

MALAYSIAN VISIONS:
EXPLORING IDENTITY, ETHNICITY AND GENDER
IN THE CASE OF THREE CONTEMPORARY WOMEN PAINTERS

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Acknowledgements | iii |
| List of Figures | v |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Chapter 1: Malaysian Modern Art, Identity, and the Aftermath of the 1969 Riots | 8 |
| Chapter 2: Why are there no Great Women Artists? | 26 |
| Chapter 3: Sharifah Fatimah Zubir | 45 |
| Chapter 4: Yuen Chee Ling | 59 |
| Chapter 5: Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam | 74 |
| Conclusion | 90 |
| Bibliography, Interviews Conducted in Malaysia | 98 |

Chapter Five: Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam



34. Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam in her home studio, 1998.

On December 22, 1998, Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam, or Nim as she's called by friends, received us warmly in her home in the Bangsar area of Kuala Lumpur. Over tea and kuih we talked for almost five hours about her life, family, and works of art. The walls of her home display many of her pieces, old and new, and some infamously controversial. She has a studio beside the family dining room, where she sequesters herself to avoid interruptions while working. Her daughter lived with her at home at the time (it seemed to be a temporary situation), and we had the opportunity to meet her husband, Dr. Shan, when he came home from work that day. Nim is warm, compassionate, and cares deeply for the people and the world around her. The information provided in the following chapter was gleaned from this personal conversation with Nim, unless otherwise noted. She has only one solo self-titled exhibition catalogue, which is frequently referred to below.

Family and Beginnings

Nim, born in Penang in 1941, comes from a conservative Hindu family. Her mother was born in India, into a simple Brahmin family. Her mother's father was a Brahmin priest. The paternal side of her family was a rich land-owning Brahmin family from India. Since the family owned a "homestead," it was customary for the sons to marry and bring their wives to live with the family in the same home. Nim's paternal grandfather wanted to escape that tradition and joined the British railway company, and was posted in Rangoon, Burma. He and his wife had two boys in Rangoon (Nim's father and uncle) before being transferred to Taiping, Penang. Nim's grandfather died young. Just before World War II, Nim's grandmother—a spirited woman, according to her—sent her two sons to college. When the Japanese landed in Malaysia, the sons came home. Nim's uncle became an inspector for the Japanese army; her father bought a rubber estate in Penang and did well for himself. Nim's father was the "noble" one in the family, the beloved son/grandson who never contested his mother. His brother, on the other hand, was considered "flamboyant, the artist." Nim says he squandered her father's estate in Penang.

Before she started going to school, Nim studied Hindi and the *Bhagavad Gita* with her grandmother. Then she attended a Methodist school because it was close to her home. Her teachers were Christian, as the school was run by the church. This is where Nim started doing drawings for the church magazine. She eventually converted to Christianity, though she says she did not have to do much to be a convert - every Friday there was a sermon at school, and bible study subjects in class.

Nim was encouraged to pursue her interest in art by her “flamboyant” uncle. He would take her to the beach at Batu Feringgi and paint watercolors of the rocks and beach while Nim sat “beside him attempting an earnest but poor imitation” (*Nirmala Shanmughalingam* 1998, 15). Nim’s grandmother, whom she described as being headstrong, instructed her son, Nim’s uncle, to educate Nim and support her passion for art, which he earnestly did. He promised to send Nim to Paris for art school, but that never came to pass (*Nirmala Shanmughalingam* 1998, acknowledgements).

As long as she can remember, Nim knew that she wanted to be an artist from the time she was very young, acknowledging that, “I was very lucky to have such fine art teachers.” She described her time in secondary school during our interview:

I had an active life as an artist because we did murals. Our art teacher’s husband [Tay Hooi Keat, a well-known artist] was the Head of the Federal Inspectorate of Art, so he would collect paintings from the [Malayan] States and send [them] for exhibition. That’s how I got my painting into The Hague when I was in school—that was my first exhibition (*National Exhibition of Child Art*). Three paintings from Penang were selected and one was mine.

The year was 1957, Nim was 16, and her painting was of a big bazaar scene in Penang.

