

**SURPASSING THE CALL FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY  
THROUGH TRADITIONAL FORMS IN NIRMALA DUTT'S  
SOCIAL COMMENTARY ARTWORKS**

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**CULTURAL CENTRE  
UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA  
KUALA LUMPUR**

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IDENTITY THROUGH TRADITIONAL FORMS IN  
NIRMALA DUTT'S SOCIAL COMMENTARY  
ARTWORKS**

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**SURPASSING THE CALL FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH  
TRADITIONAL FORMS IN NIRMALA DUTT'S SOCIAL COMMENTARY**

**ARTWORKS**

**ABSTRACT**

Nirmala Dutt, often described as a Malaysian woman artist has been inextricably linked to her landmark social commentary works characterized either by her *Statement* and *Vietnam* series of works or the more caustic *Friends in Need* (1986) in the mainstream narrative of Malaysian art. Her early social commentary works employing photomontage, silkscreen and abstracted brushwork then were a stark contrast to mainstream art practices privileging Constructivist art of the 1970s and romanticized Abstract Expressionism or Malay and Islamic-centric works of the 1980s. This diverging, albeit limited, viewpoint offers no more than merely appreciating her conscience-piquing works as downright “controversial” or simply “provocative”. Moving beyond this boxed perception requires an investigation into a central recurring theme in her art as a counter narrative. Hence, this research examines thirty-five defining major and minor tradition-inspired artworks from the 1970s until 1990s that reflect implicit and explicit *wayang kulit* or indigenous cultural influences. Visual analysis of the artworks’ styles and techniques is done before their iconographical symbolisms are decoded. These findings will then be sited in relation to the recommendations of the National Cultural Congress (NCC) in 1971 to attempt a discourse at portrayal of national identity. While Nirmala’s use of traditional forms may be conveniently construed as an assertion of the Malaysian identity, she is not necessarily jumping on the bandwagon of romanticizing nationhood. I maintain that the notion of national identity she thrusts is largely driven by a class-centered approach (characterised by the people’s welfare and the environment’s condition) more than the nation-centered approach (characterised by the apparent subscription to NCC’s call by

employing tradition). On this ground, her use of tradition as by the people and for the people reflects humanity's identity in a way that superseded national identity.

**Keywords:** social commentary, Malaysian art, *wayang kulit*, national identity

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**ABSTRAK**

Nirmala Dutt, yang sering digambarkan sebagai seorang artis wanita Malaysia, telah berkait rapat dengan karya-karya mercu tanda komentar sosialnya yang terkenal sama ada melalui siri *Statement* dan siri *Vietnam* atau *Friends in Need* (1986) yang lebih akrab dalam naratif arus perdana seni Malaysia. Karya komentar sosial awalnya yang menggunakan kaedah photomontage, silkscreen dan kerja berus adalah sangat kontras dengan amalan seni arus perdana masa itu yang mengutamakan seni Constructivist tahun 1970-an dan romantisasi Abstrak Ekspresionisme atau kerja-kerja bercirikan Melayu dan Islam pada tahun 1980-an. Sudut pandangan menyimpang, walaupun terhadap ini, menawarkan tidak lebih daripada sekadar menghargai karya beliau sebagai "kontroversial" atau "provokatif" terhadap nurani manusia. Melangkah melampaui persepsi yang terhadap ini memerlukan siasatan ke dalam tema berulang pusat dalam seninya sebagai naratif kaunter. Oleh itu, kajian ini meneliti tiga puluh lima karya seni utama dan kecil yang terinspirasi oleh tradisi dari tahun 1970-an hingga 1990-an yang mencerminkan pengaruh wayang kulit atau pengaruh budaya pribumi yang tersirat dan eksplisit. Analisis visual mengenai gaya dan teknik karya dilakukan sebelum simbolisme ikonografi diterangkan. Penemuan-penemuan ini kemudiannya akan dihubungkan dengan cadangan Kongres Kebudayaan Kebangsaan (NCC) pada tahun 1971 untuk mencuba wacana yang menggambarkan identiti kebangsaan. Walaupun penggunaan bentuk tradisional oleh Nirmala boleh dianggap sebagai sesuatu penegasan identiti Malaysia, dia tidak semestinya mempersembahkan tanggapan kenegaraan yang romantik. Saya berpendapat bahawa tanggapan identiti kebangsaan yang diterajui beliau sebahagian besarnya didorong oleh pendekatannya yang berpusatkan kelas (dicirikan

oleh kebajikan rakyat dan keadaan alam sekitar) lebih daripada pendekatan yang berpusatkan negara (dicirikan oleh langganan jelas terhadap seruan NCC untuk menggunakan tradisi). Atas alasan ini, penggunaan tradisi beliau sebagai sesuatu yang dimiliki rakyat dan untuk rakyat mencerminkan identiti manusia yang melampaui identiti kebangsaan.

**Kata kunci:** sosial komentari, seni Malaysia, wayang kulit, identiti kebangsaan

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## **LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

- NCC : National Cultural Congress
- NCP : National Culture Policy
- NEP : New Economic Policy

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Malaysian art has a fairly young scene that flourished rapidly especially after World War II in the 1950s, a period during which artworks reflected the romanticized ideals of a young nation celebrating its longing for independence. The advent of some art movements<sup>1</sup> during this pre-Independence period led to production of artworks ranging from portraits, landscapes, daily life and still life employing western painting techniques that depicted local scenes as subject matter.

Following the Independence of Malaya on 31 August 1957, local artists were overwhelmed by euphoric aspirations while remaining unaware to “real complex issues of multi-ethnicity and socio-political realities.”<sup>2</sup> This disconnect led to the May 13, 1969 racial riots. In response to this fateful event, the National Cultural Congress (NCC) in 1971 prescribed three principles that comprised the National Culture Policy (NCP) aimed at the production of quality artworks and forging of common cultural identity in hopes of fostering national unity.<sup>3</sup> The clarion call to achieve national identity is seen as a crucial unifying element toward the creation of a “Malaysian race” in a multi-cultural and multi-racial society at the world stage. It is hoped that the fulfilling of socio-cultural needs leads to enhanced quality of life in balance with the rapid socio-economic development of Malaysia then.

Firstly, the NCP states that national culture must be based on the indigenous culture of the region of Southeast Asia and South Pacific islands with special emphasis on the

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<sup>1</sup> This period in Malaya was largely coloured with the productive works of the Nanyang artists and the Wednesday Art Group. It was only in the mid 1960s a surge of Abstract Expressionist-themed artworks was seen. All these constituted the mainstream art movement in Malaya and Malaysia then.

<sup>2</sup> Redza Piyadasa, *Rupa Malaysia: A Decade of Art 1987 - 1997*(Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1998), 24.

