

## Tracing Racially Inclusive Identity in Malaysian Theatre: A Systematic Literature Review

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**Abstract:** Scholarship on contemporary Malaysian theatre has been in tandem with discussions related to nation-building, race, and identity, illustrating its importance as an archival tool of the social and political milieu of the times. However, the longstanding debate has always been about racial issues. While its relevance has been acknowledged, a comprehensive analysis that traces the chronological progression of racially inclusive identity in Malaysian theatre is absent. Hence, this systematic review is conducted to explore pertinent publications that have discussed eras in Malaysian theatre that have responded to racial issues by proposing the idea of racial inclusivity in the creative process and product. It also investigates the extent to which racial inclusivity is injected into this art form to understand how Malaysian theatre has over the years created a landscape for the fostering of the country's socio-political agendas regarding racial inclusivity. A systematic literature review was conducted to answer the research question on what efforts have been taken to cultivate a racially inclusive identity in Malaysian theatre from 1930 to 2015. To address this, the paper systematically reviewed published research papers and book chapters on the chronological progression in Malaysian theatre that has been sensitive to racial inclusivity from its initial inception in the 1930s to the development of contemporary theatre in the 1970s. The papers were studied according to three criteria: *Bangsawan* theatre, theatre post independence and theatre post May 13. The findings in this study led to a discussion on how forms of social rupture initiated efforts and engaged the theatre community to further the creative exploration into racial inclusivity through a reflection on casting and creative mechanisms, and the depiction of issues via performance. In the light of embracing racial inclusivity, this study concludes by providing future research directions to endeavor for a more holistic picture of the topic.

**Keywords:** Nation-building, race, racially-inclusive identity, Malaysian theatre, social rupture.

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## Introduction

Malaysia's multi-racial population has always impacted its socio-political climate. Since the 1930s, ethnicity and religion has been a factor in the creation, process, and consumption of performances (Chua & Lim, 2018). *Bangsawan* performances incorporated various ethnicities' cultures in the stories to cater to a wider audience (Deneerwan & Kahn, 2018). The content of *bangsawan* performances shifted from Indian-inspired stories to western-influenced scripts to pander to the evolving audiences of the time (Tan, 1989). The government held the National Cultural Congress in 1971 to curate and disseminate the country's culture through its art. Further, the National Culture Policy (NCP) was drafted to respond to the tragedy that was the May 13 incident in 1969. The racial turmoil was made more complex at a time when the country was trying to escape its post-colonial shadows to redefine the Malaysian identity (Ishak, 1987). Writers at the time became the forerunners of the campaign and wrote scripts that mirrored the national agenda, whilst balancing the need to express the sentiments of the people. These efforts continued through the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with each decade experiencing a rupture in society, which warranted investigations by theatre makers through their creative processes and performances (Turner, 1982). The ruptures were often rooted in racial issues, which inadvertently affect the social and economic milieu of the country, as explored in plays by Krishen Jit and Kee Thuan Chye (Rajendran, 2010). In fact, Azzahra and Jegathesan (2022) investigated how these forms of ruptures, or so to speak, do have an impact on social expressions, mental processes, relationship closeness and the intensity of emotions. The connection is linked to the pressure to engage, and the perception of authenticity. Hence, the creative endeavours that address these ruptures allude to the idea that racial inclusivity on stage, to mirror society, could be the answer.

### **Nation Building and Identity Investigation through Racial Inclusivity**

Azzahra and Jegathesan (2022), in their work, interestingly brought up the connection between nation-building, socio-cultural values as well as the individual's own ethnic identity in relation to the Malaysian identity as integral components to any study in gender, identity and culture. It is in this extended discussion on identity, lies the debate on racial inclusivity. Racial inclusivity is defined as when the inherent talents, worth and dignity of a person is recognised without prejudice towards human differences like race and ethnicity (Morris et al., 2021). Research done by the Inclusive Recovery Project from 1980 to 2013 in the United States cites that the opposite of inclusivity, discrimination, can happen due to educational differences, socio-economic backgrounds, and political influences (Stacy et al., 2018).

