



**Decolonizing the Malaysian Mind:  
Celebrating the Pioneering  
Achievement of Lloyd Fernando's  
Cultural Politics**

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**Abstract**

This article maps Lloyd Fernando's contributions to Malaysian English-language literature as Head of English at the University of Malaya, examines his negotiations with the inception of Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) as National Language and the downgrading of Malaysian English writing to sectional literature recorded in *Cultures in Conflict* (1986) and concludes with comparative readings of this collection and his novel, *Scorpion Orchid* (1976).

**Keywords:** Lloyd Fernando, Anglophone Malaysian literature, University of Malaya English Department, decolonizing, *Cultures in Conflict*, *Scorpion Orchid*

I wish to thank Professor Sharmani Gabriel for her invitation to lecture in the Lloyd Fernando Seminar Series.

Speaking at the University of Malaya feels very much like a homecoming, all the sweeter for the recent national changes that have electrified the world. I was an English Department undergraduate here from 1964 to 1967, and a teaching assistant writing a Masters thesis from 1967 to 1969, a period that coincided with Dr. Fernando's tenure in the department as probably its first non-white staff member. Before he arrived and was promoted to Head, all my department instructors were British, chiefly with Masters degrees from the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford. After 1969, Prof. Fernando began recruiting Malaysian lecturers, among them were K.S. Maniam and Salleh Ben Joned, two "local" Anglophone writers of prose and poetry. In fact, in 1972, as I was completing my dissertation on American turn-of-the-century poetics, he wrote to remind me that the department was holding a position for me in American Literature. However, when I wrote back requesting that my husband, Dr. Charles Bazerman, be offered a position as well so that we could stay together as a couple, he replied that he could not make that spousal hire as the university was only recruiting Malaysians, that being the national policy. What a different professional trajectory my husband and I would have found ourselves in then, had Malaysia been more open to what Singapore now calls "foreign talent"!

Professor Fernando was himself an immigrant.<sup>1</sup> Born in Sri Lanka and immigrating with his family to Singapore at the age of twelve, he graduated from the University of Malaya, then based in Singapore, in 1959, two years after *Merdeka* (Independence). He joined the Department in 1960 when it moved to Kuala Lumpur, splitting from the re-named Singapore University (later called the National University of Singapore). He left to complete his Ph.D on Victorian women writers at the University of Leeds, before returning to the department in 1965, the year of the split between Malaysia and Singapore, and was promoted to Professor and Head of English in 1967. I was fortunate in having him as a lecturer when I was completing my last undergraduate year and as Department Head in my graduate student years, for his presence heralded an expansion in the department's vision of English literature and course offerings. In my third year, for example, I enrolled for courses that were offered

for the first time in the department's history, on contemporary European literature, taught by an instructor from France who introduced us to the films of François Truffaut, and on American Literature, taught by a visiting Fulbright scholar. Most importantly, I elected for Dr. Fernando's Commonwealth Literature course, which included Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Trinidadian V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Nigerian Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and Indian and West Indian writers, as well as Malaysian texts such as Lee Kok Liang's *The Mutes in the Sun* (1964) and the poets Ee Tiang Hong and Wong Phui Nam, whose long poem "How the Hills are Distant" had been printed by the department (before it appeared in *Tenggara* in 1968), and set among old copies of *The Listener*, *Encounter*, and *Times Literary Supplement* in the English Common Room's dusty shelves.

In 1966, a Commonwealth Literature course was uncommon anywhere in the British Commonwealth. My present self-critiquing position on the global dominance of English to which I have contributed and of which I am a beneficiary may be said to have its experiential and critical origin in that Commonwealth Literature course. As I wrote in my 1996 memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces*, Prof. Fernando's (all the names were changed in the memoir following the dictates of my publisher's legal advisor) "readings contradicted the exclusive claims on English that British lecturers [...] had repeated. His course was part of a struggle to extricate a valuable sense of self-in-language from the colonialist's etymological grip. We had grown up in a compulsory language system, but, as if to strip us of all language, we were constantly reminded that this language did not belong to us. Depriving us of Chinese or Malay or Hindi, British teachers reminded us nonetheless that English was only on loan, a borrowed tongue which we could only garble" (Lim 121).