<sup>3</sup> JKKN, "National Culture Policy," Official Website of the National Department For Culture and Arts, <http://www.jkkn.gov.my/en/national-culture-policy>.

Malay culture. The focus on Malay culture is by virtue of the use of the Malay language as the *lingua franca* in trade relations during the height of the Malacca-based Malay civilization. Secondly, the NCP welcomes suitable elements from other racial cultures in recognition of the dynamic phenomenon of culture to adapt and assimilate. Thirdly, the NCP qualifies Islam as an important component in the formulation of the national culture based on its status as the official religion of the country. Subsequently, the Malay-centric values and cultural forms that took off in the late 1970s coincided with the Iranian Revolution in 1979, potentially resulting in the reaffirmation of Malay and Muslim sentiments which saw a surge of Malay-Islamic inspired art from the 1980s onwards.<sup>4</sup>

Set against these diverse but mainstream artistic approaches, Nirmala Dutt first jolted the Malaysian art scene with her social commentary artwork titled *Statement 1* (1973), which won her a Major Award in the *Man and His World* exhibition. Nirmala's obsession with sociopolitical issues in her work was a huge departure from the dominant trend of Abstract Expressionism, Malay and Islamic-centric arts of the 1970s onward.<sup>5</sup>

Social commentary works that spoke for the socially underprivileged and oppressed communities were seen earlier in the artworks of the Social Realists of The Equator Arts Society formed in 1956. However, it was Nirmala who took this genre beyond national boundaries into various thematic representations spanning her prolific years from 1970s to the 1990s; from dealing with more home grown issues such as pollution and squatters to international crisis of the war in Vietnam and the apartheid regime in South Africa.

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<sup>4</sup> Piyadasa, *Rupa Malaysia: A Decade of Art 1987 - 1997*, 28.

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that the 1970s was a productive, dynamic, sophisticated and significant decade during which a large number of artistic developments occurred; one of which relates to the New Scene group of artists whose works were characterized by constructivism, optical art and hard-edge styles. Additionally, surrealist works of the *Anak Alam* group, conceptual paintings, sculpture, photography and printmaking were increasingly gaining ground in modern Malaysian art then.

As such, Nirmala is recognized as a prominent Malaysian artist who helped redefined social commentary as an artistic expression.

However, little research has been made of Nirmala's adoption of traditional elements in her social commentary artworks (hereinafter referred to collectively as just "artworks"). It would be refreshing to reframe Nirmala's artistic practice in a new light to appreciate her artworks as beyond mere "controversial" and simply "provocative". To break away from this limited viewpoint, a comprehensive study of a large number of her never-before-seen artworks in private collection would be necessary, as a means to address the lack of visual analysis and absence of a sound "counter narrative" to this "controversial" and "provocative" depiction.

Hence, this research calls for an examination on how selected series of her artworks spanning three decades are driven by traditional forms involving the Javanese *wayang kulit* (hereinafter referred to as just *wayang kulit* or *wayang*) and indigenous cultural influences. Explicit and implicit traces of *wayang kulit* would be investigated to understand how the duality seen in social commentary artworks depicting the struggle between the oppressed and the aggressor mirrors that found in the battles between the forces of good and evil in *wayang* stories. Nirmala's artistic style and technique would be studied as part of visual analysis to determine how these traditional forms are represented, before attempting to decode their meanings.

These findings would then be sited in relation to the recommendations of the NCC and discourse surrounding national identity from both a nation-centred and class-centred approach. The "counter narrative" this research seeks to construct lies in Nirmala's use of traditional forms as by the people and for the people, in transcending the three aforementioned largely Malay and Islamic-flavoured principles of the NCP in calling for national identity and unity.

This alternative viewpoint asserts that not only does Nirmala's artworks conform to the recommended NCP principles; they surpass its call for a dignified Malaysian race for national unity by speaking to the very core of the issue at hand: the people of the human race, a notion that exceeds racial creed and religion. The use of traditional forms as a key communication element especially *wayang kulit* to engage the people is thus seen as an effective tool to raise awareness and effect change, on account of the many human qualities and moralistic lessons propagated by its classical Javanese *wayang* tales that resemble reality.

### **1.1 Research Aims and Questions**

This research examines presence of traditional influences in Nirmala's artworks spanning the 1970s until 1990s. This examination considers how the artworks relate to the discourse of national identity by the creation of "socially conscious art", in line with the recommendations of the NCC.

Firstly, this research will analyse the style and techniques by which traditional forms are implicitly and explicitly represented in the artworks before attempting to decode iconographical symbolisms.

Secondly, this research will determine the manner with which these tradition-inspired artworks interface with a discourse on national culture and identity by educating, empowering and possibly uniting Malaysians or humanity in a multi-cultural setting that surpasses geographical boundaries.

To achieve these two overarching research objectives, this research is guided by the following research questions:

- i. What are the implicit and explicit means by which the conventions of a *wayang kulit* performance are used to advance Nirmala's social commentary message? How does Nirmala reflect the role of a *dalang*?  
(Chapter 4 & 5)

- ii. How is indigenous culture explored in Nirmala's artworks? (Chapter 6)
- iii. What are the styles and techniques Nirmala used to execute these traditional forms? How readily do these styles and techniques conform to the inherent characteristics of the traditional forms? (Chapter 4, 5, 6 & 7)
- iv. How can the artworks be read and interpreted with regards to social art history? What do the iconographical representation symbolize? (Chapter 4, 5, 6 & 7)
- v. How does Nirmala's artworks challenge, if not contribute to the prevailing notion of national identity with regards to the recommendations of the NCC? Is she heeding the call for "Art for Society"? (Chapter 7)
- vi. Can her works be said to transcend the apparent projection – if any – of a "Malaysian" identity? If yes, how is this achieved? How does this transcendence deconstruct the notion of a nation? (Chapter 7)

Addressing the above research questions would potentially yield to a clearer understanding of how Nirmala drew artistic inspiration from local and regional traditions with a global outlook in order to challenge the commonly accepted Malay-Islamic dominant definition of Malaysian cultural identity.

## **1.2 Scope of Research**

This one-year research chronologically examines thirty-five of Nirmala's artworks from the 1970s until 1990s in the following four contiguous segments:

- i. The following series will be explored for implicit traces of *wayang kulit* influence: *Statement* (Pollution and Squatter), *Kampung Polo* (Squatter), *Vietnam* (War) and *Children of Asia* (War and Refugee). An analysis would be made into how the narratives in these works be consumed and viewed through the *wayang kulit* lens.