Sheela Jane Menon's analysis which discusses theatre luminary, and Jo Kukathas' work that challenges state policies have resulted in non-inclusive experiences in

Malaysians. In the piece, *The 1Malaysia Virus*, Jo's performance which depended on memories of a racially divided, corrupt, and decaying administration juxtaposes a muted but multicultural picture depicted by the state. Her investigation and representation of a (non) racially inclusive environment, provides a clear diagnosis and definition of a social rupture, as well as an artiste and her creative response (Menon, 2020).

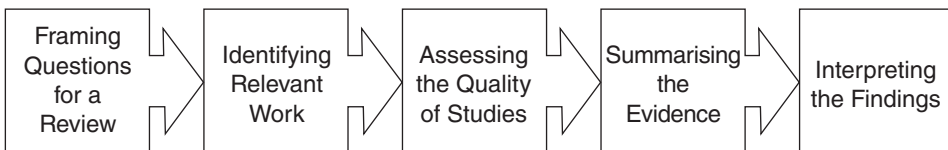
### Social Ruptures as Impetus in Malaysian Theatre

Social rupture(s) is a loaded term that brings with it an open discourse on power, cultural transfer, political ecologies and socio-economic ripples. Much of these forms of turmoil and trauma, and in some cases, inspiration and aspirations, have shaped and influenced theatre in varying degrees. Victor Turner's four stages of social drama is one such example that has become food for thought over the years.

Victor Turner's four stages comprise the breach stage, crisis stage, redressive action stage and reintegration stage. The breach stage can be defined as when a figure conflicts with society that causes rupture. The crisis stage is when the rupture caused by the breach requires attention. Redressive action is when steps are taken to address and solve the rupture. The final stage, reintegration is when the society heals but leaves a permanent shift or reconfiguration of the previous culture (Turner, 1982). Social rupture, as illustrated in the example in Menon's analysis above, provides the impetus to creative investigation in Malaysian theatre. As social ruptures are regarded as starting points to these performances, the method of research in this study places the identification of social rupture in its first stage.

### Method

In order to produce a valid, trustworthy and extensive set of findings, this systematic review made use of a broad search strategy in order to guide the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the review. It followed an explicit and transparent set of methods and stages with the potential to be replicated and updated by future research in this area. In this study, a systemic review of literature was done by searching articles from two prominent databases, namely Scopus and WOS. As for the phases of the review, five steps of conducting a systematic review as proposed by Khan et al. (2003) was employed (refer Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The five phases of systematic literature review proposed by Khan et al. (2003)

### **Phase 1: Framing Questions for a Review**

Previous studies have highlighted how Malaysia has grappled with increasing tensions of difference, straddling an ecosystem of multiculturalism over the years (Rajendran, 2010; Lim & Chua, 2018). This struggle and strive to create racial inclusivity can be traced to theatre productions and it continues to shape future directions of this art form. In order to trace the trajectory of initiatives that have been taken in this respect as well as how racial inclusivity has been developed and portrayed in each instance, the following research questions have been generated to guide the systematic literature review:

1. What efforts have been taken to cultivate racial inclusivity in Malaysian theatre?
2. How has racial inclusivity been demonstrated in these efforts in Malaysian theatre?

### **Phase 2: Identifying Relevant Work**

A total of 50 journal articles and book chapters were identified. The articles were obtained from Scopus and WOS databases. To attain relevant publications, keywords were used in the primary online search. The main keywords were “racially inclusive theatre”, “social breach”, “nation-building”, and “identity”. Once the primary search was done, and the research questions have amassed sub-categories, a more detailed online search ensued. Keywords used in this search included “*bangsawan*”, “modern Malay drama”, “Krishen Jit”, “Five Arts Centre” and “The Actors Studio”. The articles found were then screened. Only Scopus and WOS articles, as well as published books were used in the review as these two databases are sufficient in integrating other indexes while enabling this study to obtain a systematisation in terms of its review. In summary, the inclusion criteria of the materials included in this review are:

1. The articles’ sources have been defined.
2. Keywords became the determinant of the articles retrieved.
3. Scopus and ISI-indexed journals.
4. Books published by academic institutions/ arts bodies.
5. Context of study

Articles that did not meet these criteria were removed from the study. Of the 50 sources, 30 were identified as sources with a Malaysian context. Four of these were newspaper articles, hence removed. From the 26 remaining sources, 4 were published books, while the remaining were indexed journals. The books, especially Solehah Ishak’s *Histrionics of Development: A Study of Three Contemporary Malay Playwrights*, Nur Nina Zuhra’s *An Analysis of Modern Malay Drama* and Jacqueline Lo’s *Staging Nation: English Language Theatre in Malaysia and Singapore* were instrumental in framing the foundations of this research.

