

# ***INTERLOK FROM A MULTICULTURALISM PERSPECTIVE***

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## **Abstract**

*Interlok* may be read as a multiculturalism narrative that depicts the process of building a national identity, which develops from a rigid ethnic identity. Through the narrative of social events, an envisioning of a gradual formation of a national identity, situated within a multicultural space is presented by the author. This vision of multiculturalism is perhaps an ideal, but it reflects the author's optimism for a future where a nation can be formed from the unity of its multicultural diversity. This ideal form of multiculturalism goes beyond assimilation as it is indeed a kind of integration that emphasizes on the culture of the majority as the dominant culture. The practice of this dominant culture must be just and equal as it evolves into the ideal national culture. However, this vision may have its detractors. It may give rise to a false identity that differs from the social identity of the real world. Nevertheless, this paper argues that the author's vision for the formation of the ideal national identity in Malaysia's multicultural society is one that is visionary

and forward-looking showcasing his effort in promoting positive values in society through literature.

**Keywords:** Abdullah Hussain, *Interlok*, multiculturalism

## INTRODUCTION

*Interlok* is a novel written by Abdullah Hussain in 1967 and submitted to the Peraduan Novel Sepuluh Tahun Merdeka (Novel-Writing Competition on the Tenth Anniversary of Independence) in 1970. *Interlok* won the consolation prize and was published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 1971.

Peraduan Novel Sepuluh Tahun Merdeka was designed as a platform to discern the relevant issues and themes concerning unity. Interestingly, there were no first or second prize winners but the third prize was won by *Sandera*, written by Arenawati. Along with *Interlok*, other consolation prize winners were *Pulanglah Perantau* by Aziz Jahpin, *Merpati Putih Terbang Lagi* by Khadijah Hashim, *Badan Bertuah* by Ismail al-Falah and *Meniti Buih* by Alias Harun.

In 2010, the student edition of *Interlok* was selected as the prescribed text for Form Five literature for the Central Zone, which includes Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan. Soon after, controversy ensued as a number of politicians and Indian non-governmental organisations raised their objections to its selection. They claimed that *Interlok* was offensive to Indians due to the use of the word *paria*, when referring to the background of a character in the novel, Maniam, who had come to Malaya in 1910. For this reason, it was claimed that *Interlok* was not suitable to be taught in schools. It is indeed interesting as for 40 years, *Interlok* had never been deemed offensive nor had it been considered as encroaching on racial sensitivities. Further, the author had never been reprimanded for the use of the word *paria*. However, all of a sudden, the appearance of this word twice in a novel of over 120,000 words was considered offensive. At the height of the protests, copies of the novel were burnt by a certain group of Indians in Kelang on 8 January 2011.

### ***Interlok* in a Multicultural Context**

*Interlok* is a social novel that was written with a multicultural slant after the formation of Malaysia in 1963. Prior to this, Malaysia was known as

the Federation of Malaya upon obtaining independence in 1957. *Interlok* is written to give a kind of retrospective look at the history of the formation of a multicultural society in Malaysia. This retrospective treatment is meant to be a holistic view of how relations between the original Malay inhabitants and the immigrants—the Chinese and Indians—who have moved here due to the economic pull, develop to form the society of the newly-formed nation. Or, more succinctly, it is about race relations in Malaysia. It has been no easy matter for Malays, Chinese and Indians to accept one another.

Anthropologically, the Malay race comprises the original inhabitants of the Malay Peninsula who have built their civilisation here. They were not a diaspora of another civilisation from another place, while the Chinese and Indians were a diaspora of the Chinese and Indian civilisations, who can more rightfully be referred to as “ethnic groups”. The term “ethnic groups” is used here as the Chinese who came to Malaya were not of a homogenous race but consisted of several subgroups such as Hakka, Teochew, Hokkien and others. This is similarly the case with the Indian immigrants, who comprise Tamils, Malayalees, Telegus and Malabarais, not forgetting the Sinhalese, who are a different group altogether. These are referred to in general as “Chinese” and “Indians”, without specifying their ethnic subgroups. “Ethnic group” is used to refer to the immigrant groups that came to the Malay Peninsula, or to minority groups such as the Orang Asli and the like, whereas “race” stands on its own and has common origins, such as the Malays who consist of various tribes such as Rawa, Jawa, Pahang Malay, Kelantan Malay, Bugis, Banjar and others—those from the Austronesian or Malayo-Polynesian branch.

