

SINGAPORE **E** CLASSICS

GREEN IS THE COLOUR
LLOYD FERNANDO



LLOYD FERNANDO (1926–2008) was born in Kandy, Sri Lanka. He emigrated to Singapore with his family in 1938.

After obtaining his PhD in Literature in English from The University of Leeds, he served as Professor and Head of the English Department at the University of Malaya from 1967 to 1978. He then took an early retirement at the age of 52 to read Law in London. Fernando was admitted as Advocate and Solicitor of the High Court of Malaya in 1980.

Fernando is best known for his two novels, *Scorpion Orchid* and *Green is the Colour*, which explore issues of identity and cultures in a multi-racial society. For his contribution to the University of Malaya, he was conferred the title of Professor Emeritus in 2005. Fernando passed away in 2008, leaving behind his wife, Marie, two daughters and four grandchildren.

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For Marie

Introduction

IN A TRIBUTE to Lloyd Fernando (1926–2008), following his death in 2008, I wrote:

Lloyd Fernando was a trailblazer, a pathfinder in Malaysian literature and culture and for his many contributions to English writing in the country, especially during the early years of Malaysia's independence, he should appropriately be dubbed the “founder” and “father-figure” of Malaysian literature in English. (“Lloyd Fernando: A Tribute”, 1)

Four years later, as I write this Introduction for a reprint of his second novel, *Green is the Colour* (1993), by Singapore's Epigram Books, I feel that I should begin by re-emphasising Fernando's significance as a literary figure in the tradition of Malaysian literature in English. As a creative writer, Fernando wrote two novels, *Scorpion Orchid* (1976) and *Green is the Colour*, one play, *Scorpion Orchid, the Play* (first staged in 1994 and published in 2003), and a short story, “Surja Singh” (2001). This may not be a long list compared to those of younger writers in the tradition, like K.S. Maniam and Shirley Lim

(both who were Fernando's students at University Malaya and were, in a manner of speaking, anointed by him as writers), but Fernando's true significance lies in: (1) his defence of the English language at a time when English was viewed with suspicion and roundly condemned as an instrument of colonisation and a colonial relic; (2) the opportunities he created for the younger writers in the medium by introducing courses in Commonwealth literature and creative writing in his capacity as the first local Professor of English, at the country's only university then, University Malaya; (3) the socio-political circumstances in which he wrote his own works as well as the courage of imagination and vision he showed in addressing the most sensitive and contentious issues of his society, i.e. race, language, religion and gender; finally, (4) his repeated attempts to show, through his creative works, the ideal way forward for Malaysia as a newly independent multicultural society, in finding unity and an integrated national identity in the midst of its ethno-religious-linguistic pluralism and diversity.

When Malaysia became independent in 1957 as the Federation of Malaya, a provision was introduced in its constitution that after ten years Malay, or Bahasa Melayu, would become the country's sole official language. Accordingly, a Language Act was passed in parliament in 1967 making Malay the national language, thus relegating English, the language of colonial administration—but also Fernando's medium of education and creative expression—to the backdrop. However,

the real loss of status for English came in the wake of the racial riots of 1969, which shattered all preconceptions about culture and language, and redefined Malaysian society by putting Malay language and culture at the centre. Therefore, when the Malaysian Parliament reconvened in 1971, after a period of emergency rule by the National Operations Council (NOC), further amendments were introduced in the Language Act, making it illegal or seditious to dispute the status of the national language as provided for in Article 152 of the Malaysian Constitution. This effectively reduced English to a 'second' language in the country for good, concomitantly diminishing literature in the language to a secondary role, or what was dubbed by one Malay scholar as *kesusastreaan sukuan*, "sectional literature" (Quayum and Wicks, x), and exalting *Sastera Melayu* or Malay literature, owing to its symbiotic relationship with the language, to the level of national literature.

The year 1971 saw several more actions by the Government to reinforce the status of the Malay people, language and culture in the fabric of national life. The Malaysian society was already stratified at the time of Independence, as the Federation of Malaya Agreement, signed in 1948, recognised Malaya as "the country of the Malays" (*tanah Melayu*) and stipulated certain special rights and privileges for these people to ensure their political primacy. Following the riots, steps were taken to further safeguard this "constitutional contract" and uphold the supremacy of the Malay race (Cheah, 126). The New Economic

Policy (NEP) was introduced to reduce economic disparity between Malays and Chinese and eventually eliminate the correlation between race and economic function (Baker, 336; Andaya and Andaya, 310). Also formulated in 1971 was a policy on National Culture, which maintained that the national culture should be based on the culture of the Malays and other indigenous peoples—of which Islam was an important element—and that it should also include “suitable elements of other cultures” (Cheah, 133). Moreover, a ‘Sensitive Issues’ Bill was passed in parliament, which prohibited questioning of the “special rights of the Malays” (Cheah, 132).

It was in the midst of such a politically-culturally adverse and divisive environment that Lloyd Fernando embarked on and forged his career as a writer in the English language and as a professor of English. Coincidentally, Fernando became Professor and Head of English at University Malaya the same year that the Language Act was passed, i.e. 1967. That year, too, he launched a new literary magazine, *Tenggara*, to create avenues for young writers in the country. In 1968 Fernando brought out his first edited collection of Malaysian short stories, *Twenty-Two Malaysian Short Stories*, followed by two edited volumes of drama, *New Drama One* and *New Drama Two*, both published in 1972. He also published a second edited collection of short stories, *Malaysian Short Stories*, in 1981. These early anthologies were the first bricks to pave the tradition of English writing in the country, defying the political and cultural *zeitgeist* of the time.

Fernando’s first novel, *Scorpion Orchid*, came out in 1976—again, at a time when English was in the doldrums and writers in the language were exposed to the deep futility of pursuing it as a creative medium, forcing many of them to either emigrate (Ee Tiang Hong and Shirley Lim), choose silence (Wong Phui Nam, who stopped writing for over two decades), or cross over to the Malay language (Muhammad Haji Salleh, who quizzically concluded, “Should I lick the hand that strangles my language and culture” [Nor Faridah and Quayum, 124]). Despite this overwhelming crisis, Fernando decided to stay the course and bring out his novel, not so much as a marker of challenge to the country’s language policy, but rather out of a simple conviction that a writer is not free to choose his language but must write in one in which he “not only thinks but also feels in the depths of [his] being” (Quayum, “Lloyd Fernando: A Tribute”, 2). As a loyal Malaysian citizen, Fernando—actually a Sinhalese from Sri Lanka, who immigrated to British Malaya with his father in 1938, at the age of twelve and made the new place his ‘home’—came to master the country’s national language, such that he would often choose to give lectures in the classroom, and later, voluntarily argue his cases at court after becoming a lawyer (following his retirement from the university), in the Malay language. Yet English always remained his first language after, to quote from one of his interviews, “I lost fluency in my mother tongue, Sinhala” (“Lloyd Fernando: A Tribute”, 2).

