

Multiple Literary Identities in Contemporary Malaysian Literature: An Analysis of Readers' Views on *Heroes* by Karim Raslan

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ABSTRACT

*Contemporary Malaysian literature not only provides an avenue for creative expression, but also functions as a site for identity creation where writers create multiple identities for their characters. While many studies have examined specific identities possessed by the characters, there is still a need for more research on the multiplicity of literary identities and how they affect readers' understanding of the characters' identities and their own identities in the process. This paper presents readers' views on the construction of multiple literary identities in Karim Raslan's *Heroes*. Drawing on the tenets of sociocultural and literary theories, the paper examines readers' (1) views on the author's construction and portrayal of the characters' identities, and (2) understanding of these identities and their own identities in the process. The readers were two undergraduate students from a public university in Malaysia who volunteered to read and respond critically to the author's work, and share their views about the characters' identities. The analysis revealed that the author used a wide range of words and phrases to construct the characters' identities based on ethnicity, religion, gender, familial roles, social rank, place, and profession. While acknowledging that some of these identities overlapped with each other as part and parcel of being Malaysian, the readers opined that the characters' physical features, feelings and emotions, and values associated to identities could be included into the authorial construction of characters' identities. Furthermore, while the readers claimed that the author's identity portrayal enhanced their understanding of the characters' identities and their own identities in the process, they sought an avenue to challenge such portrayal, given that they too create multiple identities in the narrative of their lives.*

Keywords: multiplicity of identities; literary identities; Malaysian literature; reader response; authorial construction

INTRODUCTION

Identity is a complex and malleable construct as a result of its interaction and intersection with multiple factors pertaining to subjectivity. Identity becomes much more complex and dynamic as people create multiple identities that are enacted for a variety of reasons and expressed differently across space and time. These identities, which are constructed based on diverse "attributes" such as "organisational membership, profession, gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and family role(s)" (Ramarajan 2014, p. 589) not only affect people's actions and behaviours, but also their perception of themselves in relation to others in this world (Josselson & Harway 2012).

Multiple identities that are experienced and lived out daily are *not* entirely different from those that find their creation and expression in the fictional (literary) world. The

characters in contemporary urban African-American fiction, for instance, are portrayed as having complex, multiplex lives that require them to be in constant negotiations over multiple and intersecting identities as a result of living in a globalised postmodern world (King & Moody-Turner 2013). The same can be said of the characters in Malaysian literature or “literature of the modern Malaysian nation” (Muhamad Haji Salleh 2009, p. 15) who create multiple identities based on ethnicity and religion, to name a few, that overlap with each other which is part and parcel of living in Malaysia’s multiethnic and multireligious society.

Identities have been extensively studied in various fields of inquiry using a wide range of theories or frameworks, including a conceptual framework for analysing identity education (Schachter & Rich 2011), a framework for examining religious identity development among highly committed adolescents in the Netherlands (Visser-Vogel et al. 2012), a framework for exploring identity and integration among Russian speakers in the Baltic states (Cheskin 2015), a communication theory of identity for studying multiple identity negotiation among American first-generation college students (Orbe 2004) and a Butlerian framework of gender performativity for investigating the constructions of identities among young Malaysian bloggers (Noraini Md Yusof 2009). Identities too have been the subject of much research in the field of literary studies. Some of the theories or frameworks that have been used thus far to evaluate identities in literary texts include the framework of postcolonial discourse theory to analyse the constructions of cultural identity in recent works of fiction written in Afrikaans (Wasserman 2000) and *Youth Lens*, an adolescent-based interdisciplinary approach to textual analysis that was developed to examine identities in young adult literature (Petroni, Sarigianides & Lewis 2014). The same can be said with regard to Malaysian literature where a host of literary and socio-cultural theories have been used to analyse the constructions of identities in the works by local writers. Nasirin Abdillah et al. (2010) examined representations of women in the works of Malaysian writers in English using an Islamic theoretical framework that draws on Islamic principles in the Holy Quran, Prophetic Hadith, and Sunnah, as well as related scholarly writings by Muslims writers. Noritah Omar (2014), on the other hand, investigated the construction of national identity in modern Malaysian literature using the German Romantic ideal of collective individuality.

