



## Exile at Home: Alienation in Rehman Rashid's *A Malaysian Journey*

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### Abstract

*A Malaysian Journey* served as a novel which detailed and recorded Malaysia's journey as a country from its pre-independence era until the time of the novel's publication in 1993. But more than that, it was a novel of Rashid's personal journey as he rediscovered his country and his own identity. As such, it was a highly personal memoir which reflected Rashid's state of mind, his condition, and the problems which he faced through the years. Alienation was one of the problems that Rashid encountered throughout his life. This sense of alienation may be manifested in many forms, which could be through his ethnicity, language, religion as well as location. This alienation could occur due to the isolation that others forcefully impose on him, or it could be from his rejection towards his contemporaries. Rashid's sense of alienation only further fueled his condition as both an external and internal exile of his country, whereby he was unable to feel at home wherever he was. It was only after he discarded his foreign view of the country, casting off his state of mind as an exile at the end of the story that he was able to finally feel at home without being plagued by thoughts of alienation.

**Keywords:** Bumiputra status, Malay ethnicity, personal memoir, post-colonial literature, unhomed

### Introduction

Rashid's *A Malaysian Journey* was first published in 1993 and subsequently received six reprints until 2006—a testament of its lasting popularity and demand. With Malaysia as its backdrop, the novel provides an insight of the country's historical development from pre-independence until the moment it was published in 1993. It depicted the country's political, cultural and social changes, often alternating between the larger picture of the country's political state of affairs and the author's personal experiences and private anecdotes.

One of the interesting aspects of the novel was that its narrative and purpose is often twofold. While much of the novel was dedicated to the author's social commentary on the contemporary affairs of the country, the novel is still, first and foremost, a personal memoir. On one hand, it chronicles the country's historical development, but at the same time, it also serves to record the author's personal history and how he survived in the growing country.

But of most importance was the fact that the novel was written after a critical period in the author's life as Rashid returned from a long sojourn overseas. As such, his journey across the nation can be seen as serving two parallel intents: (1) to rediscover his homeland through a physical journey across the country after his self-imposed exile, which juxtaposes with (2) his inner spiritual journey as he recounted his life and experiences leading up to the point of his exile. The dual intent was reminiscent of Victorian ladies, such as Mary Kingsley, who had travelled for multiple purposes as well, usually one official and the other personal.

Exile and alienation are concepts which constantly appear in literary works of postcolonial writers. *A Malaysian Journey* qualified as post-colonial literature as it was a "text produced by those that have migrated from countries with a history of colonialism, or those descended from migrant families, which deal in the main with diaspora experience and its many consequences" (McLeod 51). As such, both the concepts of exile and alienation emerged in Rashid's *A Malaysian Journey*. The purpose of this paper was to identify and examine the



various facets of alienation experienced by the writer in the novel. The paper also sought to understand how alienation could have contributed to the construction of the author's identity as a writer in 'exile'.

### **Conceptual theory**

In general, the term 'exile' has been defined as either (a) the enforced removal from one's country or (b) the self-imposed absence from one's country ("Exile" def.1). However, post-colonial studies further the definition by stating that exile is the product of colonialism which "involves the idea of a separation and distancing from either a literal homeland or from a cultural and ethnic origin" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 92).

Hence, it is suggested that exile is not only the condition of one being separated physically from their homeland, it could also occur as a state of mind that one feels when they are exiled from their "culture, language and traditions." This can occur due to the "pressure" exerted by the colonisers—a lasting influence which continues to affect the lives of the natives long after their coloniser's departure (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 93).

Furthermore, it has been suggested that there are two forms of exile: external and internal exile. External exile refers to the physical departure of an individual from one's country, while internal exile happens when the exiles remain in their own country and "yet still feel alienated" (Saha 190). In both cases, a person can feel alienation due to the actual physical dislocation as well as the psychological isolation that they feel when they are being estranged due to their different views from the norm of their native community.

One of the results of exile is the creation of the "in-between" class. This group consists of people who are trapped between two opposing cultures. This state of "in-between", of being in a psychological limbo which stems from individual psychological trauma and cultural displacement has also been termed as "unhomeliness" by the post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha. In short, being "unhomed" is to "feel not at home even in one's own home because you are not at home in yourself" (Tyson 368). This echoes the psychological isolation.

The term "alienation" is commonly referred as the "act and condition of being alienated" as well as "estrangement" ("Alienation" def.1). In post-colonial studies, alienation is often the byproduct of being an exile and it can also manifest in people who possess the state of mind of an exile. Alienation also frequently occurs when a person is feeling physical or cultural displacement—a common trope among the diaspora who reside in a foreign country, whether voluntary or not.

