

MULTICULTURALISM AND MALAYSIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

The definition of multiculturalism often invites controversies regarding self-representation, including in the representation of other cultures. Gayatri C. Spivak, in an interview about the definition of multiculturalism, asserts the importance of problematising the notions of tokenism and representation, because “[tokenism] forces us all into positions in which we are distanced both from dominant ideology and from our own cultural heritage.” Issues relating to multiculturalism are seen as important aspects in the construction of national identity. Thus, we read children’s literature as one of the cultural sites through which to understand how cultural representation is conceived by these writers and the kind of multiculturalism captured in such works. This paper explores the definition of multiculturalism in relation to the problematics of the notions of tokenism and cultural representation in selected Malaysian Children’s Literature in English. The paper also considers implications of these problematics on classroom practice, particularly in teachers’ choice of classroom texts.

Introduction

Mahathir Mohamad (2002), at a US-ASEAN Business Council Dinner in Washington DC, boldly compared the US and Malaysian multicultural experiences. He stated that

The United States and Malaysia have many things in common, much more than most people realise. We share a common history, language, many of our values, goals and even challenges.... America’s welcome mat for the oppressed people of other countries has made it a melting pot of multiethnicity and multiculturalism upon which you built a prosperous, powerful and forward-looking nation. Malaysia too attracted immigrants to our shores. And today our people are made up of indigenous Malays, descendants of Chinese, Indians and other migrants living together in peace and a climate of tolerance and mutual respect. Our diversity, like yours, is the basis of our strength.

The metaphor of America as a 'melting pot' boosts the image of America as a nation with a dynamic blend of ethnicity, religions, and cultures that contributes somewhat to a sense of 'American exceptionalism', or the belief that America is exempted from the contradictions faced by, and the forces acting upon, the rest of the world (Jacobs, 2004). This metaphor as perceived by Mahathir Mohamad can be extended to the Malaysian experience as "a relatively peaceful multi-religious and multiethnic society" (Alamgir Hussain).

The historical existence of a multicultural society is assumed to construct an ideological definition of Malaysianness, manifested through the construct of *Bangsa Malaysia*, proposed by Mahathir in order to create a more multicultural national identity. Nevertheless, the current Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Abdul Razak, in responding to the continuing polemics on *Bangsa Malaysia*, conversely asserted that " 'Bangsa Malaysia' had nothing to do with the Constitution or national policies, but was related to an individual state of mind" (*The Star*, 7 November, 2006). Similarly, America's model of 'multiculturalism' through the 'melting pot' has been fraught with controversies and is continuously debated, mainly because it represents the 'standard' favoured by the proponents of assimilation. Going by the metaphor of the 'melting pot', assimilation would then involve the forging of diverse ethnicities and cultures into a single national 'alloy'. This would mean, then, that not only the products of this 'melting pot' would be culturally indistinguishable, but also that natives, along with their indigenous cultural characteristics, would be irrevocably altered (Salins, 1997). In an academic context, D'Souza (1991) cautions against the tendency towards multiculturalism in American universities, exemplified by ethnic-based programmes such as Black Studies, which inadvertently may threaten to displace the universalistic attitudes that traditional American education tried to foster. Where Malaysia is concerned, its model of multiculturalism has also been much debated in relation to its compatibility with the American model, given Malaysia's international identity as an Islamic nation. Mohamad Aslam Ahmad (2006) argues that the status of Islam as the official religion of the state would likely be challenged by proponents of Western multiculturalism because they conceive Islam as an intolerant religion, and one incapable of establishing its own social-political order in promoting national unity. In response, Ng Kam Weng (2006) is of the opinion that in a country like Malaysia, the issue of pluralism is best addressed through a brand of multiculturalism that addresses issues relating to religious and cultural diversity.

The arguments above demonstrate the complexity in addressing multiculturalism as a *modus operandi* for a multicultural nation like Malaysia,

and also that as a definition, it is fraught with tension. Given the problematics of the term, it is necessary for those who are involved in the educational curriculum to understand its definitions which are rooted in the West, and to understand it in relation to the local Malaysian context and its applications.

