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## A Fictocritical Narration of the Complexity of Nation-building in Malaysia

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### Abstract

Nation-building in Malaysia can be problematic due to its politicized racial divides. Malaysia as a nation is 60 this year, but issues of race and ethnicity are still prevalent factors that may thwart racial togetherness in modern Malaysia. Malaysia's different races live in harmony but not necessarily in unity. This article centers upon the racial issues of Malaysia creatively and critically. It looks at the sociopolitical, cultural, and mythical nuances in the form of creative arts, where the genre of fictocriticism serves as a creative contextualization narrating the complexity of the idea of nation and racial identity. In other words, this study used a creative arts methodology approach where fictocriticism is put into practice to show the iterative processes of practice-led research and research-led practice following the 'Iterative Cyclic Web' model (Smith & Roger, 2009). Fictocriticism produces a dual narrative: one which employs a fictional voice and the other, a critical voice. The critical voice in the fictocriticism allows for commentaries on the issues of the positioning of 'self' and 'other.' In addition, an exegesis, in the forms of results and discussion, was provided after the fictocritical parts to explicate further and contextualize issues related to nation-building in Malaysia. It is hoped that this article may contribute to narrating the nation, its hopes and aspirations, in the context of creative arts.

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Malaysia's nation-building is a multifaceted, ongoing process, marked by several factors such as cultural and religious diversity and language and education policies. The *Bumiputera* policy, introduced in the 1970s, has led to controversies and tensions. It is often seen as a preferential treatment of the Malay majority as they are given advantages and priorities to improve their economic well-being. Such policy has given rise to issues about fairness and equal opportunities, often voiced by other ethnic groups in a multicultural nation like Malaysia. In addition, Bahasa Melayu (Malay language), as the national language, faces resistance from other ethnic groups, such as the Chinese and Indian communities, who still insist on using their mother tongues. This can be seen in the implementation of vernacular schools (Mandarin and Tamil Schools), thus further complicating the process of nation-building. It is, therefore, essential for Malaysia, as a nation, to find 'common grounds' to further inculcate unity in achieving a mutually shared national identity. Malaysia made significant progress in pursuing a unified national identity through initiatives like the 'Rukun Negara' (National Principles). However, other relevant efforts should also be considered. In this article, it is suggested that the formation of a nation may also be achieved through the 'Story of a Nation', a common tale shared by members of a community.

In modern societies, in particular, nations that have come through the process of 'colonialization', the story of a nation is important in realizing the national consciousness. One characteristic of post-colonial societies, including Malaysia's, is their 'decolonized national belonging'. Ashcroft et al. (2002) maintain the 'imperial-colonial dialectic' idea (p. 28), where decolonized countries speak of their national belongings or cultures regarding the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. In establishing a post-colonial nation's own national culture, Ashcroft et al. (2002) outline two different processes of decolonization: first, as argued by Ngugi (1986), there is a need to bring back the pre-colonial traditions without considering the impacts of colonialization; and second, as asserted by Williams (1969), there exists a 'cultural syncreticity' (p. 29) that utilizes the colonialist discourse even after political independence, a vital feature for a post-colonial nation in the process of decolonization.

In decolonized nations, including Malaysia, cultural syncreticity implies the gradual acceptance of the colonizers, thus contributing to the formation of nationalism. India, as a decolonized country, is a case in point. Sadarangani (1997) in Rahamad (2014) remarks that "[t]he British left behind not only a railway system and a postal system, but also a British system of education and a significant number of Indians who had been educated in British literature and law, either in England or in India" (p. 42). Moreover, Rahamad (2014) observes that such acceptance of the former colonial influence is expressed in several literary works by Indian authors such as Bharati Mukherjee (Jasmine), Salman Rushdie (*The Satanic Verses*), Anita Desai (*Bye-bye Blackbird*), V.S. Naipaul (*A Bend in the River*) and many others. In other words, all these have given rise to the positive impacts of nationalism.