A broad search was conducted on these keywords: nation-building, race, racially-inclusive identity, Malaysian theatre, and social-rupture. The research generated findings on 50 international and Malaysian case studies pertaining to the keywords and were used to understand and define the questions of research. A second search was done to ascertain research done based on the keywords (racially inclusivity, social rupture, nation-building, identity), and generated findings on *bangsawan* (Zuhra, 1992), post-colonial theatre (Ishak, 1987), theatre by Krishen Jit (Rajendran, 2010) and the Actors Studio. The findings from the search which were based on performances in other countries were omitted for the main body of research and used just as reference points. Findings on Victor Turner's *Social Drama* is essential as it is used as a research framework and could be applied to any culture.

### Phase 3: Assessing Quality of Studies

The first selection criteria of the research determined key eras in Malaysian theatre history which illustrated social rupture (breach). These eras were: 1) the influx of traders in the 1930s, 2) the post-colonial period after the independence of Malaysia in 1957, and 3) a period of rediscovering identity after the May 13 incident in 1969. Defining these by time frame periods helped segment the review into three stages: publications on *bangsawan* in the 1930s, theatre in the 1960s, and development of modern and experimental theatre in the 1970s and beyond.

Research on the three eras above generated publications on *bangsawan*, post-colonial theatre in Malaysia, and theatre after the 70s in Malaysia. The keywords: racially inclusivity, social rupture, nation-building, identity was applied to the publications, and only the articles and books analysing from the keywords' tangent were selected. The rest were deemed irrelevant, and not used in this review but reserved for future research.

Articles chosen were based on an inclusion and exclusion criteria as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Inclusion and exclusion criteria for selection of articles

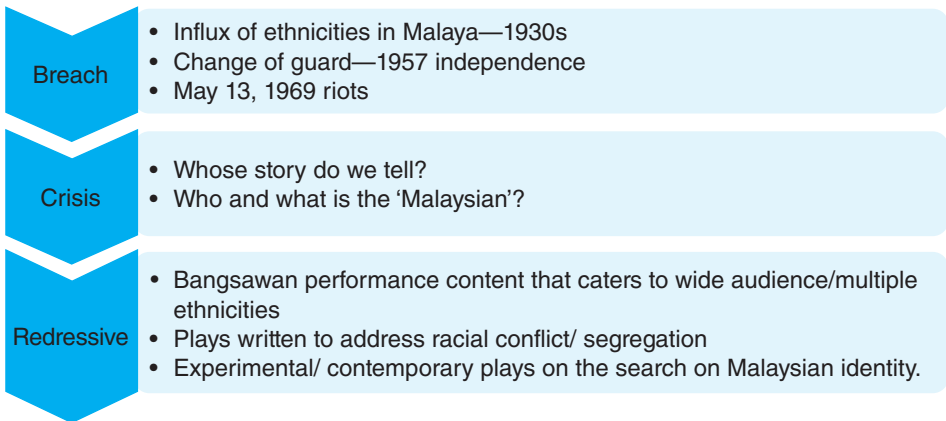
Criterion	Inclusion Criterion	Exclusion Criterion
<i>Bangsawan</i> theatre	Describes the trait of multi-ethnic audience, multi-ethnic performers.	Forms of <i>bangsawan</i> , its traits and history not related to ethnicity.
Theatre post Independence (until 1970)	MATG, Modern Malay plays, Modern English plays in Malaysia, Malaysian identity.	Traditional theatre and plays not on Malaysian identity.
Theatre post May 13, 1969	National Cultural Policy 1971, Malaysian Cultural Identity.	Traditional theatre and plays not on cultural identity.