Defining Multiculturalism in Society

The notion 'multiculturalism' must first be clarified as it is a contested term. Sneja Gunew (2005: 667) states that "it is crucial to continue to scrutinise the discourses and practices mobilised in the name of multiculturalism." Generally, multiculturalism may be considered as a response to minority needs, a reference to an ideology that gives equal status to each cultural group that exists in a particular country. In the United States, multiculturalism refers to the "movement in the 1980s and 1990s that sought to disrupt the cultural homogeneity of the educational and literary canon by including the viewpoints of minority and international authors" (Mackey, 2005: 666). The making of a nation's education more inclusive is also made complicated by multiculturalism's opponents, whose defence of Western high culture excluded women and minority writers. Charles Taylor (1992) claims that "his version of 'recognition' deems that we should not assume that all cultures are equal but that we should give all cultures the 'presumption' that they can provide something of value." The contention that some cultures are superior or greater than others leads to questions relating to the evaluation of what may be considered of value to the existing nation's culture. In clarifying this, Susan Wolf (1994) asserts that Taylor's defence of the valued contribution refers to "valuable aesthetic or intellectual contribution" (ibid.). Taylor's limited definition attempts at ensuring a more internalised (intellectual attachment) multiculturalism rather than a superficial one.

The significance of this term is observed through the social policy of various countries for different reasons since the 1970s. Countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United States of America have specific national policies that relate to issues related to multiculturalism. In Canada, for example, the French-speaking minority's grievance in Quebec has helped establish a national policy on bilingualism and biculturalism which bear multicultural elements (Oliver, 2001). Other than Canada, Australia has also adopted Canadian-style multiculturalism with the establishment of the Special Broadcasting Service which acknowledges the presence of other cultures (Madina, 1995). For the United States, the concept of the 'melting pot' is seen as an assimilation device for immigrants, and that multiculturalism is not made into any federal or state policies but is a more open

application (Frost, 2006). The multicultural policies of the United States are observed to include the following: recognition of multiple citizenship; government support for newspapers, television, and radio in minority languages; support for minority festivals, holidays, and celebrations; acceptance of traditional and religious dress in schools, the military, and society in general; support for music and the arts from minority cultures; and programs to encourage minority representation in politics, education, and the work force.

Both the “Melting Pot” model and the Canadian style multiculturalism have been identified by Diane Ravitch as pluralistic and particularist. Ravitch explains that “pluralistic multiculturalism views each culture or subculture in a society as contributing unique and valuable cultural aspects to the whole culture. Particularist multiculturalism is more concerned with preserving the distinctions between cultures” (cited in Frost, 2006). Since Mahathir Mohamad has made a clear comparison between the Malaysian multicultural experience with that of the United States, it is thus necessary to include criticisms against the metaphor of the ‘melting pot’. For instance, the metaphor is seen as an assimilation process only for European immigrants, not US-born black people. Through such an ethnically bound assimilation process, there exists an American national identity which values ‘symbolic patriotism’ above all else, when in reality the patriotism of minorities, specifically those of the blacks, is more likely to rest between the poles of ‘invested patriotism’ and ‘iconoclastic patriotism’, both ideologically opposed to ‘symbolic patriotism’. ‘Invested’ patriotism is teleological, in the sense that a minority group believes in an idealistic end (i.e. racial equality) to the toil of previous generations of minorities; while ‘iconoclastic’ patriotism is a love for the country that is contingent upon vital transformations in “traditional interpretations, identities and practices” (Shaw). Thus the metaphor of the ‘melting pot’ has led to an ‘Americanised’ identity which subsumes the cultural identity of the migrants, leaving only superficial traces of the culture of the migrants’ country of origin, “because they constituted the base material of the melting-pot” (Salins, 1997). Some, such as sociologist Horace Kellen, have argued that the ‘melting pot’ is not only unrealistic, but harmful because it leads to the attrition of a group’s cultural identity, and prefers instead ‘cultural pluralism’, in which national policy would enable each group to attain “cultural perfection...proper to its kind” (Kellen). Those who share this view provide the now popular metaphor of the ‘tossed salad’ in place of the ‘melting pot’, with the individual ingredients of that ‘salad’ intermingling, but never losing their identity. The presence of multiculturalism in Southeast Asian countries may also be read as one that recognises the cultural inheritance...[through] multicultural ...festivals, including cuisine [which] is pro-

moted for locals to provided points of community identification and for tourists as ‘instant Asia’ or ‘truly Asia’; on the other hand, the very presence of racial and ethnic *differences* [our emphasis] is treated as a potential source of tension and social disruptions that require constant surveillance by the policing apparatus of the state [in order] to maintain ‘racial harmony’ (Chua, 2002).