Similarly, in Malaysia, the return of the British to Malaya in 1945 after the period of Japanese occupation (1941-1945) was seen as an important factor in saving Malaya from communism. Ishak (2014) reiterates this view in his comment: "Indeed, colonial Malaya has been widely acclaimed as the 'success story' of British colonialism" (p. 64). Further, with the support of the British and the introduction of education and law systems, the Malayan people (the Malays and other races, particularly the Chinese and Indians) realized their sense of nationalism, which eventually culminated in the Declaration of Independence in 1957.

### Scope and Relevance of the Research

The writing of the 'story of a nation' in this article is narrated using the genre of fictocriticism. Fictocriticism, according to Amanda Nettelbeck, is a 'hybridized writing' moving between two poles: 1) fiction and criticism and 2) subjectivity and objectivity (Nettelbeck in Kerr & Nettelbeck 1998, pp. 3-4). In addition, fictocriticism, according to Gibbs (2005), is 'hybridized' because it "is free to make use of narrative modes and of the rhetorical strategies available to them, including anecdote and (or

as) allegory which stage the singular encounter between the writer's emergent, embodied subjectivity and what is written about" (p. 2). In this article, the fictocritical narratives attempt to reimagine or 're-write' ethnic and national issues, further infused by traditional Malay tales.

The following fictocriticism is a way of creating a nation's story that aims to bring back old stories from the tradition into a modern context, as expressed in the creative components of the following writings. It is often through history that we learn about nationalism. In the current Malaysian schools, where history is taught as an important subject, the idea of nation-building is suggested to have begun with the rise of nationalism propagated by the nationalists in the 1940s and 1950s, which eventually culminated in the independence of the Federation of Malaya in 1957. However, there needs to be more details concerning the importance of the traditional texts, creatively or non-creatively.

Further, the mention of early Malay kingdom(s) in the syllabus mainly centers upon the golden era of the Melaka Sultanate (1400–1511). In contrast, the Malay kingdoms, such as Jambi, Old Kedah, Langkasuka, and Srivijaya, had existed much earlier, even hundreds of years before Melaka. To sum up, the need for a national story to be told in a new, innovative way, primarily through fictocriticism that combines creative and critical voices, may contribute to realizing the importance of forging a shared national identity for a multicultural nation like Malaysia.

### Materials and Methods

Whether practice informs research and vice versa has been an ongoing debate in Creative Arts, the question of which comes first, the creative or the research and the research or creative, when someone, a practicing artist, is also an academic. In other words, which influences which? Is the work of a scholar-artist informed by his or her research? Or is it the other way around? These questions have been discussed by some scholars examining research and practice activities. In Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts (2009), Hazel Smith and Roger Dean suggest that both practices are in an 'iteratively-cyclic' relation. Linn Skoglund means this when she remarks that research and practice "can inform each other" (Skoglund, 2011, p.6). According to the Iterative Cyclic Web model, the iterative relationship between the research and creative is shown in a circular motion. The diagram 1 shows the 'iterative' processes in the connection between the creative arts and research:

Diagram 1

*A model of creative arts and research processes: The iterative cyclic web of practice-led research and research-led practice (Smith & Dean, 2009, p. 20)*



The 'iterative' directions between practice-led research and research-led practice, as well as academic research, are 'fluid' as they can shift back and forth within the process. Such iteratively-cyclic movement can lead to a similar path, be directed oppositely, or engender a new direction (Smith & Dean, 2009, pp. 19-21). This article applies the idea behind the 'Iterative Cyclic Web' model through fictocriticism. The 'fluidity' between 'research' and 'practice' that results in the 'research-led practice' and vice versa can be seen in the application through the genre of fictocriticism.

In fictocriticism, the 'fictional' element can correspond with the 'practice' whilst 'criticism' may serve a function similar to the 'research' in the conundrums of 'research-led practice' and 'practice-led research'. In this context, with the focus on the issue or theme of the nation, both the critical/criticism/research and the creative/fictional/practice conform. The combination of fiction and criticism in the creative component opens up a new way of viewing Malaysia's nation-building through the arts. In this light, fictocriticism is congruent with the 'Iterative Cyclic Web' model as both the critical and the creative inform each other. In fictocriticism, the critical is an essential part of the genre. Therefore, this writing technique further enhances the 'iteration' or 'reverberation' of the critical and the creative.

