

Image Of Ethnic Integration In Malaysian Children Novels

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Abstract : Ethnic integration is the process of uniting various racial groups in society through the introduction and creation of a common identity. Literature is one of the mediums that can serve as a vehicle for ethnic integration in society especially among children. This paper discusses the image of ethnic integration among Malaysians that are featured in children's novels. This study is based on literature reviews which found that research on ethnic integration in Malaysian literary works is largely focused on adult literature rather than on children's literature. Therefore, studies on ethnic integration in children's novels should be given attention so that the reading material offered is not only enjoyable but able to provide knowledge and educate through its content, fostering a sense of unity among the children in the Malaysian multi-ethnic society. To achieve the stated objectives, this study focuses on an award-winning children's novel, the recipient of Novel and Drama Scriptwriting Competition for Children and Teen (9-12 Years Old Category) by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, a book entitled Gerbang Pelangi (Rainbow Gate) by Rohaidah Yon as the research text. This qualitative study uses the literary review and text analysis as the methodology of the study by utilizing J. S. Furnivall's Theory of Plural Society (1948) as the analytical framework. Findings of the study show that the novel can enhance the ethnic integration of the Malaysian community through social interaction and peacefulness featured in the plot.

Keywords: Image, Ethnic Integration, Children's Novel, Literature, Theory of Plural Society.

1 INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a country of multi-ethnicity with Malays, Chinese, Indians and other natives in Sabah and Sarawak. Despite the cultural and religious differences between the ethnic groups, Malaysians live in a peaceful and harmonious environment under the same administration. One of the keys to the harmonious society is the government's continuous endeavour to foster ethnic integration among the residents since the independence of Malaysia in 1957. Ethnic integration is the process of unifying multiple racial groups in society through the introduction and creation of a common identity. According to Baterah Alias, Huzaimah Ismail and Najahudin Lateh (2010:15) ethnic integration is defined as a condition where skin colour is not important and has nothing to do with social relations. In other words, ethnic integration refers to the formation of a unified society, free from any relation to race. In this context, different cultures are celebrated but each member of the society is not barred from pursuing the same rights. The application of good moral values should be adopted from a young age. These moral values must also be seen in various aspects that lead to national solidarity. Thus, these pure values have been applied to children via folk tales that originate from the oral tradition. In the words of a Malay proverb: 'melentur buluh biarlah dari rebungnya' (to bend a bamboo, start when it's still a shoot) or the English equivalent is 'strike the iron when it's hot.'

According to Nik Rafidah Nik Muhamad Affendi, Awang Azman Awang Pawi and Normaliza Ab Rahim (2019:88), the traditional Malay community is sending a message to their children to think wisely in solving a problem. Good decisions shall give a better impression in life, but their inefficiencies shall bring negative implications. Different ways of solving problems, directly and indirectly, improve children's thinking ability. In addition, exposure to new experiences for children is also important. Such experiences can sharpen the children's mind to think critically especially towards continuity of survival. In this case, the formation of ethnic integration must start during the younger years. It has been widely applied in folk tales, yet it has not been fully developed in today's world. Another medium that can also serve as a vehicle for ethnic integration in the society especially among the children, is the literary works. Studies found that literature reviews on children's literature, especially in the studies of ethnic integration, has been underrated by researchers. From the reviews, we found that most studies on ethnic integration are focused on adult literary texts. Therefore, we must address the empty gap in the application of ethnic integration in children's novels. Studies should be conducted so that the reading materials presented to children are not only fun and exciting but also providing information, education and fostering a sense of unity among the ethnic communities.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review in this paper analyzes previous literature on ethnic integration in several literary works. Among the academic studies on ethnic integration is a doctoral thesis by Rosli Ibrahim (2016) from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris entitled Analisis Konsep Perpaduan Kaum dalam Novel Terpilih Abdullah Hussain or 'Analyzing the Concept of Racial Unity in Abdullah Hussain's Selected Novels'. This qualitative text analysis study aims to analyze the concept of racial unity in some of Abdullah Hussain's work. Using the novel *Interlok* (1971) and *Buih di Atas Air* (1980) as the subjects, this study uses Lukacs's Reflection Theory as the basis for examining the relationship between Abdullah Hussain's writings in both novels and the diverse ethnic and

