

## The Modern Malay: A Comparative Study of Katherine Sim's *Malacca Boy* (1957) and Mahathir Mohamad's *The Malay Dilemma* (1970)

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the representations of the modern Malay in Katherine Sim's *Malacca Boy* (1957), which is set against the backdrop of historical events in British Malaya, including the Japanese Occupation. An important historical commentary on Malay life and modernising Malaya, the novel invites us to revisit the ingrained scholarly views about colonial writers as well as the contemporary racial discourse about the Malay. Using a new historicist approach, this article has a two-fold aim: first, to analyse how *Malacca Boy* engages the critical issues of race and modernity in its portrayal of Malay identity through the protagonist, Hassan; and second, to examine the relevance of Sim's portrayal in relation to the contemporary political narrative of the Malay in Mahathir Mohamad's *The Malay Dilemma* (1970). Indeed, very little research has been done to consider how the trajectories of fiction and non-fiction intersect in the discussion of race and modernity, and therein lies the novelty and strength of our study. Although it is uncommon to compare literary fiction and non-fiction writing, we contend that such an unconventional approach to literary analysis will yield important insights to the narration of Malaysian history, both in the colonial past and postcolonial present, and the place of the modern Malay in it.

**Keywords:** Malaysian literature in English; British Malaya; Malay; Modernity; History

### INTRODUCTION

In 1957, the year Malaya gained independence from the British as Malaysia, Katherine Sim—a Welsh writer who had been residing in British Malaya—published her novel titled *Malacca Boy* (henceforth *MB*). Set against the backdrop of tumultuous change brought on by the ravages of the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945), post-war regeneration, and modern life in British-ruled Malaya, Sim's portrayal of “old” Malacca (and Malaya) of the 1940s and 1950s offers an interesting take on the common Malaysians, specifically the Malays, through the male protagonist Hassan. Through his and his family's experiences, including their sufferings under the Japanese

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and changing lives in the post-war era that also witnessed relative stability, industry and prosperity in the region, the novel not only provides an important historical commentary on Malay life and modernising Malaya but also requires us to revisit the ingrained scholarly views (and stereotypes) about colonial writers as well as the contemporary racial discourse about the Malay. Using a new historicist approach, this article has a two-fold aim: first, to analyse how *MB* engages the critical issues of race and modernity in its portrayal of Malay identity through Hassan; and second, to examine the relevance of Sim's portrayal in relation to the contemporary political narrative of the Malay in Mahathir Mohamad's *The Malay Dilemma* (henceforth *TMD*).

Sim's novel revolves around the life of a Malacca boy named Hassan. An interracial child born to an Indian Punjabi father and a Malay mother, Hassan is raised in a Malay village in Malacca, and lives his life as a Malay Muslim. Interestingly, Hassan's industrious, bright, curious and modern character defies the Orientalist discourse and stereotype that we have come to expect from colonial writers, namely that of the lazy, superstitious and backward Malay. Moreover, how Hassan identifies himself is complex. As our analysis below shows, Hassan identifies himself as Malay but his awareness of his mixed heritage, and indeed, the cultural heterogeneity of his Malaccan and Malayan roots and home, resists the essentialised narrative of the Malay that is established in Mahathir's controversial *TMD*, published more than a decade later in 1970, when Malaysia was already a postcolonial and modernising nation.

Written at a time when Mahathir was a politician and practising medical doctor, *TMD* ironically reinforces the colonial discourse of the "lazy/inferior Malay". Based on sociological and historical perspectives, the book scrutinises many aspects of Malay life, including their sociocultural and economic characteristics as well as heredity and environmental factors, to make the argument for what he terms the "Malay dilemma". Writing as an educated, modern and progressive "Malay", Mahathir has in the course of his political career downplayed his own mixed Malay-Indian background, and the fact that his paternal grandfather is an Indian from Kerala who had married a Malay woman (*Asia Sentinel*, 2007). Having served respectively as Malaysia's fourth and seventh Prime Minister from 1981-2003 and from 2018-2020, Mahathir was in office for at least 24 years; hence, his presence, policies and views have had a profound impact on Malaysian political life. As *TMD* carries his thoughts and views about the Malays, it is therefore an invaluable resource that provides us critical insights into the extent to which his opinions and thoughts have informed the shaping of racial identities in Malaysia, especially with regards to Malay identity and position in the plural society of postcolonial Malaysia.

Malaysia supports a culturally heterogeneous population, with Malays and indigenous groups forming the majority (69%), followed by the Chinese (22.5%), Indians (6.8%), and Eurasians and other groups (1%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). However, the nation is also divided along racial and religious lines. Historically, before 1850, relations between Malays and the earlier generations of Chinese and Indian immigrants were—despite existing cultural stereotypes and some tension—generally characterised by "relative openness" (Hirschman, 1986, p. 338), evinced by the emergence of acculturated and hybridised groups like the Peranakan Chinese (Malay-Chinese) and Jawi Peranakan (Indian Muslim-Malay) in the Straits Settlement, which included the historic multicultural city of Malacca (Melaka today). Under the British divide-and-rule policy, however, a different picture emerged. By the turn of the twentieth century, the ethnic groups were more or less "physically and socially segregated" (Hirschman, 1986, p. 353), with the Malays in their villages, the Chinese in the tin mines, and the Indians in the rubber estates. As interethnic contact was not encouraged, racial boundaries inevitably hardened.