Nim still speaks highly of her high school art teacher, Mrs. Tay, who encouraged structure and strength in art, not ambivalence: “the spirit should be strong,” she used to say. She warned her pupils against what she called “chocolate box prettiness,” which Nim says she learned all too well. “Monet, for example, could be on a chocolate box,” she said. Many years later Nim saw Mrs. Tay who would hug Nim and call

her a star pupil because she was the only student from that school who became a professional artist.

Nim's parents were not so supportive of her artistic tendencies. They took Nim's artistic talent for granted. Her father's duty was to prepare his daughters to marry Brahmin men, according to Nim:

When my father voiced that education is not for girls and things like that, I was planning to run away. He would probably have to go to India to find a suitable bridegroom, so I said I would run away. And I did run away in a way, I came to KL [Kuala Lumpur] to do my Form 6 [12th grade]. My parents gave up, I really was determined.

At age 18, Nim moved to Kuala Lumpur with her best friend. She got a teaching job and supported herself through Form 6. "I was going to study art no matter what. I worked so hard teaching in the daytime and studying at night that I ended up with TB [tuberculosis]. So I took my exam from the hospital. They kept me there for three months," she explained.

Around this time she became romantically involved with Cecil Rajendra (a well-known poet), and was offered a job in London. Rajendra was also offered a job in London at the same time but he suggested that he go first and she follow later. Taking that to mean he was not committed to her, she described it as "A dark cloud passed over what was to be my life" as their relationship ended.

Nim later married a Malaysian-Indian economist, Dr. Shan, who, she says, was very persistent to win her over. In the 1960s and 1970s, when Nim's children were young, she produced very little art work. But, she explains, "I can tell you this, what-

ever happened to me, art never left me. When my children were small, if I could send one painting to the gallery I would send it. I sent every year.” She lived, along with her family, in government housing where the bedrooms were big enough that she was able to hang her pieces on either side of her son’s bed. Despite obstacles and emotional upsets in her life, Nim never wanted to do anything else but pursue her art.

Nim and her husband have two children, a son and daughter who are both in their 30s. Their daughter, Shireen Shan, went to college in the United States and is a writer for business news publications in Kuala Lumpur. Their son was a practicing lawyer, but now works for a copyright agency also in Kuala Lumpur.

Social Critic and Anti-War Protester

Nim believes strong will and inspiration are God’s gifts to artists. She uses these gifts to make a statement through her work about social issues such as poverty, war, pollution, and corporate greed. She began this social commentary in the 1970s, feeling that her work had to have some meaning; she could not just produce decorative pieces like her friends. She collects her friends’ works which she thinks are beautiful, but says she cannot bring herself to produce such art styles herself. She began with an exhibition about pollution titled *Man and His*

World, and an installation made of rubbish she col-



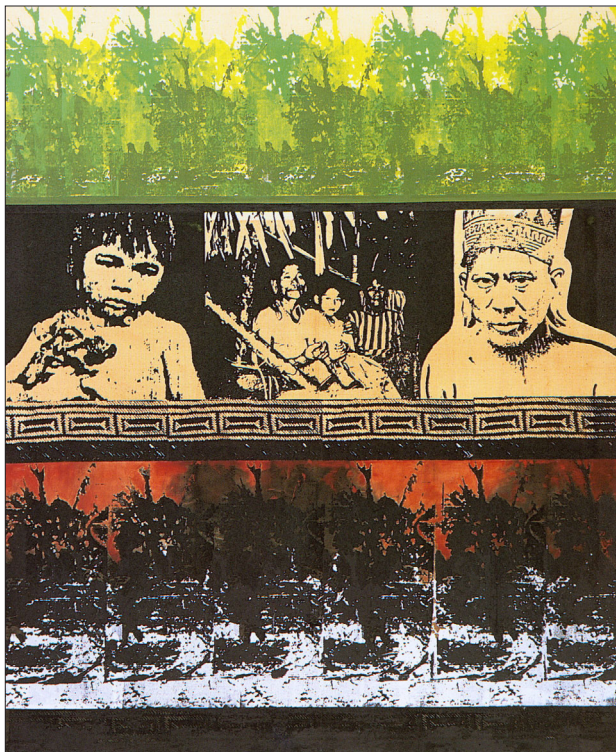
35. Nirmala Shanmughalingam, *Kenyataan II* (detail), 1975, photographic essay, 127 x 105 cm.