Furthermore, the creative component of the article explores the concept of the nation as the main theme using the first-person voice. However, using the "I" voice should not necessarily be autobiographical, as some scenes or events rendered by the narrator may be fictionalized. There are five parts in the following sections, each in fictocritical writing format (fictocriticisms 1-5). Each fictocriticism has its setting and story, which are interdependent. However, all five parts of the fictocriticism form a kind of 'dialogue' exploring the interaction between myth and culture in relation to the expanding notion of nation. In other words, the fictocritical parts form a collection of 'short fiction' that deals with issues such as identity, race, and nation. The intermingling of the personal and critical voices is prevalent throughout the fictocriticisms.

#### Fictocriticism 1

I'm not trained in politics but I'm sure I'm right to say that the notion of 'nation' is a political issue—particularly the idea of 'organizing' people and creating a sense of belonging to one country that is unified usually by a common language and a government body. In the 1882 Ernest Renan's essay, "What Is a Nation?" he declares that a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle' (Renan in Loomba, 2005, p. 163). Perhaps that is the idea of 'organizing' people together. In other words, it is an 'abstraction' that unifies people. No wonder Benedict Anderson claims that a nation is 'imagined' as a community, and the concept of race is also 'imagined.' They unite people as well as distinguish them from other groups. A nation is the 'soul' of the community 'conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship' (Anderson, 2006, p. 7). I think a nation 'symbolically' binds people together. I have learned what a nation is through literature and history. My early acquaintance with the tale of Hang Nadim didn't immediately get me thinking of what a nation is supposedly. It was more of a curiosity on my part as I wanted to know more about Malay heroes. It turned out that the most celebrated Malay hero is a man called Hang Tuah. The *kris* grazed Tuah's right shoulder. Few drops of blood from his wounded shoulder landed on the palace's white floor. He leaped to his left to avoid another blow, then Taming Sari staggered, losing his balance as he missed his target. In a split second, Tuah grabbed his opponent's arm and knocked off the *kris* from his hand. He snatched Taming Sari's *kris*, then stabbed him in his right eye causing immediate death. Taming Sari is the name of the fearless Majapahit warrior and he was invincible because his *kris* was believed to have magical powers. However, Hang Tuah defeats him in a duel using Taming Sari's own *kris*. The *kris* is then rewarded to Hang Tuah by the king of Majapahit and it was named Taming Sari ever since. Nadim could never have gone through such an ordeal. He could never amount to a Malay hero. He is simply regarded as that little boy who saved Singapura from the attack of the swordfish. Singapura is the name of Singapore in Malay. Temasik is the ancient name of Singapura/Singapore and the name, Singapura is still widely used especially among the Malays. The fact also remains that Nadim died at a very young age as compared to Tuah who fought many battles; the latter is even considered to be the greatest Malay warrior in the history and literature of the Malay community. A well-respected scholar in Malaysian Literature, Mohammad A. Quayum, writes that "nationalism implies idealisation of the nation...and it also creates a sense of conviction and loyalty among members to certain shared artefacts of the nation" (In Quayum & Manaf 2009, p. 5). Literature is a form of artefact, a shared cultural item that further enhances the idealization of the nation. Tales of Nadim and Tuah could be a culturally shared artefact in which members of a community could claim that such myths

expand the notion of nation. It's important that people who belong to the same community share the same common heroic stories. It's through myths, legends, and fairytales that people are bound together symbolically. It's through the sharing of heroic tales that may create a sense of solidarity among them. Tuah may have fought many battles, but Nadim also embodies the spirit of the 'nation' – a little hero who saved many lives of the people of Singapura from the attack of the swordfish. Can ancient texts such as Sulalat al-Salatin (Genealogies of the Kings) and Hikayat Hang Tuah (Story of Hang Tuah) help define nationhood in Malaysia? Aren't they all tales about the golden ages of the Malay kingdoms? Can other non-Malay races relate to these mythical and legendary stories?