Alienation can be twofold: it can occur either to people who feel that (1) they are being rejected by their own community or (2) it can result from their own rejection towards the community as they feel that they do not belong to it anymore. In short, alienation can occur either way—either one is rejected or when one rejects others. Alienation is diverse and can take place in many forms.

### **A Sense of exile and alienation in *A Malaysian Journey***

Rashid's state of exile was evident from the start of the novel. In the prologue, the story began with Rashid's return to Malaysia as he traverses over the Malaysia-Thailand border after a long self-imposed exile. However, just because he was physically back in Malaysia, it did not mean that his exile had ended as he added that he planned to "wander around" the country and "see how [his] homeland is" (7). From this statement, we can conclude that Malaysia had become foreign to Rashid. By rediscovering his homeland, it can be said that Rashid was still keeping the stance and perspective of an exile and that he was viewing Malaysia from the eyes of an exile and not a native.

In the following chapter, Rashid set the tone of his story when he recalled the Malaysia which he painted in his mind "during [his] years of exile" was one filled with "memories of night" with a certain "darkness" that enveloped the land (11). This indicated that the Malaysia in his mind had been converted into a blank space, void of any influence or conflict. Hence, whether unintentionally or not, Rashid had set up the Malaysian backdrop as a blank piece of canvas that was ready to be filled again through his journey as he reacquainted himself with the country as well as his past. He had also mentioned in the preface that he was travelling with a purpose, one which included "filling in the blanks and bridging the gaps" (Preface, 4).

Rashid's description of Malaysia being a blank space was rather ironic. According to Youngs, one of the motivations of nineteenth-century travelers was actually to "fill [the] blanks" of the void areas on the map of the new lands as well as in their mind (2). Youngs also stated that the blank space could not possibly exist for the people who were already living in the place (2). Thus, it was interesting to see that Rashid's reason and purpose to travel echoed those of the early colonisers. This did not necessarily mean that Rashid had taken up the position as one of the colonisers, or even their agent, as he had no intention of exploiting the uncharted areas or



create representations of race like the colonisers did. However, his statement did reflect his condition and the influence of the colonial masters on him. He might be living in the country now but his mind remained in the state of an exile, of one who was trying to “fill in the blanks” of his homeland.

Furthermore, Rashid was able to fit in both roles as an external as well as an internal exile throughout the novel. His condition as an external exile was more straightforward. Basically, he served as an external exile during the period he was away from his country. In the novel, there were two times where he voluntarily left home. The first was when he furthered his studies in England, while the second was during his later years when he left the country in a self-imposed exile for several years after being disillusioned by the politics of his country.

Rashid also qualified as an internal exile as there were times when he felt a sense of alienation even though he was back in his country. This alienation could first be seen early in the novel when he approached Malaysia as a country that he had to rediscover after a long period of absence. He knew he was home in the physical sense but there were still some sentiments of exile which lingered as he had to re-learn and re-understand what he knew about his country.

Secondly, we also saw hints of how he was constantly alienated by his own peers because of his cultural and language differences and preferences as he recapped his life as a child in the secondary part of the story. From this, it was made clear that Rashid was experiencing a sense of “unhomeliness,”—a problem commonly faced by diaspora as well as the exiled who often felt out of place.

There were other episodes which further highlighted Rashid’s state as an exile. In the preface, he brought up one of his encounters with another exiled writer V.S. Naipaul. Naipaul was a member of the Indian diaspora who resided in England and was often “regarded as the mouthpiece of displacement and rootlessness by the critics and scholars” (Recap, 115). It was interesting to note that Naipaul and Rashid shared similar backgrounds and qualities as both were members of the diaspora in a foreign country.

Not only that, Rashid also quoted the phrase “the immigrant is the central figure of our time” from Salman Rushdie as he discussed Malaysia’s multiculturalism, which resulted from the flood of immigrants during the colonial era. Even though he addressed both authors for different reasons, the fact that he actually chose to mention two prominent exiled authors early in the novel indicates that he was indeed aware of the status of the exiled and diaspora who had similar qualities and background as he did.

All these factors further reinforced the notion that Rashid was indeed looking at Malaysia through the eyes of an exile, despite being a native, and that he was physically located within the country at the point of writing this travel memoir. As mentioned earlier, alienation was often the product of being an exile and it could be manifested in many ways, whether the author was away or within the country. The fact that Rashid was both an external and internal exile only further fueled the alienation that he felt as he recounted his journey across Malaysia as well as his childhood.