Malaysia’s communal identification through cultural festivals and commemoration ceremonies are more ‘symbolic’ of cultural harmony which eclipses the ideological multicultural presence, in the sense that this emotionally/internally attached sense of community is differentiated from external displays of behaviours.

Multiculturalism and National Identity in Malaysia

When used in reference to Malaysia, the metaphor of the ‘melting pot’ seems to promote the kind of particularist multiculturalism which forms the unique cultural identity of each ethnic group. The Malaysian sense of multiculturalism can be compared to the experience of other cultural groups in the United Kingdom who are allowed to “preserve their culture, while participating as citizens – that is, integrating without assimilating” (Frost, 2006). Furthermore, the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair stated that respect for the British heritage is among the essential values belonging to the British:

When it comes to our essential values – belief in democracy, the rule of law, tolerance, equal treatment for all, respect for this country and its shared heritage – then that is where we come together, it is what we hold in common (in Johnston 2006).

The essential values of the Malaysian *Rukun Negara* (Pillars of National Philosophy) may be considered as essential principles which work to unite the different ethnic groups in Malaysia. Other ways of showing unity in Malaysia can be seen through the promotion of joined festivals such as *Deepa-Raya* (when Deepavali and Hari Raya coincide) and *Kongsi-Raya* (when Chinese New Year and Hari Raya coincide). Furthermore, the Malaysian government has allowed other minority languages’ vernacular education, such as the Chinese medium schools and the Tamil medium schools as evidence of the inclusiveness of Malaysian multiculturalism.

The descriptive nature of multiculturalism in Malaysia, which refers strictly to the multiracial makeup of society, and not any multicultural ideology or definition, informs us of the ethnic relations that exist in Malaysia. The 1957 Malayan Constitution and the 1963 Malaysian Constitution acknowledged the rights of

immigrant groups by granting them citizenship, while recognising the special rights of the Malays and other indigenous groups as the natives of the land. However, national policies such as the New Economic Policy (NEP) have raised national concerns in terms of the economic status and rights of non-Malays and Malays. Historically, political parties in Malaysia have been organised along racial lines, and when race riots in 1969, after the general election results appeared to threaten Malay political dominance, the ‘necessary’ dominance, politically and economically, of the Malays in their own ‘homeland’ was entrenched institutionally in the NEP. Racial quotas which privileged Malays were imposed on the allocation of places in universities, and jobs in the civil service, as well as the allocation of government contracts, shares of government-owned companies, and preferential bank loans for businesses and consumption. Such privileging of the Malays is, inevitably, disadvantaging the other races. In this sense, after 1969 until now, neither group nor individual equality applies in all government controlled sectors (Chua, 2002). The ‘melting pot’ metaphor may also be observed in the implementation of the National Cultural Policy in 1970 which aimed towards the assimilation of the non-Malays into the Malay ethnic group. In the 1990s, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad resisted such ethnocentric policies by introducing a more inclusive nation-state identity, a Malaysian rather than Malay construction of the nation. This was the *Bangsa Malaysia* policy, emphasising a Malaysian instead of Malay identity for the state, referring to the Malaysian nation as one that speaks the national language and is recognisably Malaysian in its identity.

The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) President, Ong Ka Ting, in commenting on the Malaysian identity promoted within the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia*, refers to the “*rakyat* [nation of] Malaysia spirit [and the belief that]... [n]o race will be deprived of its original identity, culture, religion, language, and traditional practices” (*The Star*, 7 November 2006). Thus the Malaysian brand of multiculturalism may be seen to be characterised along racial lines, and that ‘citizenship’ policy and ‘Bumiputra’ policies have confined the cultural groups in their own ethnic boundaries (Chua, 2002).

The term multiculturalism may be seen as a response to a homogeneous culture (in other words, one that is monocultural). This monoculturalism, according to Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities* (1991), refers to the original definition of nation-states, as “imagined political communit[ies]... inherently limited and sovereign”, which is rooted in the nineteenth century recognition of a singular culture and identity in order for the country to gain sovereignty, which then defines the power of a nation. A particularist multiculturalism which

refers to the act of preserving cultural differences in a way may weaken the power of the nation-state, thus an eclectic means to maintaining power is by framing the concept of multiculturalism through a pluralistic one, that is, ensuring that the subcultures contribute to the one main culture that represents the nation-state. The unstable meaning of multiculturalism vacillates between the pluralistic and particularist. These definitions are seen to have an influence on the nature of multicultural education, particularly in the study of multicultural literature.