### Fictocriticism 2

Being non-Malay, sometimes I question myself where I fit in 'literarily'. My parents are both immigrants from different countries. They met in Sabah, a state in East Malaysia on the island of Borneo. Dark-skinned, tall and handsome my father surely had attracted many women wherever he went during his youthful days. But his eyes were fixed only on the ravishing lady whose skin was as fair as the ripe yellow *langsat*. The olive skin tones were further adorned with slightly slanted eyes, accentuating her demure appearance to onlookers. Those little eyes of my mother's must have captivated my father's attention. They must have fallen in love right that instant. There and then! My father's foreign accent must have added another pull factor that my mother, without realizing, was instantly drawn to the man, soon to be her husband within a short period of just two months after their first meeting. Sabah is also one of the important habitats of the orangutans and home to Mount Kinabalu, possibly the highest mountain in the Malay Archipelago. But I don't know any Sabahan tales of heroism apart from the legend of Mount Kinabalu which was once guarded by a huge dragon. I was more exposed to Western literature as I was a student of English Literature at one of the public universities in Malaysia. While studying English Literature at bachelor's and master's levels, it had always kept me wondering if I would ever have the opportunity to study Malay Literature. Essentially I knew tales such as Hang Tuah, Hang Jebat and Hang Nadim only because they are famous and there have been efforts in reviving them especially through cinematic expressions. A prominent Malaysian poet-scholar, Wong Phui Nam, says that: "a classical text such as *Sejarah Melayu*, a text that came down from the original ethnic core, should be recognised and taught as a founding document of our nation (or nation-to-be) in schools in the country" (In Quayum & Manaf 2009, p. 58). *Sulalat al-Salatin* is widely translated as *Sejarah Melayu* following John Leyden's first English translation, *Malay Annals* in 1821. But he also questions the rationale of the distinction between National Literature and sectional literature. In the Malaysian literary context, works written in the Malay language can be considered as National Literature whilst other works in different languages fall under the category of sectional literature. The use of Malay language is then seen as the deciding factor to determine the nationalistic features in one's works.

### Fictocriticism 3

How funny it is that the Malay language does not have its own word for 'nation' according to *Kamus Dewan*, the most authoritative Malay dictionary! It still uses the word but in its derivatives such as *nasional*, *nasionalis*, *nasionalisasi*, *nasionalisir*, *nasionalisme*, and *nasionalistik*. The five terms: *nasional*, *nasionalis*, *nasionalisasi*, *nasionalisme*, and *nasionalistik* may correspond, respectively, to the English terms: 'national', 'nationalist', 'nationalization', 'nationalism' and 'nationalistic'. The word, *nasionalisir* is synonymous with *nasionalisasi* which means 'nationalization'. In *Kamus Dewan*, *nasional* is defined as 'related to race' (Baharom, 2005, p. 1072). Thus, in the Malay vocabulary, 'nation' corresponds to race. Such conflation is rather problematic to me. Can we then use them interchangeably? So if someone is a racist, does it mean he is also a nationalist? Looking at it in this perspective, is therefore the reason why the concept of 'race' predominantly defines who a Malaysian is. It doesn't begin with the 'nation' but rather the starting point is the 'race'. I noticed that you ticked 'others' then wrote Sabahan in the race section when you filled out the form. Aren't all Sabahans *bumiputera*? If they are *bumiputera*, aren't they Malays, too? Ashraf, my roommate at uni once asked me as he was curious as to why I did not declare myself a Malay. I look very Malay and I speak the Malay language fluently. And I'm Muslim too. According to the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, Article 160: "Malay" means a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom and - (a) was before Merdeka Day born in the Federation or in Singapore or born of parents one of whom was born in the Federation or in Singapore, or is on that day domiciled in the Federation or in Singapore; or (b) is the issue of such a person. Thank God both of my parents were 'domiciled' and granted citizenship before I was born. But it wouldn't matter I guess because I'm Malaysian-born so that makes me Malaysian. *Bumiputera*, literally means 'son of the soil' and is used widely for the people of Sabah and Sarawak, two Malaysian states located on the island of Borneo. The Malays and Orang Asli (Aborigines) in Peninsular Malaysia are also categorized as *bumiputera*. So all Sabahans, Sarawakians, Malays and Orang Aslis are basically *bumiputera*. I could understand Ashraf's

confusion. Perhaps he was right. I reckon he was right too but only 'constitutionally' though. If not a *bumiputera*, at least I would like to see myself simply as a Malaysian.