While the above mentioned studies (and those elsewhere) have examined *particular* identities (cultural, national, age, and gender-based identities), there is still a need for more research on the multiplicity of literary identities and how they affect readers’ understanding of the characters’ identities and their own identities in the process. This is for three reasons. Firstly, literature has the potential to enhance readers’ understanding of themselves in relations to others in this world through their engagement with literary texts. All forms of literature not only provide a source of enjoyment and satisfaction, but also serve a multiplicity of functions and purposes for different kinds of readers across space and time. These include, among others, literature’s potential for enriching readers’ understanding and appreciation of the target language and culture *in the case of literature in the second or foreign language* (Carroli 2008, Denman 2012) and heightening readers’ understanding of other people’s culture and socialisation *in the case of lesser-known literatures of indigenous communities* (Nasr & See 2014). More crucial is literature’s potentiality to enhance readers’ understanding of themselves and others in this world, which is evidenced in its ability to “[promote] self-discovery, [enhance] our understanding of others. . . and [allow] us to experience places, people, situations, and relationships we might not otherwise encounter” (Malloy & Gambrell 2013, p. 22). Such potentiality can be realised through readers’ engagement or experience with literary texts, which forms the basis of reader-response theory and criticism. This engagement or experience can take (place in) various forms including readers’ varied reactions to characters. Studies have shown that readers do not react to

characters as *mere* fictional beings of the literary world, but as creations that bear some resemblance to the inhabitants of the real world (Bal 2009, Farner 2014). This is particularly so as readers often turn to their ideas about real, actual people (i.e. themselves and others) in developing their understanding of fictional characters (Eder, Jannidis & Schneider 2010). Studies have also shown that strong emotional reactions often occur in readers' response to the characters as they become deeply engaged in/with the lives of these fictional beings (Schutte & Malouff 2006, Nikolajeva 2014). Eder, Jannidis and Schneider (2010) extend this view by positing that

we not only emotionally react to characters as fictional beings, but also react to their (brilliant or clumsy) representation, to the (often controversial) meanings they impart, to the intentions of their makers (propagandistic ones), or to the supposed effects they may have (on minors). Those kinds of reactions in turn may influence the feelings we have for the fictional being. . .". (Eder et. al 2010, p. 16)

The meanings that they impart may include, among others, meanings of and ideas about identity, particularly those that are related to readers' identity – a point that forms the basis of the argument in this paper. If "reading and comprehending literature involve "extracting" and "constructing" meaning from written text" where readers engage in "acquiring meaning, confirming meaning, and creating meaning" (Malloy & Gambrell 2013, p. 23), the same can be said of the ways in which readers extract and confirm meanings about the characters' identities, and enhance their own understanding of and create meanings about their own identities in the process.

Secondly, there is a need to evaluate and understand the creation of multiple identities in the works produced by writers in ethnically and culturally plural nations such as Malaysia, given that these identities (and the identities that are enacted and expressed daily by Malaysians) overlap and intersect with each other. If Thompson (2007, p. 15) posits that "gender, sexuality, race, class, religion, age, and place all intersect at the crossroads of (Malay) identity (construction)", the same can be said of the construction of identity among members of other ethnic communities in Malaysia and elsewhere. To make matters even more complex, many Malaysians continue to define their sense of self and belonging to the country based on their strong and overlapping ethnic, religious, and regional affiliations (Verma 2002). This is vividly portrayed in the presence of strong religious affiliation among many Malays in present-day Malaysia who identify themselves first as a Muslim, then a Malay and then a Malaysian, and the extent to which ethno-religious identity has impacted strongly the country's social and political structures (Martinez 2006, Holst 2012, Wu 2015).