Multiculturalism refers to the concept of living in a multi-ethnic, multicultural, multilingual and multi-religious environment that promotes mutual respect between one group and another. Multiculturalism involves demographic planning and policies in a specific space or region. In the political context, multiculturalism refers to the granting of equal status and rights to all ethnic and religious groups without preference or partiality to any. Multiculturalism in this sense is a cultural mosaic, which differs from assimilation and social integration, although it also often thought of as a kind of social integration. In reality, there is a fine line between their definitions and concepts.

Social integration is the movement of a minority group, such as an ethnic minority, immigrants or non-citizens, into the core community or the majority. The members of the minority group attain the same access to opportunities,

rights and facilities as the majority group. However, with respect to social integration, there are fixed rights for the majority or indigenous group, which remain dominant and separate from the minorities, who are not given the special rights awarded to the majority. Social integration differentiates between the privileged from the underprivileged in contrast to the ideal concept and definition of multiculturalism where there is no such difference. In this respect, the term “special rights” does not exist. Hence, social integration is at the level of “social acceptance” while multiculturalism is at the level of “social equality”.

Historically, multiculturalism in the ideological context developed after the Second World War with the rise of what is now known as the human rights revolution (Wessendorf, 2010). It came about as a reaction towards racism, ethnic cleansing and racial oppression that were widespread during the Second World War. This period also witnessed the gaining of independence of third world countries from their European colonial rulers, and a heightened sense of nationalism, which may have resulted in indirect racial discrimination. These events inadvertently targeted immigrants and minority groups. In the United States for instance, the civil rights movement emerged as an extension of the human rights movement that was developing all over the world, especially in Europe. The struggle for civil rights became a set strategy to fight racism, protect minorities and advocate equal rights for minority groups. This development also resulted from a strengthened liberalism that became widespread in this new phase of postcolonialism. Hence multiculturalism also refers to a communal diversity based on the rights of each ethnic group to have equal opportunities (Heywood, 1998).

### **From a Specific Identity to an Ideal Collective Identity**

*Interlok* attempts to erase the lines between nationality and race by establishing all races as groups that become entities making up the “nationality” of the newly-formed country, Malaysia. To this end, *Interlok* summarily separates these three groups, with Book One presenting the lives of Malays in Malaya through the story of Seman, Book Two presenting the lives of Malaysian Chinese through the story of Ching Huat and Book Three presenting the lives of Malaysian Indians through the story of Maniam. *Interlok* eradicates the definitions of “race” and “ethnicity” and creates a unified community,

the nation in Book Four, the final book. It is in this book where all the differences are “interlocked” to create a new community. Such aspirations are however, not easy to accept, especially for the Malays who are forced to share their indigenous rights and the sovereignty of their people and accept the immigrant peoples as being of their “nationality”. However, this is the unavoidable reality, a bitter truth. Through *Interlok*, Abdullah Hussain has sacrificed his indigenous rights (the rights of the Malays) by sharing these rights for extremely ideal aspirations. Such aspirations, created in his soul and in his thoughts, and then disseminated through his work to the entire Malaysian community, a call for the creation and maintenance of a new national entity.