Much earlier than my memoir's recollection of how his course influenced my understanding of the imperial British damage of native language worlds, Prof. Fernando offered his defense of English for an imperiled subject in territorial free fall:

Imagine that the writer is in an aeroplane which we can call his world, and he has jumped out, or been pushed or forced out. He leaves behind a one-dimensional world of language, religion and culture, and he falls free. Then he remembers to [...] pull the cord, and his parachute flutters open. The parachute is the English language [...]. He tugs at the language as best he can. He will probably tug according to the terrain over which he is and according to the winds that blow. (*Cultures in Conflict*, 85, quoted in Newton)

In fact, unbeknownst to us undergraduates admitted to the University of Malaya in 1964, Dr. Fernando was himself a creative writer. According to the literary scholar Mohammad A. Quayum, “[Fernando] started a literary magazine called *Write* in 1957. In 1967 he founded another literary journal, *Tenggara*” (Quayum 2).<sup>2</sup> Two short stories, probably written before he began his doctoral work, appeared in 1959 in *The Compact: A Selection of University of Malaya Short Stories 1953–1959*, edited by Herman Hochstadt, a Singaporean Eurasian who later became a prominent Singapore civil servant. His last known published story appeared in 1966, in A. L. McLeod’s *Malaysian Literature in English*. What can one speculate of the coincidence that in the same year that McLeod’s anthology appeared, Dr. Fernando set his Commonwealth Literature course students a short story assignment? I recall vividly that I stayed up late to complete the assignment, due the next morning. I wrote the story “Journey” in a few sleepless hours, the story that he included in *Twenty-two Malaysian Stories* published by Heinemann Asia the next year. *Twenty-two Malaysian Short Stories* included seven stories by Lee Kok Liang, whom Professor Fernando had canonized in 1966 with the likes of Conrad and Naipaul in his Commonwealth Literature course. *Twenty-two Malaysian Short Stories* also included an older generation of writers, many living in Singapore then, and who could not have passed for Malaysian in 1968, such as Goh Poh Seng and Awang Kedu, the pseudonym for Wang Gungwu, whose story, “A New Sensation,” had earlier appeared in *The Compact*, the same Raffles Society anthology in which Dr. Fernando’s two early stories were published.<sup>3</sup> It speaks volumes about Dr. Fernando’s acute modesty and integrity that he did not include any of his stories in his own edited collection. Dr. Fernando’s introductory comments show his willingness to acknowledge the slippage between the two by-then separate nation states and to risk the conflation. Singapore, of course, had been pushed out of Malaysia and had become a separate Republic in 1965, two years before the publication of the anthology. The anthology’s conflation of these separate nation writers under the rubric “Malaysian” also foregrounded the historical context and nuanced the various authors’ intertwined territorial lineage that today is often and customarily erased. Catherine Lim and Stella Kon, for example, two authors claimed today as Singaporean icons, were both raised in East Malaya before moving to Singapore when adults. That this risky reunion of freshly and still raw ruptured identities is still attempted today owes much to Prof Fernando’s editorial stance then.

My own editorial practice through my academic career has been intellectually indebted to Prof. Fernando’s broad and historicized vision, when he claimed authors resident in Singapore post-1965 as also “Malaysian” Anglophone cultural workers and writers for their works published in the pre-1965’s era, before the divorce between Malaysia and Singapore literally and materially became manifested in the immigration checks at the

Causeway border. Thus, in co-editing the 2009 anthology of Anglophone Singapore literature for the National University of Singapore Press, a teaching anthology taken by some as canonical representation, Angelia Poon, Philip Holden, and I included Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* as a significant text under the anthology's rubric of *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature*. More, the historical framing of the anthology urged the inclusion of excerpts from the *Sejarah Melayu*, articles published in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, coming out of Penang from 1897 to 1907, and pre-1965 works by authors recognized in Malaysia today as distinguished Malaysian writers, such as Ee Tiang Hong and Lee Kok Liang. In fact, perhaps ironically fitting, *Scorpion Orchid* was recently republished in 2011 under Epigram's Singapore Classics Series. After all, if *Scorpion Orchid* is only to be read as a part of Malaysian sectional literatures, why may it not be published, taught, and acclaimed as a part of Singapore's national canon?