#### Fictocriticism 4

Yesterday, I changed my timeline cover on Facebook from a self-taken picture of Wollongong Head Lighthouse to a picture of Malaysian flag with a caption: Malaysia Day – 16 September. I also added this description to the picture posted on the Facebook: "The joining together of Malaya, North Borneo, Sarawak, and Singapore to form Malaysia back in 1963 but later Singapore was expelled in 1965. Thanks Najib for making 16 September a public holiday since 2010, though the people of Malaysian Borneo have been celebrating this day since 1963. Happy 50th Malaysia Day!" Yes, it was 16 September 2013 yesterday – exactly 50 years ago a small country named Malaysia was born. I wasn't even born yet. However, many Malaysians especially the younger generation, are not aware of this significant part of our history. Some Malaysians may find it puzzling as to why Malaysia only started celebrating Malaysia Day in 2010. Why haven't we celebrated this auspicious day since 1963? A man, looked not older than 40, folded the newspaper and put it into his bag. What's the need for Malaysia Day if we have Merdeka Day every year? The man remarked, as if he wasn't satisfied with what he'd read in the paper. He was sitting next to an old Chinese lady in the train. The lady responded saying: 31 August 1957 only marks the independence of the federation of Malaya. It wasn't called Malaysia then. Not until 1963 when Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore joined the federation. The man then asked her a question: Why then only in 2010 that we started to celebrate this, why not before? The lady responded with a big smile on her face: Because Malaysian history has always been busy with the glory of the Malay sultans during the Melaka empire. Many have not realized that Sabah and Sarawak as well as Singapore, were all invited to join the formation of Malaysia by the then Federation of Malaya. They could have gone separate ways, just like what happened to Singapore. Imagine if Sabah and Sarawak merged with Brunei and Kalimantan to form a country named Borneo. Being the third largest island in the world, to form a big island nation like Australia, certainly it would have been entirely different, perhaps an interesting episode in the history of Malay Archipelago. Maybe I would never know who Hang Tuah is. Not that I don't like him as a Malay hero but I feel he is only representing one side of Malaysia – the culture and literature of the Malay community in the Malay Peninsula. Now that we're celebrating Malaysia Day yearly, perhaps it's time we celebrate other mythical and legendary heroes from the East.

#### Fictocriticism 5

I didn't learn about Malay fairytales, myths and legends from my schooling days: primary and secondary. Primary school was a big playground for me. I went to a Chinese school but I never paid any attention in my Mandarin class. I had always been the half-caste dark-skinned Chinese boy just because my mother was half Chinese. One day, some of my mates dared me to 'race' eating to see who would be the fastest to finish off the noodles in the bowl using chopsticks. I didn't win. Of course, I was only quarter Chinese. Only pure Chinese would be able to finish his meal quickly using chopsticks, that's what they said. Then I entered a boarding school but my friends were no longer Chinese. They were all Malays. Most of them came from the peninsula as their parents were either teachers or in the army stationed in Sabah for a few years. The peninsula refers to Peninsular Malaysia or Malay Peninsula (also known as West Malaysia). It is formerly called Malaya or Tanah Melayu (the 'Malay land') before 1957 when it was a British colony. I entered the school with a poor command of Malay language. To them, I was the 'Chinese' boy who was just lucky to be able to enter the prestigious Malay school. I was even called the 'infidel Malay'. Maybe they only accepted me because I was excellent in English and Mathematics. To top it all, the English teacher was Chinese. So there was a bit of connection there. Oh yes, I was a teacher's pet. Then I befriended a Malay boy from Melaka. His name was Iskandar. We became good buddies though we didn't stay in the same dormitory. But we were in the same class and we sat next to each other even during the prep hours after classes. He often laughed at the way I spoke Malay. He said I had a funny accent. I usually imitated the way he spoke, because I thought I wouldn't sound so funny if I did. We taught each other languages. He taught me proper Malay language and I helped him with his English. How do you become good at English? Do you speak English at home? I smiled. No. I speak bits of many languages all at once. In a sentence, I used words from languages spoken by my parents. He looked confused. My father is Filipino-Spanish and my mother is Bruneian-Chinese. He stared in disbelief. So I speak bits of Tagalog, Spanish, Hokkien-Mandarin and Malay-Bruneian in my daily conversations. His jaw dropped. You're kidding, right? What language do they use when talking to one another? A blob of red chili sauce dribbled down my freshly-washed white uniform. They simply use Sabahan dialect. He was quiet for a while as he handed me a tissue. Thanks! We both had chicken burgers in the school canteen that day. Our conversation was cut short when the school bell rang. It was a bit cloudy that day and I was wondering if we could play tennis later in the afternoon.