In 1963, the Federation of Malaysia was formed with the inclusion of Sabah, Sarawak (the East Malaysian states) and Singapore. However, the growing mistrust of racial otherness and strained interethnic relations, along with the rise of Chinese economic dominance, culminated in race riots on May 13, 1969. The May 13 tragedy was the defining event in Malaysia's socio-political life. In the following years, the government established key policies that protected the special rights and position of the Malays as *bumiputera*, or sons of the soil, the most significant of which is the New Economic Policy (NEP), which ran from 1971-1990. The NEP is an affirmative action policy that aimed at “redress[ing] persistent Malay poverty and the ethnic socio-economic imbalance [...] identified by the authorities as a key factor contributing to the 1969 communal riots” (Loh, 2016, p. 119). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the NEP “evolved to become among the most pervasive in coverage, from education to employment and asset ownership” (Thillainathan and Cheong, 2016, p. 52), with the *bumiputera* given preferential treatment while the non-Malays/non-*bumiputera* were marginalised and excluded. With the widening Malay *bumiputera* and non-Malay/non-*bumiputera* divide, ethnic relations consequently deteriorated.

*TMD* was therefore published at a particularly critical juncture in modern Malaysian history, and holds important insights as to how Mahathir perceived and addressed the Malay dilemma especially during his first tenure as Prime Minister from 1981-2003—a period that not only oversaw much of the development of NEP but also the implementation of the National Development Policy (NDP), which replaced the NEP, from 1990-2000. Under the NDP, the main objectives of poverty eradication and economic restructuring—along with NEP's goal of achieving 30 percent of *bumiputera* ownership of corporate equity—remained, but the non-*bumiputera* who dominated the private sector found a more favourable economic playing field due to the government's push for privatisation projects. More importantly, under Mahathir's leadership, the Malay middle class expanded, and the *bumiputera* was no longer “characterized by persistent poverty” (Loh, 2016, p. 122).

What then does Katherine Sim—a colonial woman writer—have in common with Mahathir Mohamad, a modern Malaysian leader? A Welsh woman married to a British administrator, Sim lived in Malaya for more than two decades. During this time, she developed an “enduring love for Malaya” (Shanmugam, 2010, p. 87) that is reflected in her extensive writings “on Malayan landscape, life and customs” (Manaf and Quayum, 2003, p. 26), both non-fiction and fiction. However, Sim's particular interest was in Malay literature and culture; not only did she become fluent in Malay but she even wrote a book about the Malay *pantun*. As an author, Sim has published at least four novels on Malaya, including *Malacca Boy* (1957), *The Moon at My Feet: A Malayan Love Story* (1959), *Black Rice* (1959) and *The Jungle Ends Here* (1961). While Sim is categorised as an expatriate writer, and can be counted among the colonial British or Western writers that include Somerset Maugham, Anthony Burgess, Patrick Anderson, and Henri Fauconnier, she also differs from them in two vital ways. First, Sim lived in Malaya for more than twenty years and as such occupies a unique position and perspective as both outsider and insider. Second, unlike the other colonial writers, Sim took great pains to learn and understand Malay language, literature and culture, and therefore the Malay perspective. Although Sim is not recognised as a “Malaysian” or “Malayan writer” (and rightly so), we should not overlook her literary contributions either. Indeed, Manaf's and Quayum's deliberate inclusion of Sim in their book (2003) suggests that she is an important part of the historical narrative of Malaysian Literature in English (henceforth MLE). More importantly, Sim, like Mahathir, demonstrates a deep interest in and fascination with the idea of “Malay”.

Much has indeed been written about the stereotyped figure of the Malay, including his superstitious nature, submissiveness, religious bigotry, laziness, racism, and hereditary influences (see for instance Syed Hussein Alatas's 1977 seminal work, *The Myth of the Lazy Malay*). However, very little research has been done to consider how the trajectories of fiction and non-fiction intersect in the discussion of race, and therein lies the novelty and strength of our study. Although it is uncommon to compare literary fiction and non-fiction writing, we argue that such an unconventional approach to literary analysis will yield important insights to the narration of Malaysian history, both in the colonial past and postcolonial present, and the place of the Malay in it. In the course of our analysis, we also consider the ways in which both texts historicise and textualise the modern Malay in the changing histories of Malaya/Malaysia.

To carry out our analysis, we employ new historicism as our critical reading approach and framework. According to Brannigan (1988), new historicism is a deconstructive “mode of critical interpretation that deals with literary texts as the locus of power politics while considering the power relations as the most important context for texts of all kinds” (p. 6). There is moreover an intricate link between history and text, which is aptly captured by Louis Montrose's famous statement about the “textuality of history and historicity of texts” (1997, p. 240). History, for Montrose, is constructed and therefore fictional; on the other hand, the historicity of texts must be considered as “all modes of writing” (p. 243) are situated or rooted within the specificities of historical, cultural, social and political locations and contexts. Hence new historicism as an established literary reading approach asks us not just to reconsider the ways in which history as a fictional text is manipulated and shaped by the powers that be, but also that we pay careful attention to the literary text whose meanings, views, themes, and representations carry historical and contextual significance and value.