Multicultural Literature and Some Guidelines in Identifying Multiculturalism in Children's Books

The above discussion identifies the problematics of multiculturalism. We may observe that the major contention of multiculturalism is to establish justice in relation to recognising the racial, cultural, socioeconomic, and gender differences of people in a society. The above-mentioned categories relate to "the issue of difference which is a moral [one], involving questions of privilege and power." (Pugh, 2000: 4). At the curriculum level, when analysing the presence of elements of multiculturalism, we oftentimes have to address cultural differences in the multicultural classroom, and the texts and the process itself have involved sensitive issues that may affect racial and religious sensitivities. Aldridge *et al.* (2000) point out some major misconceptions about multiculturalism such as the fact that people always assume that language and cultural values are shared by those who use a common language, and who live within the same culture. Another major misconception is that books on cultures are usually authentically represented.

The controversy on multiculturalism in the social reality of a nation has much influenced the textual framework applied to the representation of multiculturalism in literature. As stated earlier, the various definitions may influence the notion of multicultural literature (Cai, 2003: 269). Cai (2003) revisits the various definitions of multiculturalism which influence the definition of multicultural literature understood within American society. We find that these definitions are commonly applied by those who are outside of the United States. One of the many contentions that create the controversy of multicultural literature is the inclusion of subcultures in representing a multiracial nation. William Safire's (1941) historical tracing of the term multiculturalism has associated it with the concept of "nationalism, national prejudice and behaviour" (Smith, 1993). These abstract terms are manifested as aspects of representation of the nation's cultural identity, taken to refer to a community's "undisturbed existential possession...benefit of traditional long dwelling, [and] continuity with the past" (Tomlinson, 1999).

Smith (1993) further explains that the notion of multiculturalism has been extended to include marginalised groups, or those outside the mainstream such as persons with disabilities and homosexuals. Thus, multicultural literature which is based on these arguments must consider representations not only based on racial differences, but also of various lifestyles of contemporary society. If western multicultural ideology becomes the premise of Malaysian multicultural literature, such considerations must not be neglected.

Issue of Tokenism in Multicultural Literature

Cai (2003: 271) posits that “multiculturalism means inclusion of multiple cultures and therefore multicultural literature is the literature of multiple cultures. They believe that the more cultures covered, the more diverse the literature, and that both the under-represented and the mainstream cultures should be included.” This view has led to the notion of tokenism which refers to selecting aspects/traits of a person’s culture or race to be representative of that particular culture. The notion of tokenism is based on the history of representing minority groups in multicultural central institutions, as stated in the interview between Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Sneja Gunew (Spivak and Gunew, 1993: 193).

Charles Taylor’s concerns for ‘high culture’ elements in multiculturalism relate significantly to Spivak’s definition of tokenisation. She asserts that “tokenisation goes with ghettoisation” which refers to the ‘silenced’ presence of oneself (Spivak and Gunew, 1993: 196). Tokenisation may be read not only as privileging one’s cultural or racial presence, but also at the same time it may refer to negative meanings which lie in the cultural/racial stereotypes that mark subtle racism or oppression. Fang *et al.* (2003) assert that writers who resort to stereotypical images and erroneous cultural information are those writing outside their culture (p. 286). In our eagerness to include all cultures in our presentation of multicultural literature, we may have indirectly promoted an uncritical way of presenting others’ cultural identities or given less attention to cultural and historical authenticity. In other words, writing as an outsider may lead to tokenisation, the process of othering or ‘otherness’. Multicultural literature, which is responsible for representing fairly aspects of different cultures runs the risk of constructing the image of the ‘Other.’ For example, when a marginalised group of women are represented by feminists, the marginalised group is naturally put in a fixed position as the ‘Other’ when others (i.e. the feminists) speak for them. The process of othering is clearly demonstrated by Syed Hussien Al-Attas in his book the *Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977). His analysis demonstrates how Malays are captured

through the eyes of orientalists as naturally lazy. The process of ghettoisation perpetuates negative or romanticised images of the culture which is perceived to be in an inferior position.

