

Textual analysis on Rehman Rashid's "A MALAYSIAN JOURNEY"

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perceptions on pre and post independent Malaysia and to shape writer's own discernment and consciousness on his social cultural background.

Key Words: Meta-narrative, worldview, blank spaces

PREAMBLE

"A Malaysian Journey" is written by Rehman Rashid, a Malaysian Bumiputra, born in Taiping (p 25), whose father is of Arab –Indian parentage while his mother is from a Tamil –Eurasian parentage (p39-41). The text describes two journeys, the first being a physical journey that Rehman Rashid, the writer himself undertakes upon his return home to Malaysia, while the second journey is an emotionally critical, highly personal, expressive and hopeful journey on Malaysia's pre and post independence history and its impact on the him as an individual and on the multiethnic Malaysian society. Both journeys, however, attempt to:

- to introduce readers to the social matrices, politics, religion (practiced by the majority) and culture of Malaysians.
- to challenge reader's existing socio-political perceptions on pre and post independent Malaysia.
- to shape writer's own discernment and consciousness on his social cultural background.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What is the writer's past, present and future view on self, Malaysians and Malaysia?
- What determining factors influenced the formation of writer's worldview?
- What are the writer's stances on his ethno-racial identity configurations and dilemmas?

THEORITIZING THE TEXT

The written textual analysis of the text is divided into two parts:

Part One

- Explore the textual forms of the text.

Part two

- Recognize the author's voluntary and involuntary encounters with the nation's state of affairs and its society.
- Analyse the manner in which the author sees SELF, Malaysians and Malaysia.
- Examine his attempt to fulfill his desire to fill in the blanks spaces within him.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Part One

Rehman Rashid's "A Malaysian Journey" is a comprehensive meta-narrative that provides readers with factual historical accounts and social cultural experiences on pre and post independent Malaysia. The writer, intelligently, writes stories within a story, the first being a historical narrative, written in a chronological pattern, that continuously moves forward, cleverly depicting the actual Malaysian historical timeline, and the second story, a biographical narrative that depicts his physical journey as he travels from one state to another in present day Malaysia. This style of writing succeeded in not only aiding readers to follow the story line easily, but also re-created a throbbing wakefulness in readers about the familiar constant inner struggles that the textual characters- the political icons of Malaysia and the ordinary Malaysians whom Rehman Rashid encounters during his travel, endured in the narratives. The writer succeeds in unifying various unconventional and sensitive themes on the subject of religious practices, political ideologies, racial conflicts and cultural discrepancies in the nation before and after independence while desperately attempting to fulfill his own constant inner struggles and desire to fill in the blank spaces within him as an educated Muslim with a mixed parentage and Bumiputra.

The tone in the text is reflective and successfully evokes an emotional response in the reader as it slowly builds up with the conflicts faced by the characters in the text as the writer attempts to challenge and question the bases of the political, religious, social and cultural state in which the nation was and is in still.

To move on, the text is narrated using the Register scale of informality. This is apparent as the text consists features of spoken speech namely, contractions (didn't, wasn't etc) and personal pronouns. The lexis of the text is also relatively colloquial. There is no use of ambiguity in choice of lexis as the writer appears to be very clear and forward with his stream of emotional interest and perception on the subject matter. However, there is an obvious contrast between the uses of tenses in between the chapters as the text represents two different times- the writer's past and present. Never the less, text is easily understood by readers because of the simplicity of the diction and lengthened sentence structures though the excessive use of commas and word connectors.

The characters in the text are not created nor are they fictional persons. They are all, actual people from all walks of life with real names, opinions and perceptions in a capitalistic and progressive society. The writer cleverly cites their personhood without questioning the position from which the individual character speaks from, giving the character to voice his or her own self knowledge or perception on the manner in which matters are in the nation. The writer does not impose an authority by being 'their' voice and provide rationalization on the individual character's worldview. Rehman Rashid, himself, takes

upon the role of being the round and central sympathetic central character with his own set of personal flaws (example- despite being a Malay, he does not 'see' himself as being one), which have affected his interpretation of his worldview.

Part Two

"A Malaysian Journey" is truly an exciting read as it consist of an ever familiar subject on the quest on dealing with life experiences- where the writer experiences his life, remembers it again through memory and re-arranges the experience and memory into a written discourse in the form of a meta-narrative (Theodora Karamelska and Christian Geiselmann,2010).