36. Nirmala Shanmughalingam, *Kampung Polo II*, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 122 x 206 cm.



lected over a period of 6-7 months.

One series from the 1970s that is still hanging on her dining room wall is what she calls her early squatter series. Nim read about the village Kampung Polo in the



37. Nirmala Shanmughalingam, *Membalak Jangan Sebarang Nanti Ditimpa Balak II (Do Not Log Anything, the Log Will Strike Back)*, 1990, acrylic, ink and mengkudu dye on canvas, 122 x 102 cm.

newspapers that highlighted the oppression and poverty villagers were experiencing, “I was very disturbed by the situation and then one day, I felt I had to do something and I went there to document their living conditions” (*Nirmala Shanmughalingam* 1998, 2).

Through photography she documented the village and the children living there. One set of photographs shows the poor living conditions, including

children picking through a garbage pile. She returned three years later to find the squatter area unchanged but the area surrounding it built up with housing estates. To her this indicated that the developers and government were only interested in making money, not helping the poor (Nim became very upset and emotional while talking about this during our interview). She submitted this series to the National Art Gallery for a photography show. A member of the selection committee came to her house to return the series and tell her it was rejected because it was seen as socialist (*Kenyataan and Kampong Polo II*).

Nim is as concerned about logging and the destruction of indigenous peoples' homes as she is about social issues. While Nim was in London she created a piece about logging in Sarawak titled *Membalak Jangan Sebarangan Nanti Ditimpa Balak II (Do Not Log Anything, the Log Will Strike Back)*. The top portion of the piece is a lush green symbolizing the peaceful and intact rain forest. The middle depicts its inhabitants, while the bottom is unnatural red, black and white - depicting the rain forest blighted by logging. Now she is working with the Mah Meri, an indigenous group in Selangor. She has visited them many times, documenting their plight. They are being treated badly by the government because they don't want to convert to Islam, according to her.

Besides visually expressing her discontent with social conditions in the country, she actively sponsors orphaned children. About ten years ago she and a friend financially adopted twin Palestinian boys. Nim and her friend Adibah Amin, who is a nationally renowned writer and newspaper columnist, contribute money every year to

help feed, clothe, and educate the boys. The boys, Mohammed and Ahmed who are teenagers now, send cards and photos to Adibah and Nim, which she proudly showed to me.

A current, hot topic for Nim is Malaysia's shiny new buildings, the Petronas Towers. Nim asks, "why not build the greatest university in Southeast Asia instead of the Petronas Towers?" She learned that the great Chinese dynasties put money into the arts and education, not "great shiny buildings," as she calls them. She also calls Malaysia's new rail system a "ghost train" because it is too expensive to be utilized by the poorer sections of the populace. A man working for her husband said he took his daughter for a special ride on this train but could not afford to use it for regular transportation. Stories such as these fuel Nim's creative energy which she in turn expresses in all of her art work.

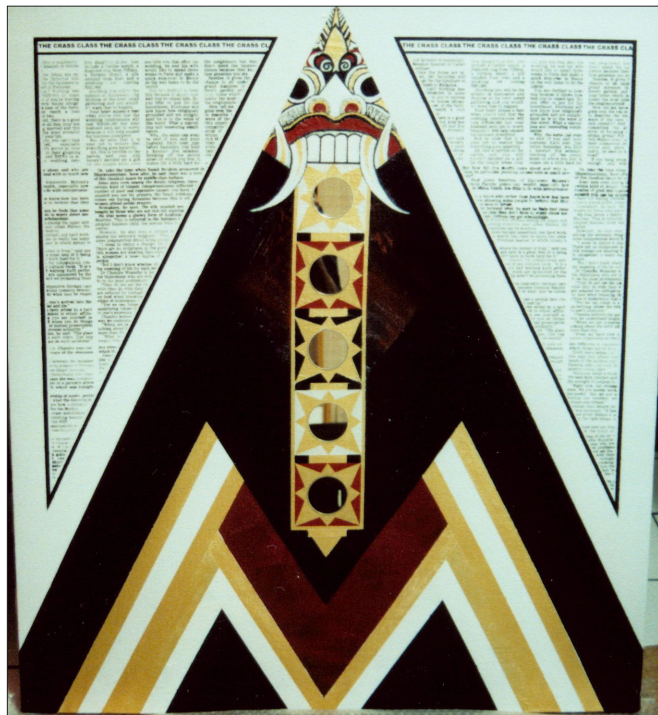
The wide gap between rich and poor is an issue Nim focuses on. She has many writer friends who share her views, who expose the corrupt aspects of society in their work. Of this, she says:

But you know, even when we have a boom here, we have a dictatorship. People like me, and writers like me, and poets like me, they write about the dark... The boom makes for luxury, and luxurious apartments, and hotels and shining malls and everything. But we go for the reality because we rebel against the reality. We know this [luxury] is false... Adibah and I, we are very close in spirit, we are like soul mates, we go for the truth and justice, and that [luxury] is not the truth; what you see there, the truth is hidden.

Nim read that in China there used to be artists who were social critics but they weren't

open about it. They would conceal their criticism within poetry and art, depicting not only beautiful mountain shapes but also a great depth of feeling. This gives Chinese art more dimension, according to Nim.

Artist Wong Hoy Cheong said that artists who produce “art for society” are at the bottom of the intellectual scale; “art for art’s sake” is at the top. But in the



38. Nirmala Shanmughalingam, *The Great Leap Forward* (a) (part of a series in progress), 1998, acrylic, silkscreen, mirrors, on canvas, 102 x 98 cm.

beginning, says Nim, when art was developing, it was for propaganda. She explains, this dichotomy of political art and propaganda versus pure art is ridiculous. Aren’t the sculptures in great Indian temples propaganda art? They were propagating a way of life and thinking, to stir the minds of the worshippers. Yet they are as pure an art form as any other ‘pure’ art. The same can be said of Buddhist art. And of course we all know of the European tradition of propaganda painting and frescos in cathedrals—didactic and awe-inspiring, glorifying not God, but kings, the aristocracy and popes!

Nowadays this type of art is not valued as much as “art for art’s sake” (*Nirmala Shanmughalingam* 1998, 1).

Nim is currently working on a series titled *The Great Leap Forward*. In the

past few years the upside down pyramid has come to symbolize the economic boom, exploding upwards, but Nim flips it right side up and makes it the central object.

One piece in the series features an image of Rangda, a greedy witch from *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) stories. Malaysians suddenly became wealthy, Nim says, and were extravagant, even using gold faucet taps.

On Rangda's tongue Nim placed five circular mirrors to reflect the viewer's image, to



39. Nirmala Shanmughalingam, *The Great Leap Forward (b)* (part of a series in progress), 1998, acrylic, silkscreen, on canvas, 102 x 98 cm.

suggest that the viewer should question him or herself. In the upper right and left corners is silk-screen of an article by K. S. Jomo that questions where the Malay wealth came from. Nim felt this was a tedious piece to create because of all the detail, saying that she prefers using Chinese brush with big, inaccurate strokes.

Another piece in this series incorporates Chinese brush painting. The central pyramid is filled with wide strokes of black and brown. The piece was created in two very intense sessions. Nim does not thoughtfully place each brush stroke because she likes spontaneity, and says that is what's so tiring. "Once I start working I forget everything," she says, adding that she cannot even take phone calls because it's too distracting. Artwork is from the subconscious and it comes from God, Nim believes. One has to let go and the inspiration will shine through, creativity cannot be forced.



40. Nirjala Shanmughalingam, *Vietnam*, 1981, acrylic on canvas, 102 x 201 cm.

Yet another piece in her *Great Leap Forward* series includes both Chinese brush and silkscreen. Inside the pyramid are Chinese brush strokes; along the bottom is a silk-screened photo of a pregnant woman from a village pushing a wheelbarrow full of all her belongings. The top corners depict the roofs of the houses shown in the bottom portion.

Nim often works in black and white, because it would look “too garish” if she expressed social criticism with colors. Black and white, she says, is the “beauty element.”