**Phase 4: Summarising the Evidence**

The electronic databases used to search for articles were Google Scholar and JStor. The keywords entered in the search engine of these databases were nation-building, race, racially-inclusive identity, Malaysian theatre, and social rupture. As performing arts journals on Malaysian theatre are limited, articles written from 1980 to 2021 were allowed.

From JStor, the keyword “nation building” generated 433, 631 results, and from Google Scholar, 4,020,000 results surfaced. The search was then narrowed to include “nation-building in Malaysian theatre”, “race and identity in Malaysian theatre” and “racial inclusivity in Malaysian theatre.” This resulted in 672 results (in nation-building in Malaysian theatre), 411 results (in race and identity in Malaysian theatre) and 18 results (in racial inclusivity in Malaysian theatre).

From these journals, “social disruption” was used as a filter to identify relevant articles for this study. It should be noted that “social disruption” may not be explicitly dictated in the article, and hence the essence of any breach of society must be carefully identified in readings. Articles that relayed evidence of a form of social disruption, in the narrative of a particular theatre performance’s study were chosen. Only 26 sources had evidence of some form of social disruption, and efforts of cultivating a racial inclusive identity in their analysis. Figure 1 shows a summary of social disruptions categorised in the happening (breach, crisis), and the creative reaction (redressive).



**Figure 2.** Summary of categories of “social disruptions”

**Phase 5: Interpreting the Findings**

The following findings are arranged chronologically to suggest the need to cultivate a racially inclusive theatre from the evolution of *bangsawan* in the 1930s, to the exploration of contemporary theatre in the 2000s.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Bangsawan* Theatre

From the review, racially inclusive theatre can be traced to the introduction of *Bangsawan* theatre in Malaysia, in the 1870s, when a troupe from India comprising Parsees introduced the performance genre to Penang. The performance was called *Wayang Parsi* and adapted Indian, Arabic, and Shakespearean stories, which were performed in Hindi (Zuhra, 1992). Zuhra's important documentation of modern Malay drama, particularly the chapter on *Bangsawan* requires a complementary understanding of Penang's history. From the 1800s to the 1990s, the port of Penang grew to become a melting pot of nationalities. Malay traders from the archipelago, Indian spice traders, and Chinese merchants came for business, and some eventually made Penang home (Hussin, 2005).

In line with the economic boom at the time, *Bangsawan* became commercialised, and was adapted to suit local tastes, as accounted by Zuhra:

“*Bangsawan* became the first Malay theatre form to be performed for commercial purposes. The commercialisation of *bangsawan* was consistent with the emergence of a monetary system and a materialistic attitude in then-Malaya which was fostered by a colonial power. The people who owned the *bangsawan* troupes, many of whom were Chinese *tauke* (businesspeople) opened the theatre as a capitalist enterprise.” (1992)

*Bangsawan*'s status as a commercial enterprise then meant, it was devoid of other motivations, apart from making a profit. The *bangsawan* troupes adopted various means to gain a competitive edge, and this included coming up with shows that would appeal to the masses. The performances used stories from Chinese and Indian culture, to cater to the growing multi-ethnic population. Even Shakespearean stories were introduced and adapted into the local language, standard Malay, understood by most. Vijaya Samarawickrama sums *bangsawan*'s role aptly, “Perhaps the one form of theater that could be called truly Malaysian in that it transcended these differences was the *bangsawan* theatre” (Zuhra, 1992, pp. 17-20).

Tan Sooi Beng's paper *From Popular to Traditional Theatre, The Dynamics of Change in Bangsawan of Malaysia*, supports this, and contests the definition of *bangsawan* as being “traditional Malay theatre” (Tan, 1989, p. 231) and instead argues it as a new form of theatre of the early 20th century. This is mainly because *bangsawan* adapts to the times. It adapted to the British colonisation in the 1963, responding to changes in the political, social, economic. It adapted to pander to the public, and to become a popular commercial theatre.

