

VOICES OF PROTEST IN SELECTED POEMS OF CECIL RAJENDRA
AND FAN YEW TENG

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PRACTICUM REPORT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES
UNIVERSITI KEBANGSAAN MALAYSIA
BANGI

2004



SUARA-SUARA PROTES DALAM PUISI TERPILIH CECIL RAJENDRA
DAN FAN YEW TENG

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LAPORAN PRAKTIKUM YANG DIKEMUKAKAN UNTUK MEMENUHI
SEBAHAGIAN DARIPADA SYARAT MEMPEROLEH IJAZAH
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BANGI

2004



DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this thesis is my own except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.

4 March 2004


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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply indebted to my supervisor, Prof. Madya Dr. Ruzy Suliza Hashim for her help and encouragement in the writing of this thesis. Her advice and suggestions were indeed invaluable throughout this study.

I would like to express my gratitude to my lecturers, Prof Dr. Zawiah Yahya, Dr. Ganakumaran Subramaniam and Dr Ismaznizam J. Azyze for the interesting and enlightening sessions on literary studies.

I would also like to express my appreciation to my friends, Mohammad Ra'in Shaari and Mohammad Diah Arjan for assisting me with the technicalities of word processing.

I am also grateful to my father for his encouragement and concern. Finally, I owe a lot to my wife, Siti Shamsinar, for her concern and support, especially for always willing to lend a helping hand. To my son, Azizi and daughter, Amirah, thank you for your patience and understanding.





ABSTRACT

This study analyses a genre of literature, namely poems written in English by Malaysians who are concerned with issues of man and society. Selected from the anthologies of Cecil Rajendra and Fan Yew Teng, these poems touch on issues and problems from the social, political and economic aspects of Malaysian society and other nations where the issues are relevant. The study would be based on the critical theory of postmodernism, which is involved with contemporary affairs. An important aspect of postmodernism, in the arts and literature, is its definition by the philosopher, Jean Francois-Lyotard as “incredulity towards metanarratives”. Postmodernists view with suspicion the grand narratives of history, ideology and the like since the narratives are a form of propaganda used to ensure stability and order. Postmodernism has a broad scope of concern especially for the dynamic global changes such as nuclear proliferation, war and environmentalism. From the analysis of the poems, it can be seen that both poets have shown concern for political issues including human rights, justice and upholding democracy. They are concerned too with environmental and socio-economic issues in Malaysia and abroad. The poets express their sentiments and protest through satire, allegory and parody. The study also proposes that further examination of radical creative writings in socio-economic and political issues are viable as reference for protest literature.





ABSTRAK

Kajian ini menganalisis salah satu genre kesusasteraan iaitu puisi-puisi yang ditulis dalam bahasa Inggeris oleh rakyat Malaysia yang prihatin tentang isu-isu manusia dan masyarakat. Puisi-puisi yang dipetik daripada antologi-antologi Cecil Rajendra dan Fan Yew Teng menyentuh isu-isu dan masalah dari aspek sosial, politik dan ekonomi dalam masyarakat Malaysia dan negara-negara lain yang mempunyai persamaan isu. Kajian ini berdasarkan teori kritikal pascamodernisma yang sememangnya terlibat dalam hal-hal semasa. Salah satu aspek penting pascamodernisma, dalam seni dan kesusasteraan, ialah definisinya oleh ahli falsafah, Jean Francois-Lyotard, sebagai “kesangsian terhadap metanaratif”. Pendokong-pendokong falsafah pascamodernisma memandang curiga terhadap cerita-cerita agung dalam sejarah, ideologi dan sebagainya kerana ia adalah satu bentuk propaganda untuk menjamin keamanan dan kestabilan. Pascamodernisma juga mempunyai skop prihatin yang luas terutama terhadap perubahan-perubahan dinamik global seperti pertambahan senjata nuklear, peperangan dan masalah alam sekitar. Berdasarkan analisis puisi-puisi tersebut, dapat dilihat bahawa kedua-dua penyajak menunjukkan keperihatinan terhadap isu-isu politik termasuk hak asasi manusia, keadilan dan menjunjung prinsip-prinsip demokrasi. Mereka juga prihatin terhadap isu-isu alam sekitar dan sosio-ekonomi di Malaysia serta di luar negara. Kedua-dua penyajak meluahkan sentimen dan protes mereka melalui satira, alegori dan parodi. Kajian ini juga mencadangkan bahawa pengkajian seterusnya dapat dibuat terhadap bahan penulisan kreatif yang radikal dalam isu-isu sosio-ekonomi dan politik sebagai bahan rujukan untuk kesusasteraan protes.