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cultural backgrounds of Malaysia. The analysis found that the selection of themes, plots and characters in both novels reflected the real-life background of the community in numerous aspects of life including socio-culture, economics, and political as well as contributing towards the community being harmony and united. This study concluded that Abdullah Hussain's writings were not racist and did not demean any ethnic group or promote any. Next is an examination of a paper written by Ding Choo Ming (2018) entitled *Banyak Lagi Karya Sastra Mengenai Hubungan Kaum Diperlukan or 'More Literary Work on the Relationship Between Races is Needed'*. This paper explores the roles of authors and Malay literature to foster racial harmony in Malaysia since the independence of Malaya in 1957 and the racial riots on 13 May 1969 and other conflicts that followed. According to the author, to build a united multi-racial society, we should not only focus on strengthening the economy and social structure alone, but we also need to be strengthened by literary works that can persuade its readers about the importance of harmony and understanding between races. This has been done by many Malay writers after the country's independence in 1957 and the racial riots in 1969. It was because they have realised that non-Malays have also become part of the society. The new generation after independence has now experienced some sort of interaction with other races either by growing up together or as neighbours. Among Malay literature that tell stories about the non-Malays are *Subuh* (1964) by Atan Long, *Embun dan Tanah* (1965) by Ibrahim Omar, *Interlok* (1971) by Abdullah Hussein, and *Tempat Jatuh Lagi Dikenang* (1983) by Adibah Amin. This proves that literary works written after 1957 to promote peaceful society have given a significant contribution to us living harmoniously, in line with the government's aspirations. The paper concludes that efforts by Malay writers to produce literature that talks about various races in various aspects, including the deep solidarity across boundaries of race, religion and politics should be intensified in order to keep pace with the Malaysian government's efforts in promoting unity. Although the work is merely an image of a utopian author with the hope of sharing the same dream, it still inspires readers by envisioning Malaysia's future of zero hatred and resentment. Furthermore, the study of ethnic integration in literary works can be explored through an article by Eh Chot Cha Chan (2015) entitled *Peranan Sastra Kebangsaan Ke Arah Memupuk Perpaduan Kaum di Malaysia or 'The Role of National Literature in Fostering Racial Unity in Malaysia'*. The article was written based on the author's observation as a teacher of upper secondary's Malay Literature for the past 32 years, who has studied hundreds of different genres of literary works including short stories, poems, novels and plays. The author also examines the role and appearance of the non-Malays writers like Chinese, Thais and Indians who emerged in the 1970s through a process of national education that used Bahasa Melayu as the main medium of instruction in schools. This group is said to be fluent in Bahasa Melayu and able to produce interesting and excellent literary works. This paper also outlines five proposals of an action plan for a Malaysian literary programme towards racial unity. Among the proposals are to disseminate literary work that focused on ethnic unity and integration through mass media, for example, television and radio, led by Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM), as well as giving scholarships or research grants to hone young writers'

talents for producing quality work that can attain world-class achievements. This paper concludes that in the post-independence and the future, national literature still plays an important role in fostering ethnic unity and integration. This is because literary works in various forms can inculcate the seeds of unity through the presentation of beautiful languages, the application of positive values that can develop the mind and contain various stories of our community that can be lessons in life. Based on the observations from previous studies, we found that the scope of discussion on ethnic integration is more focused on adult literature. Research on the application of ethnic integration in children's literature especially novels had also been given little attention by researchers. Such research is essential to ensure that reading materials available in the market can teach children to be tolerant and respectful to each other.

3 METHODOLOGY

This study will utilize library methods and text analysis as the research methodology. A library study is conducted to gather the information that is relevant to the issue or topic under study. The text analysis method is used to find the exact in-depth aspects and circumstances of a particular event or situation in the analyzed work. Through text analysis, information from the most simplistic source is possible because the necessary information is already available through a series of plots by the author. This study will focus on the social interactions found in the novel *Gerbang Pelangi* using J.S. Furnivall's theory of plural society (1948) as an analytical framework. In this study, three principles from the Theory of Plural Society will be used to analyze the texts. The principles are (i) the diversity of races and ethnicities in a plural society; (ii) Principles of living together but not mixed or unified; and (iii) Each race has its religion, language, and culture.