## *Sandiwara* Plays

*Sandiwara* plays, which took over from *bangsawan*'s popularity at the time centred on nationalist issues. The plays were based on historical stories and targeted at all races in Malaysia as an effort to remind the people of the country's own rich heritage, as a response to the colonisation effects of the British. Historian and writer, Shaharom Husain described his endeavour of writing historical plays as creating Malay classical drama, as opposed to classical English literature like Shakespeare. Sourced from the *Malay Annals*, these stories played the role of nation-building, by relegating Malay history to the forefront (Zuhra, 1992). An example would be the staging of the story of *Megat Terawis*<sup>2</sup>. The story of the Bendahara, Megat Terawis who returned to Perak to rescue the Sultan's daughter from the King of Aceh, roused nationalist sentiments when the protagonist ousted a foreign force. It didn't matter that it wasn't the British, the fact that a local hero achieved the feat, reminded the people of what they were capable as a nation.

Later, *sandiwara* plays from the late 1950s to the 1960s continued this endeavour, as apparent in plays with challenger themes<sup>3</sup>. The play by Shaharom Husain, *The Hunchback of Tanjong Puteri*, was used as a tool in nation-building, but not without tweaking its source material. The story, in its purpose to rouse nationalistic sentiments was adapted to enhance anti-colonist relevance, and to appeal to the times. To enhance the historical stories used, cultural elements were identified and included in the performances. *Silat*<sup>4</sup> fight sequences exemplified the inherent skill and bravery of the people, and *pantun*<sup>5</sup> to remind of a rich literary heritage. As with the case in the play *Megat Terawis*, elements like *syair*<sup>6</sup> was included, and careful attention by the playwright was given to the correct Perak dialect and accent to be used in the performance. These elements give a cultural identity, pertinent to the effort of nation-building (Zuhra, 1992). Therefore, in addition to the stories selected, and the cultural elements identified and inserted in the *sandiwara* plays, a determined language would be used in this effort of nation or community "imagining".

The launch of the "National Language Month" by the Malaysian government in 1960 stressed the importance of Bahasa Melayu, not just for the Malays but for non-Malays as well, as part of the nation-building exercise. The next part of this chapter

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<sup>1</sup>Literary works written between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century documenting the origin, rise and fall of the Malay maritime empire.

<sup>2</sup>Prince Terawis, about the first Bendahara of the Kingdom of Perak.

<sup>3</sup>Stories where the protagonist is portrayed a martyr.

<sup>4</sup>A form of martial arts from the Nusantara and Southeast Asia.

<sup>5</sup>Malay poetry that rhymes used to convey intricate ideas and emotions.

<sup>6</sup>Traditional Malay poetry made up of four-line stanzas.



will explore how the national language, Bahasa Malaysia was used in performances to instil patriotism and to cultivate unity through modern drama.

### Modern Dramas

The 1960s saw the emergence of realistic drama, or popularly known as modern dramas. Highly influenced by western playwrights of the time, Malaysian writers began exploring contemporary themes to be staged and presented to the audience. The themes first reflected the government's efforts in nation-building via 5-year development plans, which centred on issues like rural development, agriculture, education, and mobility of the young from the *kampung* (villages) to the city. An example of how the government's policies have affected the writing can be seen in the portrayal of symbolic characters. The inclusion of teacher characters reflected the education reforms, and roles of officials usually represented the government. While early post-independence sentiments were grounded upon issues to empower and liberate the Malaysian people from colonial shadows, modern plays in the mid-1960s centered on redefining the "Malaysian", and with that, the Malay culture was used to represent the nation, as espoused in the National Malay Congress in 1958 which states that the Malay culture would be the basis for the National Culture (Latiff, 2019).

Writers supported this cause, like in the play *Tamu di Bukit Kenny* (Visitors in Kenny Hills, 1967) by Usman Awang. In the play, a Chinese character Susie Wong has just come back from abroad. The complex plot of the *pegawai* (government official) struggling to acquire citizenship for Susie, whilst managing bribery from the Chinese *tauke* (boss) explores the nuanced concept of the non-Malay speaker as the "other", and by learning the language, becomes integrated into the society.

It was a time when the people were confronted with economical and societal changes, due largely to the various governmental policies. These changes, came with grey areas, which begged exploration. Playwrights, like Noordin Hassan, Bidin Subari, and Syed Alwi wrote and presented landscapes and characters that were reactions to the social and political milieu post-independence, but also reflective of their culture and language changes at the time (Ishak, 1987).