Stephen Greenblatt, another proponent of new historicism, is less concerned with treating literary works, such as the canonical works of Shakespeare, as models of organic unity than as “fields of force, places of dissension and shifting interests, occasions for the jostling of orthodox [by which he refers to canonical works] and subversive impulses” (Greenblatt, 1980, p. 41). In fact, new historicism challenges the hierarchical distinction between “literary foreground” (i.e., *MB*) and “political background”, (i.e., *TMD*) as well as between artistic and other kinds of production. It acknowledges that when we speak of “culture” (and in our case here, modernisation), we are speaking of a “complex network of institutions, practices, and beliefs” (Mambrol, 2017, p. 1). In this regard, Greenblatt notes the effect of literary discourse on the non-literary discourse and vice versa, as well as their combined effects on the development and promulgation of a particular narrative. What kind of narrative this is will be the subject of our research here.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review presented in this section addresses the research objectives by locating the relevant gaps when it comes to the study of the postwar colonial literature of British Malaya, specifically from 1945-1957. It also discloses the gap in relation to comparative studies between fiction and non-fiction writing. The literature review is organised according to the broad categories of genre and authorship in relation to the Anglophone literature of the aforementioned period.

Broadly speaking, there is a paucity of research into Anglophone literary publications in the late-colonial period of 1945-1957, as the majority of the studies revolved around historical, sociological, political, geographical, and linguistic fields and perspectives. These research trends are reflected in publications like Kennedy's *A History of Malaya* (1993), Jackson's *The Malayan*

*Emergency: The Commonwealth's War, 1948–1966* (1991), Yao's *The Malayan Emergency: Essays on a Small, Distant War* (2016), Mustapha Hussain's *Malay Nationalism Before Umno* (2004), Khoo's *Life As The River Flows: Women in the Malayan Anti-Colonial Struggle* (2004), Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid's *Malay Anti-Colonialism in British Malaya* (2007). Language forms another important area of inquiry, with studies such as Brewster's *Towards a Semiotic of Post-colonial Discourse: University Writing in Singapore and Malaysia 1949-1965* (1989), and Yap's *The Use of Vernacular in Fiction Written in English in Singapore and Malaysia* (1976).

When it comes to Anglophone Malayan literature, the field is generally divided into two areas of investigation, with the first focused on local Malayan writers and the second on colonial British writers. While there is a considerable corpus of studies on local writers, the majority are very much focused on the pioneering writers whose names have since become canonical in MLE: Lloyd Fernando (1926-2008); Lee Kok Liang (1927-92); Ee Tiang Hong (1933-90); and Wong Phui Nam (1935-). Examples of such studies abound in MLE, ranging from single journal articles to monographs and edited volumes (examples include Boey, 2018; Lim, 1993; Ng, 2014; Quayum & Wicks 2001; Quayum, 2007; 2008; 2020; Singh, 1988). Discussion of lesser known or non-canonical Malayan writers can be found in Lim (1993), Ng (1999) and Gui (2017). Two scholarly books—*Colonial to Global: Malaysian Women's Writing in English 1940s-1990s* (Manaf and Quayum 2003) and *Colony, Nation, and Globalisation: Not at Home in Singaporean and Malaysian Literature* (Tay, 2010)—provide a comparative study of colonial Malayan and postcolonial Malaysian literature through the genealogical “tracing” of voices, perspectives, themes, and representations. While the former (2003) uses historical and feminist approaches to situate the development of Malayan/Malaysian women writers based on the colonial-postcolonial trajectory, the latter focuses on the changing representations and meanings of home and belonging from the colonial to the globalised period.

The second line of inquiry in relation to Anglophone Malayan literature typically revolves around the “expatriate” or colonial British/Western authors who wrote about Malaya, like W. Somerset Maugham, Anthony Burgess, Patrick Anderson and Henri Fauconnier (Baulch, 2002; Ballantyne, 2017; Holden, 2016; Bahar & Razak, 2017; Bahar, et al., 2019; Sahiddan, et al. 2015; Patke & Holden, 2010; Ahmad, 2014; Snyman, 2015; Zinnatullina, et al., 2017). As an expatriate writer, Sim belongs to this group. However, as she is lesser-known woman writer, especially in comparison to her more famous male counterparts, research on her has thus remained limited. In his article on Malay pantun translations into English in British Malaya, Shanmugam (2010) considers Sim an important female voice in twentieth century British Malaya as she highlights “the importance of the Malay pantun as an essential element of the Malay language and the ingenuity of the Malay mind” (p. 80). Similarly, Manaf and Quayum (2003) point out that Sim is an important female voice in colonial literature, noting that her *MB* provides a “credible” record of “local superstitions and beliefs” (p. 28) of Malay society; however, they also criticise Sim for exoticising the tropics and for her unrealistic portrayal of Malay sexual behaviour.