Issues relating to cultural and historical authenticity have become major concerns in the study of multicultural literature. Earlier, we pointed out that multicultural literature has become a space to give voice to minorities. For example, “multicultural books about minorities are written predominantly by European American authors from an outsider’s perspective” (Reimer, 1992). Fang *et al.* (2003) further explain that most European American children’s literature writers are influenced by the dominant cultural frame or the dominant Eurocentric ideology which is imbued with, in Edward Said’s terminology, orientalism or imperialist mentality (p. 285). There is also a tendency to consider multicultural literature as multiethnic literature which focuses on only one particular race such as the people of colour as the major category within this type of literature. Such treatment of multicultural literature has reduced multiculturalism as “racial essentialism”, or fixed characteristics, that excludes many cultures from the concept of multiculturalism” (Cai, 2003: 273). It is clear, therefore, that multicultural education must not only include ethnic/racial issues but also gender and class/socioeconomic diversity (Strevy and Aldridge, 1994).

Other aspects that are not being given attention to in multicultural education are “equal opportunity in the school, cultural pluralism, alternative life styles, and respect for those who differ, and support for power equity among groups” (Sleeter and Grant, 1993). It is important to realise, however, that not all aspects of multiculturalism promoted in countries such as the United States are suitable for Malaysia’s multi-religious contexts. The Islamic national identity given to Malaysia may be seen to be at odds with the Western notion of multiculturalism, as described above. General guidelines may be applied to evaluate the suitability of children’s texts in order to encompass multiculturalism. One such example is the guidelines suggested by the Council of Interracial Books for Children in the United States which aimed to ensure non-bias in children’s textbooks and storybooks. The guidelines include checking for stereotypes or tokenism, the story line; evaluating lifestyle such as “cute-natives-in-costumes syndrome” relationship between people; evaluating the notion of heroes and children’s self-image, author’s perspective, loaded words; and checking the copyright date (Derman-Sparks, 1989).

Other than guidelines, we also need to be aware of the disputations against the existence of multicultural education in the United States when evaluating our own application of elements of multiculturalism. Some of the disagreements that

critics have pointed out is that “[m]ulticultural education is just an excuse for those who have not made it in the American way” (Limbaugh, 1994), or that it is more suited “for older children who are less egocentric or ethnocentric.” This, despite findings that “cultural understanding in one’s first culture occurs early and is typically established by age 5” (Lynch and Hanson, 1998) and that “children learn new cultural patterns more easily than adults” (p. 25). Conversely, such resistance to multicultural education can thus be seen as itself ‘egocentric’ or ‘ethnocentric’. From such contentions, we learn that multicultural classroom or education in Malaysia should not be a means for indoctrination, but should be a space for children to learn about themselves and about each other.

Concerns that the implementation of multicultural education will lead to loss of commonality (Swiniarski, Breitborde and Murphy, 1999) may be seen as natural since most people would identify with only one culture. However, the reality of an increasingly multicultural society must be accepted and addressed through education, and a “multicultural education can assist society in being more tolerant, inclusive, and equitable, recognising that the whole is rich with many contributing parts” (Ravitch, 1991/1992). Thus, the value of a multicultural education, particularly in a multicultural society such as Malaysia, cannot be emphasised enough in order to recognise the cultural diversity that exists and that children bring with them to school.

In this era of globalisation, the argument that there are not enough resources available for multicultural education is no longer persuasive, as there are now a plethora of sources which have emerged in the past ten years or so concerning cultural diversity (Aldridge *et al.*, 2000), particularly in children’s literature.

Reading Multiculturalism in Malaysian Children’s Literature

Malaysian multiculturalism can be read through the abundance of children’s literature available in the Malaysia market. We may also assume that Malaysian children, living in the context of Malaysian social reality, are familiar with different types of cultures and that reading books of people of other cultures should not be strange to them. By and large, Malaysian schoolchildren have already been exposed to the morals of cultural and religious diversity in their society. Through the classroom textbooks, we have discovered that morals related to racial harmony are highlighted by the presence or representation of major ethnic groups, namely the Malays, Chinese, and Indians in Malaysia. Many of the Malaysian children’s textbooks are thus keen to capture the friendship established by these major ethnic groups in order to instil a sense of respect and cultural understanding amongst

these different races. Much of the textual framework of Malaysian children's literature adopts the western notion of multiculturalism which has been promoted in Europe, Australia, Canada, and the United States. For example, multiculturalism such as the one in the United States encompasses the major ethnic groups that are politically and socially disenfranchised, namely, the African-Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian-Americans, and Native Americans (Cai, 2003: 270).