4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Gerbang Pelangi by Rohaidah Yon tells a story of Uzma, a smart student who is active in curricular activities and talented in writing. He was often ridiculed and bullied by his classmates simply because he was the son of a freshwater fish seller. But it did not weaken Uzma's determination to succeed. His short story entitled *Gerbang Pelangi* won the first place in a short story competition. Then, the storyline in history became a reality when an Agrotechnology Mini Park named *Gerbang Pelangi* was built by his father with the help of Professor Kamaruzaman and Teacher Zaini and encouragement from Chai Lin's family. Based on the analysis, the image of ethnic integration in the context of community social interaction highlighted by the author can be seen through the warm communication, friendly attitude and respect and concern for neighbours.

4.1 Warm Communication

Communication is a process by which people send and receive messages. This statement is also agreed by Hybels and Weaver (1992:93) who stated that communication is a process of sharing information, opinions and feelings from one person to another. Giving various greetings, smiling as well as being gentle, caring and attentive as you speak is a great source of communication and can create a sense of warmth between individuals in the community. These positive social

interactions should be instilled early in children so they can grow up with good values. Recognizing this fact, the display of warm communication involving different ethnic communities has been depicted by the novel writer through the children characters of Uzma, Chai Lin and Tavaraj. Even though they have different backgrounds where Uzma is the son of a freshwater fisherman, Chai Lin is the son of a trader and Tavaraj is a son of an oil palm farmer, but they are still the best of friends and are always respectful of one another. Uzma is a thoughtful and polite boy and it makes Chai Lin and Tavaraj feel comfortable being friends with him. This can be proven through the following dialogues:

"Lost in your thoughts? What are you thinking about?" asked Chai Lin.

"I am thinking about you, your parents and siblings who have been so kind to my family. They're like my own. I'm happy that even though we are from different races, but we are like relatives," Uzma said.

"Have you forgotten what our teacher taught us about 1Malaysia?" Chai Lin asked again.

"Yes, 1Malaysia. One voice, one ambition, one passion in developing our beloved country. Respectful to each other and living in unity," declared Uzma earnestly (pp. 57).

The dialogue between Uzma and Chai Lin indirectly symbolises that there is warmth in the communication between these children of different ethnic. The adoption of the 1Malaysia concept presented in this novel demonstrates the authors' efforts to foster the spirit of ethnic integration in line with the government's wish to ensure harmony. Thus, it is clear that the principles of multiracial society presented by J.S. Furnivall on the diversity of races and ethnicities that coexist and interact with one another are illustrated in this novel.

4.2 Being Honourable and Respectful Towards Neighbours

Respecting and being honourable to each other, especially to the neighbours, is a great formula for a harmonious society. According to Kamus Dewan Fourth Edition (2015: 634), a neighbour is a person living near our house, also known as someone 'next door'. According to Shamsul Amri Baharuddin (2008: 162), one obtains honour based on humanity, not based on colour, race, religion or descendants. Gerbang Pelangi beautifully illustrated the Malaysian culture of appreciating neighbours via the depiction of the good relationship between Uzma and Chai Lin's family. Their close bond, in sickness and health, portrayed the image of Malaysia's ethnic integration. Despite being from different races, religions, and cultures, as neighbours, Uzma and Chai Lin's family have always been genuinely kind in helping each other and treating everybody as their own. This is evident when Uzma's father allowed Chai Lin's family to build a house on his property when theirs was caught on fire. Chai Lin's family later repaid their generosity by sending groceries to Uzma's family when Uzma's father had financial trouble. They have also contributed some money to build a food stall for Uzma's mother and worked together to set it up.