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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Literature, like other disciplines in the social sciences such as sociology looks into vast aspects of human society namely the political, economic and social. Sociology, for instance, studies human society in terms of social behaviour and the problems pertaining to social interaction, co-existence and leadership. The difference between sociology and literature is that the former is more objective and explicit in its approach whereas the latter is more implicit and often transcends objective scientific analysis (Laurenson 1972: 12). Sociology and other similar disciplines like political science and anthropology, study for example, power and legitimacy in society or occurrences of race and class inequality and the factors leading to protest and dissension. Nevertheless, literature and the other social science disciplines can complement one another in understanding human nature and society.

Literature also highlights pertinent issues in society, subjectively by recreating and showing human feelings in interactions in family and community life. According to Shahnnon Ahmad, literature is viewed as life's seismograph. Literary works like the novel, short story and poetry have the characteristics of a seismograph, an instrument in geological studies which records about earthquakes. A seismograph only records earthquakes as a natural disaster whereas literary works register and analyse 'earthquakes' of life. The 'earthquakes' refer to all types of obstacles and challenges in man's life such as poverty (Shahnnon 1994: 3). Similarly the poems selected for discussion in this study would serve as the sociological seismograph which records and highlights important political, economic and social issues affecting man and society.





Literary works written in Malaysia since independence are abound with relevant issues of the particular era. They show a concern for race relations and nation building such as in Fernando's novel, *Scorpion Orchid* (1992) (Koh Tai Ann 2001: 160). The poems of Wong Phui Nam in his anthology, *Ways of Exile* (1993) portray the sentiment of alienation and exile of the diasporic Malaysian Chinese (Wong Phui Nam 1993 : xi). Ee Tiang Hong's poem, 'Exile' shows the 'linguistic exile' which refers to the poet's protest and dissatisfaction with government bureaucracy and political institutions, together with his disagreement on the use of the Malay language as the official language and the Malay culture as the national culture (Kirpal Singh 2001: 227). A Malay poet, Muhammad Haji Salleh, has shown his concern for the traditional, rural Malay life and culture in confrontation with the forces of modernization in one of his poems 'Keroncong' (Thumboo 1976: xxii). In his latest anthology, *Rowing Down Two Rivers* (2000), Muhammad focuses on the Malay identity and voices out his feelings of discontentment in the economic inequality among the ethnic groups and the poverty of the Malays. These are a few examples of how a literary work can be sociological in insight in examining and criticizing any flaws in society, or even be inclined to a certain ideology, political belief or biased to the writer's ethnicity.



In this study, I shall focus on a genre of literature that is poetry which can be regarded as sociological in nature since they are concerned with man and society. The poems intended for discussion deal with issues of man's interaction in his social, political and economic milieu and also his relation to the natural environment. The poems are selected from the anthologies by Cecil Rajendra and a single collection of poems by Fan Yew Teng. The poets are Malaysians and their poems have contributed to enriching the growth of poetry as a genre in Malaysian literature in English, from the 1970's to the 1990's. However, the poets have developed a uniqueness in their poems, in contrast to their counterparts. They concentrate more on issues not touched on by their predecessors, issues such as politics and its offshoot like government policies, legislative and judicial matters in Malaysia, neighbouring Singapore and elsewhere. As seen in the above discussion of poems by Wong Phui Nam, Ee Tiang Hong and Muhammad Haji Salleh, it can be said that





Malaysian poems in English worked only on communal themes based on the ethnicity of the poet. For instance Malay poets focused on rural life and patriotism while the Chinese immigrants would look into matters of identity, alienation and their associations with their parent country. On the contrary, the themes that are prominent in the works of Cecil Rajendra and Fan Yew Teng are no more issues of pre-independence and post-independence days such as ethnicity, but are more Malaysian in character and have a wider universal appeal. Both poets have dealt with matters of concern for every Malaysian citizen regardless of race like issues of justice and equality.

As noted earlier in the chapter, poems of a sociological nature are those which are concerned with events and changes in human society. Indeed the poems of Cecil Rajendra and Fan Yew Teng are selected for their social - biased themes and not so much on individual or personal sentiments. Both poets portray radicalism in their work, at times satirical and cynical, showing contempt for the follies of society including incidences of abuse of power, discrimination and injustice. Therefore, the aim of this study would be to examine the issues raised by the poets particularly to the Malaysian situation such as socio-economic inequality, suppression of political activities, abuse of human rights and environmental degradation and to evaluate the extent of the poets' stance on such matters.

This study is significant since it traces the changes in issues of concern of writers, including social activists since post-independent Malaysia. Issues of nationalism, nation-building, political dominance and socio-economic development from the sixties until the eighties, have now diverted to other contemporary ones like equality, liberty, adherence to the rule of law, respect for democratic and human rights and sustainable development of the environment.

