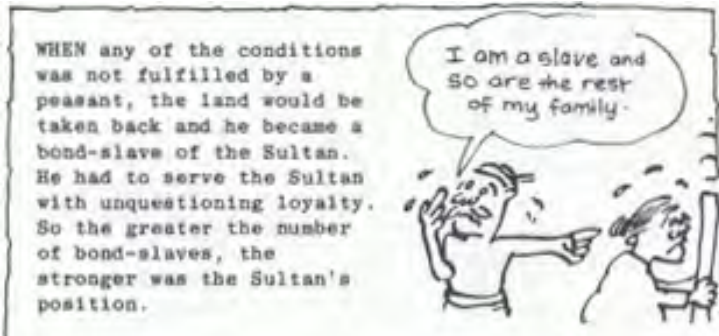
Taking an anti-establishment stand, *Where Monsoons Meet* suggests conspiracy between the colonials, the heads of states and the present government to impoverish the people. Lending authenticity to their project, the Musimgrafik team asserts the non-fictive reality of persecution and suffering by using old photographs in sepia instead of satirized caricatures. This suggests a depiction of the “truth” that is not at all humorous but painful and haunting. An example is the poignant picture of a

mass execution by Japanese troops, the MPAJA¹ troops, which acted as the interim governors prior to the return of the British after the Japanese left, and the photographs depicting the suffering of the people such as from bombings, massacres and torture during the Japanese occupation (See figures below).



¹ Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army which comprised local farmers and rubber tappers or labourers helped to rebuild a Malaya that was left in ruins after the Japanese retreated but was later disbanded because it was closely linked to the Malayan Communist Party.

The fact that Musimgrafik only succeeded in publishing² *Where Monsoons Meet* in 2007, shelved in the national library and widely distributed by local book sellers, reflects a very recent relaxation of policies toward the dissemination of sensitive information that was deemed a threat to national security. The presence of *Where Monsoons Meet* and the rest of the works mentioned in this paper imply a nation that is poised for change and a government that is willing to listen to the grumblings of its people in vocalizing their dissent from and mistrust of establishment versions of their historical experiences. In choosing to anchor Malaysian history in an economic time line of oppression, Musimgrafik provides another perspective on history from the point of view of the layman, as seen in the text's subtitle *A People's History of Malaya*. Thus, locals feature in the comic images, such as an enslaved Malay farmer, who looks confounded by the happenings around him and decries his bond-slavery to the Sultan (See figure below).



2 *Where Monsoons Meet* was first published in London in 1979 with an abridged version published in 1989 by INSAN. Only in 2007 did this original edition make it back to Malaysia through the efforts of the Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.

In the foreword of *Where Monsoons Meet*, Amir Muhammad³ acknowledges the presence of additional unverified information such as the fact that selling opium to immigrant Chinese labourers amounted to 50% of the total revenue of the Straits Settlement. Musimgrafik also challenges the nationally-accepted stance on the civil strife and power struggle for the throne of the Malay Sultanate, which contributed to the surrendering of the states to the British. For example, official versions claim Raja Abdullah was not appointed the Sultan of Perak because of his absence from the funeral of Sultan Ali (Masariah 2006, p. 235), whereas Musimgrafik claims that it was because of his drug addiction and unpopularity among the local chiefs. Another interesting change in received history is Musimgrafik's implication that the emergency⁴ period might have lasted more than the 12 years claimed in most official versions and was actually "part of a world-wide campaign supported by U.S.A. to suppress the struggle for genuine independence" (2007, p. 143). Musimgrafik openly states that the reason for the emergency was to provide the returning English with absolute power to do as they wished (2007, p. 147) sanctioned by a world campaign perpetrated by the Americans to "suppress the struggle for genuine independence" (2007, p. 143). Musimgrafik's willingness to critique all who were involved in the post-war power-grab provides a counter-history that would be attractive to many readers, although in many ways uncomfortably challenges widely-held beliefs. The question of Malay sovereignty and the Chinese immigrant's part in enriching the national coffers,

³ Amir Muhammad is a journalist, writer and film-maker interested in the Malaysian identity. His last two films, *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung* (How Are You Village People?) and *The Last Communist* have been banned in Malaysia. Despite the government's objection to his creative works, he has received many accolades abroad for his writing and films.