- ii. Explicit traces of *wayang kulit* influence would include the following artworks: *Friends in Need* (1986), *Save the Seed That Will Save the Black People* (1986), *South Africa* (1987), *Racial Violence* (1988), *Anti-Nuclear Piece (Commemoration of Hiroshima Day)* (1988), *World Peace Day “Baby Marines”* (1988), *Petruk Becomes King* (1988) and *Public Art: The Story of Ogre Citrus* (1997). An analysis would be made to identify and rationalize the relevant puppet characters and *wayang* motifs found in the artworks.
- iii. The series on indigenous-inspired artworks would include: *Membalak* (Logging), *Bakun* (Dam) and *Mah Meri* (Indigenous). An analysis would be made to identify and understand the presence of indigenous motifs, subject matter and compositional structure of the artworks.
- iv. Five artworks from the *Great Leap Forward* (Rapid Development) series will be studied as part of the discourse on national identity.

Colour and composition styles are examined along with techniques involving repetition, brushwork, abstraction, allegory, parody, humour, silkscreen, photomontages and collages; all of which will be investigated as part of visual analysis. Attempts will also be made to determine how well these style and techniques integrate into representing traditional forms.

The artworks’ meaning will also be interpreted from a social, economic and political standpoint. Additionally, the presence of any iconographical symbols would be decoded to yield potential alternative understanding of the artworks in a larger context.

This research however will not examine and discuss the sublime qualities or emotional aesthetic aspects of the artworks involved. While Nirmala demonstrates a high proclivity toward traditional Chinese brush painting, no technical analysis of such



manifestations will be made, except for cursory acknowledgements where it's due. Similarly, no study will be done to correlate Nirmala's earlier Abstract Expressionist influence to her subsequent artworks.

The discourse about the use of *wayang kulit* in Nirmala's artworks revolves around the adoption of the Javanese style of *wayang kulit* and not the Kelantanese version. This is due in part to the presence of only Javanese *wayang* forms employed by Nirmala in her artworks (seen by the depiction of *Punakawan* clowns and the apparent tripartite divisions of some artworks in accordance to the three major divisions of a Javanese *wayang* performance), despite her research exposure to Kelantanese *wayang* as well.

The analysis of Nirmala's *wayang kulit*-inspired artworks is segregated into a discussion on the implicit and explicit usage of *wayang* motifs and forms. The reading of implicit *wayang* artworks is accomplished through the "wayang lens". This "wayang lens" refers to an interpretive mindset or concept by which an artwork is appreciated with regards to the mechanics and operations of a *wayang kulit* performance, in the absence of explicit *wayang* forms. The explicit *wayang* artworks exhibit obvious traces of *wayang* motifs such as the clown and Ogre characters along with the *Kayon* puppets.

Even though the composition of some indigenous-inspired artworks closely resembles traditional textile, no analysis on their likeness or motifs used will be undertaken. This research will also not compare Nirmala's works with other Malaysian artists by genre or period, unless where necessary to explicate a point.

### **1.2.1 Limitations**

When research work first began in mid-2016, considerable time and effort were expended to ensure accuracy of information obtained from Nirmala in view of challenges in communication due to her old age, impaired hearing and failing memory.

Unfortunately, Nirmala's untimely demise on 5 December 2016 meant a loss of valuable primary resource for this research. This researcher has only interviewed her twice; on 5 May 2016 and 1 July 2016. While the almost eight hours of transcribed interview sessions helped shed light on a great number of her artworks, there are still many others not discussed, resulting in many unexplained iconographical significance.

Due to this limitation, inferences were largely made in connection to studies drawn from pure visual analysis, news articles and other secondary resources. Sometimes, such connections may appear conveniently imposed as the fitting truth. For example, the implicit *wayang kulit* reading of looking at Nirmala's early artworks from the 1970s and 1980s as paralleling that of a *wayang*'s three divisions, reveal potential underlying inconsistencies (See section 4.1, section 4.2 and section 5.6). This should however not be problematic if one merely approaches the interpretation from a validly suggested "*wayang lens*".

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

There have not been many monographs written about Nirmala Dutt and her artworks since she began painting in the early 1960s. She was never the focus in most general books on Malaysian art during the period of 1970s to 1980s. If ever there was an apparent and dedicated focus on Nirmala's artworks then, it was only to be found in exhibition catalogues.

The prevailing tone of art discourse in the 1970s and 1980s was a "horizontal" discussion of various emerging and established artists crammed into a single publishing categorized by chronological period or alphabetical order in names. It appears there was a documentary and celebratory drive to record and feature any Malaysian artists as euphoric voices of a romanticized young nation coming to being. Generally, these texts offer little critical evaluation of the artworks, but instead, dwelled on the environmental elements surrounding the artists. They are often discussed from a historical context with little discussion about their social context.

Dolores Wharton's *Contemporary Artists of Malaysia: A Biographic Survey* highlights factual survey of the leading artists' personal and education background, influences, personalities, opinions and their professional career in a work that is based on her interviews of selected thirty-something artists conducted between 1966 and 1968.<sup>6</sup> This mode of presenting Malaysian art was partially echoed by Sabapathy and Piyadasa's *Modern Artists of Malaysia* in 1983 showcasing twenty-six profiles of Malaysian artists practicing between 1979 and 1981, which was compiled from the monthly write-up of *The Dewan Budaya* monthly publication.<sup>7</sup> As a more refined

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<sup>6</sup> Dolores D. Wharton, *Contemporary Artists of Malaysia: A Biographic Survey* (Union Cultural Organization Sdn Bhd, 1971).

<sup>7</sup> Redza Piyadasa, "Nirmala Shanmughalingam," in *Modern Artists of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1983).

analysis discussing the thematic evolutions presenting the historical development of modern Malaysian art compared to Wharton's survey, this compilation pays tribute to the "artist's accomplishment in relation to the current notions of the major trends of modern art" of Malaysia. Interestingly and rather summarily, Nirmala was the final artist featured in the book through only four pages detailing her artistic influence, style and journey. Essentially, Nirmala's artistic contribution to modern Malaysian art was beginning to be recognized in the 1980s.

Similar to Sabapathy and Piyadasa's profiling of artists, Mulyadi Mahamood in his 2007 publication titled *Modern Malaysian Art: From the Pioneering Era to the Pluralist Era (1930s – 1990s)* chronicles the historical development of modern Malaysian art by highlighting the style of various artists, groups and movements in a chronological manner from decade to decade.<sup>8</sup> Mahamood structures his writing in hopes of exposing readers to the importance of art education and appreciation involving aspects of form, meaning and context of artworks. Nirmala is featured as one of the prominent artists in the 1980s, described as utilizing "cartoons" in *Friends in Need* (1986) to advance her social commentary message.