In terms of multiculturalism, *Interlok* is an ideal novel that presents a common aspiration about a multicultural Malaysia from a Malay authorial perspective. This author sees the importance of unity and togetherness for the future. In other words, he envisions the bringing together of a communal identity for people of different ethnicities, in the process of developing a Malaysian identity. Interestingly, at the time of writing, Abdullah Hussain was able to foresee the problems emanating from the issue of identity, and through his pen and literary prowess, he managed to create a sense of common identity that he envisioned would prevent problems in the future. Interestingly, this retrospective vision was crafted from societal history that traced the development and evolution of race relations during the time of the Malay States, to the birth of the new nation called Malaysia—a nation that was built on the cultural plurality of its citizens, who shared in its prosperity and struggled together for its progress. This plurality in essence depended on how far a specific identity could represent the entirety of the nation’s culture, and create a specific identification. Marguerite Nolan (2009), an Australian literary scholar, perceives this question of a multicultural identity in literature as follows:

Finally, we must be wary of privileging understanding of multiculturalism that depends too strongly on recognition of what becomes, in effect, reified identities and cultures which can harden in times of cultural conflict. We need to question who benefits from such understandings of identity, and the conditions under which both particular identities come to represent whole cultures and rigid attachment to specific identifications might develop (p. 110).

Works that express issues of multicultural societies often become the focus for observing the gradual change of identity, from a rigid ethnocentric identity to one that is more flexible and receptive to differences and variety. In this respect, Nolan writes:

In order to avoid such hardening, multiculturalism needs to recognize how cultures and identities change, the operation of difference within communities as well as between communities, and the multiple identifications and acts of differentiation that constitute us all (p. 110).

*Interlok* presents such a situation, where Ching Huat's unflinching and rigid attitude to maintain a true mainland Chinese identity gradually changes as he experiences the trials and tribulations of life together with the Malays and Indians in Malaya. In fact, this change in identity is further represented through the lives of the succeeding generations. For example, the novel shows how Yew Seng, Ching Huat's son, does not agree with how Ching Huat chases Seman out of his (Seman's) own land after buying it through fraudulent means by using the name of Seman's father, Pak Musa. In other words, Yew Seng is opposed to his own father's prejudice against the Malays and this may be explained from the development of this character that is born in Malaya and has grown up with Malays. His thoughts and feelings are no longer the same as Ching Huat's, who holds on to his old prejudices and Chinese identity. This is a depiction of the change of identity that takes place gradually through the birth of new generations.

In the same vein, the novel shows how, in the case of Maniam, the change of identity happens much more quickly. Maniam is easily able to adapt to life in the Peninsula and is more receptive to accepting the new identity of being a citizen of Malaya. Maniam also accepts Seman with an open mind and unlike Ching Huat, holds no grudge or prejudice against the indigenous inhabitants of the country. In fact, Maniam comes to the aid of Seman and his mother and helps them find a place to live and work on the estate where he is an overseer. This kind act is reciprocal in nature as Pak Musa, Seman's father, has once helped Maniam when he was attacked, and he and Maniam have forged a strong friendship as they work in the estate before Pak Musa leaves to open up a new village. From then on, they lose contact. The change of identity through the birth of a new generation can also be seen in Maniam's case when Maniam's son, Ramakrishnan, becomes a police inspector in Malaya and has let go adherence to an old-world Indian identity. Ramakrishnan's identity is that of a Malayan-born citizen.