Fernando's second novel, *Green is the Colour*, came out in 1993, a lengthy seventeen years after the publication of his first novel. By then, however, the fate of the English language had changed appreciably in the country, as, realising its global, commercial and technological value, the Government of Malaysia had undertaken several pragmatic measures since the mid-1980s to 'reinstate' the language. The renewed fortunes of the English language helped correspondingly to improve the general acceptance and status of the writers in the language; but they remained, and still are, marginalised, as literature in English is still officially a 'sectional literature' and writers pursuing the medium are not considered for any official funding or prizes. Thus, venting his frustration for this discriminatory attitude towards the writers in English (and other minority languages), vis-à-vis Singapore where all writers are treated uniformly, Kee Thuan Chye explains in a cynical tone:

Singapore respects literature in any language by its citizens. By and large, Singapore upholds a meritocratic system. It nominates writers from across the language spectrum for its Cultural Medallion and for the SEA Write Award whereas here in Malaysia, you'd have to be writing in Malay to qualify to become a national Laureate or even be considered for the SEA Write Award, which is actually bestowed by an external body.... It's a case of the writers in Malay waiting their turn to be called. (232)

However, if Malaysia remains a fractured society on the issue of language, it is even more so on the issue of race. Commenting on the caste system in Hinduism which essentially divides and polarises the society, Mahatma Gandhi said that it was the "greatest blot" and "curse" (Wolpert, 310) on Hinduism; "a rotten part or an excrescence" of the religion (Fischer, 41). One may perhaps borrow such expressions to describe the race scenario in Malaysia (although one has to be aware that the Hindu caste system is a far more inflexible and sinister a system and has been there for a much longer period)¹, as its citizens remain divided into two hierarchical groups, 'Bumiputras' (sons of the soil) and 'Pendatangs' (immigrants). Moreover, its political parties are largely race-centred; intermingling of the races is rare and often viewed with suspicion; intermarriage is almost an unthinkable proposition, as any marriage with a Malay (by far the majority group, comprising roughly about sixty per cent of the total population) would also constitutionally require the person to convert to Islam. Thus since inception, having inherited the divide and rule policy of the colonisers, Malaysia has by and large remained a racially segregated society, having many competing 'nations' living within the borders of a single country, rather than attaining its postcolonial goal of 'one country, one nation'.

These are the issues that preoccupy Fernando in his two novels: how to overcome social hierarchy, exclusivity, us/them binarism, and subsequently make Malaysia into a socially

inclusive, cohesive, holistic society? How to close the gap between the races and make every citizen feel equally at home, without their having to experience any disparity or undue isolation/inferiority? Again, with regard to the caste system, Gandhi's answer was: "We are all equal.... None are high and none are low.... The distinction between high and low is a blot on Hinduism which we must obliterate" (Fischer, 134). Fernando's answer with regard to the racial stratification in his society is comparable to that of Gandhi; he is propelled by a similar mission of equality, fellowship and justice for all Malayans/Malaysians in his two novels. In the early years of the twentieth century, when Bengal was being battered by communal violence, following its partition by the British in 1905 on religious lines, a female Bengali Muslim writer had the farsightedness and courage to give the following advice to her fellow Indian women, in her essay "Sugrihini" ("The Good Housewife"):

We ought to remember that we are not merely Hindus or Muslims; Parsis or Christians; Bengalis, Madrasis, Marwaris or Punjabis; we are all Indians. We are first Indians, and Muslims or Sikhs afterwards. A good housewife will cultivate this truth in her family. This will gradually eradicate narrow selfishness, hatred and prejudice and turn her home into a shrine; help the members of her family to grow spiritually. (*Rokeya Rachanabali*, 56; my translation)

Fernando cultivates a similar message for Malaysians in *Scorpion Orchid* and *Green is the Colour*—that they should view themselves first and foremost as Malaysians, and only then as Malays, Chinese and Indians, or Muslims, Buddhists, Christians and Hindus. Prioritising their national identity is vital for Malaysians to overcome their narrow selfishness, prejudice and hatred, and to learn to view their cultural diversity as a boon.

The two novels have considerable overlapping concerns in both theme and style; both deal with historical, political and sociological issues, and both are written in the vein of an "imaginative historian" (Saul Bellow's phrase), filtering history through imagination; both are soul searching narratives, in quest of a nation; both are written in a progressive mode, interfused with experimental techniques—but while the first novel is set in Singapore and deals with the explosive riots of the 1950s and the subsequent nation building process in the island state, the second novel is set in the aftermath of the racial riots of 1969 and deals with the social, cultural and political issues in the wake of the traumatic event.

Fernando's focus in his second novel lies on a small group of characters who are familiar with one another and share family or social and professional ties or both. The author shows how their lives and relationships are affected by the political violence in the country and how they react to the events in their personal and interpersonal lives. In Fernando's allegorical narrative, the

characters are portrayed as individuals but sometimes they are also made to stand for a group or an ideal. Thus the main characters—Siti Sara, Yun Ming, Omar, Dahlan, Lebai Hanafiah, Panglima and Gita, who are all in search of an optimal country—seem to represent the different races as well as opposing nation-building forces in the country. The characters of Panglima and Omar demonstrate the exclusivist aspirations of ethnic and religious Malaysia respectively, while Dahlan, Lebai Hanafiah, Gita, Siti Sara and Yun Ming, in different forms and degrees, manifest the vision of ‘Malaysian Malaysia’, or one, united and integrated Malaysia that will do away with racial segregation. Fernando’s overwhelming emphasis on the latter view indicates what his solution is for the country’s future.

