B. Parnickel
The relations between ethnic groups in Malaysia and their reflection in contemporary Malay prose

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THE RELATIONS BETWEEN ETHNIC GROUPS IN MALAYSIA AND THEIR REFLECTION IN CONTEMPORARY MALAY PROSE

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The rise in 1957 of the independent Federation of Malaya, which after the incorporation of a number of new territories in 1963 was called the Federation of Malaysia, necessarily accentuated the problem of the relations between the original inhabitants of the young state, the Malays (46.8 %), and the immigrants who settled there mainly at the end of last century and the first decades of the present one, i.e. the Chinese (34.1 %), the Indians (9 %) and other less important ethnic groups.

Specialists from various backgrounds are interested in these relations, especially in those between the Malay and Chinese communities, which have led to such serious crises as Singapore's defection from the Federation in 1965 and the bloody clashes between the Malay and Chinese populations of Kuala Lumpur on May 13th, 1969. In the Soviet literature more specifically problems like discrimination with regard to the Chinese and Indians in the Malaysian legislation on citizenship and the constitutionally privileged position of the Malays (cf. e.g. Gerasimov 1969: 219, 221, 227-9, 251; Rjabova 1972: 8-14), the educational policy which for many years has aimed at reduction of the number of Chinese schools and their transformation into so-called national ones (cf. Zhuravleva 1960: 107; Zherebilov 1962: 166-7), and the enforced use of Malay among adult speakers of another language (cf. Ivert 1971)

B. PARNICKEL is a graduate from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations and is at present attached to the A. M. Gorky Institute of World Literature, USSR Academy of Science. His main field of interest is the history of Malay literature. He regards as his most important publications his Russian-language editions of R. O. Winstedt's History of Classical Malay Literature, Moscow 1966, and of Hikayat Sang Boma (translated by the late L. A. Meerwarth), Moscow 1973. Mr. Parnickel's address is USSR, 125475, Moscow, A-475, Dybenko St. 14-1-67.
are dealt with. The approach of the Malaysians themselves in solving the national problem of their country is of course also very interesting in this respect.

In a recently published article by V. V. Gordeev, a survey is given of a series of studies by Malaysian and Singapore authors on the relations between the different Malaysian communities. However, in connection with changes in the Malaysian constitution in 1971, which forbade (on pain of imprisonment!) public discussions on any question relating to the national problem, the author rightly observes that, "it can hardly be expected that works of national authors containing analyses of the state and the development of the national problem in contemporary Malaysia will be published in the near future" (Gordeev 1974: 186-7).

In these circumstances it will be important to analyse literary products which to a certain degree touch upon the theme that interests us. Explicit statements — either directly by the authors or indirectly through the mouths of their heroes — are relatively rare under the present conditions, and are of little special interest. This is true even of the transparent parables which the greatest Malaysian writer, Shahnnon Ahmad, resorts to in his story Menteri (Shahnnon Ahmad 1967), which has provoked the criticism that it aroused national dissension and chauvinism (cf. Yahya Ismail 1968: 91; Skinner 1969). What interests us especially are the "simple", "accidental" literary products in which Malay and Chinese characters representing the two most numerous Malaysian communities in one way or the other act, meet or conflict with each other. By analyzing their mutual relations we will gain an insight into how the Malaysians themselves — or at least a sufficiently representative section of the total intelligentsia, the writers — look upon the relations between the ethnic groups, and see how they envisage a solution to the ethnic differences. Having no knowledge of Chinese, the present author is forced in his search for keys to the problem under discussion to confine himself to Malay literature, especially to the Malay short story. Having made this choice, it may be expected that it will be in the first place the Malay point of view that will be illustrated, since it is mainly Malay writers who occupy themselves with Malay literature, although according to the prognosis of Malay cultural experts, in the near future Malay will have to become the medium of Chinese and Tamil writers as well.

As regards the short story, the most popular genre in modern Malay literature, it is extremely suitable for illustrating the problem we are con-
cerned with, since on the one hand it represents a certain generalization of reality, while on the other it cannot afford to be too verbose or moralizing, and as a rule is concentrated on the description of a single event in someone's life.

After analyzing a sufficient number of these stories or events and clarifying the roles played by the representatives of each the two communities, we will thus be able to determine the various models of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. Especially the sloppiness and a certain superficiality which characterize some of the stories examined by us will allow us to distinguish the stereotypes and clichés with which relations between the Malays and their fellow-citizens, the Chinese, are described.