Text 1: The Malaysian Children's Favourite Stories

For the purpose of discussion, we have selected a few children's texts which are available in Malaysian school libraries and in bookstores. *The Malaysian Children's Favourite Stories* (2004) consists of nine folktales and are described in the blurb of the book as follows:

*Set in the lush and beautiful tropical country of Malaysia, **Malaysian Children's Favourite Stories** contains a fascinating selection of well-known Malaysian stories from the incredibly rich store of Malay legends and provides a glimpse of the flora and fauna of Malaysia, the exotic animals and of course, beautiful princesses and princes.*

The target audience for the book is the international reader outside of Malaysia. It aims at introducing folk traditions to these readers. Earlier, we have included some guidelines in evaluating the multicultural literature. Using Derman-Sparks's (1989) guidelines, the text, generally, has in many ways exoticised Malaysian culture through its description. As a text, it has highlighted Malaysian culture through stories of one ethnic group. Other cultures of Malaysia are assumed within the more dominant folk stories. By assuming Malay culture to represent Malaysia, the readers are exposed to inaccurate cultural and historical information. Malaysian literature is tokenised through dominant Malay cultural ideology, although the morals transcend ethnicities. Like other national folktales, these stories provide space for children to talk about moral values although they are culturally and historically rooted in Malay cultural contexts. Folktales, unlike contemporary children's literature, do not contain cultural and racial prejudices that need to be addressed. Perhaps, this book may be considered as a means to developing commonality in Malaysian social morality with values such as respect, intellectualism, critical thinking, and understanding nature.

Contemporary multicultural children's literature poses a different cultural complexity for Malaysian society. The books *A Wise Man* (2000), *Coral Bay Surprise* (2003), and *Everyone is Good at Something* (2003) are books selected by

the Centre for Curriculum Development of Malaysia to be read by primary school children. The evaluation of these books are based on the guidelines given in *Ten Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism* from The Council on Interracial Books for Children and *How to Tell the Difference* by Beverly Slapin and Doris Searle (1995). The guidelines consist of giving accurate general information such as historical information (close to readers' social reality) and settings; actual language use (translated works should convey the original content, not word-by-word interpretations); epithets which insult a particular race or ethnicity; exclusion of stereotypes or caricatures (men/women of European descent should not provide all the solutions); illustrations that convey readers' social reality; author does not exoticise cultural practices; appealing stories such as friendship, family, and school within and outside of a given culture; and treatment of difficult topics and presentation of complex issues from multiple perspectives.

Text 2: A Wise Man

A Wise Man (2000) is the story of a wise man who observed an injustice being done when a poor old man was accused by a stall owner of eating his food without paying. The old man, who only sat at the stall but did not eat the food, was being forced by the stall owner to pay. The wise man helped save the poor old man from having to pay by giving a fair solution to the problem, that because the poor old man only smelt the food, the stall owner should only get to listen to the coins jingling. Even though there was no name given to the wise man, the illustration indicates that he was a Malay man (wearing typical *kampong* clothes such as the Malay *sarong* and skullcap). The writer has used traditional folktale storyline to highlight aspects of local culture through its setting. Through a simplistic storyline, the story captures cultural stereotyping about bullies who are physically bigger than the ones being bullied. The story undermines the complexity of the nature of problem-solving thus pointing out that wisdom is only acquired by an old man who solves petty problems. Although the story has potential for discussion of complex issues such as the act of bullying and the meaning of wisdom, it remains outside young readers' social reality and grasp. Issues relating to bullies are more appealing to young adults and within the social reality of young readers rather than the meaning of wisdom of an old man.