Perhaps, the earliest written mention of Nirmala's artworks was seen in the *Man and His World* exhibition catalogue published in 1973. The catalogue briefly highlights Nirmala's *Statement 1* – discussed in section 4.1 – which won her a Major Award in an art competition of the same name organized by the National Art Gallery in 1973. Eight years later, Redza Piyadasa wrote an essay on the occasion of Nirmala's first solo exhibition entitled *The Condition of Being* in 1981.<sup>9</sup> This essay focused a great deal on

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<sup>8</sup> Mulyadi Mahamood, *Modern Malaysian Art: From the Pioneering Era to the Pluralist Era (1930s-1990s)* (Utusan Publications & Distributors Sdn Bhd, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Redza Piyadasa, "The Art of Nirmala Shanmughalingam," in *Nirmala Shanmughalingam: The Condition of Being*, ed. Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka, 1981).

Nirmala's early years and artworks that first put her in the spotlight as a social commentator artist. Piyadasa notes that Nirmala's "powerful socially-committed works" makes her "one of the more interesting artists working in Malaysia" in the 1980s.<sup>10</sup>

Increasing interests in Nirmala's artworks in this period led to a rather comprehensive discussion of Nirmala's artistic influence, style and journey in *The Condition of Being* exhibition catalogue, from which this research has been largely based. This exhibition catalogue represents Nirmala's preoccupation with the state of humanity. Kamarul Ariffin, Chairman of the Board of Trustee in National Museum of Art Malaysia wrote in the foreword of this exhibition catalogue suggesting artist to be playing the role of society's conscience. As conscience is an in-built check-and-balance of humanity against wrong doings, Nirmala's artworks may serve this purpose.

In the *American Experiences: Malaysian Images* group exhibition organized by the Embassy of the United States of America in Kuala Lumpur held in 1984, Nirmala was one of eighteen Malaysian artists whose works were exhibited. The public relations-themed exhibition aims to determine traces of American influence on the body of works of participating artists who once pursued their art education in America. The curator of the show, Yeoh Jin Leng offered little analysis beyond his observation of Nirmala's "documentation of sensational social issues through the mechanical props of photo imagery."<sup>11</sup>

Chu Li and Wong Hoy Cheong's commentaries on Nirmala's artworks are considered the most in-depth to date owing to the background information documented

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<sup>10</sup> "Nirmala Shanmughalingam," 159.

<sup>11</sup> Yeoh Jin Leng, "American Experiences: Malaysian Images," ed. American Universities Alumni Malaysia(Kuala Lumpur: Embassy of the United States of America, 1984), 6.

for Nirmala's solo exhibition then in Valentine Willie Fine Art Gallery in 1998.<sup>12</sup> This period in time coincided with Nirmala's most prolific years. The essays for this exhibition titled *Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator* provided quite a balanced overview of Nirmala's artworks from the late 1960s to late 1990s with slight emphasis on the 1980s. This exhibition catalogue has revealed, albeit cursorily, Nirmala's key influences, motivation, philosophy and creative thought processes, which would serve as a good starting point for this research.

These exhibition catalogues of her solo exhibitions in 1981 and 1998 have provided a mere back-story to her personal life, journey of artistic development and brief description of the representational qualities and emotional evocation of the artworks. Together, they have contributed to a perception of Nirmala being an outspoken and critical artist bent on advocating social justice for the people. However, the lack of comprehensive visual analysis of her artworks to understand the manner with which visual impact is made, leaves a gap in which this research will fill by providing alternative interpretations of iconographical symbols in her artworks and offering insights into the technical and compositional aspects of the artworks.

In addition to this lack of literature discussing Nirmala's visual analysis of artworks, there have also been no comprehensive writings to discuss Nirmala's use of traditional forms prominently seen in her *wayang kulit*-themed paintings and artworks with indigenous motifs. Chu Li briefly alludes to Nirmala's preoccupation with the *wayang kulit* art form in the 1980s as a unique and enriching mode of art making and visual storytelling that resulted in her pursuing the study of shadow theatre art from a *dalang*

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<sup>12</sup> Chu Li, "Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator - a Review," in *The Process of Creativity: The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator*, ed. Valentine Willie Fine Art (Kuala Lumpur: Valentine Willie Fine Art, 1998).

in Indonesia.<sup>13</sup> In the same text, Chu Li describes the often-controversial consequences of Nirmala's use of *wayang* forms especially in her depiction of Margaret Thatcher.

Interestingly, there has also been no written account attempting to bridge Nirmala's two-dimensional visual storytelling role to that of a *dalang*'s three-dimensional acts of animating his *wayang kulit* stories. James Brandon – a professor of Asian theatre whose book *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays* cited by Nirmala as one of her favourite reads – considers the *dalang* as a “god” who “through his knowledge and spiritual power brings man to life.”<sup>14</sup> This represents a consideration to investigate the parallels with that of a two-dimensional artist in injecting life and meaning into their artworks.

Nirmala's use of *wayang kulit* motifs in the twentieth century to advance her social comments beyond national interests represents a form of adopting *wayang* in a global context. Cohen notes, “the form and content of *wayang* will always keep pace with social, technological, and political changes” and maintains that there will not be a “universally preferred model for presenting *wayang* in global contexts.”<sup>15</sup> Essentially, Cohen is arguing that *wayang kulit* in contemporary times assumes different improvised representations as the artist sees fit, thereby reinforcing the notion of implicit and explicit demonstration of *wayang kulit* connections in Nirmala's “hybridized” two dimensional paintings.

One of the more recent academic writings about Nirmala's artworks attempts to cement her position as a postmodern artist in the 1970s and 1980s. In a paper published

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>14</sup> James R. Brandon, *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*(Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970), 18. This may be consistent with Nirmala's attempt at “animating” humanity's qualities, personalities and world events through the articulation of the *wayang kulit* form.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Isaac Cohen, “Contemporary “Wayang” in Global Contexts,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 24, no. 2 (2007): 364.

in December 2015, Sarena Abdullah argues that there has been a dearth of articles written about her. As such, she examines the artist's use of montage, representation of difference and allegory to claim, "that her works should be seen as some of the early postmodernist works in the Malaysian art scene."<sup>16</sup> In her paper, Abdullah concludes that Nirmala's apparently simple postmodern strategies of art making then paved the way toward adoption of more complex styles today as seen in the works of Shia Yih-Yiing and Yee I-Lann.