His pioneering 1967 collection, *Twenty-two Malaysian Short Stories*, published in the same year that he was promoted to Professor and Head of the English Department, set up a competing identity claim to a Malaysian literature against that asserted in the Chinese-language short stories, translated into English and compiled in *An Anthology of Modern Malaysian Chinese Stories*, edited by Leon Comber, Han Suyin's then husband, and Ly Singko, published also by Heinemann Asia in 1967. Until Heinemann, fresh from its success in its African series, became active in Singapore/Malaysia, local Anglophone writers (with the exception of T. Wignesan's *Bunga Emas*, published in 1964 by Anthony Blond of London and Rayirath Publications, Kuala Lumpur; Rayirath had earlier published Wignesan's poetry collection, *Tracks of a Tramp*, in 1961) chiefly published fiction, essays, and poetry in university magazines or via university-associated societies: in Singapore, *Litmus* (*Litmus One* appearing in 1958), *Focus* (first appearing in 1961), *Tumasek* (1964), and *The Forum*; and in KL LIDRA (first appearing in 1960), *Tenggara* (first appearing in 1967), and *Paper Boats* (1969). In Malaysia, English was then, as it remains still in some ways today, an elite language written chiefly by university-trained subjects and serving professional classes linked to transnational, global networks in which English was the dominant language.

Professor Fernando's 1966 Commonwealth Literature course, exposing local students to a Malaysian genii locus sensibility, confirmed and solidified my amorphous groping for a local literary habitation. His contemporaneous historical and intellectual approach to issues of social identity, hybrid stylistics, and thematic West-East fusions and confusions resonated with my youthful poetry and fiction attempts, and led me to a greater appreciation for what and how abstract and theoretical concepts can provide rigour and disciplinary control lacking in my own writing, riddled as it was with its mordant, solipsistic sentiments. In fact, in response to a question in the Commonwealth Literature final examination on the meaning of alienation in relation to any of the

set texts, I wrote on Malaysian writing and the textual debilitations rising out of an authorial position of alienation to local place, scene, and society — a debate that I continue to play out in my own work today set as it now is in the USA.

Arguably, 1967 may be taken to mark the significant turn in Malaysian English language literature, for on Dr. Fernando's accession to Professor and Department Head, his Malaysian identity was fixed, at least professionally, despite his diasporic origin. He was thus singularly able to act as catalyst for an emergent Malaysian Anglophone literature, steering the department and its resources toward publishing a generation of young university writers, who in their turn have gone on to model the vocation to newer generations. As Head, he organized and sat in on weekly evening gatherings of students who brought in cyclostyled copies of their poems for critique by staff and fellow students. His presence must have made these gatherings popular, despite the cutting comments liberally showered on the students' amateur poems. I remember one evening when I cringed at a staff member's sardonic laughter at my poem's mawkish lines, and can probably trace the loss of my adolescent adoration of Swinburne and Pre-Raphaelite excesses to that painful moment. Looking back, it is evident that these evenings enacted what are now termed "creative writing workshops", albeit not officially course work. I do not recall staff submitting *their* poems to similar critique, or that my peers offered memorable commentaries. It was the social assembling that produced poems, some of which then appeared in the university literary journals, *LIDRA* and *Paper Boat*, and later were selected by David Omerod for his edited collection, *A Private Landscape*, published by the University of Malaya Library, also in 1967. If the adage is correct that nothing succeeds like success, these flurries of prose and poetry written by local university-associated writers, modeled clearly on the earliest university-associated publications from the University of Malaya in Singapore, were auguries for the Malaysian Anglophone literature that continues to be written in the twenty-first century, this despite decades of official state disapprobation, neglect, and active hostility to the English language in Malaysia.

Professor Fernando's academic trajectory was, to put it mildly, unconventional. His 1977 monograph, *New Women in Late Victorian Novels*, a scholarly publication almost always required today for tenure and promotion, was published eight years after his promotion to Professor, and a year after his first novel *Scorpion Orchid* appeared, and he resigned from the profession a year after that legitimizing monograph was published, at the age of fifty-two. Professor Fernando served as the leading figure in the teaching of English language and literature in Malaysia for only eleven years; and his only critical book on Malaysian literature and literary studies, *Cultures in Conflict*, published in 1986, should be closely read for what it suggests of his abrupt exit from that role and for



the remarkable impact his service, cut short though it was, has had on Malaysian literary history, not merely Anglophone but national multilingual, transnational, trans-Pacific, and global literary histories.