The subject of the plays was mainly centered on the dissipating culture of the Malay community, as the people gravitate towards the government's call to migrate to the city to prosper. The creation of the "modern Malay", becomes the protagonist of the playwrights, a figure to put forth issues that were becoming more apparent in the Malay diaspora, and the bigger picture that is the country.

To debate these issues, the modern plays utilised the family unit as backdrop to stories. The living room became the common backdrop for most of the plays written and staged at the time, due to the nature of naturalistic plays, but also for its relatability to all races (Ishak, 1987). All households, regardless of race is concerned

with the family unit, hence a story set in a Malay family, has parallels with families of other races as the struggles are universal. Some writers, like Kala Dewata (Mustapha Kamil Yassin), were specific with the familial issues they wished to explore and present. In his play, *Dua Tiga, Kucing Berlari* (Two, Three Cats Running, 1963), he discussed the topic of inter-racial relationships. The play, about the relationship between a Chinese Buddhist and a Malay Muslim gave a message to the audience that it is the older generation's conditionings which have given them racist sentiments.

Once tragedy unfolds in the end, and the moral of the story is learned, it is the writer's hope that the story has managed to enlighten and question the source of our inherent racial sentiments (in this case, the Chinese characters' involvement with the communist during the Japanese Occupation), and hence, with this clarity, would hope to foster stronger racial ties amongst the community, or at least the ones privileged enough to watch the show (Ishak, 1987).

### **Experimental Theatre**

By the 1970s, fatigue had begun to set in on naturalistic modern plays. Theatre makers have begun questioning the efficacy of modern theatre's ability to truly promote a local culture and identity. Modern drama is clearly influenced by Western theatre, and hence loses relevance, and seemed ironic in an era geared towards forging a Malaysian identity. Theatre makers then began to explore ways of telling new stories, whilst infusing elements from Malay culture, birthing an age of experimental theatre in Malaysia. The May 13 incident<sup>7</sup> proved a turning point for many, including theatre makers who sought to question the methods being used to promote national culture. Modern theatres seemed to represent a Malay narrative that was no longer relevant, and the non-inclusivity of the other races echoed as a factor that led to the May 13 riots.

Director, Krishen Jit responded directly to the 1969 crisis, by consciously learning the Malay language so that he could engage and participate in the Malay language theatre community. Jit's brand of drama was certainly different from the ones created in the 1960s. He began giving significance in the movement of the actor, as opposed to just the speech, he added poetry, considered shamanic routines as part of the performance, and began experimenting with different forms (Rajendran, 2010). As he aptly sums: "Even if you don't know the meaning of the sighs, you can enjoy the sighs even for their own sake" (Jit, 1986). The quote above was referencing the non-speech component of the Chinese opera, an art form that Jit analysed, and considered in his own performances. This decision of his, coincided with the belief that the

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<sup>7</sup>The May 13, 1969, riots happened after the general election when the opposition party ousted the ruling coalition. 196 deaths were recorded, but many others were undocumented.

cultivation of a Malaysian identity in the arts is a complex process, that warrants the experimentation that Jit and his colleagues carried out. The consideration of Chinese Opera, and the learning and utilisation of the Malay language by a Sikh director like Jit demonstrated a sense that there was an awareness of a lost of touch with the Malay indigenous roots, and a need to rediscover this identity (Ishak, 1987).

This endeavour culminated in *Genta Rasa* in 1971, an event to commemorate the May 13 incident via performance art. Organised by the Malaysian Arts Theatre Group (MATG), it was the first-time practitioners of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Eurasian ethnicity came together to collaborate. All races from all backgrounds worked together inspired by the *gotong royong* (communal work) spirit, to present sketches, song, dance, and poetry, with the theme of reclaiming the Malaysian culture and identity which seemed to be dissipating with the influence of the West (Zuhra, 1991).