## Results and Discussion

In the preceding section, the five parts of fictocriticism, the sequence of narration may not adhere to the linear progression of events. However, they are all bound in a 'plot' centering upon the notions of identity and race aimed at probing deeper into the notion of nation. The plot is an essential element in the fictocriticisms. Each fictocriticism has its own 'main event or theme' tackling issues from myth, culture, history, literature, or politics. All fictocriticisms follow various themes and events to achieve the narration's 'unity of action.' According to Abrams and Harpham (2012), "[a] plot is commonly said to have unity of action (or to be 'an artistic whole') if the reader or auditor apprehends it as a complete and ordered structure of actions, directed toward the intended effect, in which none of the prominent parts, or incidents, is nonfunctional" (p. 295). Though all fictocriticisms are in an apparently 'disorderly' pattern, they are 'directed toward the intended effect,' that is, to achieve the 'artistic whole' of the narrative. The 'shuffling' of the fictocriticisms has resulted in averting the 'monotonous linearity' of the autobiographical-like voice of the narrator.

In **Fictocriticism 1**, the narrator's reminiscence of his childhood heroes is linked to the national theme. The nation is viewed concerning the concept of heroism. Though fictocriticism concerns the narrator's childhood, it does not begin with the unfolding events of the narrator's childhood. This fictocriticism begins with a question of what a nation is. The narrator's personal view of the nation is expressed with the support of academic perspectives.

Further, the 'disorderly' structure of events or episodes in the narration may function to 'disguise' cohesive personally critical views on the idea of being the 'other.' Hence, in search of the 'self,' the narrator is consciously or not reversibly projecting the idea of being the 'other.' In the next fictocriticism, being the other *Bumiputera* who comes from Sabah, the narrator realizes that he knows little about his ethnic mythology: "... I do not know any Sabahan tales of heroism apart from the legend of Mount Kinabalu which was once guarded by a huge dragon" (**Fictocriticism 2**). In this sense, the narrator is 'forced' to accept Malay mythical tales like *Tuah* and *Nadim* as part of his cultural heritage. The narrator's diverse ethnic background complicates his search for the 'self.' In this light, the narrator's position as the 'self' is now reversed to being the 'other.' Hence, the narrator's question of his own 'self' may trigger a more significant issue of cultural affiliation and identity. The myth that does not belong to the Sabahan ethnicity can be seen as an affirmative appropriation of the notion of nation. The narrator challenges the idea of what it means to be Malaysian.

Images of mythical Malay heroes such as *Hang Nadim* and *Hang Tuah* are from the 'center.' However, they are 'affirmatively appropriated' by the narrator as the 'other' from the 'margin.' The fictocritical viewpoints complement the inquisitive and evaluative voice of the narrator in using mythical, literary, and personal stories, allowing for the imagining of the nation. Borrowing Anderson's (2006) concept of 'imagined communities,' there lies a deep horizontal comradeship' (Anderson, 2006, p. 7) corresponding to the 'national ideology' needed for a new national narrative of the 'story of a nation.' The mythical stories of *Tuah* and *Nadim* are the cases in point. Both tales can be regarded as Malaysia's 'story of the nation.' Rewriting these myths creates new national narratives where the rewriting may reinterpret, appropriate, or offer new ways of looking at how traditions can help shape the national ideology and identity.