Several of her pieces are about war: the Vietnam War, Beirut, Bosnia, the bombing of Libya, and apartheid in Africa:

Right from the beginning, when I started with the Vietnam War and all that, the idea was to force the viewer to look at the thing they would throw away. Actually it is to make you uncomfortable because the war is going on and so close to us but we’re living like nothing’s happening. You see the picture in the paper but you throw it away and say no, I



41. Nirmala Shangmughalingam, *Friends in Need*, 1986, acrylic and collage on canvas, 123 x 123 cm.

don't want to look at it. I force the viewer to look at it, and I document it so it's not forgotten, it's not thrown [away].

She used Chinese brush and silk-screening for the *Vietnam*, *Beirut*, *Bosnia*, and *Africa* pieces. For two others, she experimented with shadow puppet motifs.

Nim attributes her interest in shadow puppet theater, the *Mahabharata*, and *Ramayana* stories to her Hindu roots. She studied the wayang kulit art form in Jakarta and Bali in 1986 and collaborated with a *dalang* (shadow puppet master) to produce an anti-war piece, which was never publicly performed. She returned to Malaysia inspired to incorporate wayang figures into her work. In a controversial piece, *Friends in Need*, she depicts Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan as wayang characters, during the bombing of Libya. Thatcher is portrayed as a bare-breasted hag and Reagan is depicted as the evil Chakil. "I did it for the innocent children, the innocent victims," Nim says about the piece that is currently hanging in her living room. This piece,

along with *Save the Seed that will Save the Black People*, was submitted for the exhibition, *Contemporary British and Malaysian Art 1986*.

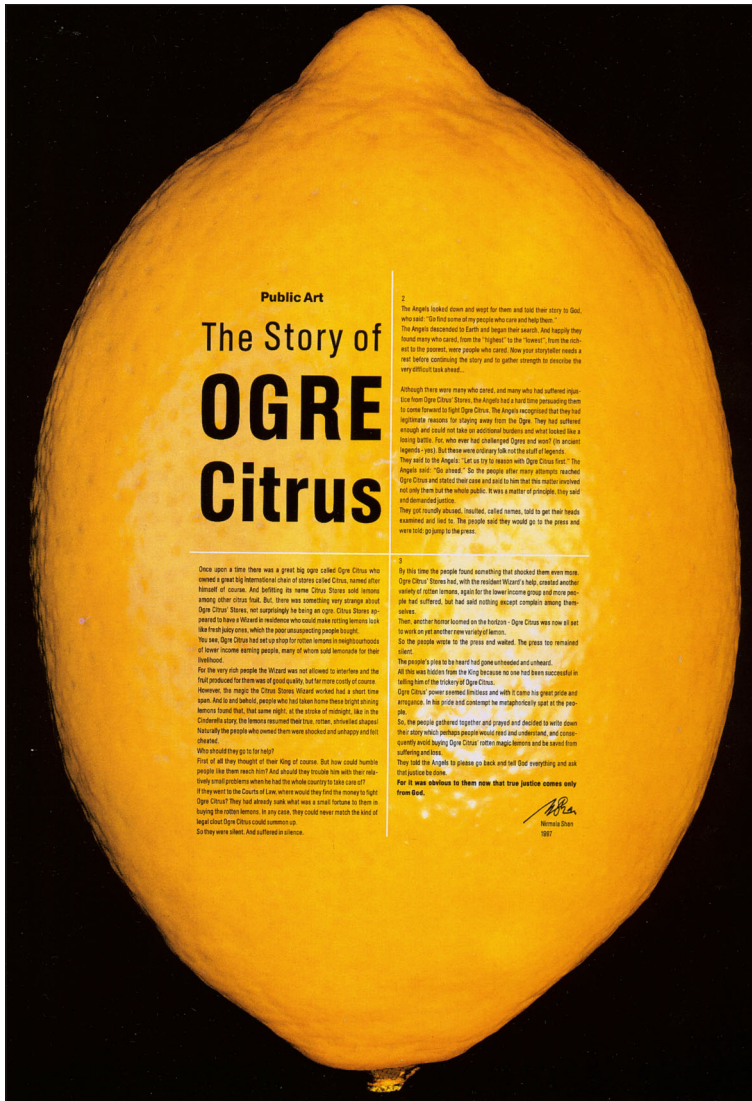
Both pieces were considered too controversial and offensive to the



42. Nirmala Shangmughalingam, *Save the Seed that will Save the Black People*, n.d., acrylic and collage on canvas. (Photo was taken in the artist's home and did not capture details in the background.)