From the review above, we find that the field of Malayan/Malaysian literature in English is dominated by studies on local authorship while colonial writers, especially women writers like Sim, are under researched. Two significant gaps are moreover revealed. First, the limited studies on Sim highlight an important research gap in the field of Anglophone Malaysian and Malayan literature. Second, literary studies that have engaged with actual political discourse about Malay life on a comparative basis are practically non-existent.

This article argues that we should pay attention to colonial Malayan literature as it may have a bearing on issues that beset the modern-day Malaysian society. By comparing colonial

Malayan literature and a contemporary political non-fiction narrative using the theory of new historicism, we hope to gain critical insights into how the narratives of the colonial past and the present postcolonial era have contributed to the racial discourse of the modern Malay.

### THE MODERN MALAY IN KATHERINE SIM'S *MALACCA BOY* (1957)

*MB* revolves around the life of Hassan, an interracial child born to Ali, a Punjabi Indian who migrated to British Malaya, and Narmah, a young 18-year-old Malay woman from Malacca. Born and raised in the village of Kampong Kembang (“Blossoming Village”, Sim, 1957, p. 13) in Malacca, Hassan experiences what seems to be an idyllic Malay childhood; besides performing family-related duties and chores, Hassan is educated at the Malay vernacular school and has adventures with his friends, Yahya and Ah Lee. Hassan eventually matures as he goes through the hardships brought about by the Japanese Occupation and the Malayan Emergency. Along the way, he and his parents move to another village, Daroi; he also picks up different jobs—as a coolie, a policeman, and a van driver. At the same time, he has numerous romantic encounters or relationships with girls of different ethnicities, including Lailah, a young Malay girl, and the Chinese girls, Ah Kim and Ah Hua. Although “deeply in love” (p. 187) with Ah Hua, Hassan is forced by a dying Narmah to marry Sareh, a Chinese orphan who was adopted by a Malay couple. Together, they have three children—the first is given away, the second dies, and only one—Yusoff, named after Hassan’s beloved teacher—is left. Hassan then wins the lottery and decides to buy his old family home in Malacca, and find a job in Singapore. Meanwhile, Hassan falls in love again, this time with a married Malay-Indian woman named Mariam. They embark on a forbidden love affair. In the end, Mariam chooses to commit suicide rather than return to her husband in India.

*MB* at first glance appears to be a typical colonial or Orientalist text, full of exoticised imagery and romanticised ideas about the Malays who “dream dreams and enjoy” (p. 12) their traditional ways of life, which seem to contradict modernity:

So the years passed, a tranquil succession of the seasons, family weddings, parties, funerals, kampong scandals and occasional rows, and the annual excitement of seeing people off to Mecca on the Haj. Such events, together with religious festivals—the Prophet’s birthday; Mandi Safar, a bathing festival much loved by Malacca Malays; the annual ordeal of Puasa, the fasting month; followed by its pleasant holiday with visits, new clothes, sweet cakes and thanksgiving—were the main landmarks of village life. (Sim, 1957, p. 19)

Through Sim’s careful observations of Malay cultural life, reflected in her detailed descriptions of cultural events, customs and rituals, including those of funerals (pp. 27-30), weddings (pp. 114-129), harvesting time (pp. 109-110) and the Mandi Safar festival (pp. 135-139), the novel seems to support the stereotype that Malay villagers have led their lives using the same traditional and rather stagnant patterns; they survive merely on rice cultivation and fishing, with little or no urge for industrial development and progress.

However, closer scrutiny reveals otherwise. Kampong Kembang is not an isolated Malay village lost in time but is connected by bridge (over the river) to the “old town” (p. 23) of Malacca, where Narmah goes shopping with her family. Here, Hassan is exposed to scenes of multicultural Malaccan life: a “rosy huddle of houses, mosques and minarets” (p. 24), a “street of Chinese houses [...] with gold and black doors” (p. 25) and “streets and lanes [...] which still bear Dutch or Portuguese names” (p. 60). Then there is Temple Street, where “Malacca’s cosmopolitan faiths”

(p. 60) can be found, including a mosque, an old Chinese temple, and a Hindu temple with its “heavy, iron-studded door and iron railings” (p. 61). The roads are moreover filled with cattle-drawn carts, “red-lacquered rickshas, and reckless drivers of countless bicycles” (p. 25), besides public buses. Indeed, social and cultural heterogeneity and hybridity are important hallmarks of historic Malacca, where “Chinese and Malay life overlap”:

Chinese live in wooden Malay houses; in them, around and under them too, cheek by jowl with the quarter of ill-repute where luscious Indonesian and Malay women in cheap gay sarongs and sleek jackets emerge from their board and palm-thatch shacks like butterflies from drab chrysalises. (p. 60)

The vividness and vitality of developing and modernising Malacca that is depicted in these images reveal to us that life around the village is changing, and that the Malays too experience modern conveniences as well as consumerism by shopping at the “medicine shop, the silk and cotton shops, the market and the fruit stalls” (p. 25). Descriptions of the villagers who partake in the modernisation of Malaya can be seen in Ali, who has a second-hand car that he “hired out as a taxi” (p. 13), and Rahmah (Narmah’s mother), a village midwife who obtained “six months of modern training at the Malacca General Hospital” (p. 15). Then there is Hassan, whose own modern character is represented through his love of “film-going and dancing” (p. 190), playing the clarinet and singing in a local band, meeting “friends in the coffee shop” (p. 177) and drinking “endless cups of coffee” (p. 228), not to mention indulging in “casual flirtations” (p. 228).