Text 3: Coral Bay Surprise

Coral Bay Surprise (2003) is about a group of friends, Amir, Farid, Yasmin and Susan, who went to Pangkor Island on a holiday to enjoy the beauty of nature but found that they had to help clean it up as irresponsible visitors before them had

dumped rubbish everywhere on Coral Bay. This story problematises cultural and racial expectations. The story centres on very significant environmental concerns about beach pollution that should be given national attention. The highlight on environmental issue is enhanced by the friendship of these individuals from different ethnic groups. However, the racial identity of Susan is not revealed. By her name, Susan can be Indian or Chinese. This may lead to simplistic dichotomous race-relations such as ‘Malay and non-Malay.’ Some socio-cultural expectations of Malay or Malaysian are reflected in specific professions typified of Malays, such as policemen, and that they expected their children to be professionals such as engineers. Although highlighting an environmental topic is a good strategy in raising children’s awareness of moral obligations to protect nature and the environment, the story presents mainstream Malaysians as a group of people who are dirty, insensitive, and ignorant of their environment. The story also problematises Malays as not being punctual and effective. Such portrayals of Malays tend to perpetuate imperialist or essentialist mentality of the Other, with their characteristics fixed in type.

Text 4: Everyone is Good at Something

In *Everyone is Good at Something* (2003), Ben, who was sad that he did not do well in his exams, saved himself and his friends during a school excursion by climbing out of the cable car and bravely pulling the rope needed in order for them to safely get out of the cable car. In the process, Ben found faith in himself, that he was also good at something, just like his mother said. A story of self-discovery is always significant for young readers. This story instils self-confidence in young readers and informs parent-child relations. This text presents general universal values rather than problematising multiculturalism. For example, the characters are not named according to local ethnic names but English names. The setting, although within the social reality of Malaysian readers, underestimates the potential of local race-relations. By centring on one dominant race (with the presence of English names), the story may not be a good space for its readers to discuss important issues related to complex racial issues such as inter-racial friendship at school. The conflict that is faced by Ben in terms of not being liked by his schoolmates is a crucial point for young readers. Stories on friendship appeal to readers and should be a space for young readers to understand important social reality and cultural history.

All three books which represent multicultural literature do not pay much attention to illustrations. Illustrations, according to the guidelines, play an important role in appealing to young readers. Through the evaluation of this small

sample of Malaysian children's literature, we found that elements of multiculturalism are not major components of this genre. Multiculturalism is always assumed to be present in a multiracial society like Malaysia. This assumption still remains to be contested, and a clear definition of multiculturalism with respect to multicultural literature in Malaysia must be determined.

Implications for Classroom Practice

The exploration of the problematics of multiculturalism and the examination of the three texts reveal certain implications on classroom practice. First, that the multicultural reality of Malaysia must be used as resource through which students can learn to appreciate each other's similarities and differences. Multiculturalism should not be seen as a handicap for the society with homogenisation as the ultimate goal. Malaysianness, or to be Malaysian, should also be a part of discussions in the classroom through literature, as well as the more general aim of inculcating universal morality.

Second, it is important that among texts selected for classroom use, there must be those that celebrate students' differences, as well as enhance their unique similarities and identity as Malaysians. The selected texts must be evaluated for their representation of what it means to be Malaysian, and texts which show tendencies towards stereotypical representation of the different races must be avoided, unless they are used as points of discussion of the dangers of stereotypes.

Clearly, there is a need for more Malaysian writers to write our own children's literature and also imperative that criticism of children's literature is developed. Whilst we can be optimistic and say that there is still hope in that direction, we have to make do with what is available currently on the market. This means that in dealing with Malaysian children's literature, teachers must guide students in handling texts critically, so that the noble intention of a harmonious multicultural existence can be turned into reality.

Conclusion

The metaphor of the 'melting pot' was made as the point of departure for us in discussing the notion of multiculturalism and multicultural literature. The term exists within discussions of power relations in the context of sensitive categories such as race, gender and class. Multiculturalism is a term which highlights the significance of difference and counter-hegemonic acts of individuals in society in order to take them out of unjust social conditions. Gender, race and class tend to

be silenced issues. Multicultural literature must therefore, become the space for Malaysian readers to voice their views on these silenced issues, thus developing a healthy collective cultural production. Continuous controversies regarding self-representation make multiculturalism a problematic field but what is important is that as a society, Malaysians realise that multiculturalism is within the scope of discussion of cultural politics, and that it will be continually debated. Questions relating to synthesising ideological differences with respect to the notion – one rooted in Western ideology and the other in the local religious and cultural contexts – must therefore be considered.

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