In analyzing the "social structure of the literary world" in the short stories chosen, we shall first try to establish in which cases the Chinese and Malay characters in these stories appear jointly as a kind of "we" — the universal psychological form of group consciousness — and in which cases these characters are opposed to each other (in a "we" versus "they" relationship). Such an analysis with a deliberate ethnosophiological aim proves to be close in many respects to an analysis of the narrative structure of a literary text. It is no coincidence that the literary scholar Yu. M. Lotman as a matter of course uses the same categories as ethno-psychologists or ethno-sociologists when giving examples of the reversibility of plots, viz.: "one of 'us' who has crossed the border... penetrates among 'them', or one of 'them' penetrates among 'us'" (Lotman 1970: 289). In this connection Lotman introduces the notion of "plotless textual structure" — being the division of the world of a literary product into two different, hostile, mutually opposed fields (spheres) — and the notion of "inception of the plot" (event) as the crossing of that prohibiting border which is set by a "plotless structure" (Lotman 1970: 286-9). These notions appear to be most conducive to an understanding of the ethnosophological content of the stories in question.

It stands to reason that a full description will also require attention for those examples of Malay-Chinese contacts which occur only incidentally and which do not represent the event which sets the plot into motion in the relevant stories.

I investigated about 400 stories by Malay authors published during the last 15 years in the journals Dewan Sastra, Dewan Masyarakat, and Dewan Bahasa, in Mingguan Malaysia — the Sunday issue of the newspaper Utusan Malaysia —, in the anthologies Cherita Pendek DPB, Mekar dan Segar, Pertentangan and Suara Semusim, and in the
collections of short stories by Keris Mas, Usman Awang, A. Samad Said, Kassim Ahmad, Anis Sabirin, S. Othman Kelantan, Ibrahim Omar, Harun Aminurrashid and Yahya Samah. Among these I found 42 stories in which there is question in one way or another of relations between representatives of the two largest sections of the Malaysian population. After a first classification of these latter stories according to the type of relations described or mentioned in them, it turned out that there are 8 stories with straightforward conflict situations, 20 about ambivalent erotic or love relations and, finally, 14 which contain some information on friendly or, at worst, neutral relations between representatives of the two communities. Let us first concentrate our attention on the “conflictual” group of stories. In the earliest of these stories, ‘Tugas’ [Duty], by Usman Awang, the main collision is purely social. Indeed, the ordinary warning of the policeman to the car-owner who has committed an offence seems to become an event not because the former is a Malay and the latter a Chinese, but because the Chinese is a rich businessman and besides a personal acquaintance of the head of the police department, whereas the Malay is a minor official worried about keeping his job. And does not the whole chorus of eye-witnesses — the majority of them lower-middle-class Chinese — support the policeman who plucked up the courage to put the self-conceited wealthy man in his place?

On the other hand, the attempted murder by the Malay sailor Mat London (in Wijaya Mala’s story by the same title, ‘Mat London’) of his old friend Baba is provoked purely by the fact that in Mat’s troubled mind no one other than the non-Malay Baba appears as a traitor, the helper of their white captain, and a subconscious challenge to Mat’s manliness.

The central character in S. Othman Kelantan’s story ‘Dedalu’ [Epiphytes], Pak Kasran, is the founder and permanent head of the village of Belukar Nangka, which is visited more and more often by the Chinese merchant Lee Tong Ho and the Indian trader Mohandar Singh with their goods. Seduced by the promised share in the profits, Pak Kasran helps the foreigners with their households to strengthen their position in Belukar Nangka, and by this very act sets in motion a series of events which rapidly aggravate the situation of his own family. There is not the least difficulty in interpreting the story sociologically: the inhabitants of Belukar Nangka (“we”) personify a natural economy, whereas the Chinese and Indian appear as the bearers of a monetary commodity economy; the characters Lee Tong Ho and Mohandar Singh
are therefore no more than stereotypes of the greedy foreign money-grubbers who stick only to "their own" people and are absolutely indifferent to the interests of the local population.

The story 'Perjuangan' [Struggle] by S. Othman Kelantan is in its own way also interesting. Its hero leaves the ranks of the partisan National Liberation Army, which up to this day is still active in the Malay provinces of southern Thailand, and makes his way to the city of his birth. There are no active Chinese characters in the story, but it is easy to guess who are the foreigners by whose side the hero has fought for so many years. It can hardly be considered a coincidence that the hero's return does not eventuate: having been enticed into the sphere of the partisan army, which was Chinese in its membership, by deceit fifteen years previously, he is deceived again when he peers through the window of the house where he was born: never realizing that the man he sees next to his wife is none other than his own brother, he goes away.