Finally, researchers have yet to directly examine the multiplicity of literary identities, and currently, there is no existing framework that integrates the tenets of different sociocultural and/or literary theories to accomplish this task, despite the abundance of studies that have examined a particular identity possessed by characters in Malaysian literature using specific theories or frameworks (Jerome & Ting 2015). The interrelationships between identities in the fictional and real worlds need to be studied in context simply because (1) they cannot exist in isolation and (2) while a particular identity is pushed into the background by circumstance, it continues to exert an influence over the realization of foregrounded identities. Moreover, the increasingly complex relationship and intersections of multiple identities in a multicultural and multiethnic nation such as Malaysia needs to be studied, given the current sociopolitical movements that proliferate the juxtaposition of identities compared to what is previously known. The current phenomena of the rise of national consciousness brought about by the 1Malaysia campaign, for example, has redefined what it means to be Malaysian, especially among those who feel that this inclusive notion of national identity fails to embody their sense of selfhood and nationhood because of their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, political beliefs and affiliations. Yet despite this phenomenon,

ethnic consciousness remains at a higher level than national consciousness at the present time in Malaysia, given the current socio-political climate.

Based on the above reasons, this paper examines readers' views on the construction of multiple literary identities in contemporary Malaysian literature. The story *Heroes* by Karim Raslan, a renowned Malaysian writer in English, is chosen for this purpose because of the presence of multiple identities (ethnic, religious, gender, sexual, and national), framed in a multiethnic and multicultural society and constructed through the author's use of narrative conventions, namely, characters/characterisation, speech (dialogues, utterances), and setting. Briefly, *Heroes* tells the story of a retired civil servant who recalls his experiences of executing an important national duty during the May 13 race riots and how he has used his heroic face to keep the true story of his cowardice from his daughter after all these years. Drawing on the tenets of several sociocultural and literary theories, the paper examines the readers' (a) views on the author's construction of characters' identities, (2) the author's portrayal of the characters' identities, and (3) the readers' understanding of the characters' identities and their own identities in the process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the past six decades, Malaysian literature –Malaysian literature in English in particular (hereafter cited as MLE)– has become a vital site for examining issues related to identity through, among others, the writers' creation of multiple identities for their characters. For instance, with regard to ethnic identity construction, MLE not only offers insights into the writers' creation of Malay ethnic identity, but also the ways in which language (English in particular) shapes the writers' notions of what it means to be Malay (Hosking et al. 2012). In terms of gender and sexual identities, MLE provides a site for the formation of normative *-and* non-normative gender and sexual identities. Many Malaysian writers in English, particularly those from the second group/generation of writers, explore in their works issues pertaining to gender and sexuality from a religious perspective (Islam) which include among others "aspects of male-female relationships", "women's body", and "alternative sexuality" (Noritah Omar & Washima Che Dan 2006, p. 7). Literary works produced by Malaysian women writers from the 1940s to 1990s, for example, explore various issues including their own notions of self and identity by reflecting on their personal gendered experiences as well as the struggles they live with daily in this world (Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf & Quayum 2001). Malaysian women writers in English, in particular, present their views about identity based on their specific experiences shaped by personal circumstances and everyday life, social expectations and modernity (Ruzy Suliza Hashim, Noraini Md. Yusof, Raihanah Mohd. Mydin & Imran Ho-Abdullah 2011).

In Malaysia, issues of self and identity, *in addition* to ethnicity and the nation, are "vital preoccupations" for many Malaysian writers in English (Raihanah Mohd Mydin 2009, p. 45) as the consequence of the sociopolitical and cultural conditions that have affected their lives and works, their vocations and freedom of speech, as well as their sense of identity and belonging to the country (Quayum 2007, 2008). This creates a tension among Malaysian writers in writing about the identities of their characters and their own identities in the process – that is, whether to identify themselves primarily in terms of ethnicity or nationality, or embrace various identities in calling themselves an individual and a member of their ethnic and national community. Such tension, which permeates through and guides the works of many of these writers, is characterised by the tension between retaining their vocation as a writer and giving it up completely given the socialpolitical conditions affecting their lives and works, especially when exclusive, rigid policies pertaining to national language, literature and

culture have relegated MLE and the use of English as medium for creative expression to the periphery of what is officially understood as Malaysian literature (Quayum 2008, Quayum & Wicks 2001). In the same vein, the tension is also observed in the problems faced by some MLE writers in creating diverse identities in their narratives. As Raihanah Mohd Mydin (2009) contends:

Multiple identifications can be problematic to the writer as he attempts to represent them in literature. For instance, when a communal outlook takes precedence over and above a national one, the writer, like the nation, faces a significant test of identity. How does one construct identity in one's narrative? Does one focus on the person, the ethnic community or the nation? Or does one consider all three constructs, and if so, what problems might one face in taking up such an endeavor? (p. 45)

With regard to national identity formation, studies have shown that MLE becomes an important site for writers to explore issues related to the construction of a Malaysian identity and the complexity surrounding it (Fadillah Merican et al. 2004, Khoo 2006, Quayum 2007, 2008). In her study on the representation of national identity in Malaysian children's literature in English, Desai (2006) discovers that while recent works from the tradition acknowledges the country's ethnically diverse societies, some of these works tactfully affirm the dominance of Malay community over others. Desai argues that:

The didactic lessons in these stories leave little doubt the authors would like to promote unity, allegiance, and virtue, under Malay leadership. The attempt is unlikely to be successful, however, as long as segments of the population (minorities) are represented as not quite belonging, others (such as women) are misrepresented; while still others (lower classes, indigenous and immigrant groups) are left out of the literature altogether. As long as these images persist in the literature, readers will receive a mixed message about who really belongs and who doesn't. (p. 19)

While there is a great body of literature on the subject matter, many studies have tended to focus on examining a *particular* identity (ethnicity, gender) using specific theories or frameworks for a variety of reasons – personal, professional, institutional or even political. With regard to the construction of gender and sexual identities, Nasirin Abdillah et al. (2010), as previously mentioned, examined representations of women in MLE through the use of an Islamic theoretical framework focusing on Islamic principles found in the Quran, Prophetic Hadith, and Sunnah as well as related scholarly writings by Muslim writers. Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya (2003), on the one hand, examined the portrayal of Santha, the female protagonist in K. S. Maniam's play *the sandpit: a monologue* using feminist theorists' evaluation of women's silence. She discovered that, rather than viewing Santha's silence as "erasure, negation or repression" (p. 4), it can be a powerful form of agency, and used as a strategy to challenge the traditional patriarchal norms of Indian society that confine her (and her fellow Indian women) within socially prescribed roles as daughters, sisters, mothers, and wives. Jeyathurai (2009), on the other hand, analysed the "troubling" construction of national identity in K. S. Maniam's "The Return" (1981) and Shirley Geok-lin Lim's "Joss and Gold" (2001) through the lenses of history, language, and ethnicity. She found that the Chinese and Indian communities in the writers' works not only experienced alienation, but also the exclusion from the Malay nationalist/elitist' narrative of national identity. Siti Hawa Muhamad and Zamila Abdul Rani (2014) studied the construction of multiple self-identities that the female character, Sara, possesses in Lloyd Fernando's "Green is the Colour" (1993) through the lens of postmodernism. They found that Sara is a "postmodernist character with multiple self-identities" (p. 43) who does not adhere to the normative notion of being 'Malay' and a 'Malay woman' that is tied to cultural and religious values. Jerome (2013a, 2013b) investigated the construction of queer Malay identity in the works of Karim Raslan and Dina

Zaman. Using theories of ethnic and queer identity formation, he examined the creation of the said identity through the writers' use of narrative conventions and found that queer Malays in these works not only employed various identity markers and strategies in constructing their identities, but experienced tensions and conflicts in asserting a Malay Muslim identity marked by sexual difference.