In the same year, the National Culture Congress was held to solidify what is to be the foundations of the country's national culture. The congress stipulated that the indigenous people of this region's culture was to be the primary base, with other culture's traits accepted if genuine and important, and Islam made an important element to the overall national culture. Jit, who presented a paper at the congress used the example of the Malay play he directed, *Uda and Dara*. The fact that the musical which was performed in the Malay language played to full houses of audiences from all ethnicities, proved that theatre can be a uniting force. The trend continued with Syed Alwi who staged *Alang Rentak Seribu* (Alang of A Thousand Wives) which saw a racially inclusive casting, with non-Malay actors like Mano Maniam acting alongside Faridah Merican and Rahim Razali. This conscious "blind-casting" again reflected a performing arts society that was multi-ethnic and multi-lingual. His next play, *Tok Perak* continued this trajectory, to great acclaim, and vast coverage in newspapers of all language mediums.

The fact that these plays were so well received by the community proves that the Malay language has been well accepted as the forefront to the national cultural identity, and the portrayal of these Malay characters by non-Malay performers demonstrated inclusivity, in the arts (Hussein, 1978).

Noordin Hassan's *Tiang Seri Tegak Berlima* (The Five Pillars Stand Shining Upright) went beyond the casting and emphasised racial harmony in its play content. In the play, Pak Ku, the Chinese Muslim convert shows eagerness to help a Malay character, hoping to send a message to the audience of comradeship between the races (Ishak, 1987).

This then suggests that the passage to racial inclusivity is multi-faceted. The inclusion of various races in a project, must be complemented by the message and the writing itself. The utilisation of experimental theatre to further the cause in

inclusivity works, as abstract plays remove the need for racial borders, as espoused by Ishak:

“Many characters in experimental theatre do not have personal names, but are represented by an overriding characteristic, an occupation, or relationship. This means of identification created abstract characters who remain open to interpretation of either sex, or race.”

### **Five Arts Centre**

Five Arts Centre was founded in 1983 as a collective to nurture the identity of Malaysia through the arts. Founded by Krishen Jit, Chin San Sooi and Marion D’Cruz, it has since grown into a multi-racial group of Malaysian practitioners. Members like Fahmi Fadzil, Mark Teh, Ivy Josiah and Janet Pillai experiment with theatre, visual arts, dance and music, while incorporating traditional elements with issues pertinent to the Malaysian identity (Abad, 2017). Five Arts Centre founder, Krishen Jit was most concerned with Malaysia’s cultural plurality, and the issues that could stem from this, including prejudice and discrimination of a singular or multiple races. His works, and collaborations through Five Arts Centre challenged the notion of being Malaysian and questioned the Malaysian identity, particularly race and class. Five Arts Centre’s performances have been noted for its consideration of the country’s colonial history and its effects, the exploration of the Malay indigenous culture (many of its productions collaborate with Sunetra Fernando and her experimentation with gamelan), and the suggestion that the Malaysian identity is porous and ever evolving. Five Art Centre’s 1995 staging of *Scorpion Orchid* consciously presented a multi-racial cast to mirror the complex racial makeup of the Malaysian society. The play, about four men of different ethnicities embroiled in the riots in Singapore required equal racial representation in its casting, but Jit’s (the director) vision is far beyond superficial representation.

Questioning and reframing cultural identity was important to Five Arts Centre, as a response to the ruptures from cultural policies that promote cultural plurality. The definition of local culture as defined by the 1971 Culture Policy required reimagining to include the narratives of the other races as well. By connecting ideas and forms that stemmed from local culture and indigenous cultural resources, the work embodied commonalities between the dimensions of race, religion, and language, thus empowering enactments of Malaysian-ness with the richness of particularity, and plurality (Rajendran, 2010).

### **The Actors Studio**

The Actors Studio was founded in 1989 by Faridah Merican with her Lebanese Australian husband, Joe Hasham (Latiff & Foley, 2017). The Actors Studio first

operated in Dataran Merdeka (1995), then in Bangsar (2001), and now (2021) at The Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (beginning 2004), with the motto “arts for all” (Maganathan, 2015).