In the case of Affandi Hassan's story 'Orang Luar' [The Outsider] one can hardly see any connection with the subject with which we are concerned. The hero of the story, the young administrator Mustakim, makes his way with rolled-up sleeves. He inspires the rebellious Malay squatters to respect the law, beats off the assaults of the deputy member of parliament and political demagogue, Syed Dollah, and politely holds his own in the discussion with the minister who advises him to better heed the voice of public opinion. Only at the end of the story do we learn that practically all of Mustakim's opponents — the poor squatters as well as their ardent defender Syed Dollah — are men of straw, puppets of the Chinese entrepreneurs. Thus the "non-antagonistic" differences among "our own" people suddenly turn out to be differences between "us" and "them", who have intruded into "our" territory catastrophically deeply.

Other things are said in a similarly veiled way at the end of Shahnon Ahmad's story 'Salam Sekeluarga' [Greetings from the Whole Family]. With extraordinary liveliness and warm humor the author tells of a distant and poor Malay village; the troubles, peculiarities, ordinary thoughts and amusements of the narrator's family come alive and materialize before the eyes of the reader, captivating in their authenticity. This uncomplicated, and at the same time stagnant life, in rhythm with the rural calendar, is suddenly interrupted by hasty and rather ineffectual preparations for an armed struggle — against whom and for what reason is unknown.
Then, from the other side of a bottomless ravine, sound the final words: "Lead father to the last road! Lead mother to the last road!"
Two years later the author explained that the story had been inspired by the confused reports of the Malay-Chinese clashes of May 1969 which reached Australia, where Shahnon Ahmad had been studying at the time (Shahnon Ahmad 1972: 65).

The theme of the Malay-Chinese slaughter — this time already in the stream of sympathetic recollection by the narrator — is also encountered in Shahnon Ahmad's brilliant story 'Kalau Ibu naik Takah Tiga' [When Mother Goes Up to the Third Step]. It will not be clear to everybody which "faithless people" the narrator's father is crushing at the foot of Mount Selambau, or for what holy war he is equipped by his wife, the narrator's mother, whose coming funeral the story describes. But the author's comments do not leave any doubt: the story is about a village in the State of Kedah, near the town of Gurun, where Malay-Chinese clashes took place at the end of the 1940's.4

And finally, we have Shahnon Ahmad's story 'Di Tengah Keluarga' [In the Midst of the Family], which is inimitable in its naturalness. It is the story of the complicated relations between a son and his parents, which are finally broken off. This happens when the son, inspired by new humanistic ideas and knowing that his father dreams of a grandson, someone to continue the family line, adopts a Chinese boy. The foreign body is bitterly and indignantly rejected by "our" social organism, even though in this case it is only the body of a year-old child.

Summarizing, it is obvious that in the majority of the stories discussed above the Chinese are depicted as a rival group (cf. I. Kon 1966: 188, 198), the more dangerous when the Malays themselves appear to be their actual helpers and direct agents ('Perjuangan', 'Orang Luar', 'Di Tengah Keluarga'). It should be remarked, however, that in only two stories do we come across the widespread S.E. Asian stereotype of the Chinese as a wealthy, influential, ruthless bourgeois,5 while in one other story the Chinese characters are understood to be of this type. But in the other stories the Chinese are opposed to the Malay simply as an ethnic group, and as such more than anything else. It is noteworthy that the "plotless structure" of six of the stories investigated is built on a pronounced division into "our" and "their" spheres of influence, while in all these stories the Chinese — alone or with the aid of those Malays who have linked their fate with them — appear as those who trespass over the border between the respective spheres of influence, which again is characteristic for rival ethnic groups.
In the 20 stories of the second and most numerous group, mention is made 14 times of a relation between a Malay man and a Chinese girl, and 6 times between a Chinese man and a Malay girl. In 9 stories the Chinese girl is the incarnation of the sensual principle, while in all these stories, with one exception — 'Budi' [Kindness] by Usman Awang — she intentionally or unintentionally leads the Malay man astray and even openly seduces him. Thus Che' Shukur, a newly appointed member of the People's Representative Council in Usman Awang's story 'Kacang dan Kulitnya' [The Peanut and its Shell], decides to look for a new wife after having danced with a charming young Chinese girl at an evening party. A similar situation is described, in fact, in Anis Sabirin's story 'Dia Telah Membunuh Bapanya' [The Parricide], in which the hero's father, having left his wife and small child, marries his Chinese girlfriend.

We have no reason to suspect the coquettish second-year student Mimi in Ismail Haji Adnan's story 'Insaf' [Realization] of dishonourable intentions, but the fact remains that her pretty little face, her perfect figure and her inimitable way of singing "Honey Come Back" nearly make the student Hamid forget his selfless fiancee, the modest village teacher Tinah.