There has been little formal analysis made on Nirmala's artworks with regards to brushwork, abstraction and color. Cheong Lai Tong once remarked of Nirmala's paintings shown to him that they embodied influences of Chinese brush painting.<sup>17</sup> Safrizal Shahir's essay entitled *Abstract Themes and Approaches in Malaysian Modern Art* attempts to chart the trends of progression of abstract art in the history of modern Malaysian art through five developmental "waves" from the 1940s until 1990s. He concludes that the use of abstraction in the history of modern Malaysian art is a constant struggle between the sensorial and perceptual aspects of Western abstraction with the spiritually harmonious aspects of Eastern abstraction.<sup>18</sup> Piyadasa has also remarked Nirmala's knack to "project a sensitive handling of colour" under the tutelage of Ismail Zain as a demonstration of Nirmala's ability to paint visually pleasing abstract

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<sup>16</sup> Sarena Abdullah, "Postmodernity in Malaysian Art: Tracing Works by Nirmala Shanmughalingam," *Indian Journal of Arts* 5, no. 16 (2015): 36.

<sup>17</sup> Li, "Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator - a Review," 7. While this research will not look into this aspect in detail, attempts will be made to note this influence especially when studying traces of abstract expressionist brushworks.

<sup>18</sup> Safrizal Shahir, "Abstract Themes and Approaches in Malaysian Modern Art," in *Imagining Identities: Narratives in Malaysian Art*, ed. Beverly Yong Nur Hanim Khairuddin, T.K. Sabapathy, *Narratives in Malaysian Art* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: RogueArt, 2012), 251.



imagery.<sup>19</sup> This aspect of color use will also be noted in examining her artworks in this research.

Besides looking into formalistic aspects of painting, Nirmala's photo documentary approach has also been duly acknowledged. Zhuang Wubin notes of Nirmala's use of documentary photography to highlight her championing of social and environmental issues in the 1970s, as part of his investigation into the photographic practices of Malaysian artists since the 1950s.<sup>20</sup> However, no further visual analysis on their grid compositional use has been made. Instead, Wubin attributes the popularized use of grids to Ismail Hashim since the 1980s, with an apparent omission of Nirmala's employment of the grid structure in her photographic representations of the *Statement* series of the 1970s.<sup>21</sup> Regardless, Shahir renders due recognition to both Ismail Hashim and Nirmala as key pioneers who "use photography as a mode of social critique" during the 1970s.<sup>22</sup> Essentially, Shahir views Nirmala as a significant contributor in imparting "colour and character to the development of modern Malaysian art."<sup>23</sup> Visual analysis of Nirmala's artworks in this research will further add appreciation to this notion.

In charting the developmental course of photography in Malaysia, *Malaysian Photography: History and Beyond* looks at the evolution of photography in Malaysia with regards to the fast changing historical events surrounding a young nation from the 1960s to the late 1970s in one of its chapters.<sup>24</sup> This publication attempts to categorize

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<sup>19</sup> Piyadasa, "The Art of Nirmala Shanmughalingam," 6.

<sup>20</sup> Zhuang Wubin, "Against the Grain: Photographic Practices in Malaysia since the 1950s," in *Reactions - New Critical Strategies: Narratives in Malaysian Art*, ed. Beverly Yong Nur Hanim Khairuddin, T.K. Sabapathy, *Narratives in Malaysian Art* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: RogueArt, 2013), 204.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>22</sup> Safrizal Shahir, "Dynamism and Sophistication: Modern Malaysian Art in the 1970s," *ibid.*, 76.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>24</sup> National Art Gallery, *Malaysian Photography: History and Beyond* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 2004).

the various genres of photography in Malaysia from straight and surrealism photography to humanist photography, the latter of which Nirmala has been described as belonging to. The period in question coincides with the formative years of Malaysia caught up in the complex web of social, economic and political turmoil, a period during which Nirmala's documentary photography was known to have taken off.

Published in 1994, *Vision and Idea: ReLooking Modern Malaysian Art* exhibition catalogue serves as both a celebratory and analytical reflection of the state of Malaysian art to commemorate the National Art Gallery's thirty five years of existence. This retrospective exhibition was pivotal in that it began taking interest in the social context of artworks instead of the individual artist and their achievements in art. This sat well with Prof. Ungku A. Aziz's call in 1971 that "Art for Society" should supersede "Art for Art's Sake" to ensure art plays a more inclusive role in the economic and political development of Malaysia.<sup>25</sup> It was only three years earlier that he advocated the concept of "socially conscious art" as being crucial for one to keep a pulse on a nation's social, economic and political dynamics.<sup>26</sup>

*Vision and Idea's* attempt to construct a unique narrative of modern Malaysian art revolving around the national discourse of ideology, ethnicity, culture and identity fails to give much emphasis on the discussion of Nirmala's artworks especially in relation to the recommendations of the NCC in 1971. In fact, only Nirmala's *Friends in Need* (1986) artwork was featured in the exhibition. Generally, the text does not specifically discuss how discomfiting social commentary artworks utilizing traditional forms be

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<sup>25</sup> T.K. Sabapathy, "Merdeka Makes Art, or Does It?," in *Vision and Idea: ReLooking Modern Malaysian Art*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy(Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994), 71.

<sup>26</sup> Ungku Aziz, "Salon Malaysia Open Art Competition and Exhibition (Exhibition Catalogue)," ed. National Art Gallery(Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1968).

seen as conforming to the call of the NCP to produce works that unify the nation as per its Malay-centred cultural framework.

Nevertheless, a perceived genuine attempt to address this gap is seen in one of the book's essay written by Zainol Shariff. In *Towards an Alter-native Vision: The Idea of Malaysian Art Since 1980*, Shariff organizes his discourse about modern Malaysian art around three areas: the consideration of Islamic influence in artworks, pursuit of artistic identity and the advent of post-modernism works by younger artists in the 1980s (of which Nirmala was not included). Essentially, Shariff was exploring the discernment of "Malaysianness" in the works of artists in the 1980s that were balancing from a wide array of concerns involving religion, artistic style, social pre-occupations and clash of East-West culture.

In 1998, Piyadasa as the exhibition curator for *Rupa Malaysia – A Decade of Art, 1987 – 1997* began the exhibition catalogue by first investigating the seminal influence of early English traveller-artists who painted landscape sceneries. He then acknowledged the role of Nanyang artists and returning Malaysian artists from overseas studies in the 1950s, in establishing modern Malaysian art. The exhibition catalogue continues looking into artworks that defined nationalism before ending with an essay on social commentary artworks as a means to discover identities. Nirmala's artworks were however not mentioned in this text.

