TRACING MULTICULTURALISM IN LAT'S CARTOON

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ABSTRACT

The harmonious multicultural landscape in Malaysia is rooted in a plural society during the colonial rule. It was a time when the Malays, Chinese and Indians – met and lived together, sharing the same space yet remain culturally unique and apart. This research traces the transformation of pluralistic society into one with a multicultural identity as portrayed in Lat's cartoons, from his earlier works to the more recent ones, captured the progression of Malaysia's ethno-cultural and social dynamics from a plural society during its early independence, to the multi-ethnic, multicultural Malaysia of today. Three series of Lat's cartoon: Kampung Boy, Town Boy and The Early Series are chosen as the research corpus. Two theories: Reception Theory and Reader Response Theory formed the basis for the analysis and discussion of the corpus. Findings reveal that Lat's cartoon had successfully traced the transformation of the cultural landscape in Malaysia

Keywords: Multiculturalism, reception theory, reader response theory, Malaysian's cartoons, nation building.

INTRODUCTION

The multicultural landscape in Malaysia today is rooted in a plural society that emerged decades ago, as historically documented, when the three main races – Malays, Chinese and Indians – were brought together by the forces of colonialism under the British occupation. This paper will trace the transformation of this multicultural society as represented in the selected cartoon series by Lat. Tracing the progression from the pluralistic landscape into the multi-ethnic setting

and then to a multicultural society enables better understanding of the development of multiculturalism in Malaysia. This paper asserts that Lat's cartoons, from his earlier works to the more recent ones, have successfully captured the progression of Malaysia's ethno-cultural and social dynamics from a plural society during its early independence as Malaya, to the multi-ethnic, and the multicultural Malaysia of today. This paper sets out to observe to what extent cultural diversity and social heterogeneity is depicted in its stages of transformation in three selected cartoon series by Lat: *Kampung Boy, The Town Boy* and *Lat: The Early Series 2009.*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural diversity in multiculturalism

As Malaysia's multiculturalism evolved from a plural background, "the dominant Malay community was given preference in the social, cultural and economic realms through the elevation of the Malay language, literature and culture to a national status" (Raihanah M M, 2009:45). It is no surprise that this competition for equality in the educational, political and social front has created a social condition in Malaysia which is described as a "state of stable tension" (Shamsul, A.B., 2001:4). He further asserts that the Malaysian society practices "Cultural Borrowing" (Shamsul, A.B., 2004:13) where we borrow certain elements from each other's culture such as food and style of cooking as well as way of dressing. He concludes by saying that these also contributed to the state of

"stable tension" where the seemingly harmonious society which we live in is the result of continuous negotiation in dealing with constant daily ethnicity and cultural contradictions.

Imagined Community

The term "imagined community" popularized by Anderson (1991:7) is most apt in describing the scenario in this shared space. He asserts that this "imagined community" is depicted through "print-capitalism" (Anderson, 1991:22). Capitalist entrepreneurs in colonial Malaya published reading materials in their mother tongue (and not in a common language or national language). Anderson (1991:7) further elaborates that a nation is "a community socially constructed", that it is "imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group".

In Anderson's (2006:46) opinion, the existence of a "national print-language" is vital in creating a national identity. The print-capitalism is thus able to help promote nationalism through the standardization of a particular language (national language) that displaces local vernaculars. Consequently, readers of various dialects begin to share common reading materials and will be able to understand each other, leading to the emergence of a common discourse within that community. In today's "globally connected and culturally intertwined" (Castells, 1997, p.3) society, we are experiencing a more pertinent and relevant force of "the being" (Hall, 2000:225) in our multicultural identity. Those that have been recognized as heterogeneous has now become "part of the conscious identity of modern societies", re-designing "new hybrid forms" (Young, 1996:69) in which "the concepts of sameness and difference are presented as compatible rather than opposed" (Harvey, 1996:69). Thus, a culturally homogenous society is no longer required in projecting a national culture; rather the uniquely different cultures of the races co-exist harmoniously, giving birth to a multi-cultural national identity.

Cultural identity

The cultural identity projected in the field of performing arts and films is beginning to show signs of the "interactive multicultural synergies taking place beyond the 'market-place' boundaries" (Young, 1996:69) that were originally conceptualized in Furnivall's (1948:308) notion of a "plural society". Zawawi (2004:134) further explained that: "The multicultural synergies in the popular culture and arts of the country show the diverse 'cosmopolitanism' and 'hybridization' which have been 'evolving independently of state cultural policies and intervention".