This change of identity does not affect the entire identity but affects the acceptance of difference and diversity as a shared collective identity. However, a specific identity that signifies each ethnicity is maintained. In *Interlok*, no one form of identity that is to be accepted by all ethnicities is stressed, instead, it details the identity of each ethnicity as a new identity that is shaped through the process of awareness and acceptance which takes place in earnest. In reality, the Malaysian constitution dictates that the national identity must be based on Malay identity, such as Malay being the national language, the national culture being based on the original culture of the Malay States, and the Malay Sultans being the pillars of the Constitution. However, in *Interlok*, the question of assimilation is not a focus. Instead, Abdullah Hussain takes a much “gentler” approach to the process of integration. One notes that where multiculturalism is concerned, *Interlok* is so multicultural that it does not even give a clear emphasis on integration as being acceptance while maintaining indigenous rights. In other words, *Interlok* does not mention at all the special rights of the Malays as the indigenous group and the sovereignty of the Malay rulers, as it wishes to emphasize the question of race relations without prejudice between the indigenous people and the immigrant community. As such, *Interlok* comes closer to the concept of multiculturalism as it gives equal weight to all ethnicities without presenting one culture as being dominant over others. Malays are seen as a people who accept the arrival of other ethnic groups, such as the Chinese and Indians into their cultural circle, without the need to impose or force their cultural values and practices on them. It can be said that the Malays in *Interlok* display a collective multicultural identity, accepting outsiders with an open mind, without abandoning the Malay culture that is so closely linked to the Malay world.

### **Contextual Comparison between *Interlok* and *They're a Weird Mob***

Marguerite Nolan's discussion of multicultural issues in Australian literature deals with a similar situation. Nolan looks at *They're a Weird Mob*, a novel by Nino Culotta about the lives of Italian immigrants, who migrated to Australia on a large scale in the early 20th century. *They're a Weird Mob* enjoyed a reprint of 74 000 copies for the Australian market in April 1958, after the initial print run of 6000 copies was sold out. Australia began its White Australia Policy through the Immigration Restriction Act 901 in an effort to form an Australian society in the mould of white British-Australians.

Although white Britons formed the largest population in Australia, a European labour force had been brought in to overcome the shortage of manpower. Among the biggest groups of European immigrants that began flooding Australia beginning in 1951 were white Italians.

In the 1950s, the Commonwealth campaigned for Europeans to migrate and become citizens of Australia, and to assimilate into the British-Australian culture dominated by the British. In 1970, assimilation was replaced with multiculturalism after a series of improvements to the immigration policy in the 1960s, and this became the official policy. This multiculturalism was not a result of the rejection of the assimilation policy but came about because of the failure of objective assimilation, especially due to socioeconomic factors. This is explained by Charles Taylor in his essay, "The Politics of Recognition" (1994) where he explains that identity is something that is dialogical in nature; that the feelings about who we are come from our relationships or interactions with others who are in the same environment as we are. Interaction in a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multireligious society complicates the establishing of a dominant form of identity through the process of assimilation. However, Anthony Kwame Appiah (1994) refutes Taylor's point of view by stating that identity is born from original characteristics which are biological. Appiah adds that no one single identity can become an official collective identity; minorities can only talk within the scope of their ethnicity. Therefore, the establishing of an official identity based on the dominant identity is necessary in a nation in order to enable all ethnic groups to have an identity that gives them a voice and rights on par with the other groups. Thus, when they voice their concerns, this voice will be heard in a large circle involving all other citizens. In other words, their voice is the voice of all citizens regardless of their ethnicity or race.

Culotta's literary work is a narrative that deals with the formation of a collective identity in an emerging multicultural space—in other words, literature as a multiculturalism narrative. However, this narrative functions not only as a script for the collective identity of the minority but should also be read as a script for a national identity. As a script for national identity, it brings out more similarities than differences. Nolan considers a narrative with such characteristics (referring to Culotta's *They're a Weird Mob*) as a "...historical relationship between nationalism, multiculturalism and identity construction in the Australian context" (p. 101). In the context of history, *They're a Weird Mob* shows how it becomes a script for a national identity by depicting how the Italian immigrants assimilate into what is



termed “Australianness”; what defines them is not “Italianness” but rather “Englishness”. Although assimilation is mentioned and takes place here, it is not assimilation in the true sense. Instead, it is a dialogical process in the context of the formation of a shared identity that significantly happens in a multicultural space. Nolan writes:

Multiculturalism, if it is to mean in practice anything significantly different from assimilation, is about intercultural dialogue, negotiation, and mutual compromise (p. 108).