Panglima and Omar are both unilateral and monolithic in their outlook, but while Panglima favours the formation of a hierarchical Malay Malaysia, Omar is in search of an Islamic Malaysia. Panglima believes in forced cultural assimilation. He is of the view that because Malays are the natives of the land, it is incumbent upon the non-Malays to follow the Malay culture. He wants the nation to have a single set of values, and he fights for it tooth-and-nail to the end, to the extent that he becomes brutally ruthless towards all those who stand in his way: he is behind the abduction, torture and death of Dahlan, the kidnapping of Yun Ming and Siti Sara, and the physical assault on Lebai Hanafiah. He also rapes Siti Sara in the penultimate chapter of the novel—all because, as a

Machiavellian, he thinks that the ends justify the means; he must therefore undertake whatever he believes necessary to realise his vision for the nation.

However, it is interesting that although Panglima is a fierce advocate of Malay ethnic nationalism, he himself is not a true Malay. Originally from Rangoon (Burma), he came to Malaya via Thailand in 1941, married a Muslim woman, and converted to Islam. His main advantage is that he has the features of a Malay: “All agreed he had Malay features” (206). It is because of this and his conversion to Islam that he has been accepted into the mainstream Malay community, and through subtle manoeuvrings has become the political secretary to the Home Minister. This goes to show that Malays are not a race but an ethnic conglomerate and that many Malays who enjoy the privileges of the Bumiputra community actually came to Malaya/Malaysia long after the arrival of the Indians and Chinese—a glaring example of injustice inherent in the ideal of an exclusionary Malay nationalism.

Omar, however, is in search of an Islamic Malaysia. He wants to create a “pure society of only believers” (119) and turn Malaysia into “a real country” where all its citizens will be “of the same faith” (53). Omar considers Gita, a friend and colleague of his wife Siti Sara, “a distraction and ultimately a danger” (46), only because she belongs to another faith. He also refuses to sign a petition by his Harvard friend, Sabapathy, for the renovation of a temple, because he does not wish to

encourage the spread and survival of beliefs that are contrary to his own; and, when his wife volunteers to sign the petition, he retaliates by abusing her physically and sexually. Omar is of the view that Western modernity is the ultimate threat to Malaysia. Therefore, he leaves Kuala Lumpur to join an Islamic commune and forces his wife, Siti Sara, to give up her lectureship at a local university and accompany him to Jerangau, a remote village, where the movement is based. This is his way of rejecting modern civilisation and affirming an Islamic way of life where the followers will live a modest life of worship and piety (or of otherworldliness) instead of aspiring to 'sinful' worldly success. However, the futility of Omar's aspiration is expressed in the fact that at the time he and his wife reach the village to join the cult, a feud breaks out between rival leaders of the group, splitting the followers into two factions at each others' throats, and signalling the eventual collapse of the entire movement. On the other hand, to be fair to Omar, he abandons his religious mission by the end of the novel and returns to Sayong (Siti Sara's village) in time to rescue Siti Sara from Panglima's sexual assault, knowing fully that "she is not [his] wife" (as Siti Sara had earlier abandoned Omar in Jerangau and returned to Kuala Lumpur, where she carried on with her relationship with Yun Ming), but nevertheless "a human being" (224). This action indicates the restoration of Omar's human identity and human point of view, replacing his former fragmentary identity and monolithic outlook.

In contrast to the polarised and polarising views of Panglima and Omar, Dahlan, Gita, Siti Sara, Yun Ming and Lebai Hanafiah share an inclusivist and encyclopaedic vision for the nation. They all consider that Malaysia should become a composite, mosaic nation where all the races and religions can coexist on equal footing, and every citizen is perceived first and foremost as a human being and, as a Malaysian, above his or her racial and religious identity. In other words, Malaysia, in their view, should be a country for all Malaysians and not predominantly for any one group of people.

Of these characters, Dahlan is certainly the most spirited advocate of unity. He says, "All of us must make amends. Each and every one of us has to make an individual effort. Words are not enough. We must show by individual actions that we will not tolerate bigotry and race hatred" (79). As a personal gesture, he, a Malay Muslim, marries Gita, a Hindu woman, without asking her to convert to Islam. He also stands up for Ti Shung, a Chinese preacher, and Fateema Neelambigai, an Indian-Hindu woman who had converted previously to Islam but is refused burial by the Religious Department after her death, for lack of proper documents of conversion. However, Dahlan's incendiary lectures on unity create violence. He is looking for a quick fix for a problem which requires time to heal. Unity cannot be achieved through destructive excitement or violence of passion, but requires a gradual overcoming of differences through shared memories and understanding of

each other's values. Dahlan's death at the end of the novel signifies the author's rejection of a revolutionary method in resolving Malaysia's socio-political problems, in favour of slow evolutionary reforms; to light the house there is no need to set fire to it; to build up something, we need not sacrifice the dykes of prudence and patience.

Perhaps Yun Ming, Siti Sara and Lebai Hanafiah are better role models for change and Malaysian unity. They all think on a wider spectrum and envision a nation built on compromise, consensus and reciprocity; they have the right frame of mind to lead by personal examples, especially at a time when the country is embroiled in an inter-racial crisis.

Yun Ming is a second-generation Chinese-Malaysian² who "doggedly maintained a loyalty to his country" (83). Unlike Panglima and Omar, who advocate that non-Malays should "understand us" (Malays), Yun Ming maintains that Malaysians should "understand one another" (82). Moreover, he believes in the "brotherhood of all" (170) and approaches issues from a "human point of view" (170). Even Panglima and Omar acknowledge that he is "sincere" and he "understands." Panglima, his superior in office, explains, "I can trust [Yun Ming] just like our own people" (40). When riots break out in the Malay areas, Yun Ming does not hesitate to carry relief goods on his own, despite the risks. Such gestures are essential in creating trust and inter-cultural understanding among the races.

Siti Sara also believes in cultural reciprocity and inclusivism. She is not a doctrinaire like Panglima or Omar, and rejects their unilateral and monolithic visions for the nation. She regrets, "The colonialists had gone, was the whole business repeating itself? Different groups were scrambling to put their own brands on people. Just like the colonialists..." (122). When Omar complains to Sara that not many non-Malays try to "understand" them, she explains that there are many who do and that Malays should do likewise: "My students, Gita... Even outside. Many ordinary people show respect and understanding. We should do the same to them" (109). This is her dialogic vision; she believes that only through the spirit of acceptance and sharing between the races can Malaysia positively invigorate race dynamics and develop itself into a plural, peaceful and united nation. Her own plural imagination is reflected in her constant use of the plural pronoun, 'we', in her discourses of the nation: "She developed and clung to the use of the plural personal pronoun because they soothed her: they stirred feelings of patriotism, of love for fellow citizens whether Malay, Chinese, Indian or Eurasian" (97).