The hero of Hamdan Yahya's humorous story 'Saya kenal Nietzsche' [I know Nietzsche] nearly finds himself in the same situation; he is indelibly impressed not only by the feminine charms and professional skills of the hairdresser Mei Ling, but also by her academic learning, which in the end results in an astronomical bill for her services. In Keris Mas's story 'Bilik Belakang' [Back-room] we see how the young Malay bureaucrat Che' Yusof during Ramadan indulges behind his wife's back in drinking in the company of a European civil servant, a Chinese businessman and a pretty young, ever-smiling Chinese girl, who gives generous signs of attention to him as well as, incidentally, to his boon companions.

In another story by the same author, 'Runtoh' [The Fall], Hashim, a public figure, compromises himself by dividing his free time between his wife, who has lost her love and respect for him, and a certain Nancy, the willing and loving mistress of a wealthy Chinese; thus the latter is paying in advance for Hashim's future services, as it were.

The seduction of Aidil, a young and responsible official in one of the Malaysian ministries, is the subject of Yahya Samah's story 'Linda di tengah Gelanggang' [Linda in the Arena]. Finding himself in the bedroom with the voluptuous Chinese girl Linda, the hero forgets
everything except his official duty. But Linda does not forget her business, either: first and foremost she wants a document from Aidil which will allow her husband to go on undisturbedly polluting the natural surroundings of his mine, in spite of the complaints of the Malay population. Thus Linda’s principal aim comes into collision with Aidil’s principal duty, and the seductress comes to grief. In Rubaidin Siwar’s story ‘Malam Bulan Madu’ [A Honeymoon Night] loyalty — this time the conjugal fidelity of a newly-married Malay — is once more put to the test. His seductress, the young and attractive Janet Leong, is forced to walk the streets to guarantee her family some kind of a living and to earn the necessary money for herself and her younger brother to be able to study. The really startled newly married youth succeeds only after the greatest of effort in escaping the embraces of the persistent prostitute.

As one can easily see, there is as before a distinct duality in the portrayal of the world. The Malays yielding to the temptation thus pass forever to the opposite pole and fuse with it, which is tantamount to their moral ruin. The characters who withstand the temptation always return to “their own” Malay world. If we base ourselves on the supposition that the system of ideas here is common to a considerable number of the stories investigated, we may conjecture that the transition of a Chinese girl to the “Malay world” (“the world of morality”, “the world of spiritual life”) and her organic fusion with it will be evaluated in the most positive terms. And indeed, the Malay-Chinese marriages which crown the stories ‘Anak Angkat Panghulu Majid’ [Panghulu Majid’s Adopted Child] by Khalid bin Abbas and ‘Secoret Kesah Dharurat’ [An Emergency Story] by Buang Alias Ibrahim appear to be quite happy. And in Agus Salim’s story ‘Pertahanan Terakhir’ [The Last Defence], the eldest daughter of the conservative bourgeois Baba Goh also marries a Malay, which arouses the ill-concealed sympathy of Baba Goh’s second daughter, Mi Lan, as well. Of course, the Chinese brides all have to adopt Islam, this being a formal but essential act in view of the fact that — as Yu. V. Maretin rightly observes — in South-East Asia religion is a community-building factor for the majority of the members of a particular persuasion (Maretin 1972: 41-2). Obstacles are only put in the heroes’ way towards unification by the bride’s relatives and fellow-countrymen (‘Pertahanan Terakhir’). As for the bridegroom’s relatives, they always receive the young woman in their midst with open arms.

The differences in the perception of the Malay and Chinese worlds
appear in an especially clear light if one compares the above-mentioned stories by Rubaidin Siwar and Buang Alias Ibrahim. When the former's hero describes the Chinese quarter, everything makes him uneasy and strikes him unpleasantly: the dark back-streets, the sinister, closely crowded houses, and the stinking ponds and ditches filled with muddy, stagnant water. The hero's disgust grows as Janet's environment unfolds before him: her filthy grandmother who casts malicious glances at him, the wretched opium smoker who turns out to be her grandfather — "his time had come long ago to depart for the other world and no longer burden the earth with his presence" — and Janet's rickets-stricken brother clinging to the naked breast of his pock-marked mother while chewing the last rice remnants. The chaste meetings of Buang Alias Ibrahim's hero with his future wife Kim Lee, on the other hand, take place under a blue sky, with little clouds passing over the lovers' heads, and a light breeze refreshing them and sending the luxuriant verdure around them rustling (note the opposition of "own" village versus "foreign" city). And when she is accepted into the Malay family, Kim Lee finds a common language in which to communicate with her mother-in-law with the same ease with which she has found one with her husband ("though there was much that separated us — religion, habits, culture and origin — this did not stand in the way of our feelings. Obeying the call of our youth, we enfolded each other in our hearts, which had long been thirsting with love." "My mother loved her with all her heart, and Kim for her part became very fond of my mother and was filled with a profound respect towards her."). In these contrasts one cannot but notice the vestiges of an ethnocentric consciousness, which perceives the own group and its characteristics as the only moral, natural and perfect ones, as opposed to the characteristics of every other group (cf. Obrebski 1936).