The historicity of *MB* as a text is thus reflected in the critical ways in which the novel engages the sociocultural changes and transformations in modernising British Malaya in the first half of the twentieth century. Hence, Hassan’s life is anything but static or backward. While he still enjoys the traditional facets of a relatively slower-paced Malay village life, he and the villagers nonetheless experience change and progress as they are linked to Malacca, and beyond it, the rest of Malaya, Singapore and the wider world, through roads, railways, and modern modes of transportation as well as through inventions like the radio. Through developments in transportation and technology, Hassan’s family possesses mobility through migration: Ali migrates to Malaya; Hassan and his parents relocate to Daroi in Berembau district; Hassan’s brother, Ismail, leaves for Siam (Thailand today) but returns later; Hassan’s sister, Rohani, marries an Indian soldier and relocates with her husband to India; and Hassan in the end decides to leave for Singapore. More turbulent changes are forced upon Hassan and his community when the Japanese invade and when the Malayan Emergency is declared.

Informed by his changing environment and also the education received through formal schooling and informal means via lived experiences, Hassan is representative of the modernising or progressive Malay. An important feature, for instance, is his lack of superstitious fear—a trait often associated with colonised natives in Orientalist discourse. Although the novel draws on colonial tropes to portray Malay superstitious beliefs in “ghosts and spirits and devils” (p. 69), it also shows that Hassan is taught by his religious teacher “that superstitious belief in the power of spirits and places was alien to Islam” (p. 69). When thinking of his future, an ambitious Hassan envisions himself in modern terms, in which the age of twentieth century technology is more powerful than superstitious myths: “I’m an aeroplane, the ghosts cannot touch me now” (p. 102). Hassan is moreover influenced by his teacher Mohammed Yusoff about the importance of a proper education. As his education was disrupted by the war, Hassan plans later to go to Singapore to find work and to “study in his spare time” (p. 263).

As a result, Hassan prefers to think for himself rather than blindly follow cultural dictates. One of the most important characteristics of his modernity and progressive identity is his resistance against the Malay custom of arranged marriage. That Hassan recognises the “importance of mutual attraction” (p. 185) and desires “to marry a girl he knew and loved” (p. 173) not only resists Malay cultural traditions, but also reflects how the Western notion of romantic love has influenced the making of the modern Malay. When Narmah arranges his marriage with Sareh, Hassan reacts with “numbed horror” (p. 193) as he is in love with Ah Hua and wishes to marry her. Indeed, his conflicted struggle between his own individual desires— “I don’t want it. I have no happiness in this wedding” (p. 204)—and his dying mother’s wish, which represents the collective forces of Malay culture, is very much a modern Malay predicament. With the birth of Rokiah, his daughter, Hassan decides that his child must break with tradition. As he tells his wife, “We will not force her into marriage. [...] We will not follow the traditions of our parents” (p. 231).

Perhaps the most crucial feature of Hassan’s modern Malay identity is his cosmopolitanism, which is reflected in his multilingualism as well as social and sexual life. Hassan speaks not just Malay and English but also Japanese (p. 159), Urdu (p. 74; 171), and a little Hakka (p. 186). He also has friends and lovers drawn from varying ethnicities, Chinese and Malay-Indian included. Furthermore, Hassan demonstrates tolerance and respect for ethnic and religious difference. For instance, when his Chinese friend, Ah Lee, asks Hassan to accompany him to a Chinese grave to ask the spirit of “Dato” and the White Tiger (p. 72) to help his mother recover from illness, Hassan readily agrees out of compassion and friendship, even when he knows what he’s doing is against Islam. With his openness towards and acceptance of difference and diversity, it can be said that Hassan embodies cultural heterogeneity and hybridity, and is therefore representative of the social, cultural and ethnic plurality that has come to define the historic city of Malacca, as observed earlier.

Certainly, Hassan’s hybridity is most visibly projected through his mixed Malay-Indian heritage. Although raised as a Malay, Hassan grows up being “conscious of his Indian blood” (p. 74); he looks a little different with his “aquiline features” and “dark golden colour” (p. 17). When he meets the Indian soldiers who were posted to Malaya after the war, Hassan “began to pick up more Urdu, the language his father had taught him long ago, and he heard tantalizing tales of that great country, his father’s, that had never ceased to beckon him, even when he most felt himself to be a Malay” (p. 171). Sim’s novel thus recognises the Malays, as an ethnic group, have heterogeneous roots, and that race is a social and cultural construct. Sareh is a good example of this instructive point. Although Chinese by birth, Sareh has been assimilated into Malay community through adoption and considers herself “a child of Malays” (p. 218).