However, Siti Sara's father, Lebai Hanafiah, is perhaps Fernando's best role model in the novel for national unity. A Malay and an elderly religious teacher, he bears no spite to those of other races, and even blesses Sara and Yun Ming for a peaceful future together in one of Sara's dreams, knowing full well that there are just too many hurdles in their cross-cultural

love relationship. He has no agenda except to propagate the beauty and glory of Islam and ensure the happiness of his family and friends, in particular his only child, Siti Sara. His broad humanitarian outlook is summed up in the following statement, which is also perhaps Fernando's message for building a multicultural nation:

There are so many who want to force you to follow the right path. Each one's right path is the only one. I am tired of seeing the folly spread in the name of such right paths. I fear those who seek to come between me and love for all humanity. They are the source of hate and destruction. (138)

To find unity in a plural society and to build a polychromic, polycultural nation, one cannot afford to be orthodox or dogmatic towards any one point of view, but rather, must keep oneself open to multiple options, multiple value-systems and multiple ways of thinking, and learn to embrace humanity with open arms, despite the differences in mores and practices. Fernando has successfully embedded this message in his narrative not only through his portrayal of characters such as Yun Ming, Siti Sara and Lebai Hanafiah but also through the cross-ethnic, biracial love relationships between Yun Ming and Siti Sara, and Dahlan and Gita. These relationships signal allegorically the harmonious coming together of the races, notwithstanding the many challenges, threats and hurdles

they are likely to encounter, as finding unity in a multiracial, multilingual and multi-religious society is by no means a hasty or facile task; it will require serious, honest and wholesome effort from all groups, over a period of time, to forge a holistic national identity.

Mohammad A. Quayum, August 2012

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NOTES

- 1 My comparison of caste hierarchy in Hinduism and race stratification in Malaysia is only notional; it is only meant to point to the injustice inherent in both practices. However, having said that, it should be pointed out that there is an element of racism inherent in casteism, as the original Sanskrit word for caste is *varna* or colour, referring to the skin colour of the members of different castes: white for *brahmins*, red for *Kshatriyas*, brown for *vaishyas* and black for *shudras*. When the "wheat-coloured" Aryans first came to India, they reduced the pre-Aryan *dasas* to captivity and kept them in a lowly status only because of their darker skin colour. For further details on the subject, see Wolpert, 24-36.
- 2 I have deliberately used the term 'Chinese-Malaysian', instead of 'Malaysian Chinese', which is the normative description of the Chinese population in Malaysia, as the former is suggestive of national unity, in which the emphasis lies on the person's national identity rather than one's ethnicity or race as in the case of the latter.

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GREEN IS THE COLOUR

ALTHOUGH AFTER A three-day period of relative calm, shooting broke out again in the centre of the city not far from the Campbell Complex, and police road blocks caused a three-hour traffic jam, Panglima assured the organisers of the cultural concert that they need not cancel it.

He told Yun Ming, referring to the participants, "Just make sure they avoid the town area."

That evening in the *dewan*, at the reception prior to the start of the show, Yun Ming noticed that despite many absentees there was still a sizeable crowd of people who had come. He caught sight of Dahlan above the sea of batik shirts, and began edging through the crowd towards him. A girl was talking to Dahlan. She had a wide mouth on which a smile lightly played.

Wan Nurudin, spade-bearded, was holding forth on the *Analects* of Confucius. A group of people stood round him listening respectfully. How could Yun Ming pass by without seeming insolent? Waiters crisscrossed with trays of clinking glasses.

Wan Nurudin was saying, "These are the times when loyalty to the Government is paramount. Even Confucius said that long ago. There's Yun Ming. He knows Confucius better than I do."

Yun Ming stopped, marvelling not for the first time at Wan Nurudin's gall. "Think of a saying on the role of the civil servant. You know—like, 'One is an overseer to all inferiors and a subject to all superiors'".

Dahlan broke the spell cast by Wan Nurudin on his audience. "So who plans? Confucius didn't ask people to surrender their thinking to the brainless." Dahlan was a lawyer with a thinning crop of hair on his head. His pockmarked face, darker than usual for a Malay, made him look older than his years.

"Wait a minute. Let's hear Yun Ming first."

Yun Ming said, "There is something about government in the *Four Books*. There's a saying in *Lun Yu*—'Let the official give himself no respite, and let all his acts be loyal'—is that the kind of thing you want?"

Wan Nurudin beamed. "That's just what I was getting at. Now take Yun Ming, a fine civil servant. But I'm losing him, I have to give him back to the Foreign Ministry. He's going to Bangkok." Wan Nurudin was Secretary-General in the Department of Unity and was used to having persons who listened obsequiously to the views he propounded on all subjects and who did his bidding without question.

Dahlan said again, "So who plans?"

"Why, the leaders, of course. Because they have the confidence of the people."

"Sounds feudal to me." Dahlan's thought came at the hearer like a verbal shaft aimed at resolving muddle.

Sara, the girl he had been talking to, said, "That's what I used to think."

Dahlan nodded. "You don't, now, I suppose. Uh-huh. It's traditional, so it's good."

Sara said, "I mean we've got to use our own ways. We have used other people's way long enough. That's what the seminar was driving at."

"So you passed a number of resolutions and now you are going to force us to observe them."

In the silence that descended on this little semicircle of people the hum of conversation in the hall suddenly sounded louder.

Wan Nurudin stroked his beard. "What we have formed are guidelines," he said. He returned ostentatiously away from Dahlan to address his more docile listeners. "That's the trouble with some people today. Everything we do they measure by Western criteria. When I was—"

A waiter thrust a tray of tidbits at them. Wan Nurudin's hearers reached at the tray in reflex fashion, and he raised his voice to retain their attention. Yun Ming pulled Dahlan away and said, "Hey, Dahlan."

Dahlan said, "Ay, man!" But his look contradicted the familiarity of the greeting.