A somewhat different relation to "their" world is found in the case of Hashim, the hero of Hassan Ali's story 'Kapalnya dibakar' [Her Ship was Burnt]. He does not feel any horror or disgust on entering the house of Siew Fong, who, incidentally, has been spared the presence of relatives by the author, but watches with interest the ceremonies and customs observed by his beloved.

For Hashim, too, however, it is a foregone conclusion that his future wife will have to abandon the culture she has inherited from her parents and adopt the "simple" and "natural" Muslim religion. But in vain does Siew Fong burn a little paper ship symbolizing her dream of a return to the land of her forefathers which she cherished together with
her former sweetheart Kim Wa. Inertness prevents her from entering the hospitably opened gates to the Malay world — and finally she marries a Chinese.

The only story which does not deal with the integration of a Malay man into the Chinese world or with the assimilation of his Chinese love is Kassim Ahmad's 'Percintaan di Kuala Lumpur' [A Love Affair in Kuala Lumpur]. The hero of the story, the well-educated Malay Abdul Rahim, is a champion of genuine mutual understanding between the Malaysian communities. Finding full sympathy in the chaste and sensitive Kim Lian, who loves him passionately, he hopes to raise a family with her — as the nucleus and prototype of the new Malaysian nation. The spiritual closeness of the two lovers only accentuates their freedom from their surroundings (we do not receive any information on Abdul Rahim's family, while Kim Lian's relatives are mentioned only once, namely in connection with her resolution to break with them in order to be able to follow her lover). Abdul Rahim calls his love by her Chinese name, Lian, which he jokingly interprets as a shortened form of the Malay name Kamalian. Their common language — they have to take refuge in English as a language they both share — and their neutral meeting-places — a restaurant or the street (from which they are separated only by the body of Abdul Rahim's car) — all this bears witness to the indefiniteness and homelessness of the heroes.

We are convinced by all this that we are dealing with a new kind of plot here: having crossed the borders of their respective worlds, the heroes do not return in a hurry, holding on to something of their own worlds, but try to linger on in the no-man's-land along the border and make it their own. The given rigid structure of the text decidedly precludes excessively active heroes who ignore the special border-area rules. The lovers are pursued by two unknown Chinese and receive anonymous threatening letters, Abdul Rahim is blackmailed in a restaurant by a Malay he has never seen before, and finally — a few days before their marriage — he is killed by a young Chinese, a tool in the hands of unknown malefactors, and Kim Lian commits suicide by taking poison.

Thus 'Percintaan di Kuala Lumpur' confirms the impression that in a Malay story the love of a Malay for a Chinese woman can only have a happy (matrimonial) ending if the object of his feelings is prepared to adopt Islam and become assimilated to the Malay world. Not much good usually comes of a Chinese man showing an interest in a Malay girl, either. A. Samad Said's story 'Sebuah Bilek' [A Ward] describes
the unsuccessful flirtation of the middle-aged married assistant Luan with the nurse Khatijah. Aminah, the heroine of Harun Aminurrashid's story 'Istri Muda' [The Young Wife], is found killed, and among those arrested on suspicion of the murder is Aminah's lover, a Chinese who had promised to marry her and to adopt Islam. In Awang Had Salleh's story 'Kesah Perasaan-ku' [The Story of my Feelings] the "libertine artist" Robert (a baptized Chinese) abandons Salmah, who is expecting a child by him, after which she commits suicide. Vain hopes stir the heart of executive Lim (in Hashima's story 'Munshi'): coming as a guest to the house of his charming teacher Che’ Zarina, he finds out that the initiator of his invitation has been, in fact, Che’ Zarina’s father, formerly fired by himself because he had felt compelled to borrow money right and left in his efforts to give his daughter a good education. In Sarah Rahim’s story ‘Ketandusan’ [The Ruin], finally, we see the adolescent Wong Kiew, who is passionately in love with the teacher Munira, and very lonely amid his squabbling bourgeois family, dying a senseless death. Noting in passing that the love of the son of the old conservative Baba Goh for the young Malay Norani in the above-mentioned story ‘Pertahanan Terakhir’ does contain a certain hopeful element, we can say nonetheless that the structure of the world we encounter in our stories excludes a happy ending of such mixed relations.