Further, the narrator points to the problem of the conflation of the concepts of 'nation' and 'race' in Malay vocabulary in **Fictocriticism 3**. The 'nation' is defined as having a relation to 'race.' The narrator views this as problematic as he does not want to be labeled 'racist' if he is being 'nationalistic' or a 'nationalist': "So if someone is a racist, does it mean he is also a nationalist?" Being a native of Sabah, the narrator is 'constitutionally' defined as a *Bumiputera*, thus putting him in the position of the 'natives' along with the Malays and Orang Asli. In a recent development of the dictionary

entry for the term(s) related to 'nation,' the new Malay dictionary, *Kamus Dewan Perdana* (2021), has a different emphasis on the definition of the term *nasional* (national). It is defined as follows: 1) related to a country as a whole and not any part of it or any other country (berkaitan dgn negara secara keseluruhan dan bukannya mana-mana bahagian daripadanya ataupun negara lain), and 2) characterized as being nationalistic as one's own race and country as its attributes (bersifat kebangsaan dgn bangsa dan negara sendiri sbg cirinya) (p. 1521). In the previous Malay dictionary, *Kamus Dewan* (2005), the term '*nasional*' is defined in a simpler definition: related to race and nationalism (berkaitan dgn bangsa, kebangsaan) (p. 1072). *Kamus Dewan Perdana*, the most recent Malay dictionary, is undoubtedly the latest edition with more than 120,000 entries and subentries, surpassing the former one, *Kamus Dewan*; thus, it is imperative to consult this most updated reference. Though the term *bangsa* (race) is still used in the new Malay dictionary, there is an apparent shift in the definition where the emphasis is now more focused on *negara* (country). This may look like a small change; however, it shows important progress in understanding the concept of 'nation.' Nevertheless, both dictionaries still need to have an entry on the term 'nation' except its derivatives, as pointed out in *Fictocriticism 3*.

In addition, the narrator in *Fictocriticism 3* claims that a Malaysian is, first and foremost, defined by 'race.' It means that a Malaysian citizen identifies himself or herself as a Malay, Indian, Chinese, Bajau, Orang Asli, Iban, or any other ethnic group, and then only will he or she be identified as a Malaysian. The current Malaysian political scenario is a case in point where race or ethnicity characterizes the political parties in Malaysia. The Barisan Nasional (National Front) Coalition's website lists 13 component parties that make up the coalition. The three major component parties well-known to Malaysians are the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). These major component parties are race-based, as indicated respectively by their names. It is common knowledge in Malaysia that a Chinese is a member of MCA but not UMNO or MIC.

Similarly, an Indian is a member of MIC, and a Malay is a member of UMNO, though all claim to be members of Barisan Nasional. Thus, the myth tinged with narratives of the self and others in relation to ethnicity offers a new way of looking at Malaysian identity. In Malaysia, what it means to be Malaysian has perhaps been defined through its multiculturalism, but Malay as the dominant ethnic group 'imposing' upon others may further complicate the construction of a Malaysian identity.

In *Fictocriticism 4*, the narrator hints at the idea of 'history and cultural appropriation' spoken through the old Chinese lady who says: "...Malaysian history has always been busy with the glory of the Malay sultans during the Melaka empire." This is a criticism against the emphasis placed on the history of Malaya, which is regarded as 'lopsided.' It is lopsided in the sense that Malaysian history is predominantly made up of the narratives of the Malays. The case of the glorification of Melaka is constantly repeated throughout the history of Malaysia. Another example is the sarcastic tone of the narrator in showing his appreciation of the long overdue celebration of Malaysia Day: "Happy 50th Malaysia Day!" Yes, it was 16 September 2013 yesterday – precisely 50 years ago, a small country named Malaysia was born." Malaysia as a nation turned 60 years old in 2023. Only the Malay Peninsula (formerly known as Malaya) in 2023 is 66 years old since its independence in 1957. Before 1963, there was no Malaysia.

