

A SENSE OF PLACE

Bloodlines

By Bernice Chauly (Malaysia)

To understand the notion of Malaysia and Malaysian identity, one has to look at oneself. But this is an arduous thing; we are allowed to, but we aren't. We are not allowed to discuss the racist ills that divide our multicultural nation for fear of being charged with sedition, yet Muslims and non-Muslims are allowed to hurl racist vitriol at each other. We are not allowed to show a man and a woman kiss on screen, but the explicit details of sodomy between a politician and his aide make lurid headlines. We live in a country where a man is allowed to marry a child he has raped, but a Muslim woman is unable to marry a Hindu man. We have become a nation ruled by crippling contradiction, where the absurd is permissible, where truths are dangerous, and where silence has ruled for decades. A silence that came from fear - a fear that has now led to confusion.

The very notion of what it is to be Malaysian is now steeped in doubt, distrust and deception. We have become wary of each other, we do not know who we are. The project of a united nation has failed.

As a writer and poet, I have chosen to live in Malaysia and use it as my context. I have chosen to stay in a land that I love and hate, in a land that still continues to inspire me. It is a land that embraces me, yet treats me as an outsider, a *pendatang*. As a Malaysian of mixed heritage, I was a confused child, I did not fit in, I felt different. I spoke Cantonese to my Chinese grandmother, smatterings of Punjabi to my father's mother and the English of Enid Blyton in my daydreams. People made fun of my name. I did not like who I was.

In Malaysia, if you are Malay, you have to be Muslim. To be Malay entitles you to rights, unlike your Chinese, Indian or Iban brethren. But what is Malay? The Malay race is a British colonial construct devised to unite the 'natives'. A Malay is Javanese, Achenese, Arab, Thai, Gujarati. A Malay is all of the above and more. He is a *bumiputera* – a son of the soil, he inherits the earth. The Chinese and Indians do not. The earth is not ours. They tell us to go home, "Go back to China". "If you don't like Malaysia, go back to India". And so issues of race and identity arise from nationalism, nationhood. We are Indian first, Malaysian second. We are Malay first and we want the nation all to ourselves. We do not celebrate our history, we do not celebrate our diversity, we do not remember where we came from. We are a nation that suffers from historical amnesia. We have chosen to forget.

So where do we write from? What are our points of view? What do we write about?

I write to make sense of my country. Of my anger. Of my grief.

Our stories matter, they are of Malaysia. They are Malaysian.

I write because I have to. I write to discover who I am, and to find the path to who I have to become. I had to write myself into my country's narrative, I had to make myself belong. I chose to write about my mother and father, my illiterate grandmothers and grandfathers. Ordinary Malaysians who lived and survived wars. Ordinary Malaysians who were part of our landscape and history.

In my memoir *Growing Up With Ghosts*, I explore bloodlines, history, forbidden love. I trace memory, stories, curses. I remember my ancestors. I let them speak. I give them voices.

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So, writing has become an act of will, of defiance, of memory. It's an act of faith. I write myself into my country and into the world.