Analyzing the stories of this group, one can say that the same "plotless textual structure", as well as the same opposition between the Malay and Chinese communities, is retained as in the stories of the first group. Chinese women have undeniable qualities in the eyes of the Malay, which testifies to the relatively high status of the Chinese community from the Malay point of view. At the same time, the relatively low moral level of the "rival group" is the reason why Chinese girls as members of their community influence the Malays they attract in a negative way, and why only in those rare cases where the Malays succeed in overcoming the resistance of the Chinese environment and in drawing the Chinese into their own milieu, can they turn into good wives and virtuous mothers. In spite of all the conventionality of this model (even today mixed marriages between Malay men and Chinese girls are extremely rare), one cannot help noticing its one-sidedness: there only is reason to speak of the achievement of integration and the realization of matrimonial relations between two groups where the principle of mutuality is observed (cf. Lévi-Straus 1949: 79). In the meantime there is no question of mutuality in the model described: matrimonial ties between Chinese men and Malay women are not con-
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sidered at all, and the rare mixed marriages that one does find in no way resemble any synthetic form of gift exchange, but look rather like a Malay variant of the abduction of the Sabine women.

Half the stories of the third group contain the same situations that we are familiar with already. Thus in Keris Mas's story 'Banyak Anak' [A Lot of Children] a certain Tan Lian, who loves a life of ease and dubious entertainments, tries in vain to lead astray the thoughtful Hamzah, who is looking for a way of combining in one person the role of a loving son and of a wise and prudent family head. In Awam-il-Sarkam's story 'Pengintipan' [Spying] the main character, the Malay Palil, becomes a burglar with the help of a certain Tan Ah Bee, together with whom he eventually finds himself in prison. Arman Sani's story 'Mendung' [Cloud], finally, is the story of the gradual corruption of a middle-level Malay official by two villains, Ah Leong and his follower Semaun.

All three of these cases can easily be classified as new variants of the "temptation" of a Malay by a representative of the Chinese community, albeit that now it is a man who is the tempter. The stories 'Harya Melina' and 'Berkat Usaha Dari Kehendak Hati' [Thanks to Voluntary Effort] by Ibrahim Omar and 'Gadis Berbaju Kurong' [The Girl in the Long Jacket] \(^9\) by L. C. Lan are related to the familiar stories about Chinese girls adopting Islam and contracting legal marriages with Malay men. The first is about a young Chinese midwife who with the help of an old Malay woman assists a Malay mother in childbirth; the second is about a Chinese girl who has found her vocation as a teacher of Malay at a Chinese school. The story (or rather sketch) by Lan is about two girl students who personify the ideal assimilated Chinese women: both of them hardly possess any Chinese characteristics any longer save perhaps that one of them is still able to read a Chinese newspaper! The development of the plot again comes down to the heroines' leaving their own community and renouncing the attributes of their culture to promote the growth of the Malay community (albeit in the role of deliverer of Malay children), or assimilating themselves and subsequently their fellow-Chinese to the Malay culture.

More interesting is Asmal's story 'Ah Khaw Masok Syorga' [Ah Khaw Goes to Heaven], in which the same theme is presented in a different light. The elderly housewife who has granted asylum to the unemployed rickshaw-driver Ah Khaw, who also is no longer young, tries to accustom the latter to the outward forms of Malay culture and cure him of the habits which are so offensive to her — the wearing of
the light, “indecent” clothes usually affected by Malaysian Chinese, his partiality for their favourite delicacy, pork, a pipe of opium at critical moments in a person’s life, and so on. Ah Khaw gives in step by step, grumbling and sighing. On the one hand he understands that in her own way the woman wishes him well, while on the other hand he has no choice: without the landlady and her eldest son, a friend of Ah Khaw, he would long ago have been arrested by the Japanese, who are occupying Singapore and organizing raids on the Chinese. To all appearances the old woman’s secret dream is on the point of coming true and the poor heathen Ah Khaw is finally ready to become the Muslim Ahmad. The further we read on in Asmal’s story, however, the stronger an impression we get of the utter conditionality of the changes in Ah Khaw’s way of life, and of the absolute superficiality of his forthcoming conversion to the “true faith”. As a psychologist would rightly say, Ah Khaw has changed his way of life by force of circumstances, while conversion to a certain religion without understanding or feeling is a purely formal act. With regard to the plot, Ah Khaw’s never eventuating conversion to Islam cannot be considered an event, since his joining the ranks of the true believers would amount to no more than his transferal to “our area”, to which he had already been allocated. What can be considered a real event has been left out of the narrative framework: Ah Khaw’s first appearance in the family of his Malay friend, his entry into the friendly world of the Malay family out of the world in which the Japanese occupiers were master, the “world in which people were murdered” (characteristically, the sons are opposed or at least indifferent to their mother’s efforts at conversion, while the youngest son, who is the “I” of the story, even openly helps Ah Khaw to take refuge in one of his cherished habits). A second event, taking place at the end of the story, is Ah Khaw’s sudden death, which expels him again from the world in which he has succeeded in being accepted unquestioningly and in which he has come to feel “at home”.