Furthermore, the feeling of 'historically and culturally inappropriate' is also expressed in *Fictocriticism 5*. The narrator, a Sabahan from a diverse ethnic background, feels excluded when mingling with the Malays: "I entered the school with a poor command of Malay language. To them, I was the 'Chinese' boy who was just lucky to be able to enter the prestigious Malay school. I was even called the 'infidel Malay.'" The narrator is now the 'other' despite being a *Bumiputera*: "I had always been the half-caste dark-skinned Chinese boy just because my mother was half Chinese"



(Fictocriticism 5).

The above fictocriticisms may have opened up the idea of the need to realize nationhood through rewriting the myth, thus lending support to ‘anticolonial resistance’ (Patke, 2013, p. 54) with the implication that there exists a need for ‘racial purity’ of the Malay in the construction of Malaysian identity and Malaysia as a nation. Further, this may also perpetuate the idea of the need to privilege the Malays as the ‘mainstream’ race. Such assumptions parallel the ‘national story’ that upholds the rights of the Malays, as observed by Joel S. Kahn (2006, p. xv):

The national story of an indigenous race (the Malays) formed in traditional society of courts and kampung, disadvantaged and marginalized by the twin forces of colonialism and large-scale foreign immigration, and rescued by a post-colonial state guaranteeing Malay rights suppresses the role of other Malaysians – Chinese and Indians, peoples perhaps more deserving of the indigenous label like the Orang Asli on the peninsula, various indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak, women and others – in the making of modern Malaysia.

The use of fictocriticism further helps explore how myth can be exploited to ‘expand’ the notion of nation as seen in the relationship between the self and other. Through the process of rewriting the myth, alternating between the fictional and the critical or personal, the fictocritical genre used here serves as a tool to speak for the cultural politics of the center and the marginal. In asserting the personal in the narrative, the aim here is responding to the dichotomy of ‘self’ versus ‘other’. The issue of marginality is addressed through what Stephen Muecke calls an ‘affirmative appropriation’ – a form of a fusion to ‘dialogue respectfully across cultural boundaries’ (Muecke, 2005, p. 161)—speaking through the narrator’s voice as a Sabahan ethnic (being considered as not ‘pure’ Malay), the ‘self’ is displaced, turning into the ‘other’. This is the case of the ‘self’ as being the ‘other’ in the context of ethnicity. Most narrators in the above fictocriticisms seem well-versed in Malay myths, especially tales concerning Hang Tuah and Hang Nadim. The narrator’s knowledge of these well-known Malay myths perpetuates the idea of the narrator being the ‘self’, thus, ‘aligning’ himself with the other, especially the Malays, who are expected to know his culture well. The narrator’s search for the ‘self’ is deeply entrenched in his understanding of his culture.

## Conclusion

Nation-building in Malaysia can be seen as problematic due to its particularly politicized issues of ethnicity that may discourage racial unity in modern Malaysia. Ali (2015, p. 1) stated that “ethnic differences exist, which often manifest in stereotypes, discriminations, tensions and conflicts that complicate the process of building national unity.” Stereotypes such as Malays are the ‘masters of the land’ while Chinese and Indians are *pendatang* (immigrants) are deemed as racial discrimination, thus preventing the realization of Bangsa Malaysia (Malaysian race). The dreams of a truly united Malaysia can be realized through the arts, not necessarily via history subject, and in this case, by creating the ‘story of a nation’ as shown above. Fictocriticism can then be concluded as being able to occupy the middle ground or ‘liminality’ of narratives resulting in the participation in the ‘space between’ (Kerr & Nettelback, 1998) – narrating the ‘imagined nation’ of Malaysia where Malays and non-Malays are harmoniously united. Fictocriticism, which features the creative and critical voices of the ‘other’ Malay, can be seen as a way of participating ‘in the mainstream’ (Muecke, 2005, p. 157). This form of expression is hoped to ignite a sense of togetherness in further understanding nationalism in 21st-century Malaysia.

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