Rashid’s ethnicity was one of the elements which made him feel alienated. First of all, while Rashid’s ethnicity was Malay, he was also a child of mixed heritage. His paternal ancestry was of Arab-Indian stock and the later generation had “adopted Malay customs and manners” upon settling in Malaysia (39). On the other hand, his maternal ancestry was even more complex, consisting of Indian, Eurasian, and even Chinese.

As a result of his complex mixed bloodline, Rashid was said to possess a darker complexion and a taller height compared to his other Malay contemporaries in school. Even though he was Malay and technically no different from his classmates, he had to endure bullying and discrimination from his peers during his younger years because of his different physical appearance.

There was an episode in the novel where he recounted a bullying incident that was induced by juvenile racism. He recalled that a “particularly vicious lad” had switched his coffee for soy sauce and when he accidentally drank it, the boy made taunts and claimed that Rashid would become even “blacker” (81). From this, it could be seen that Rashid was alienated and unaccepted by his fellow Malay peers because his physical appearance was said to be “un-Malay” by normal standards.

His Malay ethnicity also caused him to face alienation in his adult life. Article 153 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia granted the Malay and the natives a special position, a term which was commonly known as “Bumiputra.” In the 1970s, the New Economy Policy (NEP) established many policies to assist the Bumiputra, granting them certain privileges to push them forward economically.



As a Malay, Rashid admitted that he had benefitted from the implementation of NEP in many ways. However, while Rashid believed that the NEP policy did provide economic favours, it had also brought disadvantages in terms of strained racial relations which only served to further alienate him from non-Bumiputras. In the novel, Rashid claimed that the NEP was a “double-edged sword” and that while it provided quicker advancements to the Malay, he believed it would not “win them the respect of their fellow countrymen” (140).

Throughout most of his careers, whether it was his early stint at the Fisheries Department or his later job as a journalist, Rashid had faced alienation from his peers because of his Bumiputra status. Many had believed that his achievements were due to his privileged status and his abilities and qualifications were often put into question. In order to gain acceptance, he had to work extra hard to prove himself to his contemporaries.

In his early days, even though he was a fresh graduate from England, where he earned his degree in a normal environment without any privileges, his colleague still claimed that he owed most of his achievements due to this “Bumi” status (139). During his period with the Fisheries Department, his non-Malay colleagues accepted him as their crew but still held judgment against him, believing that he was the “vanguard of the New Order” (140). By doing so, his peers had already drawn the distinction between themselves and Rashid; hence, alienating him based on his ethnicity and pretty much waving off all his achievements based on their preconceptions of him.

Rashid stated that the alienation caused by his Bumiputra status never left him even after changing careers. Later on, after having been disenchanted by his stint with the Fisheries Department and the university, he was offered a job as a New Straits Times writer. He believed that writer’s job could clearly be measured based on one’s ability to write and that there was no room for privileges. He had coped rather well until he was offered a rapid promotion as the editor of the Entertainment Desk. It was a move which his non-Malay colleague viewed as being motivated by his Bumiputra status and both parties soon fell out because of it. This showed that Rashid was once again being judged and alienated by his non-Malay contemporaries, even though he believed that a writer could prove his worth with his writing, and that his status did not factor on his success.

Through this, it could be seen that Rashid suffered alienation from his contemporaries because of his ethnicity. First, he was isolated and bullied in his younger years because of his unusual complexion and physical appearance even though he was of the same race as his peers in school. As an adult, he faced similar alienation which also stemmed from his ethnicity though it was from non-Malays. Hence, Rashid was subjected to alienation because of his ethnicity from both the people of his own race and those that were not for different reasons. It was ironic because he was isolated for not being “culturally Malay” enough for his Malay peers as well as being just “Malay” to his non-Malay contemporaries.

To Rashid, language was also one of the causes of alienation. As a child, Rashid was brought up in a predominantly English-speaking environment with much emphasis being placed on English. His father had insisted on him mastering English as he claimed that it was the “language that would give [them] the world,” even though he was “a man of Malay letters” (81, 83). From this, it was obvious that Rashid’s father was influenced by the colonial ideals which he sought to instill in his son. As a result, Rashid had little contact and usage of the Malay language until he entered the Malay college (81).

In school, Rashid was alienated by his peers because of his “limited command of the Malay language” (81). His inability to use the Malay language in his speech as fluently as his peers earned him “taunts and sarcasms” (81). However, he proved himself a proud asset to his college by participating in English debates and earned considerable respect from his peers who were willing to overlook his poor Malay in favour of his achievements in English. Nonetheless, this showed that Rashid’s contemporaries deemed fluency in the Malay language as part of being Malay. His poor command of the language, despite being Malay, isolated him from his peers until he was able to prove himself.