The meta-narrative consists of a reconstruction of the writer's life history with an emphasis on matters that are important and personal to him, beginning with his past as a young boy, a growing up adolescent, a working adult, and finally an encultured individual returning from exile. His approach to materialize the story of his life, practically mirrors his current desire to fill in the blank spaces within himself in attempt to conceptualized space as an individual in the present society.

Rehman Rashid not only goes on a physical journey literally, travelling from one state to another but he also travels back in time and writes about the many different phrases that Malaysia as a nation had gone through before and after its independence from the British Imperialism, seen through his perception.

Both 'journeys', in my humble opinion, are an imperative for his psychological and spiritual progression in his life as a Malay, Muslim and a member of the diversified Malaysian society.

His search for self may not have been intentional initially but the positive and negative facets that he encountered on his 'journeys' certainly did compel him to contemplate his perceptions on his state of being Malay, a Muslim and a Malaysian. This is done through the close narration of his accounts on his faith and beliefs, culture, occupational and educational background, and upbringing in the past, all giving an insight to his present , providing a core for his future as an individual and a Malaysian.

Example one

"A group of Malay girls floated by like ghosts, or angels, depending about how one felt about organised Islam. I watched their round brown faces graced with smiles and framed by white head coverings that fluttered about their shoulders as they trilled along. They noticed me; they fell into silence, swallowing their smiles and casting down their eyes. Their faces, a moment before so lively, became masks of wood carved by a melancholy sculptor. A few paces on, and presumably out of harms' range, animated chatter resumed and bright laughter danced like tinsel on the enervated afternoon air." (p.21)

Author's analysis on the whole incident –

"It was a curious piece of theatre. Three swift acts; two instant costume changes: schoolgirls-Muslims women –schoolgirls. The transitions seemed practiced to the perfection of unconsciousness. One moment they were four carefree young friends walking home from school. The next, in the presence of modest, and commanded by the burdens and perils of their gender. It was like tripping off a switch. They had their magnetic field; I had mine. The fields emerged, their defenses triggered. There is a man. He can see you. Therefore he is watching you. Therefore you are in danger. Sinfulness is in the air. Be alert. Move swiftly. Do not attract his attention." (p.21)

At this early point in the text, Rehman Rashid is still figuring out who he is as a Muslim as he lacked the personal and emotional support of the Muslim community and family when growing up (p.81). If he had a stronger exposure and a good support system from his family, his spiritual growth would have cultivated a stronger communal commitment towards the safety and well being of his female Muslim community. Instead, in the example above, he isolates himself from his Muslim faith that he himself ought to be practicing and scrutinizes the whole communicative event, with a hint of sarcasm.

Example Two

"I wish he had said: We understand each other better now. But it was still in this Malaysia I had not seen for so long, in the Malaysia of this hot and sunny April afternoon in 1992, a matter of "us" and "them". Perhaps it truly would take another thirty years to bridge that gap." (p.10)

The writer is excited and pleased to be back to his homeland, but he is still disappointed by the manner in which matter in relation to ethnicity had not changed much since he last left the country. There is still a conflict between the races where the national identity contracts and becomes next to nothing in present day Malaysia as Malaysians do not have a strong sense of national identity, but instead have a strong sense of communal ethnic identity, where they are able to identify with their own ethnic groups and differentiate others who are not in their group. As a result, the matter of 'us' versus 'them' arises and creates social unrest among the Malaysian society. But, this non neutral identity calamity that common Malaysians face on a daily basis in relation to almost all aspects in the lives, be it education, politics and even professional opportunities, is heavily influenced by the policies in Malaysia which awards the Malays with special privileges that other ethnic groups do not enjoy, and this in return causes the other groups to feel a sense of resent against the Malays, although the policies meant more good than harm, when they were implemented.

Examples of that are as follows:

