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# Lessons from Malay literature

## RACE RELATIONS:

### How 'Interlok' re-maps the nation's citizenry

**C**OLLECTIVELY, we reflect and echo the sentiments of our forefathers. We are the projection of yesterday — of destiny and of the follies and foibles of those before us.

A recent issue of the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka-published journal, *Malay Literature*, projected an instance where literature and its comprehension are embedded in history. We cannot ignore the cultural memory in our midst.

The issue carried a series of papers reflecting further on Abdullah Hussain's *Interlok*. Set in Penang, the novel narrated the experiences and dreams of three main characters telling the story of how the nation evolved to be what it is today. I do not intend to rehearse the characters and the plot.

Rather, I wish to recapture what we conceive as literature through the socio-historical dimension. Briefly, the novelist was motivated by a desire to promote unity in a new nation. Remember that *In-*

*terlok* was published by DBP in 1971, when the nation faced critical junctures.

Abdullah was essentially portraying race relations through *Interlok*. In the article *Of race and man: Reconstructing citizenship and the nation in Abdullah Hussain's Interlok*, the authors asserted that the novelist was attempting to re-map the nation's citizenship and nationhood through a depiction of race and ethnic adaptation, and conflict in Malaya between 1900 and 1957.

The period set the background for the story — in the contacts between the Malays and the Chinese and Indians. The authors used Chicago sociologist Robert E. Park's race relations cycle concept, which described how different people came into contact with one another and are coerced to live together. The concept examines the factors of contact, competition, accommodation and assimilation. The use of the concept reflected a renewed interest in comprehending a generalised law of human relations.

Nevertheless, there is still ambiguity as to its contribution to sociology as compared with its usefulness for social and political re-

forms. Park made Chicago a living laboratory, especially in the 1920s and 1930s.

Abdullah attempts to re-evaluate the spirit of diversity in nation-building in the wake of the May 1969 incident. I reckon that being a citizen of the new nation-state, Abdullah was making a plea for greater understanding and cooperation between the different ethnic groups. And this was particularly relevant in 1971 — the year it was published. This was the argument in the second article titled *Literary freedom and the need to interlock*.

Imagine Shakespeare without the *Merchant of Venice* because the Jews find the characterisation of Shylock "offensive". Similarly, the authors cited Jane Austen's novels, in that, it should not be part of any literature syllabus because it was offensive to readers outside the West. Before arriving in the colonies as texts, Austen's novels were used as "literary texts" in the industrial towns of England to help provide the "masses" with the idea and "benefits" of an ordered English society. Works of fiction do provide us with a powerful narrative of colonialism.



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The past made mistakes, echoing the foibles of man. Abdullah, as some have argued, made many factual errors in *Interlok*. He, like many of us, did not escape from misreading the environment.

But the novelist has demonstrated knowledge and respect for the Indians. In *Way of the warrior: Battling issues of Interlok with the sword of wisdom*, the author provided arguments based on the foundation of Hindu religious and spiritual doctrines and methods, and on the traditionalist perspective of metaphysical truths.

Interestingly, the author posed the possibility that *Interlok* — a transliteration of the English word "interlock" — resembles the original Sanskrit word *lok* or *loka*, which means world or realms, and in this instance, the socio-cultural, physical, geographical, metaphysical and spiritual.

The world may evoke false consciousness and identity, but then *Interlok* "is also a representation of a social situation in a multicultural space... unique when seen as a multiculturalism text or narrative", as the author of *Interlok* from a multiculturalism perspective" argued.

Subconsciously, Abdullah absorbs words and symbols. The author in "Unveiling poverty in *Interlok*, via the keywords semiotic model", essentialises Abdullah's conceptualisation of poverty in the novel. Fic-

tion does not arise from a vacuum. From a semiotic perspective, the novelist lives in society and expresses what he observes and experiences in that society. In so doing, how do we problematise Abdullah's efforts in writing fiction and writing history at the same time?

As in "The historical order of Malaysian socio-culture in *Interlok*", the author brings our attention to the "historicisation of a fiction" and the "fictionalising of a piece of reality or history".

History is selective. And it is presented to us in many layers, by commission or omission. Through historicising fiction, what has been written is read as a product of history and, hence, decreases its value as fiction. In fictionalising history, a piece of text is seen as a work of fiction as it conceals the empirically known.

Embracing the socio-historical dimension in reading autobiographies, memoirs and works conceived as literary epics and pertinent works of fiction strangely relieves us of the constraints faced by historians.

I am not trained in history or literature and we cannot ignore the cultural memory of Abdullah. Nor can we suppress the collective consciousness that his story powerfully evokes.