In line with this, the company has produced plays and musicals to reflect its inclusive values. The 2012 play *Stories for Amah* written by Mark Beau de Silva and directed by Joe Hasham explores the struggle between the authoritative construct of race and identity in Malaysia (Philip, 2004). The protagonist in the play, a ‘*lain-lain*’<sup>8</sup>(others) recounts experiences in school, and at home that challenges conventional racial identities. The play argues that being Malaysian, is more than being a Malay, Indian or Chinese, and with its questioning of the rigid construct set by authorities, suggests ruptures in society that are usually unheard (especially from a minority), and begs remedial exploration in the form of more apparent inclusivity. The final scene in *Stories for Amah*, has the protagonist imagining a “better future” which illustrates the function of the arts in suggesting alternative states.

### Conclusion and Implications

From this study, it can be summarised that endeavours to cultivate racial inclusivity in theatre become necessary when societal ruptures occur. These social ruptures can range from an introduction of new ethnicities in the community, to the effects of new governmental policies that marginalises, and racial riots that affect the community. The influx of traders in the 1930s changed the makeup of the society and prompted *bangsawan* makers to rethink their performance content. Motivated by profit, the adaptation of *bangsawan* at the time demanded a performance that would be broad enough to cater to various ethnicities. The hybridity of cultural influences in the *bangsawan*, and its non-specific audience alluded to the beginnings of a racially inclusive identity on the Malaysian stage.

Thus, theatre became a tool for nation-building and identity defining in the 1950s and 1960s. *Sandiwara* plays responded to a freshly independent Malaysia by aspiring to rouse nationalistic sentiments to the audience. A change in government inspired independence in thought and imagination for the future, reflected in characters on stage that conquered colonist powers. The sentiments took a turn in the 1960s, when the public then, as represented by the writers began questioning the state’s policies which have propagated more division than unity. An acknowledgement of “Malay plays only acted by Malay actors” was a sign of the seeds of segregation, and the theatre fraternity took action to remedy that via productions that were consciously racially inclusive.

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<sup>8</sup>Official governmental forms in Malaysia require the individual to select a race, from the choices of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and ‘Others (*lain-lain*)’.

The formation of independent theatre companies in the 1980s continued the trajectory of identity building in the 70s. The 1969 racial riots prompted theatre makers like Krishen Jit to ask questions like “who is the Malaysian”? Questions like this prompted intimate investigations into subjects like subcultures, segregation, and the concept of cultural plurality. In a pluralistic society like Malaysia, where multiculturalism is a product of heterogeneity brought on by Western imperialism, there appears to be a clash between the management of diversity and its mode of operation versus the struggle for equality of race, class and gender (Rajandram, 2020). While all these may seem anti-establishment in sentiment, they are all endeavouring towards racial inclusivity, imagined, and proposed via the stage.

There is, hence, a need to present a more critical examination of the state’s role and standing on racial inclusivity, particularly in performance. Catherine Diamond’s paper, *Two Currents of Difference in Kuala Lumpur’s Contemporary Theatre* details two parallel streams of performance ecosystems, independent from one another. This reality contradicts the state’s vision of an all-inclusive society and echoes Kallen (1924) when she suggests that there are in fact three varieties of pluralism: cultural pluralism, structural pluralism and integration without acculturation.

While the state’s policies, as in the case with the National Cultural Policy, may promote the use of one culture to represent all, Krishen Jit suggests that “cultural plurality” is a more realistic ideology. Cultural plurality considers the representation and contribution of all cultures’ histories, language, and form, to forge a new creation that is essentially Malaysian. Jit’s cultural plurality reimagines the definition of “indigenous”. Indigenous, when defined is “originating or naturally occurring in a particular place”, but when applied in this reimagination, excavates and considers the commonalities in all races’ heritage. Acknowledging, and representing these commonalities in the making and offerings of performances demonstrate the ideology of a racially inclusive identity in theatre.

Malaysia is complex, as pointed out earlier, because of its historical past. That past not only includes the impact of Western colonialism on the stratification of the people post-independence but also how the political, economic and social policies of the government, in lieu of British rule, further complicates the issue of multiculturalism, racial inclusivity, and how social ruptures have created forms of disruption over the years. One has to consider how this government’s policies post-independence has served to either create or disrupt this multicultural unit. It is essential to reconsider and review the other impacts of Western colonisation on the Malay society as the after-effects continue to haunt the nation in the light of Malaysian theatre and all it aspires to become.

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