Zakaria Ali, in exploring the issue of Malaysian identity in his essay *The Malaysianess of Malaysian Art: The Question of Identity* alludes to the often-depicted romanticized scenes of the nation as a form of commonly accepted national identity,

without offering a discourse on the contributory role that social commentary artworks may play in this.<sup>27</sup>

Ariana Leon Rabindranath, in an interview conducted in 2003 for her postgraduate thesis discovered from Nirmala that a “definite ‘Malaysian’ art will emerge” if artists “reflect the life of their country”.<sup>28</sup> However, Rabindranath did not seek for more clarification on this matter. Similarly, a vague response from Nirmala: “If you’re not painting about what is going on around you, how are you going to develop an identity?” does not clarify details of what to paint, even though Nirmala indicated the need for a “role model” citing the *wayang kulit* as such.<sup>29</sup>

While these findings from Rabindranath are inconclusive, they still serve as a helpful reference. This research aims to expand on these points through visual analysis in hopes of discovering how Nirmala’s artworks reflect national identity and at the same time, possibly question the need for artworks to even have a national identity. At its core, Rabindranath’s thesis merely serves to explore the discourse on identity, ethnicity and gender along with their many challenges faced by the Malaysian female artists, namely Sharifah Fatimah Zubir, Yuen Chee Ling and Nirmala Dutt. Hence, no in-depth visual analysis of Nirmala’s artworks has been done.

In attempting to discuss the various means by which Malaysian artists have depicted the local landscape, Piyadasa cited Nirmala’s *Statement* series of artworks as a key turning point in the history of modern Malaysian art, in his essay entitled *The Treatment of the Local Landscape in Modern Malaysian Art, 1930 – 1981* published in 1981.

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<sup>27</sup> Zakaria Ali, *The Malaysianess of Malaysian Art: The Question of Identity* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1991).

<sup>28</sup> Ariana Leon Rabindranath, "Malaysian Visions: Exploring Identity, Ethnicity and Gender in the Case of Three Contemporary Women Painters" (Masters of Arts, Ohio University, 2003), 89.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Nirmala's *Statement 1* and *Statement 3* in the 1970s were described as "depressing" in stark contrast to other more celebratory, romanticized, abstracted and conceptualized representations of the Malaysian landscape. This was partly due to rapid modernization and urbanization gripping Malaysia then, resulting in degradation of environmental qualities. Sarena Abdullah further extends this discourse in 2012 to include works of younger contemporary artists who exhibit environmental consciousness as a theme in their artistic expression.<sup>30</sup>

Krishen Jit, in his essay written for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Asian Art Show in Japan in 1989 makes a cursory mention of Nirmala as "one of the few important women artists of Malaysia" championing for a social cause via her fusion of "manipulated mass media and journalistic symbology" without discussing her use of the *wayang kulit* form.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, in an article published in New Sunday Times in 1976, Jit describes how the Department of Information began employing *wayang kulit* as a propaganda machinery to communicate government policies to the rural populace in Kelantan in as early as the 1970s, an effort which attracted a large majority of people including even the indigenous people.<sup>32</sup> He highlights the effectiveness of traditional theatre to simultaneously entertain and instruct on social commentary and moralistic values to engage with the everyday men on the street.

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<sup>30</sup> Sarena Abdullah, "The Environment as a Theme in Malaysian Art," *Jati* 17(2012).

<sup>31</sup> Krishen Jit, "Symbols and Symbolic Visions in Modern Malaysian Art," in *Krishen Jit: An Uncommon Position, Selected Writings*(Singapore: Contemporary Asian Art Centre, 2003), 223.

<sup>32</sup> "Using Theatre to Get the Message Across," in *Krishen Jit: An Uncommon Position, Selected Writings*(Singapore: Contemporary Asian Art Centre, 2003), 135.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Nirmala's thirty five artworks will be categorized into four segments –corresponding with the Chapters 4, 5, 6 & 7 – as outlined in the scope of research. The segments follow four periods of duration: 1970s – mid 1980s (Chapter 4), mid 1980s – late 1990s (Chapter 5), late 1980s – late 1990s (Chapter 6) and late 1990s (Chapter 7); some of which overlap or isolated for emphasis.

Utilising this timeline as a guiding framework, the artworks are subject to visual analysis to meet four areas of inquiries. Firstly, Chapter 4 looks at implicit traces of *wayang* in the works. This means trying to drive the narrative of the artworks by adopting the *wayang* notion or framework of understanding in terms of the role of *dalang*, concept of motion, time and space, field of vision and divisions of play. Essentially, the selected artworks will be viewed through the “*wayang* lens”.

Secondly, Chapter 5 delves into the identification of explicit *wayang* characters and other relevant motifs to draw direct correlation between the stories and reality. Iconographical symbols and *wayang* figures depicted will be decoded in relation to the environmental happenings then and now.

Thirdly, Chapter 6 scrutinizes the indigenous motifs, subject matter and composition structure to assess their spiritual and physical qualities. Where relevant, a cross analysis with *wayang* conventions and Hindu cosmological influences is made.

Finally, Chapter 7 concludes this research by examining Nirmala's – arguably – most notable series, the *Great Leap Forward*; and seeks to use this as an all-encompassing summary of her artworks from 1970s until 1990s to explore national identity in relation to recommendations of NCC. Throughout these four chapters, visual analysis will be conducted to examine the prevailing colour schemes and composition style of Nirmala's

artworks, in addition to exploring the fabrication (repetition, photomontages, silkscreen) and narrative (allegory, humour, abstraction) techniques involved.

Once the visual analysis is done, the interpretation of the artworks and their iconographical symbolism will be examined under a social art historical context. A chronological approach is employed to identify the inter-relatedness and evolution of artistic style through time so as to facilitate the appreciation of stylistic consistency demonstrated by Nirmala. For example, the unusually lengthy Chapter 4 owes its size to an attempt in analyzing Nirmala's use of the grid in the 1970s, upon which her subsequent artworks are strongly based in later years.

### **3.1 Fieldwork**

This research is mainly driven by analysis of secondary resources involving newspaper articles, press releases, special feature media reports, government reports, academic books and journals, essays, exhibition catalogues, museum databases, thesis and websites of relevant international organisations. Primary resources involving unstructured interviews with Nirmala will be used to supplement the findings. Interviews are audio recorded and transcribed to facilitate analysis.

The resulting qualitative data discussing tradition, formal and visual analysis of artworks and their meaning will be deconstructed to reveal traces of recurring patterns or themes in hopes of understanding Nirmala's artworks especially in relation to contemporary times.

### **3.2 Theoretical Framework**

An overarching theoretical framework involving a mixed discourse from straightforward technical visual analysis to a more nuanced "spiritual" aspect of beholding guides the discussion on Nirmala's thirty-five artworks throughout this

research. They include an attempt to contextualize Benedict Anderson's concept of a nation, Marshall McLuhan's media theory, Roland Barthes' inquiry into photography's "wounding" properties, Walter Benjamin's engagement with the aura of artworks and Rosalind Krauss' deconstruction of the grid structure. Finally, a discussion of how the "wayang lens" is used to conceptualize the readings of the artworks based on the principles of *wayang kulit* performance will be undertaken.