This review shows that contemporary Malaysian literature –Malaysian literature in English in particular – provides not only an avenue for creative expression, but functions as a site for identity creation, where writers create multiple identities for their characters. However, most of these studies have focused on examining *particular* identities using an array of theories or frameworks. This is a gap in research and important to be addressed given that researchers have yet to examine multiple literary identities in Malaysian literature, and, currently, there is no existing framework that integrates from the tenets or principles of different socio-cultural and/or literary theories to accomplish the task.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this paper are drawn from an ongoing research that examines the constructions of multiple literary identities in MLE and attempts to develop a framework for analysing these constructions. ¹ For the purpose of this paper, it examines the views of two readers on the constructions of multiple literary identities in Karim Raslan's *Heroes* (1996) (one of the texts chosen for the ongoing research) using the tenets of several sociocultural and literary theories as shown in Table 1 below. The decision to use these theories was based on the ways in which they (1) allow for an examination of readers' response to the characters' identities and their own identities in the process (as evidenced in reader-response theory, post-structuralism/deconstruction, and postcolonial criticism, where readers extract and confirm meanings about the characters' multiple identities and help them to understand their own identities by interacting with the text and reacting to the re/constructions of characters' identities), and (2) frame the examination within the multiple identity formation context.

TABLE 1. The tenets drawn from different theories

Theories	Tenets
Reader-Response	The interaction of/between the text and the reader to create meaning and the ways in which the reader interprets the text to show that the reader's response is analogous to the topic of the story (<i>Literary Theory</i> , 2015)
Post-structuralism/ Deconstruction	The ways in which the author (or a character) re/construct identity (<i>Literary Theory</i> , 2015)
Postcolonial Criticism	What the text says or reveals about the operations of cultural difference - the ways in which race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, cultural beliefs, and customs combine to form individual identity - in shaping our perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world in which we live (<i>Literary Theory</i> , 2015)
Ethnic Identity Theory	The ways in which all social aspects of ethnic groups e.g. histories, cultures, identities, intergroup relations, and the social, economic, cultural and historical forces that shape the development of ethnic groups and their interrelations (Yang, 2000, p. 8).
Identity Theory	The ways in which people possess multiple identities because they occupy multiple roles, are members of multiple groups, and claim multiple personal characteristics, yet the meanings of these identities are shared by members of the society. Identity theory seeks to explain the specific meanings that individuals have for the multiple identities they claim; how these identities relate to one another for any one person; how their identities influence their behavior, thoughts, feelings or emotions; and how their identities tie them in to the society at large (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 1).

As previously mentioned, the text is selected based on the presence of multiple identities (ethnic, religious, gender, sexual, and national), which are constructed through the

writers' use of narrative conventions such as characters/characterization, speech (dialogues, utterances), and setting. References to or mention of designated places/spaces that are associated to the formulation and representation of the characters' identities are also considered for analysis. The readers in this paper were Leha and Evia (pseudonyms), two undergraduate students from a public university in Malaysia (Universiti Malaysia Sarawak) who volunteered to participate in the ongoing research. They were specifically chosen because of their good mastery of the English language and their experience of and familiarity with the Malaysian culture in which multiple identities are enacted, experienced, and lived out daily – all of which are essential for them to read and respond critically to *Heroes* and share their views about Karim Raslan's construction and portrayal of multiple literary identities.