His wife Marie in a 2005 interview notes Prof. Fernando's in-between position on the national language policy set out in his 1967 inaugural lecture two years before the May 13<sup>th</sup> riots<sup>4</sup> but dated in his collection as 1969:

Lloyd *was* very much engaged in the language issue at the time. [See a]n important article [...] based on his inaugural lecture when he became professor in 1967 [...]. In it he advocates a policy of bilingualism. There were many people who were rather resentful of that policy, as they felt that everything should convert into Malay. Lloyd felt that Malay should take its proper place, in the scheme of things in Malaysia, but that English should not be neglected. So, he became very involved in this language issue. The nationalists didn't like the idea, as English was seen as a colonial language. (Newton 108, emphasis in original)

However, Prof. Fernando's chapter, titled "English Literature & Bilingualism in S.E. Asia," did not argue for "bilingualism" as the national language policy, but rather as a practical matter.<sup>5</sup> Instead of "bilingualism," the chapter speaks of "a residual inexpressible awareness of deep conflict between languages," and speaks in the voice of a subaltern linguistic Other, a non-Anglophone intellectual: "Asians find that it goes deeply against the grain to accept that our own native languages seem to have little outside exotic significance to contribute to the world of learning" and pleads for translations as the method to treat "linguistic confrontations," the "genius of one language versus that of another." Clearly, with true bilingualism, translations are not needed. Appealing to Benjamin Whorf's "principle of relativity" that "unless linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated," subjects must fail to agree on perspectives (109), the chapter argues for "our education system [to] give all our children one common language in the same way as other nations do," but also that this common language be brought "into close dialectic with another quite different linguistic system" (109). That Malaysia is willy-nilly there today, in that modified "bilingual" condition, with Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) as the common national language and English as "another quite different linguistic system" is clear, but to get from 1967-1969 to 2018, much had been lost, much sacrificed, much vilified, and much yet to evolve. Marie Fernando, speaking for her husband, noted that Prof. Fernando:

[...] practiced what he preached. He learned to speak Malay. He taught himself with the help of friends long before it became the national policy to do so, because he really believed that people ought to be bilingual in this country. He wrote a number of articles on Malay writers, especially in the 1960s and 1970s – these were people like Shannon Ahmad, Osman Awang and Syed Alwi, the playwright. Lloyd’s Malay was so good that he even became a judge for the Hadiah Sastera, an award for the Best Creative Writing in *Bahasa Melayu* in the early 1970s. [...] And when he became a lawyer, he was able to conduct cases in court in Malay. (Newton 110)

In a late interview, the novelist Fernando notes of his vocation, “Creating a novel or short story is presenting an important alternative way of looking at life. For me it is one of the most worthwhile things in life to do” (Quayum 2). According to Quayum in his tribute to Fernando, “[h]is objective was to hold up fragments of life in this part of the world for inspection and reflection” (2). But even as he was working on *Scorpion Orchid*, beginning sometime in the 1960s, he was also Professor of English in Malaysia’s only university.<sup>6</sup> As Quayum notes, “during the early years of independence, Fernando defended the language and literature in English from its detractors with conviction, but never expressed doubt about the importance of Bahasa Malaysia (or Malay) as the country’s new national language” (2). As he told Quayum, during this time he was “accused of being pro-English and anti-Malay by a group of lecturers at University Malaya. [...] I was very diplomatic about the way I defended English. They began to feel embarrassed. Later it all fizzled out” (Quayum 2).

In that discursive negotiation between speaking for Bahasa as the national language and defending a pragmatic bilingual practice of English (to which he carefully ascribed second language status), my celebration today is less of Professor Fernando, despite his role in my de-colonizing *bildungs*, than that of Lloyd Fernando, the novelist. In a crucial way, and just in time, Dr. Fernando made the decision to change from Professor to the novelist, Lloyd Fernando. In the 40 plus years since *Scorpion Orchid* appeared and the 30 plus years since *Cultures in Conflict* was published, Lloyd Fernando’s novels, not his critical texts, are read, memorialized, and celebrated, as can be affirmed by a quick Internet search. Christopher Patterson’s 2018 *Transitive Cultures*, a study of “Anglophone Literature of the Transpacific,” in fact instates Fernando as a foundational figure in Anglophone writing coming out not only from Malaysia or South East Asia, but from a region he terms “Transpacific,” reaching from Pacific Asia and to the USA and Canada: “Fernando’s essays, his two edited volumes of writing in English (*Twenty-two Malaysian Short Stories* in 1968 and *Malaysian Short Stories* in 1981), and his two novels



