

Identity in Contemporary Malaysian Literature: Diversities, Writers' Dilemma and Implications for Teaching

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Abstract

This article examines the construction of diverse identities in contemporary Malaysian literature. Using one literary text, "Neighbours" by Karim Raslan (1996), the analysis shows that the characters, particularly the ancillary male character, Kassim, possesses diverse identities with ethnic identity being foregrounded over other forms of identity that are based on age, social class, gender and sexuality. However, these other forms of identity exert influence over the realization of the characters' ethnic identity, thereby reinforcing the idea that social identities do not exist in isolation, but interact with each other in the process of identity formation and expression. This article also discusses the dilemmas and challenges that local writers face in constructing the identities of their characters and their own identities in the process, as well as the implications of using the writers' works to discuss issues related to identity in the literature classroom.

Keywords social identity, identity formation, Malaysian literature, writers' dilemma, literature classroom

INTRODUCTION

Identity has been and continues to be studied in various disciplines and fields. This is essentially attributed to the complex, contested, and malleable nature of identity which requires not only further research but also constant theorising and reflection by scholars and researchers alike. The need for these activities becomes even more crucial in today's highly technological and globalised world where identity requires further rethinking given the occurrences of recent identity-related phenomena such as "the liquidization of contemporary identity processes", "the arrival of a post-traditional process of identity-construction" and "the emergence of a "new individualism" (Eliot, 2013, p. xii).

Issues pertaining to identity have always been salient in people's everyday lives, especially in the lives of those living in ethnically and culturally plural nation states such as Malaysia. This is mainly because many Malaysians *and* non-Malaysians experience complex processes of identity formation and how these processes are influenced by a host of interacting factors and conditions (see Barlocco, 2014; Holst, 2102; Milner, Abdul Rahman Embong, & Tham, 2014). For instance, people's "primordial" or "deep psychic" attachments to their culture, language, ethnicity, religion, and regional origin exert a pervasive influence on their notions of personal, cultural and national identity (see Ibrahim Saad, 1980, Gill, 2013, Verma, 2002).

**This article is based on a paper presented at the International Seminar on Language Teaching (ISELT) 2015 organized by Pusat CITRA Universiti, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.*