- "The changes came swiftly. On May 14, 1969, a state of emergency was declared, Parliament was suspended (merely a formality, of course; it had never been reconvened), and the governance of Malaysia passed to a National Operations Council, headed by Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, the deputy Prime Minister. (p.95)...The first decade of the New Economic Policy went by swimmingly. The oil flowed. The coffers swelled. The nation restructured. (p. 129)...But the Malay wanted it all, and wanted it NOW. In 1983, it was somewhat sheepishly admitted that of 55,000 loans MARA had given to Malay businesses by then, nearly 90% had not been repaid when due." (p.134)...And what of the Chinese in all of this? He fell back on the traditional bonds that had always cemented his community; he took care of his own, and was in turn taken care of. And he worked even harder: during these years when Malay shops were mushrooming as never before, with the Chinese share of main street sundry stores dropping from three quarters to thirds, their average turnovers remained proportionately the same. The Chinese shop kept making on average three times as much as the Malay's (p. 134)...The argument, and it was a potent one, was that the NEP's success depended on the Chinese continuing to bolster the national economy during these formative years, while the Malays were still feeling their way. ... the Chinese with his expertise, experience and savvy would actually help the Malay learn the ropes of the business...it might have worked if the Malay had actually had wanted to learn the ropes but more often than not, he just wanted to be rich.... The inter-racial co-operation under the NEP...consisted of the Malay using his privileges to acquire licenses and permits, thus denying the non Malay, and then accepting a fee to be the front man while the non-Malay ran the business. (p.134-135)...Very early in my career,...I was feeling the cut of the NEP as the double edged sword as it was. It would help the Malays move faster and better but it would

never win them the respect of their fellow countrymen. Advancement they'd be given, respect they'd still have to earn." (p. 140)

- "...what could I say? She was right. It was true. Had I not been a Bumi I'd never receive a scholarship to Britain, never have gone to university, never have come home with a degree, never have gotten a job with the agriculture Ministry within three months of coming back" (p.139)

Here, the writer himself acknowledges the privileges that he as a Bumiputra benefits and enjoys despite him coming from a background where he himself and his own Malay community rejected his identity as Malay because of his Indian looks. This is indeed a self identity dilemma- he enjoys the privileges, but he doesn't see himself as Malay simply because of his physical traits and cultural upbringing.

1. "I had never realized how unMalay I looked...., and my various Indian bloodiness had no unmistakably manifested themselves in my facial features and complexion. Coupled with my limited command of the Malay language, I was the butt of taunts and sarcasm." (p. 81)
2. "Mine had been an English speaking upbringing, my father had insisted on that, as that was the language that "would give us the world" (p.81)
3. "But soon after I went back home for the first term holidays, I overheard my father tell my mother, his voice thick with disgust, "You hear the boy? He sounds like Sayong Malay!" (Sayong being a decrepit little village buried amidst banana groves across the river from Kuala Kangsar.)" (p.81)

But then, later in the narrative, readers see the other side of the writer where his Malayness is forcefully projected when he discusses the implications that arose due to the implementation of the National Economic Policy.

1. "... supplemented my allowance by grading undergraduate papers and soon fell foul of the students ... the group in question was a mixed bag of Bumiputras and non Bumiputras...I would receive the neatest manuscripts from the Chinese students ...and the scruffiest pieces of works from the Malay students.. At first glance, I saw this as evidence of the economic gulf between them ..but then upon reading the papers, I'd see an equal gulf in the diligence that had gone into them...I was enraged. Didn't they know what they were up against? Couldn't they see how earnest their non Malay colleagues were and the standard that they were setting?" (p.156)... "I graded the papers according to their content...to the effect that I was showing favoritism towards the non-Malays." (p. 156)

Here, readers see his Malay identity interconnecting with his personal identity, where he actually stands for his communal ethnic group as well. The question that would arise here would certainly be – Why is he enraged by the matter- especially when he himself doesn't see himself as a Malay? The obvious answer would be, yes, no matter how much he has denied, he is Malay and deep down his subconscious mind also acknowledges the plain fact of him being Malay. In my opinion, the writer's understanding on the concept of his racial identity is very much misunderstood and contested as he was always under the impression that a person's racial identity is influenced by his biological dimension. He consciously failed to understand that an individual's racial identity can also be influenced by his social dimension (Alicia Fedelina Chávez, Florence Guido-DiBrito, 1999) and that he learns to see though his interaction with his own self and others around him while travelling and while going back in time to his past and re evaluating his cultural frameworks, priorities and actions.

CONCLUSION

It is essential to acknowledge that Rehman Rashid's character in the text did undergo a journey where he self imposed an examination on his own sense of identity while fighting his past and his self knowledge on who the thought he was as a Malay, Muslim and a Malaysian. This journey of an exploration of his identity analysis took place as he crossed the states and confronted the disparate cultures and histories.

From the narrative, as readers, it is evident that he started his journey to Malaysia with the idea of the core 'self', a person who shaped his own worldviews and was not touched by the Malaysian society- the practices, the way of living (Mead,1962). But as he progressed with his physical and historical travels, he started recognizing and was able to stabilize his worldviews to mirror his social and cultural role, as Malay, a Muslim and A Malaysian.

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