[...] are essential to any discussion of Anglophone writing in the region” (Patterson 38). However, in valorizing Fernando’s central and critical role in this historical and geopolitical sweep, Patterson’s study focuses almost wholly on *Scorpion Orchid* to unpack how the novel’s treatment of the ambiguously and indeterminately raced figures of Sally/Salmah and Tok Said against the types of CMIO (Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other or Eurasian) that allegorize the conflicts of cultures, reduced and reified to race identities, is productive of challenging British-colonial-originated identity discourses of authenticity that divide to maintain state power apparatuses. Tellingly, the index to Patterson’s book underlines that his study does not include *Cultures in Conflict* (absent in the index), which I am today placing beside the deservedly recognized novel as tribute to Professor Fernando.

A few out-takes as conclusion to this too brief tribute to Lloyd Fernando, the Malaysian intellectual and novelist who had done so much to decolonize the Malaysian mind.

First, his only critical book featuring Malaysian literature and culture, *Cultures in Conflict*, is a careful culling of earlier published reviews, refereed and commissioned articles, and unpublished conference papers and various ephemera, strategically self-edited to frame a pieced-together auto-critical articulation of himself as Commonwealth, postcolonial critic, author, academic, scholar, and man of letters negotiating the dueling conflicts that beleaguer a globalizing postcolonial English in increasingly defensive, hostile nativist-language nationalist territories, in which race and religion set up barbed trip-wires for Western-trained intellectual elites.

Second, the book is not a monograph but a carefully dated, although not strictly chronologically sequenced, selection of expository pieces that articulate an organic critical point of view and voice while not being in fact creative non-fiction; that is, the nineteen chapters hew to a disciplinary rigour marked by scholarly research, citations, thesis, argument, and persuasion. Invention, speculation, subjective assertion, even description, and narration are either absent or strictly minimized, but they are stylistic tactics that Lloyd Fernando the novelist generously deployed in *Scorpion Orchid*.

Third, the different dates of the pieces that appear to delineate chapters structured in a coherent text also suggest shifts in authorial critical positioning that may well be read through the lens of the racialized language tensions Fernando encountered after the riots of May 13<sup>th</sup> 1969, the very same year when he might well have congratulated himself on nurturing the department and its staff and students toward a triumphant emergence of local English language creative writing, evidenced in the publication of *Twenty-two Malaysian Short Stories, A Private Landscape*, and the establishment of *Tenggara* and on-going publications of *LIDRA* and its dramatic performances. *Cultures in Conflict*’s opening chapter, “Open & Closed Cultures in Literature,” was first published in 1975, eight years after his inaugural lecture on bilingualism in South East Asia, six years after May 13<sup>th</sup> 1969,

and a year before *Scorpion Orchid* appeared in 1976. That is, the rather somber paradigm of the three optional tracks that he laid out for a society riven by heterogeneous cultures — 1) supremacy for one 2) irreconcilable conflict for all, or 3) a painful uncertain gradualist evolution — expressed in expository prose is also the somber plot line of *Scorpion Orchid*'s dramatic relationships.