Before the data collection was conducted, the writer's work was analysed to find out how he constructs the identities for his characters, particularly the main character. Following this, the results of the analysis on patterns of the authorial constructions of identities were used to develop questions for the semi-structured interview with the readers. Then, the readers were asked to read the text before the data collection. Two types of data were collected for this study using a three-part form that was given to students to be filled out immediately after they had read the text, and a group interview (focus groups) with the readers. For the three-part form, readers were required to provide their personal details including age and place of origin in the first part of the form, followed by information about their reading habits and interests in the second part. They were then required to respond to a series of questions related to the text in the third part of the form. Several days after the readers submitted their forms, a focus groups was conducted. Following Hennink's (2014, pp. 1-2) notes on focus groups, the readers were "preselected as they had similar backgrounds" (same ethnic background) and "shared experience related to the research project" (the experience of what it means to be a member of their ethnic community). The overall aim of the focus groups was to "identify a range of perspectives on a research topic, and to gain an understanding of the issues from the perspectives of the participant themselves" (Hennink 2014, p. 2). For the focus groups, the readers were asked to give their views on the authorial construction of identities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the purpose of this paper, the results presented are based on the responses to the last section of the three-part form provided by the readers. The results are discussed in following order: (1) the readers' views on the author's construction of characters' multiple identities; (2) the readers' views on the author's portrayal of characters' multiple identities; and (3) the readers' understanding of the characters' multiple identities and their own identities in the process.

AUTHORIAL CONSTRUCTION OF CHARACTERS' MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

The analysis of authorial construction of the characters' identities in *Heroes* showed that the author used a range of words and phrases framed via narrative conventions such as character/characterisation, dialogue, and setting to construct the main character's multiple identities. The readers confirmed this fact and the evidence of a collocation of words and/or phrases with different identities. The two female students in this study did not seem to use or list out words and/or phrases which represented two or more identities for these types of

identities: ethnic identity, religious identity, gender-familial identity, and profession-based identity.

When asked the words and phrases used by the author to describe the main characters' identities in the story, the readers listed out examples such as 'Malay' for ethnic identity; 'Allah', 'Ustaz', and 'Kitab' for religious identity; and 'husband', 'wife', 'daughter', and 'grand daughter' for gender-familial identity. The readers also listed out words and phrases that clearly described profession-based identities (civil servant, padi-farmers, Malay studies graduate) and the identities of other characters in the story (Chinese, Cina Apeh, Gerakan leaders).

When asked the words and phrases used by the author to describe the main characters' sense of identity in their interaction with other characters (as evidenced in the words and phrases that they use to describe their own identity when interacting with others or words and phrases used by other characters to describe the main characters' identity), both readers cited examples such as 'Ayah', 'hero', and 'Tuan', which were frequently used by the male protagonist and other characters in their interaction with each other in describing the former's gender-familial and social rank/prestige-based identities.

When asked the words and phrases used by the author to describe the story's setting and its relation to the main characters' sense of identity, the readers listed out examples such as 'kampung' for ethnic identity and 'Malaysia' for national identity, as well as 'KL', 'Petaling Jaya', 'Georgetown', 'Ipoh', 'Penang', 'Perak' for place-based identity. The readers also cited word and/ phrases that clearly described the identities of other characters in the story ('Chinese district of Menglembu', 'Sungai Siput incense sticks', and 'Gasing Hill rubber plantation' for ethnic identity; 'Chinese dhobi' and 'Hok Siow General Store' for ethnic-profession-based identity) and other forms of identities apart from the ones initially identified by the ongoing research ('single-storey bungalow' and 'large Philips radio-television console', 'floors laid with terrazzo tiles' for class-based identity (middle/upper class Malay)).

The clear mapping of descriptors onto identities indicates that the multiple identities are clearly delineated in the minds of the readers for ethnic identity, religious identity, gender-familial identity, *and* profession-based identity. However, the words and phrases used for gender-familial and social rank/prestige-based identities overlap to some extent in the context of interaction with each other. Ethnic identity and place-based identities are even more closely associated. For example, kampung is linked to Malay identity whereas Menglembu is linked to Chinese identity. However, there was commonality in words and phrases cited by the readers, showing shared views on the authorial construction of characters' multiple identities.