Thus Asmal’s story belongs to the last and most interesting subgroup, comprising eight stories. Here the opposition “we” (the Malays) versus “they” (the Chinese) is eventually replaced by a kind of general, heterogeneous “we”, which is opposed to a new “they” (it is irrelevant that within this “we” group there may be special internal contradictions and frictions). In four stories a socially foreign environment has the function of this “they”. In A. Samad Said’s story ‘Di Tepi Jalan’ [By the Roadside] a small but in ethnic terms motley group of roadmen are set against a world which is certainly attractive but is closed to
them and in which people enjoy life without any notion of exhausting labour or perpetual haste.

An analogous situation is found in S. Hamisal's 'Dua Makhluk, Dua Harapan' [Two People, Two Expectations], in which two women are brought together by a common fate: both the Malay Ramlah, who has many children, and the young Chinese Ah Kim are forced to earn their living by heavy work cleaning offices. The same sort of situation is described in Amir Tan's carefully constructed story 'Tamu' [Guests]. Its hero, Meng Tat, leaves his wealthy parents and finds a new home among simple Malay people, who are clearing virgin forest. Meanwhile he does not forget his original culture: he is in the middle of organizing the celebration of the Chinese "lantern-feast" for his Malay neighbours when his parents and elder brother arrive to try in vain to get him to come back to comfortable city life. In Othman Kelantan's story 'Sisa' [The Dregs], on the other hand, a gang of juvenile outcasts on the edge of criminality, including the cowardly Chinese boy Guan Seng, are opposed to the law-abiding world of indifferent adults.

In four stories of this subgroup the second member of the opposition, which makes possible the formation of a new "we", is, as in Asmal's story, an external enemy, a foreign aggressor, a saboteur causing all Malaysian people harm. While in Asmal's story "our" territory is made up by the domestic surroundings, in Keris Mas's 'Kedai Sederet di Kampung Kami' [The Shops Stand in a Row in our Village] it appears as a kind of ideal village, in which all the conditions for harmony between the different communities are given. The Chinese here are not new-comers, but have been residents for just as long as the Malays, and, moreover, are just as poor. Original villagers who become demoralized settle on the other side — with "them" in the city — whether they be enriched Chinese or Malays who want to be near the centre of government. And at the declaration of the State of Emergency (1948-1956) the village head goes out into the woods, followed by a number of his friends — young Malays and Chinese (again an equal representation!) — to prevent the punitive units departing from the city under orders from the authorities from reaching their ("our") native village. (The English are not mentioned even once, for understandable reasons: the story was published for the first time in 1956, i.e. still in colonial Malaya.)

Brotherly relations established in the course of a year of trial are independent of time is a theme on which Othman Kelantan seems to continue. The meeting of Chinese and Malay veterans of the in-
dependence struggle in his story ‘Ibu Tidak Mati’ [Your Mother is not Dead]; their incessant laughter and jokes, which are not without eroticism, make the impression of being a hardly conscious reconstruction of an archaic ritual: a ritual symbolizing the victory of life over death (the wife of one of the companions in arms, a Malay, has died), and the inexhaustible fertility and vitality of the soil (in this case the Malay soil, being the common mother of the members of the brotherhood of combatants, who are indulging in ritual merriment at the author’s wish). The optimistic picture as drawn by Keris Mas and Othman Kelantan, however, fades somewhat when one turns to the stories of A. Samad Said, who also touches upon the theme of a Malay-Chinese community beginning to form in times of war. A. Samad’s stories ‘Perang dan Manusia’ [War and Man] and ‘Penyerahan’ [Capitulation] can be considered a kind of diptych. The “they” of the first story, the Japanese who are advancing on Singapore, are themselves left out of the picture. In the second story the aggressors enter the city, and there is no citizen who is not frightened because of the intrusion of “the foreigners” into his territory, which from now on will be confined within the insecure walls of his own house. The mixed population of Singapore, exposed to common danger, appears to feel united as never before: the bus-driver Siew Fong, hearing that his friend and colleague Sapuan has been left homeless, offers to share his lodgings with him and is most actively concerned about the fate of his near relatives; the Malay Maarof feels like a member of the family of the Muslim-Chinese who has given him refuge and of the latter’s daughter Zubaidah. But when it becomes clear that it is most dangerous in occupied Singapore to be a Chinese, or consequently even to help one or live under the same roof with one, the group-consciousness of the new community sustains deep cracks. When the Japanese appear at their door, Maarof’s wife Latifah, with tears in her eyes, almost pushes Zubaidah outside towards them, and a quarter of an hour later Maarof himself decides — seeing his children’s emaciated little faces and sensing his wife’s imploring look — not to interfere to help the girl when she is raped by a Japanese officer. In the inexorable circumstances outlined by the author, the burgeoning Malay-Chinese unity is not able to withstand the solidity test.