⁴ The emergency period began from June 18th 1948 and refers to the period after World War 2 when the Allies declared victory and the Japanese retreated while the British colonials returned to secure their holdings in Malaya demonstrating their inclination for brutality.

plus the unveiling of British or American colonials' insidious plans leave readers at an uncomfortable level of belief or disbelief. A renegotiation of loyalties and priorities of Malaysian readers is conditionally ignited by the suggestions but hampered by its fictitious genre. In the light of these "truth(s)," patriotic Malaysians who persist in viewing the government as altruistic may cease to do so while cynics continue to view with suspicion and conviction of their worst beliefs about the Malaysian race and identity beginning with selective histori[sizing].

When analyzing British and French editorial cartoons, Purseigle observes that "cartoons also targeted the state and especially the way national bureaucracies impinged on daily life in an absurd manner throughout the war" (2001, p. 291). Similarly, through the comic genre, *Musingrafik* provides Malaysian history with a platform to critique rulers, governors, and the common man without fear of reprisals.⁵ Purseigle's observations ring true in issues pertaining to policies motivated by money, such as the complicity between the government and aristocrats in the setting up of Malayan Union plus the Federal Malaya Plan (2007, p. 134). With the comic genre, the sting of criticism is buffered by humour because the cartoons distort and also shrink the reality of the situation, asserting a distance between the "truth" in the past and the present (Purseigle 2001, p. 291). This ability to voice dissent is also due to the fact that cartoons in comics are meant to be funny, which levels out the serious nature of dissent. Nevertheless, the freedom afforded by the genre is superseded by the actual freedom to voice individual dissension against the government in current law. However, recent relaxing of such laws has in turn encouraged the kind of freedom of

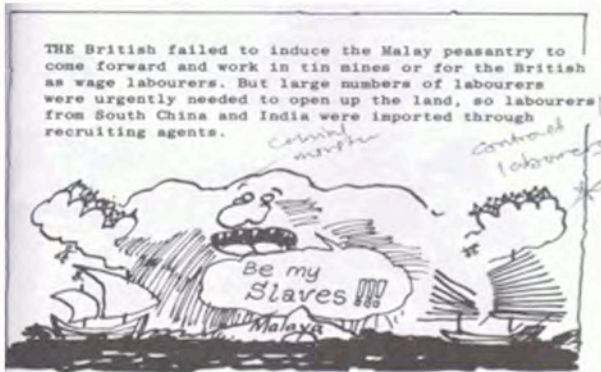
⁵ Malaysia has an Internal Security Act 1960 (ISA) which is a preventive detention law that gives the right to the government to detain any persons found to have threatened the security of the country with their actions or words. Since 1974 until 2011, 37 dissidents have been detained including journalists, trade unionists, student leaders, political activists, religious groups, academicians, NGO activists.

speech demonstrated by the publication of *Where Monsoons Meet*. This implies a new order of things to come in the present.⁶

In its comic depiction of Malaysian history, Musimgrafik clearly wants to prove that Malaysian history was mobilized by greed for economic gain and power and was not driven by State altruism, especially where the European colonials were concerned. These criticisms are couched in visual textual strategies such as caricature, parodies, and satire, allowing wit, sarcasm, and irony founded upon humour to carry across the social criticism. Parodies in connection with popular cartoon characters such as Popeye, who represents the current neo-colonial American influence, are placed alongside grotesque depictions of colonial powers that are faceless and formless monsters designed to scorn the subject through the disgust elicited in place of laughter (See figures opposite). This complies with Purseigle's claim that "visual dimensions provoke laughter based on the distortion and exaggeration of the subject's features" (2001, p.292). Thus, caricatures of all sorts abound in *Where Monsoons Meet*, as tools of humour that demean the subject, often ridiculing him or her by playing