Both poets are chosen for analysis since they speak using a similar voice of protest against hypocrisy and oppression. However, they also differ in certain aspects such as ethnicity and political outlook.





It is apt at this stage to have a brief look at the poets' background in order to understand the differences. Cecil Rajendra is a lawyer by profession and is an active member of the Malaysian Bar Council. He is much involved in voluntary service such as providing free legal aid to poor fishermen and factory workers in his home state, Penang. During his sojourn in London, he was involved with Third World writers and poets and had even teamed up with the Third World Troubadours, a group of musicians using poetry and music to comment on the situation in developing countries. He was the first Malaysian poet to gain recognition by the national Poetry Secretariat of Great Britain and Northern Ireland as well as the London Poetry Secretariat. His poems, mostly of Third World concern, have been published and broadcasted in over thirty-six countries and also translated into other languages (Rajendra 1989: 1-2). He has been a prolific poet with not less than thirteen anthologies of his poems published since 1965. His poems are also published in other anthologies on Malaysian writers and poets (Vethamani 2001: 66).



Fan Yew Teng is a former teacher, trained at Brinsford Lodge, England, from 1961 to 1962. He was once active in the field of education, being a Parvin Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, in the United States from 1976 to 1977. He is also active in trade unions and in politics, once holding the post of an opposition member of Parliament. He was also convicted for sedition in 1975 and was sentenced to a fine of RM2000 or six months imprisonment. He was disqualified from parliamentary pension for this conviction. He was again convicted for the publication of a banned article, deemed to be a threat to the security of the nation. He was sentenced to a RM 2000 fine and a day's jail. For this offence, he was barred from standing for elections and holding office in any registered society for five years (Fan 1990: 60). He has only published an anthology of poems, *The Song of the Merbok* in 1990 (Vethamani 2001: 46). However, he still writes articles, mostly on current social and political issues in Malaysia and abroad, and since they are not accepted in the mainstream media due to the sensitive issues they touch on, they are published in tabloids of opposition parties and non-governmental organizations.





It can be seen from the above brief biography of the two poets that they are activists involved not only in their profession which demand that they keep in touch with the happenings around them, but they are also concerned with the social, economic and political dilemma of their fellow human beings. They differ, as mentioned, in ethnicity, but they are still Malaysians. They differ in political outlook, where Rajendra through his poems, seems to be non-partisan, whereas Fan is more politically inclined to the opposition camp. However, they can be compared and contrasted so that the convergences and divergences in their thoughts, concerns and issues can be formulated to show the multi-ethnicity of Malaysia. In addition, the concern of the poets, although from two diverse ethnic groups in Malaysia, do converge on certain issues which affect the nation as a whole, thus projecting the unity in diversity as a unique Malaysian feature.

The theoretical framework for this study would be taken from the theory of postmodernism. The theory is compatible with the issues found in the selected poems. Postmodernism is a response to contemporary world affairs, for instance to the ever-changing global condition as war and nuclear threat. It reacts to the general human condition or society (Lye 2002:1). The poems by both poets are concerned with current local and global issues and this framework could be used to analyse them. The theory of postmodernism is wide ranging and can be selectively used in this study. A detailed elaboration of this theory is available in Chapter Three.

Some aspects of postmodernism, such as irony and cynicism, are profound in the poems. This is a peculiar characteristic of most of the poems in this study. The poets make use of satire as means of criticism or as a way to voice out their sentiments, disagreement, or anger against society or personalities. Some of the poems in the analysis contain elements of humour or comic, but it is not intended to be just a comedy. Both poets would be seen to have used satire as a tool of ridicule or cynicism against others. According to Abrams (1999: 275) satire is a literary art that is derogatory of others. It amuses but also insults and evokes feelings of contempt and scorn for their actions.





According to Pollard, a satirist is like a preacher but he is in a difficult position since he has to make his readers agree with him in identifying and condemning behaviour of men and behaviour he regards as vicious. The satirist is conscious of what things are and what things ought to be, especially in exposing hypocrisy (Pollard 1977: 3).

As such there are various motives in the writing of satires. However there is one constant objective of a satirist, that is to correct the mistakes done. According to Sutherland, the satirist "...feels a sort of compulsion when they see a picture hanging crooked, to walk up to it and straighten it, so the satirist feels driven to draw attention to any departure from what he believes to be the truth." (1967: 4)

The elements of satire, irony and cynicism which would be encountered in the course of analysis of the poems would show that they aim to criticize and bring changes to society. It is also a sort of mechanism that can make man realizes his flaws and weaknesses. According to Ian Jack (in Pollard 1977: 7) "satire is born of the instinct to protest; it is protest becomes art." Thus it can be deduced here that the use of satire, irony and cynicism in the poems are born out of the desire of both poets to voice their protest, on behalf of others, for wrongdoings in society.