Yun Ming's smile froze as he thought how easily the memory of old friendship could be repulsed. As freshmen they had, at the behest of their seniors, waded or crawled across the muddy Bukit Timah canal between their residential hall and

the University grounds. They had sat on low, wooden stools and drunk *teh halia*—ginger tea—at Wahab's stall at three in the morning, arguing about the view that the Chinese were the Jews of Asia, and about Eurocentric biases in social theories about the Malays. Meeting now for the first time so many years later, Dahlan's gaze had only polite, wary attention. Maybe time was needed to wear out stiffness. But then again, maybe time was the culprit which had changed them both so much. There was nothing for it but to get to the point.

Yun Ming said, "Do me a favour."

Dahlan stared at him.

Yun Ming said, "You're already in trouble, don't make things worse."

"What do you mean?"

"Why talk back to the Secretary-General? Let him talk, why make him angry?" Dahlan shook his head in an exaggerated gesture of despair. "Ay, I heard you were working that guy's Ministry. But you're really gone man, I didn't know how far."

"When you go for the interview—"

Dahlan said, "I went last week. You don't know ah?"

Yun Ming did not know. He said impassively, "I'm talking about the next one."

Dahlan laughed with mock heartiness. "You did not know about the first one. Why should there be another one? There won't be another." He turned to Sara. "Let me introduce you to Yun Ming. He's a very important man. He arranges interviews

for me. Don't want the interviews also cannot. Must go." A delegate who had been standing nearby with a glass in hand and a fixed smile on his face, laughed uncertainly. "This is Siti Sara Hanafiah."

Yun Ming glanced briefly at the girl and said, "Hullo." She smiled. Her gaze disconcerted him.

"She studied Sociology in the States. She's a lecturer in the University. You know Omar? Ministry of Trade? His wife. He's not here tonight."

"He's gone outstation," she murmured as she shook hands.

Yun Ming drew him aside. "Dahlan, listen I can't stop. When you go again, it's just a normal requirement—just a form. Just say the words. They've really got nothing against you. They just don't want to make exceptions. They know you, you see."

"I see." Dahlan mocked him. "You think you are so great, anything you say I must jump." His forced laughter was irritating. "Here, Sara, come here." She approached wide-eyed. "Let me tell you more about this guy." He turned to Yun Ming. "You don't mind if I call you 'this guy'? We've been friends for so long, what. You're a nice fellow. You're sincere. You work hard for that guy," he jerked his head sideways in the direction of Wan Nurudin, "and that guy" he nodded at Panglima and then spoke directly to Sara. "Trouble is he doesn't know—doesn't want to know what bastards those guys are."

Yun Ming's face was mottled. "I don't have much time left. That's why I'm talking to you."

“Yeah, I heard just now. Bangkok, eh? Have a nice time with the girls.” Dahlan had a glint in his eyes: he wanted to make Yun Ming uncomfortable in the presence of the girl. “You think your posting is a reward? They only want you out of the way, man. You didn’t know about my first interview, now did you? See what I mean?”

“I’m trying to say something to you. Do you understand?”

“No need. You know the kind of buggers you’re working for and you still work for them. And see what they do to you.”

Yun Ming said, “My God, man, don’t you know the trouble that’s going on outside?”

Dahlan said, “Okay. Do you know the root causes of the trouble? You want to argue with me, okay, I’ll argue with you.”

Yun Ming turned away. Nobody could say he had not tried.

At the bar he met Panglima sipping orange cordial. “I know, Ming,” Panglima said, his lips hardly moving. “I saw what happened. Now we must keep him from the Minister.” Panglima had a square, balding head, and behind thick glasses—eyes that narrowed as if by habit. When Yun Ming looked questioningly at him, he said, “Don’t worry, I’ve arranged for that. Take a look.”

The Minister of Culture was at that moment laughing heartily at something he himself had said. The Yang di-Pertua remained expressionless. He picked a skewer of *satay* from a dish held out to him and dipped it in the bowl of peanut sauce. A circle of men stood round the two like a casual barrier.

Panglima said, “See those men. Ours.”

“How do you know he wants to see the Minister?”

“He’s been phoning the Suria Complex for more than a week now trying to get an appointment. We blocked him. He knows he’s in trouble. He has to work fast.” Dahlan was banking on old friendship with the Minister. They had been law students together in London. He might succeed. If he got through. Tonight may be his only chance, Panglima said. His eyes were mere slits as he watched intently. Suddenly he said, “He’s got through!”

Dahlan had barged through the discreet barrier and was now shaking hands with the Minister. They began an earnest conversation.

But it did not last long. A moment later Wan Nurudin had insinuated himself between them, and Dahlan’s chance was gone. The Minister and the Yang di-Pertua were hastily led by Wan Nurudin into the auditorium, their aides straggling obsequiously behind.

Dahlan stood nonplussed. His head jerked from side to side as if he was looking for something or someone. He caught sight of Panglima looking at him with a faintly mocking smile.

He turned and walked away stiffly. There was no one in this gathering who would offer him help. Sara could not. She did not understand what had happened. She was laughing and chatting with some of the guests as they moved slowly towards the entrance to the auditorium. She called out to him

as he passed by, "The show is starting," but his face was set and he did not seem to hear. He went up to the bar and ordered a drink.

Yun Ming said, "Aren't you going in?"

Dahlan turned and glowered at him. "Did you see that?"

The other stared steadily at him.

Dahlan said, "I said did you see that?"

"What did you expect?"

Dahlan was trembling. "Screw you."

Sara come back and said, "You better go in now, the show is starting." She fumbled with her handbag briefly, glancing from one to the other as she did so. "Is anything the matter?" Neither looked at her. "I'm sorry, I don't want to interrupt you. But I want to ask a favour and—"

Yun Ming said, "I only want to say—"

"Yeah. Never mind."

"You think you're so special; who the hell are you, man? You just come to these functions and expect us to say how great you are simply because you criticise everything. You want to talk like those fellows in Hyde Park, you better go back to London."

Dahlan said, "I know the way you want me to talk. You told me just now. Now tell me something else. Why are you doing this? Being so kind, want to advise me. I tell you now it's no use man, you hear? No use. In spite of what happened just now. I don't know why you joined those buggers. That bloody Janggut is a shit. All of you are shits. Why, because you all want to do

this to us." He made a gesture with his fist. "Do me a favour man, ay? Just go back to Janggut and do what you're good at. Carry his balls."

"Harry, this is not the university any more. When we were there you talked like this, nothing happened. What I'm telling you is now, man, now. If you carry on like you've been doing, see what happens. I'm trying to tell you you've gone too far."