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Since the nation's independence in 1957, the Malaysian government has been working towards materializing a true state of social integration to ensure continuous racial harmony – a vital element in nation building. One way of achieving this goal is to enable the hyphenating of ethnicity and class in a multicultural setting, as Hall (2000:227) states, "in diasporic conditions people are often obliged to adopt shifting, multiple or hyphenated positions of identification". Although Malaysia has always been regarded as one of the most culturally and economically diverse regions in the world, its people continue to live in harmony, generating a true picturesque of multiculturalism. Among other forms of representations, well-known local cartoonist Lat has, through his artistic creation, provided an "author-defined social-reality" (Raihanah M.M. 2009:52) in depicting "the daunting challenges in coping with diversity become the responsibility of writers who have to be mindful of the nation that they represent in their literature" (Raihanah M.M. 2009:52) especially in reviewing this multicultural landscape.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The reader respond theory helps to explicate the meaning making of the work of art to highlight the visibility of the pluralistic setting and the multi-ethnic landscape which leads to the formation of a multicultural society. With close reference to the semiotic theory to deconstruct the images in the cartoon strips, the meaning

making based on the reader's perspective is explained.

The reception theory, which includes the cultural aspects in viewing the image representations in Lat's cartoon strips, is employed to detail the decoding of meaning. The three stages explained the progression of Malaya from a pluralistic setting to a multi-ethnic one which subsequently leads to the formation of a multicultural landscape by giving acknowledgement of other cultures in a multicultural landscape.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to examine the recognition of social differences in cultural identity that can help to alter the position of 'self' and 'other' to construct the 'one-ness' in a multicultural setting as in Malaysia to promote national unity and ethnic tolerance.The representation of cultural diversity and social heterogeneity in Lat's cartoon reflects the transformation from a pluralistic setting of Malaya to a multi-ethnic landscape before a multi-cultural society is formed as in today's Malaysia which is depicted in the cartoonist's selected works.

METHODOLOGY

In deciphering meaning in non-linear text such as cartoons, the field of semiotic is most useful. As "non-linear text is made up of a series of popular cultural exhibits: press advertisements, front covers of popular journals and mysteries and excerpts of cartoons" (McLuhan in Judith Stamps, 1995:110). Semiotic figures constitute a way of being, constructing particular social or personal identities. Culler, Johnathan (1985:102) considers that "semiotics can help to denaturalize theoretical assumptions in academia just as in everyday life; it can thus raise new theoretical issues".

The paper with the selected sub-title is based on the reading of Quappe and Cantatore (2007) insights on the dynamic of cultural diversity. These phrases (as shown in the sub-title) are used to display the stages of cultural awareness – an important element in maintaining racial and cultural harmony.

The diagram below will illustrate three stages and the corpus used in the respective stages.

Stage One- Pluralistic Society	• lack of a common social will (Furnivall,1956:445) • two or more elements or social orders which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit. (Furnival, 1939:446) • politically organized cultural communities • salience of ethnicity (Alvin Rabushka and Kenneth A. Shepsle, 1972:74)	The Kampung Boy, published in 1979
Stage Two – Multi-ethnic Society	• Culturally diverse societies • intense awareness of nationalism • social heterogeneity showing signs	*The Town Boy*, published in 1981
Stage Three – Multicultural Society	• several cultures or cultural communities show their own distinct systems of meaning and significance • without any one culture dominating the region • overcome any form of	*Lat: The Early Series*, published in 2009

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	discrimination	

CONCLUSION

Lat's wittiness as a cartoonist allows him to poke fun in a most gentle and respectful way while raising awareness of the country's multi ethnic, cultural and religious background. It has successfully delivered the message of the needs for 'one-ness' as a nation for a better future. His artwork traces the paths before independent, right after to the present day developing nation, bringing in the elements of cultural diversity and social heterogeneity in charting the important chapters of the transformation of this beloved homeland from a pluralistic setting to a multicultural landscape.

Cultural diversity adds favours to the uniqueness of a society. It enhances its community aesthetically while encourages the values of tolerance and understanding among them.

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