*They're a Weird Mob* as a multiculturalism narrative is a form of complex understanding of the formation of identity, both individual as well as collective, and the relationship between identity and culture that is encouraged to thrive and develop. It opens room for retrospection or a reviewing of the history of the establishment of a multicultural society and finally the formation of a new identity born out of the dialogical process mentioned earlier. This situation is similar to that in *Interlok*. In *Interlok*, it can be seen that the process of identity formation for a multicultural society begins from the time the indigenous Malays encounter the Chinese and Indian immigrants; they socialise, assimilate in the context of having dialogue, accept diversity and finally begin to gradually develop a new social identity in a multicultural space. In other words, there is a dialogical process to form a shared identity. Like *They're a Weird Mob*, *Interlok* does not stress on the cultural domination or cultural hegemony of the dominant culture over the minority cultures, instead it becomes the narrative or the script for a national identity by depicting the immigrants as assimilating into what can be termed as “Malaysianness”, a national culture which is indirectly based on the indigenous culture. In truth, *Interlok* is also a complex understanding of the formation of a national identity through this process of multiculturalism. In other words, *Interlok* indirectly depicts the history of the relationship between nationalism, multiculturalism and the reconstruction of identity in a Malaysian context.

### **Multiculturalism Narrative and False Identity**

There are several other novels that can be referred to as one looks at a multicultural space as presented in *Interlok*. *Nanyang*, a novel by Khoo Kheng-Hor (2007), presents a story that is quite similar to *Interlok*. It

begins with the migration of Yap Kee, who leaves Kwantung after the Taiping army under General Yang Hsiu-ching is defeated by the army led by General Wei Chang-hui. Yap Kee, who has fought in the Taiping army, escapes Kwantung to save himself from persecution. Yap Kee comes from the Hakka tribe, who settled in Southern China for centuries after leaving the Eastern regions of China. The Hokkiens refer to the Hakka as “khek”, meaning “guests” or foreigners. The Hakkas are labelled as foreigners or aliens by the Cantonese in Kwantung, in Fujian province. The Hakkas are very poor and are looked down on by the Cantonese of Southern China. Yap Kee escapes to Singapore, which is called Nanyang (meaning “southern ocean”, a term used to refer to Southeast Asia) in the 1860s. Yap Kee then goes to Kuala Lumpur, where Yap Ah Loy is opening tin mines and has become the powerful Chinese Kapitan of Kuala Lumpur. At the same time, Dato’ Jaffar is in charge of a small area of Perak. Also at the same time, John Sutcliffe arrives in Singapore to begin his duties at the office of the Governor of the Straits Settlements.

The plots involving Yap Kee, Dato’ Jaffar and Sutcliffe have been developed to span several generations intertwining to becoming relatives through marriage and incidents which take place in Malaya and Singapore. The development of the plot of the novel *Nanyang* is similar to that of *Interlok*, in which the story of each character type, representing a different race, is developed separately in different chapters, culminating in the parallel finally converging at the end. This can be seen when Yap’s great-grandson Yap Keong, or Dr Yazid, marries Dato Jaffar’s great-granddaughter Nik Aini, and John Sutcliffe’s great-grandson Mark Peregrine marries Tan Mui Kooi, who is Yap Kee’s great-granddaughter. There is also a point of convergence in the political events and social development of the multicultural society that has formed in Malaya and Singapore. *Nanyang* has many characters, and it paints a complicated picture of the formation of the Malaysian multicultural society. It, too, shows how a multicultural space gives rise to a gradual change in identity, as is also presented in *Interlok*. However, *Nanyang* is far more complex and deals with far more generations, with far more events spanning a longer time.