This brings us to the end of our survey. As we have been able to ascertain, the plotless textual structure of the majority of the stories checked by us implies a sharp demarcation between “our” (Malay)
and "their" (Chinese) spheres of activity. In 21 cases (50%) the Chinese turned out to be the bearers of a certain harmful principle, often related to wealth, relations with them bringing injury to the Malay. Crossing the border between the Malay and Chinese worlds was positively valued in six cases (14%), in which a Chinese girl entered the Malay world, breaking with her own environment and dedicating herself to serving the Malay cause. It is logical to suppose that these stories, when read by Malays, will promote a sense of Malay solidarity and encourage conservative (ethnocentric) tendencies in the Malay community.

This cannot be said of the 9 stories (21%) in which a new "we" is formed — mostly in the face of external danger or in the framework of joint labour — and the Malay characters are on equal terms with the Chinese.11

Especially those stories which from a literary point of view vary in quality, among which the stories of Asmal and A. Samid Said are the most outstanding, can be considered, as far as their conception is concerned, as the products of a new Malay-language Malaysian literature which is free from Malay nationalism and which may contribute to a further rallying of the Malaysian peoples.

NOTES

1 Shahnon Ahmad's hero, a Malay minister, is, in his dream, transferred from 1967 to 1987 and observes with horror how people with a yellow skin and flat noses (the Chinese!) are complete master in the Malaysian cities, whereas the minister's dark fellow-Malays are doomed to a life of starvation and vegetation in the wild mountains and jungles (Shahnon Ahmad 1967: 107-117).

2 Azizi Haji Abdullah's symbolic story 'Pertiwi' [Mother Earth] has been excluded from this survey, though the Malay critic Hashim Awang does not doubt that the main hero of the story is an allegoric personification of Malay nationalism, and that the lovers of his mother, killed by him together with her, are "foreigners", "elements from elsewhere", who are unlawfully exploiting the bounties of the Malay soil (see Dewan Sastra, May 1973, p. 13).

3 Baba is the common nickname for naturalized Chinese in Malaysia.

4 Personal information in a letter from Shahnon Ahmad to the author dated December 20th, 1972.

5 As W. F. Wertheim remarks (1964: 44), in traditional S.E. Asian societies trade was carried on by foreigners, above all by Chinese, "and though, in the course of time, they were admitted to or were able to make headway towards several other occupations, they have still to bear the odium attached to the trading profession by a rural society in which aristocratic and feudal values are still strong".
As Yu. M. Lotman remarks: "All kinds of obstacles are as a rule concentrated on the border and structurally are always part of it in the text" (Lotman 1970: 291).

Speaking of the psychological stereotype of a national minority which is at the same time a rival group, I. Kon remarks that, "They are not denied having intellectual faculties; on the contrary, these faculties are often exaggerated — fear of the rivals causes overestimation of their danger — but are said to be 'badly employed'; the 'rival group' is judged and accordingly proclaimed to be 'lower' morally" (I. Kon 1966: 198).

According to carefully studied Singapore data, "Marriages between Malays and Chinese are extremely rare. As a rule, they are marriages between a Chinese girl who has been brought up in a Malay family and has adopted Islam, and a Malay man" (cf. Tufanov 1967: 68-9).

*Baju kurong* (Mal.) = a type of straight women's blouse.

The narrator's humanity is the more striking since, in fact, "It is not cultural divergence which is at the root of the tensions (between the Chinese and the original inhabitants of S.E. Asia - B.P.). The movement becomes virulent precisely at the moment when the cultural differences are waning to such an extent that competition becomes possible. Lack of assimilation is not the real motive force for the (chauvinistic - B.P.) campaign: it is a convenient rationalization" (Wertheim 1964: 79).

Our conclusions differ considerably from those of the Malay philologist Mohammad Taib Osman in his recently published article 'Tema Antara Kaum Dalam Cerpen Melayu Semenjak Rusuhan 13 Mei' [The Theme of inter-Community Relations in the Malay Short Story since the Disturbances of May 13th]. About two thirds of the 55 stories studied by Mohammad Taib Osman appear to describe idyllic relations between the communities. This can be explained, in my view, by the conjuncture which developed in the Malay press after the events of May 13th, 1969 (see p. 283 above), by the circumstance that the Malay author selected for his analysis those newspaper publications which reacted most sensitively to this conjuncture, and finally by the fact that Mohammad Taib Osman interprets all the stories about mixed marriages without exception as stories about intercommunal relations which are harmonious, though this is far removed from reality.

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