Through the historicity of *MB* as a vital colonial text, we find important evidence of Malaya as a multicultural and modernising colony, and whose changing society has been influenced and shaped by migrations and Western technological advancements under the British rule. The modern Malay represented by Hassan is not only informed by these historic changes and transitions in the colony, but his character also underscores the changing Malay identity, mind-set and perspective, as evinced by his desire for education, lack of superstitious fear, and resistance against the custom of arranged marriage. Hassan’s cosmopolitan character is moreover stressed when he respects and accepts ethnic, religious and cultural difference and diversity, seen in his friendship with Ah Lee and his relationships with Ah Hua and Mariam. More importantly, his Malay identity—like that of Malacca, and ultimately Malaya—is rooted in racial heterogeneity and hybridity as a result of the social interactions and relations among the Malays and the Chinese and Indian immigrants, notably seen in mixed or hybrid characters like Sareh and Mariam.



*MB* is not, however, without its flaws. In many ways, the novel still draws on familiar colonial tropes and stereotypes that include Malay submission and compliance, in addition to Malay superstitious nature, seen especially when Hassan was “born in a caul” (p. 16) and the villagers could not decide if his birth meant good fortune, God’s blessing, or a sign of his strangeness or wickedness. Sim also reveals her own racial bias by depicting the British, though rarely mentioned, as kind and just colonial masters: “under the English, a man had his own self-respect, and kindness was once again a quality to be admired” (p. 169). Nevertheless, to fall back on ingrained scholarly views and biases about colonial writers would also be an injustice to Sim, who has so carefully observed the changes and transitions in Malay social and cultural life in modernising Malaya through the novel’s protagonist, Hassan. In this manner, she has significantly moved away from the colonial narrative and myth of the lazy, backward Malay.

### THE MODERN MALAY IN MAHATHIR MOHAMAD’S *THE MALAY DILEMMA* (1970)

This section examines how *TMD* as a historicised text reveals the narrative being constructed about Malay identity by referring to Greenblatt’s (1980; 1981) argument that all texts are placed on the same playing field, in that there is no hierarchical distinction between “literary foreground” and “political background” texts, and that texts “explain” themselves, including their histories, contextual influences, and also prejudices. As noted earlier, *TMD* holds great political significance because it offers pertinent insights into a modern Malaysian leader’s views of the Malays. *TMD*’s observations of Malay life—social or cultural domain, economic life or political development—are not just based on Mahathir’s personal viewpoint as a medical doctor but also on his identity as a *bumiputera*. Given its author’s prominence in Malaysian politics, there is a reasonable chance that the book might have influenced the opinions of the growing numbers of educated masses or *ra’ayat*. Keeping in mind the significant socio-political developments of the early 1970s, notably the rising Malay nationalism and the deepening divide between the Malay *bumiputera* and non-Malay/non-*bumiputera*, our analysis thus considers how *TMD*’s portrayal of the Malay plays into a specific racial narrative and the attendant power politics that were emerging at this critical juncture in Malaysian history.

One of the most important arguments made in *TMD* is that heredity plays an important role in the development of the Malay race, as “intermarriages enriched Malay stock” (Mohamad, 1970, p. 28) while in-breeding leads to “the propagation of the poorer characteristics, whether dominant or recessive, originally found in the brothers or sisters who were parents of the married couple” (p. 29). *TMD* alludes to Darwin’s idea of the survival of the fittest by suggesting the construction of the Malay “purebred”—due to “in-breeding” and heredity factors—as the obstacle that may have hindered Malay competitiveness. However, the book’s emphasis on heredity as an impediment to Malay progress becomes problematic because it concurs with the colonial portrayal of Malay culture as “backward.” *TMD* further reifies this problematic portrayal of the Malays by describing them as “courteous and self-effacing” people who are always obedient to their rajas and chiefs; moreover, the “vast majority of the Malays are feudalist and wish to remain so” (p. 104). This generalised description of Malay feudal attitude and submission to their rajas and chiefs once again plays into the colonial narrative, in which the “fearful” Malays must be uplifted from their feudal past.

Then there are the negative traits like running amok. Described as a “facet of Malay character”, running amok is defined by *TMD* as “the external physical expression of the conflict

within the Malay which his perpetual observance of the rules and regulations of his life causes in him. It is a spilling over, an overflowing of his inner bitterness” (p. 118) before concluding that it “is only a legend” (p. 118). However, what is crucial here is that *TMD* underscores running amok as an undesirable Malay facet, a weakness, the causes of which must be eliminated in order to prevent it from occurring, much like treating a disease.