Both Abdullah Hussain and Khoo Kheng-Hor have created narratives that depict the development of a multicultural society in Malaysia from a “national” point of view (Khoo focuses on Singapore as well, however, historically, Singapore was a part of the Malay Peninsula that later became a part of Malaysia). Both present multiculturalism narratives with a positive

slant and ideal aspirations regarding the formation of a multicultural identity that needs to be accepted as the new reality of the nation. Although Khoo inserts some of his personal points of view through his persona in *Nanyang*, which leave room to be exploited as issues, on the whole, he has a positive vision for a multicultural Malaysia. Firstly, this makes the literary product a kind of bridge for studying a society that has developed in a multicultural space. Secondly, these works of literature display a form of requirement for the legitimacy of the multicultural situation that must be seen as the basis for understanding the identity of Malaysian society. The process of viewing and understanding multiculturalism through literary works such as *Interlok* and *Nanyang* requires analysis with a clear framework. Nolan (2009) sees this situation in the same way in her analysis of the novel *They're a Weird Mob*, and says, "There are two things I want to draw out about this process: one, the concern with image takes us into the realm of representation, which is why it is relevant to literary studies; and two, the demand for recognition is also about domination, subordination and resistance" (p. 99).

However, notwithstanding its intention, all the ideal situations created in these novels, especially in *Interlok*, also create what is termed as a "false identity". Not all depictions in the novel take place in the real world. There are a number of incidents where a false identity can be seen in relation to the situation and condition of a multicultural society. The reality of Malaysia's multicultural society is not as attractive as that depicted by Abdullah Hussain. A close perusal of the real situation in multicultural Malaysia shows several instances where a "national identity" that is a product of the multicultural process resulting in acceptance, unity and equality or homogeneity, is really a false identity. As a multicultural society, the people still maintain very separate identities, strongly rooted in their own ethnic or racial identities. In fact, ethnic antagonism (Abraham, 2004), that is, the suspicion with which each ethnic group views the other as antagonistic, is still strongly perceived among Malaysians, to the extent that there are times when ethnic identity takes precedence over national identity. In other words, ethnic identity comes first and national identity comes second.

That ethnic identity reigns supreme is evidenced when *Interlok* falls victim to racial debate when ethnic Indian politicians and non-governmental organisations representing ethnic Indians called for *Interlok* not to be used as a literature text in schools. The use of the word *paria* twice in the novel, in relation to Maniam and the caste that he belongs to when he arrives in Malaya, is deemed derogatory. This explains that the identity that has

formed through multiculturalism as depicted in *Interlok* does not reflect the true situation of the multicultural society in Malaysia. Although *Interlok* does not make the Pariah caste an issue for identity, in reality ethnic Indians in Malaysia view the origins of some of these, from the Pariah caste, who came to Malaya in the 1910s as an identity issue. The assumption that the depiction of Maniam as a pariah implies that that is the caste of all ethnic Indians, who settle in Malaya is of course inaccurate, and shows a lack of understanding of *Interlok*. The criticisms also highlighted many inaccurate readings of *Interlok*, arousing much anger and transgressing into sensitive issues, which had nothing much to do with the novel.

### **“Pariahs” in Mulk Raj Anand’s Novel**

Mulk Raj Anand’s novel entitled *Untouchable* was translated into Malay by the Oxford University Press in 1964 under the title *Paria*. This novel was published in 1935 by Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., and traces the humiliation suffered by the pariahs, as represented by the character of Bakha, a young toilet cleaner who works in Bulashah. *Paria* exposes the drawbacks of the caste system, which has existed for thousands of years in India. Mulk Raj Anand criticizes this practice and the injustices suffered by this group of people. Pariah, in its true sense, refers to social outcasts. They are not a part of the caste system and Hindus are forbidden from touching them. However, through the diversity of religions in India, pariahs are able to get paid for working and spending their money, just like others. Therefore, pariahs are able to possess whatever they wish, if they can afford to, like everyone else. In *Paria*, it is narrated how Bakha buys “Red-Lamp” cigarettes and *jelebi* costing four *anna*, and wears shorts given to him by an English soldier. In fact, the novel tells that Bakha’s father had once owned a buffalo given to him by a wealthy Hindu merchant:

*Teringat olehnya (Bakha) dengan patut menurut diri sendiri bagaimana ketika ayahnya mempunyai seekor kerbau yang disedekahkan kepadanya (atau lebih-lebih kerana tahyul) oleh seorang saudagar Hindu yang kaya, yang menginginkan anak dan yang dinasihatkan oleh orang-orang Brahmana untuk menyedekahkan ternak kepada tukang-tukang sapu, mereka biasa memberinya makan sehari-hari dengan padi dan memeliharanya sedemikian baiknya sehingga menghasilkan dua belas seer susu sehari.*

(He recalled with great self-righteousness, how when his father had a buffalo given him in charity (or rather out of superstition) by a rich Hindu merchant who desired sons and was advised by the Brahmins to bestow some cattle on the sweepers, they used to feed it daily with grain, and tended to it so well that it yielded twelve seers of milk a day.)

(Mulk Raj Anand. *Paria*, 1964:64)

This excerpt shows that pariahs may possess property, as it shows that Bakha's father, even though a pariah, possesses a buffalo and keeps it for milk. The buffalo is Bakha's father's personal property. The novel also narrates how Bakha and the other pariahs are able to buy whatever they want with the income they earn as sweepers, toilet cleaners and the like. It is evident that pariahs are entitled to the right of property, according to their means, like other people. It is thus not impossible for pariahs to own buffaloes, cows and other possessions as their personal property.

Several parties have alleged that *Interlok* is factually wrong when depicting how Maniam, who is from the Pariah caste, is able to sell his cows in order to come to Malaya, as pariahs are to them, not allowed to own property. Such an argument is factually incorrect when one alludes to *Untouchables* and Mulk Raj Anand has precisely and accurately depicted the situations of the pariahs regarding the ability and freedom to earn an income as well as to own property according to their means. Thus, what is presented in *Interlok* about Maniam as coming from the Pariah caste and selling his cows to gather funds in order to come to Malaya and live a better life is in fact, plausible. One notes that in India, some individuals from among the pariahs have become successful and well-known through their own effort and struggle to forge better lives for themselves.

Yet another issue of contention is the call to withdraw the word *paria* from the novel. In *Paria*, these people are referred to as *orang-orang Paria* until the end of the novel, where it tells about how, in the 1930s, Mahatma Ghandi introduced the term "Harijan" to refer to the pariahs. The term "Harijan", that means "children of God" has been used since then to replace the term "pariah". However, *Interlok* depicts the coming of people from the Pariah caste to Malaya in the 1910s and more importantly, during this time, the terms "Harijan" or "Dalit" (another term used to refer to the pariahs) have not yet been used.

It must be stressed that Abdullah Hussain does not use the term "pariah" derogatorily, as he describes Maniam as good and hard-working. There

is no connection between the identity of the ethnic Indian community in Malaysia at the time in question to the context that is understood in India. This is because the term “pariah” in Malaysia carries no negative connotation and the group is treated like any other ethnic group. As the caste system has never been practiced in Malaysia, the discrimination against that caste is unknown and not understood in Malaysia. Therefore, the terms “pariah” or “Khek” or any other terms that carry with them negative connotations outside the Malay world, cannot be said to be associated with any negative identity in Malaysia.

### **Reality of Malaysia’s Multicultural Society**

At this juncture, what can we say about the Malaysian multicultural landscape? If we allude to the *Interlok* episode, the reality is that Malaysia’s multicultural society is still shackled by racist issues which, may be used by politicians and certain parties, and in this case, by the ethnic Indian community. This shows that the national identity as depicted in *Interlok* does not exist in the Malaysian society. Therefore, the identity created in the novel is a false one. The process of multiculturalism as seen in the narrative is at times at odds with the reality outside the text. As such, the identity that is formed through this multiculturalism narrative is unfortunately, a false one. This is what Nolan has found in the identity presented in *They’re a Weird Mob*. There too, issues on the “multicultural identity” as presented in the novel which contradict the actual situation taking place in Australia, remain unresolved. Just as in *Interlok*, the multicultural identity that is depicted does not really exist. On *They’re a Weird Mob*, this is what Nolan has to say (2009:102):

Anecdotaly, *They’re a Weird Mob* was popular with migrants as well as its vision of Australia as egalitarian, simple minded and open-hearted. Even at the same time, reviews of the book suggested that its vision of Australia was manifestly false.