"What happens to me, never mind. What's happened to you ah, tell me that. I still cannot believe it. You. You have become—" Dahlan waved a hand in disgust. "Ah—h—h—you make me sick." He put his glass on the bar and strode away. Then he stopped and turned around. "I have another saying from Confucius. Confucius, he say, 'Those who lick arse shall be shat upon'."

Yun Ming, trembling, stared after Dahlan for a long time. He thought: He's determined to be juvenile. It was easy for him to talk. Just attack everything. Just like the *mat sallehs*. Everything they want to say about us, you say for them. No need for them to say anything. Dahlan will speak. Just criticise everything we do. Dahlan was going on as if there had never been any change. There was no originality in him. He was just an imitation radical. A colonial product to the end.

An apprehension that someone was watching him made him turn involuntarily. Sara was still standing as if she were waiting for permission to speak. In the dimmed lighting of the concourse the light fixture on the pillar near which she stood

shone like a flare. She looked golden in the light which fell upon her face.

He stared at her and said, "I'm sorry", although he did not know what he was apologising for.

She said, "Hope you don't mind if I ask you a favour? You're Dahlan's friend, no? Even though you were quarrelling? You were quarrelling?"

He nodded ruefully. He was looking at her but he did not seem to be listening.

"Can you give me a lift?" she asked. "You see I came with Panglima because my husband is outstation. Panglima is from my hometown. Trouble is—"

The eyes were large with curling lashes, the lips full and sensuous, her complexion, though she now no longer stood near pillar, still golden. She wore a *baju kurung* which glistened in the dim light.

He said, "What did you say?"

"I said—"

"Yah, you want a lift. It's okay. I'll take you home after the show." He broke off, feeling unseen eyes studying them. "You want to leave before the end?"

"Yes. Before Panglima finds out. I'll explain why."

Yun Ming said, "No need. Say, ten-thirty?"

The concourse had thinned out and still she remained. He could not make her out. There was no shadow in her face, her eyes were wide open now like a child's and looked at him

frankly, and her words flowed in a running stream. For a moment Yun Ming felt they were enclosed in the real world from which the shadow world had been excluded.

From inside the hall came the melodious clanging of the *gamelan*. The vigorous beat of the music was wafted to them in waves. They listened in unconscious unison, delighted by the jangling symphony of sounds until they became aware of curious glances of the hall attendants cast in their direction. Yun Ming turned abruptly and walked away saying, "I'll meet you here at ten-thirty."

2

THEY DROVE AWAY from the *dewan* unnoticed. Yun Ming waited on the outer steps standing as if he were looking intently at a neon advertisement which blinked on and off in an irregular pattern. She caught sight of his stocky frame and he gave her a brief glance before he led the way to his car. He drove slowly, even reflectively out of the suburb onto the highway leading into the city, before she told him where she wanted to be dropped.

He said, "Is that on the other side of the railway tracks?"

"Yes. But I can get off just before the bridge and walk across."

He said he would take her right up to her house. She did not protest. They spoke perfunctorily about the Dance Company's performance that evening. Then she said, "Let me explain about tonight. I mean why I asked for a lift."

She had come with Panglima and his wife. Panglima was from her own *kampung*, and a friend of her father's. The trouble was, she laughed self-consciously, she was embarrassed to return with him.

"Why?" He drove slowly, allowing other cars to roar past.

"You know him."

"Yes. He's my boss. Was he trying to get smart with you?"

"Maybe I shouldn't say anything more."

He took his eye off the road to look at her as he said, "It doesn't matter. I am glad to give you a lift."

They were silent for a while. Then she said, "When we were coming to the show, he picked me up first, then he drove to a quiet spot and tried to get fresh. I wouldn't let him, so he's in a rage. When he went back to pick up Hasnah—his wife—he told her to sit in the back seat of the car, and he asked me to sit in front with him."

Thinking of what she had said earlier, he said, "You're from Perak."

"Sayong is your *kampung* then. Panglima is from there. There is an agriculture station there. I've been there a few times myself."

"Where are you from?"

"Just Kuala Lumpur," he said with mock apology. His manner disarmed her.

She said, "I have been away too long. Things have changed a lot. People too. My father contacted Panglima since he's from my hometown and asked him to keep in touch with me. You know he's something of a big shot. Actually he was quite helpful to us—me and my husband, I mean. Especially when we came back from the States. He knows people. We got a telephone fast. We got a car and a fridge on easy payments, no deposit—that kind of things."

Near the turn-off at Angkasapuri, he stepped suddenly on

the brakes, jerking her forward. Three or four torchlights flashed wildly at him from the dark road ahead like glow-worms.

He said, "Put your window up and lock your door."

The cars in front of him had slowed down. Now they came to a dead stop. The street lights were out and the metal of the vehicles arrested ahead on the darkened road shone dully. A figure came up to Yun Ming's side of the car and tapped on the glass, gesticulating as he did so. After a few seconds' hesitation Yun Ming wound down his window a bit.

The figure said in Cantonese, "Indians are attacking shops. Near the rail crossing. What for, don't know." The figure bent lower, angling his head as he peered into the car and stared at Sara. "She's Chinese or Malay? Malay not safe, you know. She's Malay, better you wait a while, let other car go first."

Yun Ming said, "What about Campbell Road?"

The man said it was okay, the soldiers were there. Now there was trouble in Ipoh Road. Not Indians. Some other group.

Yun Ming edged his car to the side of the road and switched off his engine. Other cars had done likewise. A few moved on. They watched as figures dashed past, some shouting. More cars pulled up behind them until the road was fully packed.

He said, "Nothing to do but wait."

He could see she was frightened but was trying not to show it. Later on he thought about the things they talked about while waiting. The Seminar, the speakers, the Communists, the fundamentalists, Dahlan. The occasional flurry of footsteps

ceased to alarm or even distract them. She told him she had known Dahlan since their sixth form days in Ipoh. They had belonged to the school's drama club and had acted in plays together. She had once been Rosalind, he Jacques.

"You know what he's doing now?" he asked.

"He's a lawyer, yes. Oh you mean politically."

"Yes."

"He's quite frank, that I know. Even in school he spoke out." She broke off. "I don't fully know what's been going on. I know he still speaks his mind. Like tonight. Is that what you mean?"

"Not just that."