### 3.2.1 Anderson's Nation

Initial readings of Nirmala's artworks highlighting the plight of the underprivileged class seems to point in the direction of upholding humanity's rights and will to live a life of peace and justice. Such class-centered inclination is devoid of any notion of a nation. Thus, this research will need to examine how a class-centered approach in Nirmala's artworks questions the role of national identity, because humanity certainly extends beyond the boundaries of a nation.

In analyzing nationalism, Benedict Anderson coined the concept "Imagined Communities" to depict a nation as a socially, imagined and politically constructed community that is "both inherently limited and sovereign."<sup>33</sup> By "imagining", one assumes to possess shared experiences, values and beliefs with others whom one has never even met in person.<sup>34</sup> This lived imagination exists in total freedom from external intervention, within the confines of a political boundary that geographically defines a nation.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised ed.(Verso, 2006), 6.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 7.



Considering Anderson's logic on the construction of identity arising from this shared notion, Nirmala is certainly stranger to most of the squatters (with the exception of Adibah Amin in Kampung Polo), children and indigenous people featured in her paintings. As they reside within this country called Malaysia, the highlighting of their plight lends such portrayal a form of national identity to her artworks. Nirmala shares with them, an "imagined" state of connectedness.

This connectedness or camaraderie of nationhood could even be attributed to the role of "Print Capitalism" in the creation of an imagined community. Anderson notes of print capitalism's use of a common language driven by the printing press to rally people together on a common discourse. For instance, Nirmala's appropriation of newspaper cuttings and use of printing technologies, namely photography and silkscreen, constitute a form of print capitalism in uniting the community of underprivileged.

While not necessarily an ardent nationalist, Nirmala could even be said to feel "shameful" and guilty for the dire condition these people find themselves in. It is unbelievable that a young nation progressed at the cost of certain quarters of society, a sentiment she definitely wasn't proud of. After all, being shameful of one's country is a pre-requisite to being a nationalist.<sup>36</sup> Anderson claims that despite the "inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship."<sup>37</sup> It was likely that Nirmala was tending to this comradeship with the socially disadvantaged.

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<sup>36</sup> Lorenz Khazaleh, "Benedict Anderson: 'I Like Nationalism's Utopian Elements'," (2005), <https://www.uio.no/english/research/interfaculty-research-areas/culcom/news/2005/anderson.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 7.

### 3.2.2 McLuhan's Media

According to Anderson, nationalism as a product of modernity is well crafted by modern communication tools such as TV and print media that had helped construct a “national community” through propagation of news and messages that shape society.<sup>38</sup> As a result of mass-produced and oversaturated imagery in the media, there's likelihood that society becomes numbed to the effects of the media. Nirmala's appropriated imagery from the mass media silkscreened into her paintings provokes the viewers to question their apparent indifference to social injustices happening around the world.

This numbness to the effects of media in an increasingly globalized world connects with Marshall McLuhan's theory of media desensitization and the concept of a Global Village. McLuhan in his book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* published in 1964 describes how media and technology “extend our reach” by exerting behavioural modification effects.<sup>39</sup> As a double-edged sword, this “overexposure” means making life easier for humans but at the same time pose a form of “stress” as well, which leads to numbness. For example, access to news happening half way around the globe keeps one updated as an informed and learned individual; however, an excess of these stimuli overloads the sensorial experience to a point one gets desensitized.

Similarly, constant media coverage of the war in Vietnam or the ongoing illegal logging in Sarawak lead to eventual “shutting down” of one's senses to their gravity. Consequently, visual analysis should be done to investigate how Nirmala addresses this increasing desensitization by maintaining visual strength in her paintings via gestural brushworks and the grid layout.

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<sup>38</sup> Khazaleh, "Benedict Anderson: "I Like Nationalism's Utopian Elements"".

<sup>39</sup> Nirmala's artworks can be deemed as an extension of herself, a medium of art to bring about social change. This medium, as McLuhan posits, is the message of change.

### 3.2.3 Barthes' *Punctum*

Perhaps, as a means to combat desensitization, Nirmala uses repetition to advance a salient feature in hopes of shocking the viewer into holding their gaze. Roland Barthes in his book theorizing on photography, *Camera Lucida* published in 1980 explores the twin concept of the descriptive *studium* and the incisive *punctum*.<sup>40</sup> The former concerns with the cultural, linguistic and political interpretation of a photograph while the latter serves as a form of emotionally charged “personal attachment” by which someone subjectively relates to especially with regards to poignant details of interest.

For instance, this poignant detail as a *punctum* could be represented by the depiction of corpses, wailing mothers or a poverty-stricken squatter in Nirmala's artworks. It could even be a portrayal of an innocent individual staring at the viewer, whose state of affairs piques the curiosity of the viewer to envision their true identity and question how it would be like living their condition.<sup>41</sup> A negotiation of this process and the resulting emotions engendered is of course highly subjective to different viewers. Nevertheless, attaching the notion of *punctum* to Nirmala's artworks as a means to “wound” or prick the viewer's conscience represents a logical and refreshing take to an otherwise often simply described as “provocative and disturbing” subject matter.

### 3.2.4 Benjamin's Aura & Authenticity

The *punctum* as a visually arresting attribute to capture the attention of viewers can be in some ways likened to the concept of aura. As expounded by Walter Benjamin in

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<sup>40</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, Second ed.(New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), 26-27.

<sup>41</sup> The concept of *punctum* is highly linked to the use of photographs as “memorial objects” that exude an air of constantly searching for the unconscious and the familiar. As *Camera Lucida* was written in direct response to his mother's death as a means to mourn and reconnect with her, Barthes was grappling with issues of mortality and vulnerability. He notes the spectral qualities in photographs as having evocative power to associate with memories. For instance, even though one may not personally know the dead child in the arms of a grieving Vietnamese mother, one could be thinking: “This child was alive. He wasn't thinking of dying. But now he's dead. If he wasn't, how would he be like today?” At the benefit of hindsight, such premonitory qualities of imagery allow oneself to traverse through time to experience different possibilities just like how a *wayang kulit* performance is viewed.

his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, he ascribes aura to an original artwork's uniqueness and permanence that inspires a sense of awe by virtue of its irreproducible qualities. In his opinion, the first executions of paintings and sculpture possess aura while photographs do not, by virtue of their reproducibility making images commonplace. By virtue of the uniqueness of Nirmala's silkscreen process involving brushwork, the large canvas sizes of her artworks and her documentary photography approaches, I argue that they do contribute somewhat to exuding a sense of aura in Nirmala's artworks.