*They’re a Weird Mob* presents an angle from the immigrants that is in line with the vision of the country as being just, open and accepting. However, in reality the opposite is true. The same can be said about *Interlok* in view of a multicultural society that is fair and just, which accepts diversity with an open mind, and in the end, leaving behind the identities of their ancestors through the formation of a new identity as citizens of the new country.

However, the issue of the use of the term *paria* in *Interlok* shows that it is the immigrants who are prejudiced and racist, and who remain caught in between dual identities—Indian and Malaysian identity—and whose point of reference remains to be India and the Indian culture.

## Conclusion

*Interlok* is Abdullah Hussain's vision, aligned with the theme of a novel—writing competition held in conjunction with the tenth anniversary of Malaysia's independence. He envisions the formation of an ideal national identity for a multicultural Malaysia, existing in a multicultural space. This narrative is aimed at providing a covert definition and understanding of multiculturalism. As a work of fiction and not political doctrine, it cannot be deemed to be inaccurate. *Interlok* is a product of artistic freedom and fictional realism. It presents a narrative that is not subject to definitions or political doctrines. Abdullah Hussain has moved far in freeing *Interlok* from the trappings of political clutches. Instead, he draws the outlines of a vision of a multicultural society in the context of forming a fair and just identity for all. *Interlok* is an attempt to move away from the reality of politics, and with that it tries to avoid stressing cultural hegemony or dominance by the majority group in authority. For *Interlok*, the reality of cultural politics suffices to be represented in more symbolic ways. However, it is this "gentle" approach that leads to a tendency in *Interlok* to see multiculturalism as an expression of equality to the extent that it rejects assimilation. Further, such equality seems to extend to the integrity of the rights of the indigenous inhabitants. It is obvious that *Interlok* does not directly stress the special rights of the indigenous people and that a national identity should be based on such a premise. This makes *Interlok* very much multicultural in nature. However, it must be understood that *Interlok* attempts to free itself from the political realm as well as the existing reality in order to create an ideal multicultural identity. It is not a political tool, nor an ideological weapon for indoctrination, but a mirror to reflect an ideal vision.

*Interlok* is however, faced with the creation of a false identity. It is false as it stands in opposition with what is experienced in reality. The real world shows that ethnic identity is still strong and still authoritative in all social decisions, while the ideal multicultural social identity depicted in *Interlok* does not exist in the Malaysia context. The series of objections against *Interlok* are evidence of a social situation still trapped in operations based

on racist thinking. If the identity of “Maniam” truly exists among ethnic Indians in Malaysia, the term *paria* would not have been a big issue where identity is concerned. Maniam after all, has done away with this identity and has identified himself differently. No retrospection of history will cause him to take back that identity. It is this point that makes *Interlok* successful in suggesting a vision of the formation of an ideal multicultural identity, while at the same time creating a false one. The ideal multicultural identity does not exist in the social situation in Malaysia at present. However, the false identity that emerges in *Interlok* is also a representation of a social situation in a multicultural space, and *Interlok* becomes unique when seen as a multiculturalism text or narrative.

In the overall analysis, *Interlok* can be seen as a fictional creation of a reality presented in the form of a multiculturalism narrative that alludes to interesting issues central to the formation of an ideal identity, as well as to the issues of domination, subordination and social acquiescence in multicultural Malaysia during present times.

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**(Translated by Tanja Jonid)**