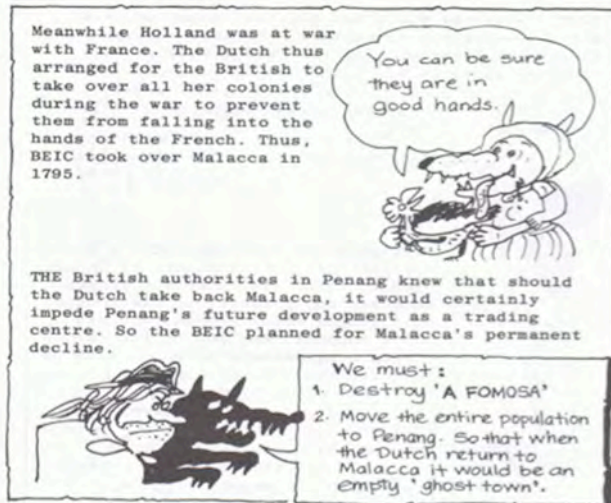
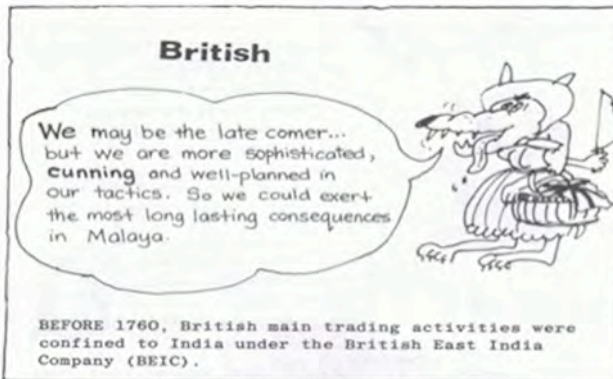
⁶ Section 73(1) of the Internal Security Act 1960 (ISA) claims that "Any police officer may without warrant arrest and detain pending enquiries any person in respect of whom he has reason to believe that there are grounds which would justify his detention under section 8; and that he has acted or is about to act or is likely to act in any manner prejudicial to the security of Malaysia or any part thereof or to maintenance of essential services therein or to the economic life thereof." The legislation was inherited by Malaysia after it gained independence from Britain in 1957 and was originally used to deter communist activity in Malaysia. However, one website claims it has been "consistently used against people who criticize the government and defend human rights. Known as the 'white terror,' it has been the most feared and despised, yet convenient tool for the state to suppress opposition and open debate. The Act is seen by some as an instrument maintained by the ruling government to control public life and civil society" http://forum.moonlightchest.com/internal_security_act_malaysia.asp.

The current prime minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak has announced a decision to repeal ISA along with three Emergency Ordinances enacted to prevent racial riots in 1969 which allow persons to be detained without charge with the permission of a minister.



upon the visual stereotypes of the subject. This is especially true of the depiction of European colonials. The earliest Portuguese invaders are depicted as sloe-eyed individuals wearing the Portuguese war-helmet. Their picture disintegrates as other European powers appear in Malacca. The metonymy of the Dutch is a fat short merchant who is keen only on profit when he sells his wares. The most condemning caricature is probably the repeated personification of the English as the wolf in a parody of Little Red Riding Hood (See figures below and opposite). Other traditional caricatures of Malayan historical heroes, Chinese chieftains (2007, p. 44), and popular British residents such as Stamford Raffles (2007, p. 28), Frank Swettenham (2007, p. 63), and J.W.W. Birch (2007, p. 50) are designed to ridicule the subject by calling upon wit and sarcasm to underline the true British agenda in Malaya as economic gain and power. The freedom in which the comic genre allows for derisive condescension is perhaps indicative of the nature of the new order that allows for a certain freedom without fear of reprisals.





A Children's History of Malaysia

Just as comic sketch is one medium of presenting alternative history, fairytale is another. The illusion of simplicity and greater attention to imagination over fact draws its audience back to childhood, thereby engendering feelings of romantic nostalgia. A history presented in this manner

merges the worlds of realism and fantasy in which facts become less important than the tale. Tunku Halim's *A Children's History of Malaysia* (2008) is a Malaysian history book for children. The author admits that he was inspired by C.S. Lewis's *Narnia Chronicles* to write a version of Malaysian history that was both memorable and enjoyable (2008, p. 271). Beginning with the magical words "a long time ago," and segregating Malaysian history into different "kingdoms," Halim's text uses the fairytale quality of children's literature to fictionalize Malaysian history.

The children's literary genre not only simplifies history but obscures certain events to emphasize a positive perspective that is aptly supplied in the form of a "happy ending" of the fairytale genre. For instance, the Japanese invasion and subsequent occupation is related in six short pages in a tale-like manner. Japanese characters such as Private Sumi and Kenjo are bewildered by the need to cycle through jungles⁷ to invade Malaya while Corporal Malik and Private Anum represent the heroic Malay regiment who sacrificed their lives to fight the Japanese army. Despite the short references to beheading (2008, p. 219) and bombing (2008, p. 220), the tale-like style of negotiating Malaysian history dampens the gruesome and often violent war that would usually be deemed unsuitable for children. Nonetheless, the interplay of gravity and flippancy creates a certain tension throughout the book. While the factual priorities of conventional history provide the realism that is often banal, the insertion of a fairytale-like representation of history lightens the impact and also opens the non-negotiable boundaries of history to questions of subjectivity. In analysing adolescent fiction, Robyn McCallum observed that during adolescence, "conceptions of subjectivity are intrinsic to narratives of personal growth or maturation, to stories about relationships between individuals and the world,

