

Diverse Construction of Identities in Contemporary Malaysian Literature: Challenges in Deconstructing and Teaching Literature

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ABSTRACT

*Contemporary Malaysian literature functions as a site of diverse constructions of identity where local writers construct various identities of their fictional characters and their own identities in the process. Their dilemma in writing about these identities in their works, that is, aligning themselves to certain social identities such as ethnicity, religion, and regional origin or embracing various identities to call themselves “Malaysian” is coming to the fore but not gaining enough recognition because previously literary texts have tended to portray single identity/ies. This paper addresses the diverse constructions of identity in contemporary Malaysian literature using one literary text, *Neighbours*. Using theories relating to identity formation, the analysis, among others, indicated that the identity of the protagonist that is foregrounded is Malay identity but diverse identities that are backgrounded include gender, sexual and ethno-religious identities. However, these diverse identities still exert influence on the realization of the dominant social identity, highlighted in incidents and issues discussed by the characters in the fictional work. The challenges in deconstructing, and therefore teaching these diverse identities in literature in the plural Malaysian nation-state, are discussed.*

Keywords: Malaysian literature, deconstruction, fictional work, social identity

INTRODUCTION

Issues pertaining to identity have always been salient in ethnically and culturally plural nation states such as Malaysia. Verma (2002), among many scholars in the field of Malaysian studies, maintains that strong and often unswerving ethnic, religious, and regional affinities continue to exert pervasive influence on people's notions of identity and their sense of belonging to this nation state. This can be observed in the presence of strong religious affiliation among many Malays in modern day Malaysia who, as Martinez (2006) discovers, identify themselves first as Muslims, Malaysians second, and Malays third. Contemporary Malaysian literature, among many forms of written discourses produced within and beyond the nation state, is well known not only for its role in examining issues related to identity, but also as a site of diverse creations of identity where writers construct various identities of their characters and their own identity in the process. Literary works by Malaysian Malay writers in English, for example, explore diverse constructions of Malay identity and the ways in which language (English in particular) moulds their views of Malayness and Malay culture (see Hosking, Hosking, Omar, & Dan, 2012).

A growing number of studies over the last several years have shown that identity in Malaysian literature (Malaysian literature in English in particular) continues to be a topic of interest among local, regional, and international scholars, academics, researchers, students, and enthusiasts. However, many of these studies have focussed on examining specific identities using specific theories. Abdillah, Muslim, and Abdul Manaf (2010) examined representations of women in Malaysian literature in English using Islamic theoretical framework focusing on Islamic principles found in the Quran, Prophetic Hadith, and Sunnah as well as related scholarly writings by Muslim writers. Jerome (2013a, 2013b), on the other hand, examined the construction of queer Malay identity in the works of contemporary Malaysian writers in English. Furthermore, very few studies have examined the dilemma that Malaysian writers experience in writing about the identities of their characters and their own identities in the process (i.e. identify themselves primarily in terms of ethnicity or religion, or embrace various identities in calling themselves an individual and a member of their ethnic and national community). This is a gap in research and important to be addressed, considering that (1) people have different social identities and a particular identity may come to the fore under certain circumstances and settings while other identities are backgrounded but continue to exert an influence over the realization of that particular identity. Since social identity cannot exist in isolation, the interrelationships between