

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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A Note on Malaya's
Angry Young Men

5 Lorong 9/5B
Petaling Jaya, Selangor
Malaya
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
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Dear Mr. Nolte,

Recently the Sunday edition of a leading Malayan newspaper, The Malay Mail, published a series of nine short stories by modern Malay authors. As I read these stories I became aware of certain consistencies in the characters, events, and themes. A second and more critical reading confirmed my first impression; this was the writing of a Malay version of the angry young men.

Almost all the stories expose the struggle between the old and the new, the tensions in an old society undergoing modernization. The only exception is the story of an ill-fated love affair between a simple Malay seaman and a fickle prostitute. In my estimation this is the poorest of the stories in its literary quality.

The tensions are reflected within individuals, in the relations between individuals and in the relations between groups. A wide array of human emotions and conflicts are portrayed, but within only two major arenas. One is the relation between men and women, the other is the arena of modern politics.

In four of the stories women hold a central position. They are all portrayed as carriers of traditional values and as the most backward and simple of the actors in the drama. Consequently the conflict between the old and the new is seen as a conflict between women and men, but it is not the open and fierce conflict the Western reader has come to expect. In all cases the woman is a good and simple person who accepts her fate calmly and without a great show of emotion. Even when she is an activist, as is the woman who tries to convert her Chinese friend to Islam, she goes about her work in a subtle and unassuming, but extremely persistent manner.

Two of the women are portrayed quite sympathetically. They are simple rural people who are the unfortunate victims of the rapidly changing values of urban life. Caught up in the world of urban work, their husbands are changing more rapidly than they. The result is tension within the home, or dissolution of the home.

The other two women are portrayed unsympathetically. It may be just a coincidence, but these two women are primarily concerned with the protection of traditional religious values.

One tries to make her husband more religious, the other works at the conversion of her Chinese friend. This religiosity calls forth two reactions. In one case the other central characters turn away apathetically. In the other case the protagonist reacts as a religious individualist. He protests that Islam is a liberal democratic religion, not a dogma or set of rituals that must be followed slavishly. He insists that Islam can and must adapt itself to modern, scientifically oriented life.

Malaya's angry young man is disturbed by, rather than angry at, the conflict between the old and the new. He does not rant and rave at the middle class pressures for upward mobility or for keeping up with the neighbors. He merely dislikes this part of life. He finds distasteful the hypocrisy he sees in many traditional followers of Islam, but he is not really anti-religious. If his reaction to religion is not one of apathy, it is one of support for the more humanistic principles of Islam.

From the number of stories, there seems to be considerable interest in modern politics as the arena of conflict between the old and the new. In six of the stories we are given a view of the political process or of the new elected leaders. In not one case is the political leader portrayed favorably. The common people are all simple, good, and hard-working. The political leaders are tireless and dedicated only in the business of having a good time and in keeping the rural mud off their shoes. They have become better acquainted with the night spots of Kuala Lumpur, Tokyo, Paris and London, than they are with their own constituencies.

Perhaps the most significant part of this view of the world lies in the categories into which it can be divided. There are those who see the conflict as one between human goodness and human selfishness. Others see the conflict in the orthodox Marxist terms of class struggle.

The two stories that present the clearest and most unfavorable picture of the new politicians make a sharp and unsophisticated distinction between good and evil. On the one hand is the simple, trustworthy, rustic wife or the village party organizer. On the other hand is the successful politician, corrupted by a too rapid rise to power, prestige and wealth. The good wife supports her husband, even pawning her jewelry to contribute to his campaign fund, only to be dropped for a younger English speaking girl soon after the successful elections. And the cad doesn't even have the courage to tell her he is getting a divorce; he just sends her packing back to her village.

The faithful village party organizer humbly comes to ask the new Member of Parliament to attend a small celebration marking the completion of a rural development project in the village. Naturally, the MP's calendar is too full for this type of frivolity. To obtain this refusal, however, the good village man has had to wait most of the day while the MP discussed

Tokyo night-clubs with another politician just returned from a fact-finding junket.

The message is clear. Modern life has come too quickly to Malaya and its influence is largely corrupting; it could happen to anyone. However, the new politicians have been most susceptible to the change. Political power has come too quickly and its influence is absolutely corrupting.

Others see the conflict in the Marxist terms of class struggle. A poor peasant is constantly exploited by the Chinese shop-keeper and money lender. By dint of hard work and a little luck he is able to get slightly ahead, only to be ground down again by a Malay land-owner. He went to his fellow Muslim in hopes of securing more humane treatment, but finds that they are "all leeches of the same species." There is no help from the new political leaders, either, for they have become representatives of only the bourgeoisie.

In the only story concerned with the Emergency, the class struggle is combined with something more unique. The story is pervaded with a heavy sense of apathy. Things happen to the protagonist over which he has no control. His father died before, and his mother during, his birth. His marriage and divorce were not really of his own doing. He was forced to be a special constable to guard an estate in Pahang. Life weighs heavily on him and gives him little opportunity or little desire to move of his own volition. His single flash of emotion comes after his discharge from service when he is listening to one of the new politicians. The talk of democracy and of the will of Allah disgust him. He feels that he has been made to kill, and he feels more in common with his boyhood friends who went over to the terrorists (whom he calls nationalists) than with the puffy British ex-sargeant who commanded his Special Constabulary unit, or with the ranting politician on the platform.

This is the class struggle, the struggle between the haves and the have-nots, portrayed both in the daily life of the peasants and in the national move for independence. Malaya's angry young men have found some inspiration in the theories of Marx, but regardless of their political orientation, they seem to have little respect for the new men of power.

There are a number of things about these angry young men that seem particularly significant to me. In the first place they appear devoid of strong racial feelings. They handle the relations between Chinese and Malays without the crude stereotypes and the vehemence that signify deep racial prejudices. This may be just another indication of the very pervasive fear of racial tensions in Malaya (see GDN-2). If this does indicate minimal prejudices, however, it is indeed fortunate for Malaya, for if this very articulate part of the elite were strongly racist, there would be little hope for the more rational forces of moderation in race relations here.

As important, but less fortunate, is the attitude toward politics and politicians portrayed in the works of the angry young men. They see absolutely nothing good in the new leadership. If this view becomes prevalent among the peasantry, the ability of the government to provide effective leadership for economic development will be seriously undermined.

Perhaps the most serious symptom portrayed by the angry young men is a sense of apathy and helplessness. In the face of forces that are beyond their control these young men feel no sense of resentment or frustration. They feel only tired and helpless. In short they appear more tired than angry. They are romantics, but there is little hope in their romanticism. They may well see greater value in the simple rustic than in the more sophisticated middle class, but they are not stimulated by this to go out among the peasantry in support of these rustic values. There was such a romanticism in western Europe during the last century and its effects were generally salutary. It sent a part of the intellectual elite out among the rural people and gave rise to such things as the cooperative movement and the folk high schools of the Scandinavian countries. Malayan romanticism lacks the optimism and activism of its 19th century European counterpart. This might contribute to Malaya's political stability in a small way, but it will not contribute to Malaya's economic development.

I may well be reading too much into these nine short stories. However, the other things I have seen of Malayan literature and intellectuals support rather than weaken my impression. More than anything else, the Malayan version of the angry young man looks like a tired hedonist.

Sincerely,

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