7 The Japanese managed to take the British unawares in Malaya in 1941 because they took the land route from the north, purportedly launching their assault on bicycles.

society or the past—that is, subjectivity is intrinsic to the major concerns of adolescent fiction” (1999, p. 3). In projecting Malaysian history through the fairytale, Halim reveals untold aspects deemed unimportant, such as Alfonso Albuquerque’s pillage of a Sultan’s grave, removing six bronze lions that sank along with the *Flor de La Mar* (2008, p. 50). Other information that contributes to a better understanding of the ascension of the Malacca throne linked to a *sepak takraw*, a rattan ball game that is now a Malay traditional sport, is interesting and provides a humanistic, romantic slant to the official version that sidelines such information in favor of facts.

Halim provides subjectivities in the areas of truth, identity and reality through a treasure trove of little-known facts. Examples include his assertion that “Malays have been Hindus for hundreds of years” (2008, p. 30), which he substantiates with the tale of Parameswara and Cheng Ho, and that the mother of Raja Kassim was the daughter of a Tamil merchant (2008, p. 34). Such details are stealthily inserted into the well-known tales of war between kingdoms with the villain rotating between the Siamese during the Malacca Sultanate and the British during their colonization of Malaya. Small details such as the taking of the six bronze lions suggest a folkloric perspective that prevail in oral tradition yet are uncommon in written literature. Despite a certain amount of implausibility, and the impossibility of verifying sources, oral folklore is popularly admitted as the first source of history that comes from the mouth of a people who relay information about cultural practices along the lines of folk art and antiques. Thus Halim’s efforts at adopting fairytale and folklore traditions to represent Malaysian history suggests that his intention is not only to mirror the Malay traditions of story-telling but also to write a legacy of “truth” for his children; to ensure that they remember the subjective roots of their Malaysian identity.

While *Musimgrafik* provides a people’s perspective, Halim’s perspective leans toward the elite, with special emphasis on the kingship of each state. The narrative is interspersed with a list of rulers’

names (2008, p. 76; 99; Royal Family Trees Appendix II) that do not even figure in established versions of Malaysian history. In his role as the storyteller, Halim is also keen on tracing the activities of kings directly linked to the Malaccan Empire. As such, his efforts have contributed to a “royal” perspective of Malaysian history. He unashamedly chronicles Malaysian history according to “Kingdoms” rather than by chronological events. Hence, Halim sets Dutch and British colonization against the Malay Kingdom, as having divided the “Malay World” (2008, p. 159-160). He also portrays the Malay Kingdom as including the Indonesian islands before the Dutch and English, and even before that to the founding of Malacca through the legend of the three Princes of Bukit Seguntang (2008, p. 13). By chronicling Malaysian history according to myths, legends, and tales incorporated into fairytale modes, Halim’s fictionalized history asserts the idea of subjective individual truth. This accords with what McCallum identifies as “growth and maturation” (McCallum 1993, p. 3), except in Halim’s case it is the Malaysian national identity itself that is the adolescent subject, entering a state of angst similar to that experienced by teenagers about to mature to adulthood questioning their existence, their rights, boundaries and freedom.

The Other Malaysia

Farish Noor’s *The Other Malaysia* (2005) provides a subaltern perspective of Malaysian history boldly claimed through the subtitle *A Subaltern History of Malaysia*. In Edward Said’s foreword to *Selected Subaltern Studies*, the word “subaltern” is defined as “in opposition of dominant or elite terms of political and intellectual power.” The ways in which power discourses are linked to representations is the focus of Noor’s compilation of essays. As the editors assert in the introduction to the collection on subaltern studies, the field’s objective is to “fill in the gaps and lapses” in any intellectual enterprise that enables readers to see the whole of the experience in fairer terms than

the formal mainstream and sanctioned version (1988, p. vii). *The Other Malaysia* falls in with this objective in relation to Malaysian history as an “alternative” Malaysian history. Noor’s compilation of his regular column *The Other Malaysia*, which appeared in an online independent news as “alternative writing” (Noor 2005, p. 21)⁸ is an anti-establishment deconstruction of the political history of Malaysia that he claims has “awkward silences and blind spots” (2005, p. 21). His book is of interest not as much for the merging of the styles of journalistic writing and historiography of the period between 1999 and 2002 as it is for its content. Noor’s approach includes a short synopsis of the events before the content of his column is expanded. As they target different audiences and present different information, both the journalistic and history writing are provocative challenges that evoke change in an otherwise stagnated oligarchy.