AUTHORIAL PORTRAYAL OF CHARACTERS' MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

The analysis of authorial portrayal of characters' identities in *Heroes* showed that multiple identities continue to be clearly delineated in the minds of the readers. This corroborates the tenets of *Ethnic Identity Theory* and *Identity Theory* as shown in Table 1 where Leha and Evia respectively claimed in the excerpts below that the main character possesses multiple identities by taking on various roles ('a husband', 'a father', 'a senior civil servant') and asserting various characteristics ('a typical Malay', 'superstitious', 'unduly', 'old-fashioned'). They also correspondingly claimed that these diverse identities not only relate to one another (Malay, Muslim, male, husband, father) and influence the character's behaviours, thoughts, feelings or emotions (Muslim and fatherly affection), but also tie the character into the community (Malay ethnic identity and norms of Malay community). As Leha and Evia individually explained:

Leha:

The main character is portrayed as having two opposite identities before and after the conflict of the story. At the beginning of the story, the writer tries to convince the readers of the perfect identities and personalities of the main character like having a happy family of three, living in a luxury [home] and most importantly, labelled as a hero by his daughter. The main character is told to be perfect with everything he owns but those perfections turned into the opposite when the plot of the story reaching conflict whereby he fails to save Nazrin, a young boy whom his beloved daughter [was] so fond of from being beaten to cripple by a crowd of a Chinese people while doing his task as a civil servant.

Besides that, the writer tells the readers that the main character is just a typical Malay who is superstitious, unduly and old-fashioned. Some Arabic words are also used portraying that the main character is a Muslim. For example the words Allah, 'ustaz', 'nikah' and so on. Hence, this conforms that the main character's national identity is a Malaysian when he also states that the task he is responsible in as told in the story is for the 'Gerakan' people and it is for the sake of the nation, Malay race as well as Nazri's future.

Evia:

The main character is portrayed as having various identities which include Malay, a Muslim, a male, a husband, a father and he was a senior civil servant of Malaysian Government, a "Tuan". I personally think that writer does this for a number of reasons. One of the reasons will be that the readers will find it easy to identify with the characteristic of the main character or behavior which is aligned with his certain identities. For example, on page 7, the main character's daughter, Fariza, after she made her excuses. She remembered to kiss her father's cheek gently as a custom for every Muslims. Besides, it enabled the readers to differentiate one character's identity with the other as well. Just like page 11, where the writer wrote that the main character's daughter's husband was a Chinese and not Malay.

In hindsight, i think that the author creates a sense of identity that is acceptable to the main character's community and country. For example, the main character's sense of ethnic identity adheres to the norms of the Malay community for the frequent use of the Malay words and names. Words like *pantun*, *bedak putih*, *bengkel*, etc, together with names like Datuk Halim, Nazrin and few others are common in Malay community. The main character's sense of national identity, on the other hand, conforms to the acceptable definition of Malaysian identity as the story center more around 1969, the year of Malaysian darkest history. It was during those times that the main character had been entrusted by the highest authorities, carrying messages of national importance to the supposedly, Gerakan leaders.

READERS' UNDERSTANDING OF CHARACTERS' MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

The analysis of readers' understanding of characters' identities in *Heroes* showed such understanding is influenced by their interaction with the text, particularly the author's construction and portrayal of multiple identities. This corroborates the tenets of *Reader Response* and *Postcolonial Criticism* as shown in Table 1 where the readers extract and construct meanings (specifically those about identities) through their interaction with the text and how the operations of cultural difference (how race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, cultural beliefs, and customs combine to form an individual identity) influence the ways in which readers' make sense of the characters' identities and their own identities in the process.

When asked whether the author's portrayal of identity enhanced their understanding of the main characters' identity, both readers felt the portrayal had done so in terms of ethnic *and* national identity. For Leha, the author's portrayal enhanced her understanding of Malaysian identity through the words and phrases associated to it which was used by the author in the story. Evia, on the other hand, said that the portrayal enhanced her understanding of Malay identity not just because of the Malay words used throughout the story, but also the names of places and references made to Malay food, culture, tradition and the people.