"I hear he's spoken at rallies. Very strongly. He's roused up feelings, they say."

She was provoking him now, Yun Ming thought. He said, "Some people love to hear him. Others hate his guts. He talks about racial matters, religion—have you heard him speak on religion? That seminar some months ago, were you here? My God, he really made people angry."

She said, "Those who don't know him can easily misunderstand him."

"Enough to want to hurt him. He's in trouble and he doesn't seem to care. Maybe you can help him."

She asked politely, "What were you quarrelling about? You don't think—"

He said, "You know what he's done? I don't mean just, what you call, speaking his mind. That we can take but—"

“We,” she repeated his word thoughtfully.

He stuttered a little and then said shortly, “All right. I don’t want to get into an argument with you. If you’re his friend talk to him.”

“About what?”

Was she trying to be difficult? Play deadpan, don’t answer, use the Socratic method of questioning even for the most obvious facts. He said, “I suppose you will say it’s nothing very much.”

“You’re also his friend, no? Have you talked to him?”

He tried to keep the irritation out of his voice. “You saw what happened at the *dewan*, didn’t you.”

“What has he done?”

He searched for the words for a few moments, and when they occurred to him, he thought she would say: what a thing to complain of. He supposed it was a great thing to be able to do what Dahlan did and was doing. The pseudo-intellectuals would gather around him and admire his active commitment. It was in the best traditions of liberalism. If he was arrested, they would pass the hat round for his defence. If there was no trial they would murmur in the luxury of their living rooms at night. None of them would look any further to ask, Are not Dahlan’s opponents committed, too? Is not Dahlan wrong just to bring an idea in without asking how it should be brought in for people of different cultures?

He took a deep breath and said, “Three weeks ago he stood on the steps of St. Peter’s Church in Malacca and made some

remarks about religious intolerance. Just himself. He didn’t announce it in advance. A few people stopped to listen to him—maybe I should say, to watch him. Now he says he wants to do it again.”

“And that’s the problem.”

“There was a fight among some youths that evening near the church. What with the disturbances that have begun, he’s not making things better, he’s only making them worse. If he really means to carry on like that—” he stopped as if he had completed his sentence.

They listened to the barking of dogs from the houses nearby. In the distance heavy vehicles were passing along the other highway. On their road some cars were starting up and even in the cool of the night the exhaust fumes made Yun Ming’s head spin.

A voice shouted, “Cheh! Don’t know how to pray, cannot let other people pray also. Next time you better look out, I put some shit in your place. Then only you will know.” Several other voices were raised in reply, the ground shook slightly as scurrying feet padded along the moonlit grass verge. Then the cars began to move again, some untidily edging into the right-hand lane and edging back when it did not move fast enough.

He felt vaguely dissatisfied. She did not understand the urgency. Then again, maybe she didn’t mean to be sceptical, maybe it just a manner picked up from her university overseas. Even when she was talking seriously the manner could not

dampen her beguiling impulsiveness. Like when she asked him for a lift.

They were now on Jalan Bangsar, the traffic from both directions moving slowly and without hindrance. At the railway crossing the road glistened with splintered glass. Two cars stood parked, their bodies dented, their bonnets and boot-lids raised high. In a neon-lit coffeeshop nearby a man sat with his head bandaged while three shirtless urchins stood round him looking at him curiously. People from the shanty houses below the verge on the other side of the road had come out and now stood in groups, *sarong*-clad, arms folded, staring at a scene from which the main actors had departed.

They crossed the bridge over the railway line, went round what passed for a roundabout and stopped just past a large, gloomy *angsana* tree.

They had been silent for this last part of the journey. She said, "Thanks", and steadfastly refused his offer to accompany her along a short, dark stretch of the lane to her house.

He said, "It's dangerous. I'd better accompany you."

She opened the car door on her side, turned back to him and smiled. Then she was gone.

For the next few days, Yun Ming avoided Panglima's telephone calls. He was caught once; Panglima was at the other end. Yun Ming mumbled something about a meeting in the Secretary-General's office and hastily put down the receiver. Then he thought it might be a good idea to meet him, to

scrutinise once again the visage of the man who was his guide and immediate superior. What would he find there that he would not find in the faces of other men, including his own?

"Ming ah. Ay, why your face so sour like that?" It was Tengku. She really was a Tengku—Tengku Sabariah in fact. She was his office assistant.

Yun Ming said, "Yah what. You don't finish your work who gets the blame? I get the blame."

She wore expensive clothes over her slight, small frame. She often repainted her lips in the office outside Yun Ming's room, where the general staff worked, re-rouged her fair cheeks, adjusted and re-adjusted her bangles and rings from time to time, and smiled with a sweetly vacant look at each and every visitor to the office. The rest of the staff had long since ceased to take any notice of her save to say, "Tengku, do this list", or "Tengku, this one got mistakes, do again", and she would, with the same sweetly vacant look, attend to the task given to her for a few minutes before she got up and wandered off. She liked Yun Ming because he didn't scold her. He always explained things nicely. At one time she thought he was 'interested' in her, as she told her brother, but nothing happened. She sometimes took advantage of her status to make a mild bantering remark to him and he would reply in kind.

She smiled through her heavy makeup. "So many days you're looking serious, come near you also, I'm scared."

"Got work lah, Tengku."

"I think so you have a friend. Am I right?" She did not stop for an answer. "See? I know I am right."

Yun Ming went into his room and picked up the telephone. This time he got through to Sara.

"Oh it's you," she said. "I thought it was the Ministry—"

"Yeah, it's where I work. I called many times but you were giving lectures or something."

"Sorry. Well—how are you? Oh thank you for giving me a lift that night."

His mind had suddenly gone blank, and there was silence on the line for a while.

"Hullo?"

"Hullo?"

At last he said, "What did you tell Panglima?"

She laughed. "I called the next day and I said I had a bad stomachache and had to rush home."

"About—about—our friend. You know who I mean? I wanted to explain a little bit more."

She came in hastily. "It's okay, there's no need. I've spoken to him. He's told me everything."

She spoke urgently. He said it was important she knew why Dahlan might be in trouble. They met outside the Federal Cinema and walked to a *nasi padang* shop on Jalan Chow Kit.

"He could be taken in," he said, when they sat down at a marble-topped table after ordering some food.

She stated at him. "Why?"

"It's no use asking why. You've been away too long. You will understand by and by."