Noor’s combined style of writing is a kind of metafiction. As such, it destroys the boundaries between fiction and history, “ask[ing] us to recall that history and fiction are themselves historical terms and that their definitions and interrelations are historically determined and vary with time” (Seamon 1983, p. 212). This approach allows a deconstruction of the present perception of history by reinscribing it to “re-present the past in fiction and in history [mainly to avoid] conclusivity and incontestability” (Hutcheon 1988, p. 109). For instance, Noor portrays Sultan Abu Bakar as a hero in comparison to the Sultans of Selangor and Perak for becoming the “black peril of the West” (2005, p. 52). The prowess of this westernized King is detailed over three chapters to launch a consideration of an “other” Malaysian history (2005, p. 53). Abu Bakar’s westernized ways of making his presence visually conspicuous in Europe, especially in Britain through his regular visits

8 His articles appeared regularly in an online news portal called Malaysiakini.

and socializing with British gentry, is described as ingenious. His presence created a perception of the king as a formidable enemy to the British colonials who were not used to “sovereign native men” (2005, p. 52). Consequently, Johor remained out of the clutches of the British for as long as Abu Bakar could convince them that Johor did not need them, unlike the other states. In another sign of his Westernization, Abu Bakar acquired vast knowledge and was not afraid to implement reforms, especially in technological advancements. Noor thus celebrates Sultan Abu Bakar not only because of his ability to thwart the English and their well-disguised altruism but because of his ability to defy the perceptions of subalternism in a colonial-native paradigm. The Sultan defied the colonial understanding and expectations of a sovereign native, and at the same time stumped his critical observers at home, who assumed his alliance with the colonialist based on his westernized ways.

Noor demonstrates that conventional historical truth claims do not necessarily denote validity. Furthermore, instead of validating his own claims of truth, Noor’s extensive use of endnotes that follow every chapter in *The Other Malaysia* appear to be “paratextual conventions” of historiography that seek to undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations (Hutcheon 1988, p. 123). One of the most important aspects of Noor’s contributions is the subaltern agency his writing represents that has tremendous socio-political implications for Malaysia in terms of journalistic freedom of expression and the right to criticize and challenge social and political truisms.

Conclusion

As seen through the study of these three very different texts, different fictional genres create alternative histories which challenge conceptions of nation and identity by providing alternatives

which in turn create dialogues between historical perspectives. The portrayal of history through the comic genre, fairytale, folklore, and journalistic writing has caused the boundaries between the fields to melt away, bridging the distance between history's infamous aura of non-fiction and modes of fiction. As revealed in the discussions above, the many specific conventions attached to the fictional genres when merged with historical conventions allow for a freer method of expression in which different versions of "truths" merge with information that was not included in the official versions to generate the ambivalence and subjectivities that evoke changes previously disallowed. The implications include the rise of a new order that involves the pursuit of subjective truth validated or invalidated by facts that will inform a nation poised for changes. Ultimately, the different perspectives of Malaysian history will influence a discourse around Malaysian identity itself.

Aside from the structural contributions of presenting history in different narrative modes, these texts show an awareness of the power to dictate or reject socio-political identity markers through the agency of writing. By contrast with the static dictations of democratic or undemocratic rule, in this case, the Malaysian government, such works embrace the subjectivity and fragmentation of postmodernity. Even if teleological thresholds exist, it must be observed that where "representation" is concerned nothing is permanent. In the analysis of the different ways the above mentioned books question the truth of Malaysian history, they assert other versions of truths that generate discussion of territorial space and hegemony. Since there are multiple "truths," it is logical to assume multiple histories as well. With multiple versions of Malaysian history, there will be multiple kinds of identities based on multiple conceptions of nationhood. Such is the impact of fictionalizing Malaysian history.

Thus, history, perceived as singular, is not dead or weighed down by the burden of a singular validity but is injected with new life through historiographic metafiction which negotiate the intricacies of

validity in relation to nation and identity. As a result, a single authoritative validity ceases to be more important than the tale, the humour that is elicited, and the other perspectives that have been hitherto left out. The identity of a nation and an individual no longer only rests on the ontology of country, kingdom, race, or government but on a host of other social political perspectives that begins with recognizing multiple overlapping identities. As Foucault says of representation in a postmodern world, "There is a freedom in representation ... to conceive of power without a king thus the movement of history in terms of discontinuity and rupture, [is] not linear succession" (qtd in Currie 1998, p. 73). History is non-linear because it is constantly being created, making it change constantly in a discourse of national identity.

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