Further, after this introductory frame, interrupted by four chapters on British colonial and post-colonial writers (including James Joyce), the thirteen chapters that follow treat Malaysian and South East Asian writing in English and issues of English language and teaching in the region. While the opening chapter sets up the book's major paradigmatic frame, the fine-grained texture of these other essays sometimes belie or at least struggle with that account. Indeed, these local and regional-oriented chapters are clearly hobbled by the opening frame, for the polarizing binary of societies as open or closed instates reified representations that foreclose and deny more dynamic possibilities. For Fernando in the 1970s, just before he resigned from the profession of university leadership in British/American/Commonwealth/Postcolonial/Malaysian Anglophone literature, "bicultural realities" defined and characterized the condition of heterogeneous societies. To repeat, he saw such "bicultural studies" as inevitably resulting in "co-existing cultural logics" that impose one of three distinctive reactions: supremacy of one over the others; irremediable separation of all; or a confusing exploration in "the blind hope" of future reconciliation. Fernando's literary readings thus parsed every individual psyche represented in fictions where cultures are in conflict as inevitably one that "will reveal one of [these] three attitudes" (11, emphasis mine). From 1969 onwards, his literary readings displayed this fraught negotiation among at least two of these three attitudes. The essays pitched a didactic position from his bully pulpit of Anglophone literary studies in Malaysia as secondary and subordinate to the supremacy of Malaysian literature in Malay, with the corollary of the very minor status of Malaysian literature in English, Chinese, and the Indian languages; or they suggested the hope of an exploratory evolution in the reconciliation of co-existing cultural logics helpfully mediated through Malaysian Anglophone literature.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, to be fair to Prof. Fernando, his abdication as department and university leader did not signify his abandonment of grateful service to the parachute-life-saving language, English, in Malaysia and the region. He remained a member of ACLALS, the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, and founded its Malaysian chapter, MACLALS. In 1980, two years after he left the university, he founded *SARE: Southeast Asian Review of English* as an international peer-reviewed journal, that, unlike most literary journals, published both peer-reviewed scholarly articles and also creative works from emergent authors as well as essays on cultural interventions in Anglophone South East Asian productions. No longer Professor, Fernando in the

inaugural issue still wrote authoritatively and with his usual generous receptivity to diverse voices and practices that *SARE* will cover “an already diverse and still expanding area of literary, cultural, and social interest: Malaysian and Singaporean literature in English through Commonwealth literature to Third World literature in English,” but “it won’t be a journal of a jealously and zealously delimited specialism.” *SARE*, now in its 55<sup>th</sup> volume, continues to define the University of Malaya English Department’s international identity, even as the department’s 1970s premier position in the nation as the center for English language and literary activities has diminished, a great deal on account of radically dwindling institutional support.

After my decision not to return to the position waiting for me in Prof. Fernando’s department, we did not stay in touch much. I did not send him my poems nor did I share my short stories, many written after my son’s birth in 1980, and after my first poetry collection, *Crossing the Peninsula*, received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. My U.S. academic career proceeded with no appeal for his assistance, even if he could have provided it. But I never forgot his intervention in my writer’s path, and never forgot that I had not repaid him in kind. In 1982 we met at a conference in Perth, also attended by Ee Tiang Hong, another native-born Melakan exile, when the novelist Fernando, an immigrant true-fired patriotic Malaysian, laughingly asked me to stop calling him “Prof.” I met him again at a 1994 conference in Adelaide, still sharply analytical, but with a trailing limp after his stroke. When Lim Chee Seng, then Head of English at UM, invited me to speak at the 11<sup>th</sup> ACLALS conference in Kuala Lumpur in 1998, I urged him to schedule a tribute to Prof. Fernando, whom I heard was by then quite disabled. I was there in the hall when he received a standing ovation, and watched with overwhelmed heart as he tried to speak and shed his tears of appreciation for the tribute, so long delayed.

A decade after his death, Prof. Fernando’s intervention in the transition of Anglophone writing from “English literature” to “English-language national or regional literature” to “postcolonial literature” is perhaps finally receiving its deserved recognition. John McLeod in a 2015 essay in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature (JCL)* undertakes a lengthy analysis of Fernando’s 1978 *JCL* article “The social imagination and the functions of criticism in Asia,” to valorize his pioneering turn away from Eurocentric and Western claims of universal moral and aesthetic absolutes, such as those undergirding Leavisite literary approaches:

[Fernando] offers a view of literature as “the human community’s social imagination”, in that “every work of literature, good or bad, speaks for and of the writer’s culture” (LF 56). [...] Fernando’s ideal literary critic works alongside cultural practitioners and participates in the contextual particulars and artistic

endeavours of the cultural milieu in question, rather than occupying a cloistered or elite position away from the daily business of social expression. (McLeod 9-10)

While McLeod remarks, as this brief paper does, on the contradictions between Fernando's decolonizing turn and his continued unacknowledged adherence to universals of human bonds and literary worth, he critiques these inconsistencies in Fernando's article as an aporia to the historical and contemporary problems besetting the Malaysian nation:

Fernando's queasiness with Marxist thinking betrays itself in his capricious use of notions of the national. On the one hand he praises "the adoption of Bahasa Indonesia as the national language in 1928" (59) and the constitutional adoption of Bahasa in Malaysia in 1957 as making possible "a vital connection between literature and society" (59-60). This manoeuvre somewhat sidesteps the deeply problematic matter of national language in Malaysia, a region with a history of manifold cultures and often conflicted relations between its Malay, Indian, and Chinese populations. On the other hand, at the same time Fernando quotes approvingly the Malaysian poet Usman Awang who revered the artist who fights not simply for the independence of the nation but "the brotherhood of man, and the community of nations, regardless of political ideology, belief, race, and colour of skin" (60). Very quickly indeed, Fernando slips into a language of human universals which becomes more and more detached from cultural and geographical specifics (especially vexed in Malaysia). [. . .] At the very moment when Fernando might more fully relinquish the constraints of Leavisite critique, he seems strangely unwilling to make the necessary jump and heads instead for the safe harbour of abstraction rather than stay for long amidst the complex terrain of Malaysia's tense cultural, historical, and national fortunes. (McLeod 10-11)

My analysis of Prof. Fernando's entire collection, *Cultures in Conflict*, arrives at much the same conclusion, but from a different biographical slant. In retrospect, Prof. Fernando's thirteen essays on Malaysian and regional literature in the collection illuminate the incommensurate positions Fernando was required, as English Department

Head and Professor, to occupy at the University of Malaya, then the only university in the country, after the national trauma of May 13<sup>th</sup> 1969, which exposed in earnest the cultures in conflict that the title of his only book-length critical study of postcolonial and Malaysian Anglophone literature so nicely abstracted. The conflicts the essays parsed are discursive; they show up as bloodless, conceptual, theoretical, neatly even elegantly soliloquized in expository prose.

In contrast, *Scorpion Orchid*, published two years before he resigned from the university, was clearly composed on a very different time-line, beginning, according to his own recounting, sometime in the 1960s. While *Cultures in Conflict* spans decades of reviews, refereed articles, lectures, talks, and unpublished essays, the novel published two years before he changed profession from English to Law, covered a shorter writing period, and reads as if created by a *doppelgänger*. *Scorpion Orchid* makes stylistically emphatic the inventive sociologically-constructed and revelatory deployment of diverse voices and points-of-view, through a set array of raced characters — Indian, Malay, Chinese, and Eurasian, representing the four major culture types of Malaysia. While its tactical code-switching and play of socio-linguistic registers demonstrate the features that Michel Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination* notes of the novel as a genre, *Scorpion Orchid* read side-by-side with *Cultures in Conflict* takes on a differently nuanced and plangent urgency. In the context of Fernando's biography and parallel critical and creative work, and in the timeline of his contemporaneous professional shift from academia to law and the accompanying writerly move from scholarly to creative writing, *Scorpion Orchid's* fiction of raced and mob violence, failed multi- and inter-racial friendships and gender-sexual bonding, and its equivalencies of fragmented myths, histories, archival documents, and threads of narrative realism thematize a tone of incommensurable misery in a way that Professor Fernando would or could not permit himself to inscribe as an academic in his years as Department Professor and Head. (The collection *Cultures in Conflict* came out in 1986, published by a press in Singapore, underlining how its reception in Malaysia as an English language critical study was even then uncertain).

What I have just read is the piece I had long wished to write in celebration of my role-model teacher whom I had never stopped calling "Prof," even after I had become a professor myself. I do not think Prof. Fernando would have approved of this reconsideration of his critical essays that set out to decolonize Anglophone World and Malaysian literature. The dynamics of decolonization were pitted against a colonialist history of Western nations exploiting, subordinating, othering, inferiorizing, and orientalizing indigenous natives; and, as Fernando's introductory essay noted, these were also dynamics of heterogeneous cultures that contested each other for autonomy and supremacy in their differently situated bids for independence, freedom, and sovereignty. As

Professor, Fernando subdued his earlier advocacy for the English language in Malaysia, most visibly seen in the successful multiple creative writing publications produced during his first two years as Professor and Head of the English Department. After May 13<sup>th</sup>, he accepted, no, he supported the state decision to not simply promulgate Bahasa as the national language but to downgrade English as a second language and its literature to a sectional category — unfunded and delegitimized. Malay is the territory's supreme language, he stated unequivocally, a language superiority taken as his unambiguous stance on decolonizing the Malaysian nation. But *Scorpion Orchid* equivocates through the voices of the Others, through the terror and anguish of an indeterminate female character, who may be Malay, Chinese, or whatever, but whose rape stands for that physical violation that transcends any discursive pieties because it is so obdurately that of a suffering body.