A girl came up and cleared away from the marble top bits of chewed-up chicken bones, spilt soya sauce, and scattered rice grains with a soiled rag. They moved their plastic stools closer to make room for three smartly-dressed office girls who were shown to their table. It was lunchtime, and the shop was crowded. Above the noise of the passing traffic on the street outside, the girl attendant shouted an order to the man at the front of the shop where steamed and roasted chickens hung by their throats on short, iron hooks. An Indian man in a thin, white *dhoti* held out some lottery tickets spread out in a fan, like a hand of cards. He held this posture for a few seconds and when they did not take any notice, moved to the next table.

Their food arrived and they commenced eating. The *rendang* sat in a dark, velvet brown gravy against a background of crimson oil. He scooped up a piece with his spoon and fork and put it in her plate. Then he helped himself. It was when he was about to put a spoonful of rice and curried chicken into his mouth that he caught sight of the man gazing at him with a fixed stare as he picked his teeth. The jaws were open at a distorted angle, the thumb and forefinger holding the toothpick paused momentarily, then resumed picking, but the eyes never wavered.

"You're in the Ministry, you can do something," she was saying.

"I've been posted overseas, that's why I'm asking you."

“Oh, I forgot. When are you going?”

“Few weeks’ time.”

He continued eating without speaking any further, his head bent, his face fixed on the food in front of him. There was a second man of dark brown complexion, jug-eared and with eyes like black pin-points. He knew they were looking at him between the bobbing heads and the weaving bodies of the other customers in the shop who conversed as they ate.

“I don’t understand this at all,” she said. “He loves to talk but he would never cause any trouble to anyone.”

“How long since you last saw him?”

“Maybe seven eight years.”

“That’s why you don’t understand. He’s changed. You know he had a breakdown in university? He was in hospital for a spell.”

“Why? For how long?”

“Not long. Things were all right after he got married. For a while. When he came back from England after studying law, he wouldn’t settle down. The big firms were after him; one even offered him an immediate partnership. It seems he gave that firm an obscene reply. He’s got his own firm now. You should see it. A real hole. He wants to help the masses, I suppose.”

He caught sight of the two men again and he stiffened. A long silence ensued which made her feel awkward.

She pushed her chair back and said, “Well, I have to go.” She shared the cost of the meal with him. As they walked out, one of the men loudly slurped his spittle through the side of his

mouth. He tried hard to think that the sound was not directed at them. Outside on the grass verge they walked one behind the other, threading their way among the pedestrians, the din of the noon-day traffic precluding any conversation. At the next junction she turned briefly, and said, “They were making those sounds at us, weren’t they?” Then she waved a hand, and disappeared into the crowd of people who crossed the road when the lights turned green.

• • •

Tengku Sabariah said to him some days later that Panglima had called him on the telephone but she had put him off. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he demanded.

“You so moody how to tell?” She searched his face. He walked into his room and picked up the receiver.

There was a *kampung* up north to which the trouble had spread, Panglima said. He needed someone to make an on-the-spot report quickly. Would Yun Ming do this last thing before he left the Ministry?

Yun Ming had a potential buyer coming to his apartment to look at his car; he had not even packed yet. Panglima was insistent. He had always counted on Yun Ming even in preference to his Malay officers to undertake inconvenient tasks.

Yun Ming asked, “What kind of trouble?”

“Nothing too serious,” Panglima said, trying to make light

of it. "Some fellows broke something or other. Supposed to be holy. You know these young people nowadays. They don't really mean to harm. Simply fooling around. But they made some other people angry. Now it's a good thing that groups are on edge with each other. That way when we send a directive, everyone has to obey. But we must see to it that our own groups do not suffer. Just go and have a talk with people there. Find out what's really going on."

Panglima was the first highly-placed officer who really took Yun Ming as a friend after May 1969. They had met at a *muhibah* dinner, and began talking in earnest after they discovered that a relative of Panglima's owned property a few streets away from Yun Ming's father's house in Tranquerah in Malacca. Even if they hadn't spoken at length then, Panglima would have stood out; the high forehead, the square face and greying bushy hair at the back of his head; the narrowly slanted eyes that, behind thick-lensed horn-rimmed spectacles, seemed to glower. At this dinner, he did not pretend; he did not go around laughing heartily and slapping the backs of the Chinese and Indians present. But he caught in the intonation of Yun Ming's eagerly enunciated Malay a remorse beyond the personal for the events of thirteenth May. He stocked it carefully, referring to the people out of touch with the *rakyat* who were responsible for everything bad that had happened. Despite their education they were insensitive, they had no real social understanding. Yun Ming nodded his head several times.

On later occasions, they spoke of the obstacles to nation-building; so many different customs, so many religions. Yun Ming did not know for certain whether Panglima was speaking in praise or deprecation of this. The eyebrows were raised as he glowered at Yun Ming expecting him to show full comprehension of what he, Panglima, had said. Yun Ming found himself saying with fervour that the Chinese and the Indians had to forget where they came from. They must follow one way of life, have one way of doing things. He caught himself in time before being swept into saying they should have one religion. Panglima's pursed, lipless mouth widened slightly in approval. After an interval it was Panglima who, learning of Yun Ming's position in the Foreign Ministry, had asked that he be seconded to the Home Ministry for urgent work covering unity. Now Yun Ming was being moved again. He didn't mind. Everything was for the country and the nation.

"Oh and by the way," Panglima was saying, "Wan Nurudin is having a farewell dinner for you next Saturday after you come back. Ask anyone you like. Your wife here?"

"She's gone to England. With the boy."

"Will she join you in Bangkok?"

Yun Ming hesitated. "We haven't made any plans yet."

After trying for a few minutes not to call Sara, he eventually did. He said he would like to meet her again before he left and suggested lunch. He would give her the whole background of what Dahlan was up against.

She said, "I'm not free."

"How about Thursday?"

"Term time is not good. I have classes most days."

"Okay, then, Friday."

After some hesitation she agreed.

That was on Wednesday. On Thursday afternoon he got a call from her. She was sorry she could not make it. He had feared something like that would happen.

"How about another day?"

"I can't. I'm sorry."

He said, "Okay. Then come to my farewell party. It's at the Sec-Gen's place. Next Saturday." He gave her the address. "At least you can make sure I'll be going off."

She laughed and said she wasn't sure but she would try to be there.

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