British and were taken down on opening day. This censorship caused a flurry of dissonance from the art community. Nim's supporters wrote to newspapers the following week, saying Malaysians were still too quick to appease the British and they insult the Malaysian Prime Minister with this "Yes, Sir" attitude leftover from colonial times. Even the British curator, Mary Rose Beaumont, did not think the pieces deserved such criticism and commended Nim's compassion in an article written for the *Art Monthly* in London, 1986. As a result of the protests and publicity, the pieces were re-hung for the show at the National Art Gallery. The Director of the Gallery at the time, Syed Ahmed Jamal (also an artist), wrote an apologetic letter to Nim, thanking her for "chang[ing] our awareness of the role of art, artist and society..." (*Nirmala Shanmughalingam* 1998, 11-12). She has been befriended by the Libyan embassy as a result of the *Friends in Need* piece - they invite her to visit for tea. "They're so sweet," she says of them.

Save the Seed that will Save the Black People, another piece with wayang kulit figures, is about apartheid and here again Margaret Thatcher is depicted as an evil ogre who is protecting the administrators of apartheid from the outside world. Nim's inspiration was a piece by Kathy Kollwitz that depicts a mother protecting her children from the war machine, titled *Seed Corn Shall Not be Ground*. Kollwitz lost her



43. Nirmala Shangkumhalingam, *Public Art: The Story of OGRE Citrus*, 1997, 59.5 x 42 cm.

son in a war.

Public Art

Nim's first attempt at "public art" was a poster with a photograph of a lemon titled *The Story of OGRE Citrus*. She produced 1000 copies of the poster and hand-

signed each one. Nim wrote the story while she was recuperating from foot surgery, saying “It just came, in two sittings.” It was during a time when a village was being demolished and she felt helpless to do anything about it. The story is based on a real car company that Nim had to deal with:

“The big company that produces Protons, a popular Malaysian car, was [originally under] Japanese [management]. Due to differences with the Japanese, the company was given to French management. The French eventually produced a car which was considered unfit and unreliable, a lemon [the car was actually a “Citroen”]. Many people suffered [because of the poor performance of the car] and they couldn’t do anything about it. But the Hydro Consumer Association collected twenty [complaint] cases.”

Nim was one of the people who suffered, and when she tried to complain about her car, the company would not help her. Nim designed the layout of the public art piece and had a professional photographer take the photograph of the lemon.

Malaysian Identity

Nim thinks other artists might be intimidated or put off by her work. Other artists are more interested in the history of art and think of art as a series of pictures rather than statements. Since Malaysian contemporary art is still young (being between 50 and 60 years old), people might not have the exposure and experience to appreciate and understand her art.

It takes generations before a nation can have a national art, says Nim, adding that, “with independence there was a rush to say ‘Malaysia’ and stick that on every-

thing.” She explains that Malaysian art cannot mature that quickly, unless it’s just a scene like the Petronas Towers, which is obviously Malaysian; maybe it will come after 100 years. Nim feels that if artists reflect the life of their country, a definite “Malaysian” art will emerge.

Malaysia has been affluent enough to send artists abroad ever since the beginning of the twentieth century. The artists came back and produced Euro-influenced expressionist art. But, “if you’re not painting about what is going on around you, how are you going to develop an identity?” asks Nim. If an artist creates “art for society” (versus “art for art’s sake”) they will be more likely to develop an identity, according to Nim. In this way she supports the government’s role in promoting nationalistic artistic expression, which came about after the May 13th riots of 1969.

It is important to have a role model, Nim says. For example, the wayang kulit tradition was developed 800 years ago in Indonesia and passed down father to son – it is still being passed to the younger generation. Nim thinks the ASEAN nations should come together for more exhibitions like European countries did, that is how styles and schools developed. She explains, “We need to develop as a region, because the countries are so small. In Singapore and Malaysia we have similar cultures, so the art will not be distinctive. There is a kind of loneliness in Southeast Asia, with so many different ethnic groups and languages.”

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