In short, Lloyd Fernando's vision of cultures in conflict was always humanistic, not nationalistic; but that was a vision he expressed as the novelist Fernando and not as Prof. Fernando. As the novelist Fernando wrote, almost heretically, in the voice of the teacher of the Qu'ran, "There are so many who want to force you to follow the right path. Each one's right path is the only one. I am tired of seeing the folly spread in the name of such right paths. I fear those who seek to come between me and love for all humanity. They are the source of hate and destruction" (*Green is the Colour* 138). This "love for all humanity," not merely for one's community and tribe, drove Prof. Fernando's agenda in teaching not just English Literature but simply literature as a phenomenon central to the discipline of the humanities, and it is this overarching theme in his novels' dramas that fuels the multiracial characters' relations and suggests epiphanies however dim and faraway.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lloyd Fernando was born in Sri Lanka in 1926 and moved to Singapore with his family in 1938. He received a B.A. from the University of Singapore, graduating in 1959 with double honours in English and philosophy. He received a Ph.D. from the University of Leeds, U.K. Fernando taught at the University of Malaya, where he served as Professor until 1978, and then entered the practice of law. His two novels, *Scorpion Orchid* (1976) and *Green is the Colour* (1993), continue to be studied as significant narratives of the multiracial dynamics that characterize Malaysia and Singapore. A dramatization of *Scorpion Orchid, the Play* (1998) was well received. He edited a ground-breaking English-language collection of short stories, *Twenty-two Malaysian Short Stories* (1967), and the first two anthologies of Malaysian playwriting in English, *New Drama One* and *New Drama Two* (both in 1972). Fernando passed away in 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Quayum claims Fernando's "vision for Malaysian literature [...] will continue to motivate and guide many of his friends, fellow academics and writers. Lloyd Fernando was a trailblazer, a pathfinder in Malaysian literature and culture and for his many contributions to English writing in the country, especially during the early years of Malaysia's independence, he should appropriately be dubbed the "founder" and "father-figure" of Malaysian literature in English" (1).



<sup>3</sup> Authors included in *Twenty-two Malaysian Short Stories* are Kassim Ahmad, Siew Yue Killingley, Yap Kok Keong, Lim Beng Hap, Lee Kok Liang, S. Kon, Shirley Lim, Awang Kedu, Lim Beng Hap, Chua Cheng Lock, Goh Poh Seng, Mary Frances Chong, John Machado, and Maureen Ten.

<sup>4</sup> May 13<sup>th</sup> 1969 marks a pivotal date in Malaysian race history, when organized violence followed electoral victories by the governing Alliance Party and resulted in the massacre of hundreds of Chinese Malaysians. The state of national emergency following the riots suspended the Malaysian Parliament for two years, and the nation has since then adopted the New Economic Policy, which favours Malays as “Bumiputras” (“Sons of the Soil”) in all sectors of society.

<sup>5</sup> A brief context on the central language issue in Malaysia: After Malaysia became independent in 1957, a provision was introduced in the constitution that after ten years (that is, in 1967), Malay would become the sole official language. The Language Act passed in parliament in 1967 made Malay (Bahasa Malaysia) the national language. In 1971, an amendment to the act made it illegal or seditious to dispute the national language status of the Malay language.

<sup>6</sup> According to Quayum, Fernando “began writing the novel in the 60s but it took him several years to complete the work because [...] “I didn’t have a shape for it and didn’t know enough of the cultures of the Chinese, Indians and Malays.... I wanted to get behind the façade” (3-4).

<sup>7</sup> The Cultural Congress of 1971 marked a defining moment in Malaysian literature and culture and introduced the categories of “national” and “sectional” literature in the description of Malaysian writing. Fernando spoke in Malay at the Cultural Congress and did not contest the new categories.

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