Furthermore, Rashid’s father’s preoccupation with the English language also served to alienate his son from himself. In order to fit in better with his peers, Rashid had adopted Malay speech after his first term. As a result, his father was disappointed and rejected him by complaining that he sounded like a “Sayong Malay.” While he understood his son’s intention of using Malay speech, he still insisted on pointing out the “damage done to [his] speech” (81). Regardless, Rashid’s father was critical of his son’s usage of Malay speech and was said to be disgusted by it, thus alienating his son based on language.

Moreover, despite being Malay, Rashid noted that he had to adopt Malay speech in order to fit into the “alien environment” (81). By using the term “alien,” Rashid had made it apparent that he was feeling out of place because of language differences and preferences. Here, the language issue showcased the sense of



“unhomeliness” which Rashid felt as he was torn between two opposing cultures, whether he was at home with his family or in college with those of his own race and ethnicity. Hence, Rashid experienced alienation due to his language usage, both at home and in school. Religion was another cause of alienation for Rashid. As a child, he had not received much education on his faith and his father did not play a huge role in nurturing and teaching the rituals and prayers of his faith to him. Nevertheless, regardless of his lack of “proper teachings” he took pride in his identity as a Muslim.

However, in spite of his personal convictions, he was deemed to be only “culturally Malay” because he “didn’t know how to pray” (81). His lack of knowledge in the religious rituals had “set [him] apart from others” and even his teachers had rebuffed his questions and rejected him. From this, it could be seen that Rashid was alienated because of his lack of knowledge on the rituals of his religion. Even though Rashid and the rest of the Muslim contemporaries were of the same faith, distinctions were drawn when one did not meet up the expectations and isolation would still occurred.

However, alienation through religion was not only limited to one’s knowledge on the rituals and prayers of the faith. It could also take place when one took a different stance in the practice of the religion as well as the zealotry in which one upheld one’s faith. In the 1970s, there was a *Dakwah* movement in England which caused a resurgence of Islamism among his fellow Muslim colleagues. Rashid did not involve himself in the movement, and like other Muslims who were not part of the *Dakwah* revolution, they lead “isolated and solitary lives” or had to seek friends among the British (116).

Rashid may have been a Muslim, but he was isolated from his friends who took part in the *Dakwah* movement. In his case, it was a double alienation as the first isolation occurred when the Malaysian students grouped themselves into the Bumiputra and non-Bumiputra. The second isolation took place when he was further alienated by his Muslim friends because he did not subscribe to their ideas and conduct towards their faith.

All this showed that alienation could occur even among people with the same faith. Rashid felt isolated from his Muslim peers because he was different from them. First, it was from his level of knowledge, which was later followed by his different approach to the faith. Either way, Rashid found himself excluded and often alone even though he shared the same faith.

Lastly, Rashid also felt alienated from the people around him because of his location. As an exile, he experienced physical displacement when he was away from his homeland. During his years in England, he did not find the foreign country and its customs to be strange, and yet, it did not yield much interest for him. He believed that he was “too Malaysian from the rest of the world” (113). By drawing this distinction, Rashid was already isolating himself from the British and the rest of the world as he was much too grounded in his Malaysian identity.

Not only that, he had also painted himself as being a “wanderer” and “explorer” who was away from home. The term “wanderer” showed his disposition as one who was not rooted to a place and of not belonging to where he was stationed when he was in a foreign land. This showed that Rashid was always alienated when he was overseas and it was a temporary sojourn where he could never fit in.

This alienation was not limited to his experience overseas. At times, Rashid still felt like a stranger in his own country. This was most evident when he chose to look upon his own country through the eyes of an exile after a long sojourn overseas in his later years. He might have returned to his homeland, but by embarking on a journey to rediscover his country, he had already drawn the distinction between himself and his homeland, putting himself in a foreign position as he attempted to re-understand his home.

In fact, it was only during the last chapter in which Rashid was finally able to come to terms with his own identity when he realised that he was “not seeing Malaysia the way other Malaysians did” (267). And that he was actually indirectly isolating himself from his own people when he adopted a “foreign view” of the country.

## **Conclusion**

Just as its title stated, *A Malaysian Journey* served as a novel which detailed and recorded Malaysia’s journey as a country from its pre-independence era until the time of the novels publication in 1993. But more than that, it was a novel of Rehman Rashid’s personal journey as he rediscovered his country and his own identity. As such, it was a highly personal memoir which reflected Rashid’s state of mind, his condition and the problems which he faced through the years.



It was clear that alienation was one of the problems that Rashid encountered throughout his life. The sense of alienation may be manifested in many forms, which could be through his ethnicity, language, religion, as well as location. This alienation could occur due to the isolation that others forcefully impose on him, or it could be from his rejection towards his contemporaries.

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