Uzma and Chai Lin are close because their families are also close. According to the story from Uzma's father,

Chai Lin's father, Uncle Yaw Kun used to be poor. Her grandfather's old store was burned down in a fire. Uncle Yaw Kun is a small retailer. Uncle Yaw Kun would usually give Uzma's father some groceries for free when he didn't have enough money. And because of this, his father will always remember Uncle Yaw Kun's kindness.

...

When the accident happened to Uncle Yaw Kun, Uzma's father was the first one to lend a helping hand, especially during the incident when Uncle Yaw Kun's shop was burned down due to an electrical shortage. After all, Uzma's father thinks of Uncle Yaw Kun as his own brother.

...

Uzma's father is deeply moved when Chai Lin's family lost their home. Therefore, he asked her family to build a new house on his inherited land. (pp. 18-19).

This event shows the close relationship between neighbours among the Malaysian communities. The portrayal of genuine connections between two different ethnicities, religions, and cultures in this novel is deliberately emphasized by the author to provide exposure and education to children on the importance of maintaining the harmony in the society. This scenario indirectly provides a representation of the principle of coexistence among plural societies by Furnivall.

4.3 Being Concerned

Being concerned is important when you're living in a community. This does not mean that you're searching for somebody's mistake or their wrongdoings but it is about creating a great bond through the sharing of advice and guidance. The consciousness and care to things happening around us is the symbol of love and social responsibility between the community members. In the context of a plural society such as in Malaysia, being concerned is usually translated through the practice of visiting one another, asking how people are doing as well as being friendly. The practice of being concerned towards other people in the same community is also demonstrated by the author in Gerbang Pelangi through the actions of Chai Lin's brother who cares about the health of Uzma's father and his family. Kai Sin works as a doctor. He would examine Uzma's parents' blood pressure and sugar levels each time he returns home. Kai Sin has always been grateful towards Uzma's family that he doesn't mind spending money for them as he considers them as his own. Even though Chai Lin's family had moved a little farther away, they still visit every now and then. Chai Lin shared Uzma's grief when his family lost his mother's food stall after a fire. Chai Lin's parents, Uncle Yaw Kun and Auntie Tay held a donation drive among the villagers of Kampung Parit Raja to help rebuild the ruined stall. Uncle Yaw Kun also gave so many advice and words of encouragement to Uzma's father to continue working on his haruan fish business and strive to follow his dreams of being a successful fish breeder. Needless to say, the act of kindness and concern for each other, shown by Chai Lin and Uzma's families, is a great example of ethnic integration that must be followed by all Malaysians. This event proves that we are capable of building a nation with citizens who love and care for one another, regardless of their ethnic background. The author's initiative to create the novel this way is a sincere effort to provide children

with good teachings and set a solid example on the importance of caring for one another to keep a peaceful nation. The social interactions between ethnic groups through their concern for each other also further explains Furnivall's theory. Thus, we are convinced that Gerbang Pelangi succeeded in presenting the image of ethnic integration among the plural society in Malaysia. The portrayal of harmonious ethnic integration in our society through the values manifested by the author can be a catalyst for children to emulate the habit of interacting with people from different background. Although literary works are merely an imagination - a utopia of the authors, as stated by Ding Choo Ming (2018), they still provide hope and inspiration for readers to maintain the balance and peace they have achieved, while continuing to plant the seeds of unity and ethnic integration.

5 CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of Gerbang Pelangi, we found that the image of ethnic integration via social interaction among the community can be clearly seen through the plot presented by the author. The creative writing style is simple and well-suited to children's level of reading. This indicates that the author seeks to provide awareness in injecting the spirit of ethnic integration into children readers through the works she produces. It also proves that literary works, especially novels, can serve the national aspiration to achieve unity and it is capable of creating a peaceful and integrated society through various heartwarming life stories. Moreover, this study also confirms J.S Furnivall's notion that the people of Tanah Melayu (Malaysia), who is a diverse society made up of various nationalities, races and ethnicities can live together despite their differences in religious practice, languages and cultures. There are no barriers for them in keeping a close-knit relationship as well as being respectful and caring of one another through good communications just like what was being demonstrated in the novel studied. The portrayal of ethnic integration in this novel is particularly crucial for children, to produce compassionate and tolerant citizens in future.

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