*TMD* also asserts that Islam has greatly influenced the Malay character, which may explain their value system and code of ethics, such as the Malay respect towards their Rajas as religious heads. However, what *TMD* considers more important is “not so much of the religion, but the interpretation of the doctrines of Islam, which has the most significant effect” (Mohamad, 1970, p. 155) on the Malays. Due to their misinterpretation of Islamic doctrines, certain rural communities spend most periods preparing for the hereafter, since life in this world is temporary while the hereafter is permanent. To Mahathir, however, such is “of course a fatalistic attitude” (p. 162), and nothing more than a “form of escapism from the realities of life, an insulation against the envy the Malays must feel for the prosperity of other races and other countries.” (p. 162). Other aspects of the Malay culture too suffer from the misinterpretations of Islam. As *TMD* notes, the Malay belief that an excessive preoccupation with “worldly things...is bad” (p. 157) has also become “impediments to their progress” (p. 173).

Similarly, the Malays do not regard time as important, an attitude that has been observed since the colonial era:

[D]espite...[their]...reverence for life, the Malays do not seem to know what to do with it.... Life is related to time. To live is to exist for a period of time. Life and time are therefore inseparable. If life is valued, time must also be valued. Unfortunately, this relationship between life and time does not seem to be appreciated by the Malays. Life is valuable but time is not.

(pp. 162-163)

The awareness of the significance of time however is necessary in order for the Malays to be progressive and live in the modern and technological era. After all, a “time-table is an essential part of the life of modern man. Indeed, the more technologically advanced the man, the more he is bound to time” (p. 163). Even the notion of Malay laziness has everything to do with time:

A community which is not conscious of time must be regarded as a very backward society. It can never achieve anything on its own and it can never be expected to advance and catch up with superior time-conscious civilizations. There is no doubt that the Malay failure to value time is one of the most important handicaps to their progress.

(p. 163)

The concept of Malay laziness is also attributed to “geographical considerations” (p. 21). After all, with an abundance of land and food sources, it did not require “great exertion or ingenuity” (p. 21) for the Malays to obtain food as there was “plenty for everyone throughout the year” (p. 21). The nature of traditional Malay activities such as rice cultivation as “a seasonal occupation” (p. 21) also plays a role in sustaining the idea of Malay laziness, since actual hard work takes up only two months and the yield can last for the whole year. There was certainly a lot of free time, and the Malays spend it on leisure for there is little reason to be hardworking throughout the year. To a certain extent, particularly at this point, Mahathir seems to be arguing that there is some truth in the colonial allegation of Malay’s laziness.

It did not help too that the agrarian nature of Malay traditional occupation also meant that they “tended to live in small villages or on individual farms. Social contact was limited and so the development of community services was insignificant. Division of labour and specialization of

skills were limited as most farmers could provide for their own needs” (p. 22). This statement is interestingly reflected in Weber’s concept of “traditionalism”, in which “a man does not ‘by nature’ wish to earn more and more money but simply to live as he is accustomed to live and to earn as much as is necessary for that purpose” (Weber, 1930, p. 60). Nevertheless, these traditional facets of Malay life and character, including their failure to “understand the potential capacity of money” (Mohamad, 1970, p. 167), have not only hindered their economic progress as a whole but also formed what Mahathir terms the “Malay dilemma.”

As a modern medical doctor who believes in “the pragmatism of the modern approach” (p. 171), *TMD* proposes a solution to the Malay dilemma—change. As *TMD* stresses, “a quality that [the Malays] must certainly be re-evaluated is their capacity for change” (p. 59). To change and progress, and to, indeed, become modern, the Malays must first “be aware of their own faults as much as the faults of others” (p. 60). Using the analogy of medical treatment, Mahathir notes that one must “face boldly the pain of self-examination, the admission that one is wrong, and the acceptance that the cure lies in the rejection of some ideas and concepts no matter how dear to the heart they may be” (p. 172).

Another change proposed is the way Islam is interpreted, for instance. Instead of viewing the accumulation of wealth of materialism as being against the teachings of Islam, the Malays should embrace the holistic understanding of Islam in which the pursuit of wealth is a duty, and labour is not merely an economic means, but a spiritual end. In other words, the pursuit of wealth, which was once feared as the enemy of religion by the Malays, can now be welcomed as its ally.

By far the most important change that can affect Malay identity and bring about modernity and progress is urbanisation, for “the progress of communities lies in the more complex organization which the town and cities provide” (pp. 79-80). Moreover, urbanisation “involves a process of physical and psychological uprooting of the Malays from the traditional rural society” (p. 113). Since urbanisation involves the rehabilitation of the Malays from their traditional environment where the old customs and *adat* are being practised, the new environment requires the Malays to learn new ways of thinking and a new system of values. In short, the Malays need to confront “the realities of life and ...to adjust their thinking to conform with these realities” (p. 113).