When asked whether the author's portrayal of characters' multiple identities enhanced their understanding of their own sense of identity, both readers agreed that it had done so in some ways. Leha found commonality between her sense of identity and the main character's identity (the protagonist's daughter in particular) particularly with regard to religious, gender, familial, and national identities. Such a response was mainly attributed to the ways in which Leha perceived identity as a confluence of many aspects such as ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, and nationality and drew upon her religious belief (Islam) in defining her sense of self and identity as a Melanau Muslim. Evia, on the other hand, said that the portrayal enhanced her understanding of Malay identity mainly because the story highlighted the importance of a name, a family background, a social status and a community, which helped readers like herself to reflect on their own sense of identity – be it ethnic, gender, sexual, religious, or national identity.

The readers, however, provided different views when they were asked to comment on the inclusion of other aspects of identity in the story and the use of other narrative conventions in analyzing the characters' identities. Leha suggested that the author could have included aspects such as the physical description of characters, their feelings and emotions, as well as their "mother tongue" which would help readers like her to recognise the characters' ethnicity and place of origin. Leha also suggested that the author could have used more verbs/action verbs to help readers recognise the main characters' sense of identity:

For example, if the main character is portrayed as a Muslim, the writer may add activities or verbs as if the main character is performing his 5 times daily prayers, reciting the Koran and so on. By doing so, the identity of the main character would be further enhanced not limited to the adjective words only.

Evia, on the other hand, suggested that the author could have given the male protagonist a proper name which would provide a glimpse into his background, in addition to including physical descriptions of characters (physical features in particular) to enable readers like herself to understand their actions and decisions. Evia also suggested that other narrative conventions such as the plot and theme may be used to analyze the characters' identities:

The story lacks a resolution which is needed in every plot. A complete plot helps the readers to know what happens to the main character and its relationship with the main character's sense of identity. As for the theme, the writer should emphasize on a specific theme. In so doing, the main character's sense of identity can be developed into a clearly defined identity of sorts.

In general, the findings reveal some insights about the readers' views on multiple identities in the text read which have significant impact on the development of the framework that the ongoing research seeks to develop. Firstly, both readers responded to the identities of *other minor secondary characters* and the constructions of *other forms of identities* (profession-, place-, and social rank/class-based types), despite being required to respond only to the main characters' ethnic, religious, gender, sexual, and/or national identity. This opens up the possibility for the researchers of the ongoing study to allow future readers to respond to the construction of *both* the primary/main *and* secondary characters' identities that include those organised around their profession, place of origin or dwelling, and their social class.

Secondly, both readers' suggested that authorial construction of characters' identities must include other aspects such as physical features as well as feelings and emotions, and values associated to their identities – a point that needs to be taken into account by the researchers in selecting the texts for the ongoing study. Furthermore, the readers suggested that the story's plot, theme and even the use of verbs in the authors' description of the

characters' identities should be considered when readers like themselves were asked to respond to the constructions of characters' multiple identities – another point for the researchers to consider in thinking about the types of narrative conventions that could be analysed within the scope of the proposed framework.

Finally, while both readers' acknowledged the fact that the author's literary identity portrayal enhanced their understanding of characters' identities and their own identities in the process, the researchers should reconsider modifying some tasks/questions related to the texts to enable future readers to challenge such portrayal – a task that must be done in keeping with the aim of developing the said framework. Another possible way to achieve this is to select literary texts that portray previously unknown identity features or uncommonly discussed identities (identities of migrant workers and people with disabilities).

CONCLUSION

The paper examined readers' views on the construction of multiple literary identities in *Heroes* by Karim Raslan by focusing on their (1) views on the author's construction and portrayal of the character's multiple identities and (2) understanding of the characters' multiple identities and their own in the process. The results revealed that the Karim Raslan uses an assortment of words and phrases framed via characters/characterisation, dialogue, and setting to create the characters' multiple identities that include those that are based on ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, and nationality. The results also showed that the multiplicity of characters' identities enhances the readers' understanding of their own identities as they identify themselves in relation to others in this world. The results suggests other narrative conventions and identity features could be included in the framework that the ongoing research seeks to develop so that it can be used to examine more fully multiple literary identities in contemporary Malaysian literature.

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ENDNOTES

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