From the discussion above, it is clear that *TMD* is not only painting a picture of the Malay dilemma based on the Malays’ lack of competitiveness and progress—they are still a “backward society” (p. 163)—but that it also conforms to the colonial narrative created by the British. Change must therefore be foisted on the Malays; they must be uprooted in order for “old values and ways of life [to] give way to new” (p. 113). While it could be said that Mahathir seems to be seeing the Malays from the colonial viewpoint, it would be remiss of us if we did not point out the timing of such a narrative, coming on the heels of May 13. Significantly, *TMD* plays on Malay resentment, fears and anxieties of being left behind in modernising Malaysia, not to mention the threat of the economically dominant Chinese—sentiments that had also contributed to the escalation in ethnic hostilities leading up to May 13. Notably too, *TMD*’s argument that the urbanisation of the Malays is critical for the progress of the community and country seems to foreshadow the implementation of the NEP in 1971, one year after *TMD* was published. Indeed, the book’s call for the Malays to change, to adapt to the new realities, and to become “modern”, has come to pass. In short, the “text” or “fiction” that is created by *TMD* and represented as the “history” of the Malays, involving “factual” descriptions of their traditional ways of life, perspectives and attitudes, is woven into the very fabric of the state narrative through which the identity politics and polemic between Malay

*bumiputera* and non-Malay/non-*bumiputera* have been constructed and controlled since the early 1970s.

### COMPARING *MALACCA BOY* AND *THE MALAY DILEMMA*: FINDINGS

Through the historicity of *MB* as a vital colonial text, and through the textuality of *TMD* as a political and historical work, we have come up with several significant insights. Sim's novel attempts to show that the platform for the multicultural and plural components of British Malaya—as a result of colonial policies—has already been established. This can be seen in the novel's inclusive vision of modern Malaya—soon to be Malaysia—as an evolving space of racial, cultural and religious diversity through the hybrid and heterogeneous characters like Hassan, Sareh and Mariam. Change among the Malays occur at their own pace, slowly but surely. Moreover, the Chinese have become “localised”, having adapted to their Malayan environment; Ah Lee and Ah Kim speak Malay, the “Chinese and Malay life overlap” (Sim, 1957, p. 60) with social and sexual interactions occurring between each other, and so on. It remains to be seen then—at the time of Sim's writing and publication in 1957—what the Malaysians would make of their own country in the post-independence age.

Fast forward to 1970, in the aftermath of the race riots of 13 May 1969, *TMD* was published. Unlike Sim's novel, it constructs a very different “fiction”—a problematic narrative that asserts the colonial myth and stereotype of the lazy Malay. In contrast to *MB* which seems to recognise race as a construct and the possibilities of change in its characterisation of the modern Malay, *TMD* essentialises and homogenises the Malay by emphasising heredity and the stagnant Malay society as impediments to Malaysia's progress. In this narrative, the Malay and therefore Malaysia are not modern enough. Change, unlike in *MB*, must be forced onto the Malays, who must be urbanised and modernised through interventionist policies. That the financial deprivation of the Malays is due primarily to their dependence on traditional agrarian lifestyles also shores up Malay fears and anxieties by distinguishing the poor, lazy Malay from racial “others” like the Chinese. In this manner, *TMD* creates barriers by playing on the racial polemic between the Malay Self and non-Malay Other, rather than support a narrative that recognises the plurality and diversity of Malaysia.

The comparison between the respective colonial and postcolonial texts of *MB* and *TMD* additionally demonstrates that race and identity have remained constant and relevant concerns, despite the passage of time between the two texts. However, the distinctive ways in which race and identity are narrated in both texts also reveal irreconcilable differences in the conception of the Malayan/Malaysian nation. *MB* supports the inclusive vision of an evolving plural and hybrid society as the basis of nationhood, but *TMD* rejects this vision by upholding a monolithic and exclusionary narrative that centralises Malay dominance as the defining feature of the postcolonial Malaysian nation, while the non-Malay is marginalised and subordinated. Given that this racial polemic has been entrenched as a central feature of Malaysian politics since the early 1970s, and reinforced during Mahathir's tenure as Prime Minister, we can safely conjecture that the views espoused in *TMD* have contributed to the making of the racial and religious divisions that have come to characterise the modern Malaysian nation.

## CONCLUSION

Using new historicism as the critical reading approach and framework, this article has successfully achieved the two research objectives outlined in the Introduction, which are: first, to analyse how *MB* engages the critical issues of race and modernity in its representation of the modern Malay through the male protagonist, Hassan; and second, to examine the relevance of this representation in relation to the postcolonial narrative of the Malay in *TMD*. In addressing the first objective, we found that Sim espouses an inclusive vision of heterogeneity, diversity and hybridity in her narration of the modern Malay in British Malaya. Sim's unique position and perspective as both outsider and insider moreover differentiate her from other colonial writers; in this way too, she resists the established scholarly views and stereotypes about colonial writers in Malayan/Malaysian Anglophone literature. Through the second objective, we conclude that Mahathir Mohamad's *TMD* bears a problematic understanding and view of the Malay, who is essentialised as lazy and unable to progress or become modern, and that interventionist policies are required to push the Malay into the modernised postcolonial era. By refusing to recognise the multiculturalism of Malaysian society too, *TMD* advocates an exclusionary narrative of the nation, and solidifies the racial division between the Malay Self and non-Malay Other in the process. Finally, this article shows that it is possible to compare fiction and non-fiction in the analysis of identity, modernity and history, and that such an approach has significant implications for literary studies as a whole. A comparative approach, we suggest, not only yields ground breaking critical insights into the intersections as well as dialogical relations and "conversations" between literary and non-literary texts, but can also contribute positively to the growing scholarship in MLE.

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