Benjamin maintains that the aura is made possible by its unique presence of the art object in time and space by virtue of its dependence on ritual and tradition. A photograph's ubiquity and mobility strips it from this possession, thus liberating it from ritualistic values. This pedantry is indeed problematic: does this mean Nirmala's photo documentation and appropriation of mass media images into her silkscreen paintings are not original? Do they lack aura as a result of the mechanical means by which they are created? What is original? Why is originality important? These will be addressed in section 4.4.

### **3.2.5 The Kraussian Grid**

No discourse on the grid structure in art would be complete without taking into consideration Rosalind Krauss' canonical article titled *Grids* published in 1979. In it, she discusses the role of grid in declaring the modernity of modern art as both an aesthetic and mythological tool.

The exploration of Krauss' analysis is crucial in attempting to make sense of Nirmala's use of the grid as a spatial and narrative element in her photo documentary artworks of the 1970s. This includes, among others, the use of grid to depict motion and project a centrifugal reading of a "window" especially with regards to ordering the

canvas surface in taking after a perceived *wayang kulit* stage. Such implicit reading into the mechanics of *wayang* in Nirmala's artworks is facilitated by the grid layout.

Krauss' framework to understanding the grid is applicable to selected artworks of Nirmala employing explicit and implied grid structures. In fact, a similar appreciation can also be carried forward toward analyzing geometrical compositions with non-descript grid layout as seen in some indigenous artworks in Chapter 6.

### **3.2.6 The *Wayang* Lens as the overarching narrative framework**

Generally, the social commentary artworks of Nirmala exhibit a prevalent duality of constant friction between the oppressed and the aggressor. The former often represents the disadvantaged working class while the latter, the powers that be. This shift in the balance of equality and justice in favour of the latter is often driven by the latter's insatiable thirst for power, wealth and status. As a result of this growing tension and conflict between the socio-economic and politically oppressed quarters with that of the opposing "perpetrators", Nirmala's social commentary artworks remain poignant as a voice for the repressed.

Similarly, this tension is mirrored by the constant battle between the forces of good and evil often depicted in a Javanese *wayang kulit* play. The aforementioned duality depicted as a conflict between the commoners and the governing authority of the real world is often reflected in the struggle between the protagonists and the despicable Ogres of a *wayang* performance. Thus, this parallel is recognized as a valid nod to view Nirmala's artworks as a form of *wayang* lessons filled with many intricate meaning and dimensions, even when no obvious forms of *wayang* motifs are found in the artworks – as evidenced by her early works in the 1970s.

The underlying qualities of a *wayang* play inherent in Nirmala's artworks allows for their reading and appreciation through the "*wayang* lens" in recognition of the aforesaid parallelism. These underlying qualities in question refer to two key attributes: the narrative vehicle and the transitory aspect. The narrative vehicle refers to the three major divisions of a Javanese *wayang kulit* play, the structure of which is seen in a number of Nirmala's artworks. This storytelling signposts help guide the viewer toward a better art appreciation experience. This narrative element also signifies Nirmala's role as a *dalang* who enriches the artwork viewing experience through her various artistic styles and techniques. The transitory nature of a *wayang* play is represented by the use of the *Kayon* puppet. As an intermission device, the *Kayon*'s functions are reflected in Nirmala's artworks as bearing an indeterminate and open quality, whose resulting interpretation remain fluid and evolving.

Together, these two underlying qualities of shadow puppet that constitute the "*wayang* lens" by which Nirmala's artworks are analysed offers a unique viewpoint to frame her artistic practice. By analyzing Nirmala's artworks via this "*wayang* lens", one is also able to draw from a richer source of understanding as to how meaning is generated and sustained. For example, Nirmala's use of gestural brushwork is akin to a *dalang*'s deft movement of puppets across the screen to create motion and chaos while the use of a triangular motif questions the viewer on the outcome of the issue being portrayed in the artwork.

In short, the "*wayang* lens" represents an overarching principle through which Nirmala's artworks can be read, regardless of the presence of distinct *wayang* forms. This perception of Nirmala's artworks as a form of embodying the various *wayang kulit* qualities lends a notion of visual storytelling to her artistic practice.

It is worth noting that Nirmala's artworks of the 1970s do not exhibit explicit forms of *wayang*, as her distinctively *wayang*-inspired works did not materialize until the 1980s. Despite the absence of obvious *wayang* forms, Nirmala's use of the grid in the 1970s as a story-telling and compositional tool parallels that of the narrative and transitory qualities of a *wayang kulit* performance. This resemblance will be discussed in the following Chapter 4 and further sealed in Chapter 5 and 6.

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## CHAPTER 4: THE GRID & IMPLICIT WAYANG KULIT FORMS

This chapter serves as a crucial foundation upon which Chapter 5 and 6 are built by virtue of its discussion of Nirmala's evolutionary use of the grid. As a compositional tool, the grid functions as a story-telling and anticipatory device whose applications took on multiple forms and significance right up till the 1990s. Regardless of its recurring forms of manifestations and prominence, this chapter attempts to draw parallel between the organizational functions of the grid, with that of the structural qualities of a *wayang kulit* performance. This parallel is possible on account of the grid's natural and methodical narrative guide that coincides with the story-telling structure of a *wayang kulit* performance.

This chapter begins by focusing on the early artworks of Nirmala reviewing her *Statement* series of artworks in the 1970s, which witnessed her foray into the realm of social commentary after having shifted her focus from Abstract Expressionist paintings. The researcher has chosen to begin by highlighting in the first two sections, two important pieces of her artworks in the history of Malaysian art – *Statement 1* and *Statement 3* – and in relation to her personal practice, as they were pivotal by virtue of three reasons.

Firstly, the *Statement* series of artworks demonstrate a departure from mainstream art practices in the 1970s which were pre-dominantly non-confrontational Abstract Expressionist works. This is made possible by the sentiments they provoked and the difficult social issues championed, namely issues on squatter and environmental pollution.

Secondly, these artworks are an elaborate execution that spans considerable time involving careful research, observation, record and collation of facts. These are then



presented in a narrative that befit the storytelling flow of a *wayang kulit* performance. Essentially, despite these works not projecting obvious forms of *wayang kulit* at a glance such as those found in Chapter 5, one can appreciate and understand the essence of the narrative from a “*wayang* lens”.

Lastly, these artworks represent a unique style of creative approach – at least in the 1970s – employing seminal techniques, such as the grid and representation of children and homes, whose evolvment would be seen manifested many times in Nirmala’s subsequent artworks in the 1980s. In short, it appears Nirmala has used the grid to effectively enliven her story-telling approach by teasing out implicit *wayang kulit* borrowings.

The exploration of the implicit undertones of *wayang kulit* continues in section 4.3, section 4.4 and section 4.5 with visual analysis of artworks from *Children of Asia*, *Vietnam* and the *Kampung Polo* series.

#### **4.1 Statement 1 (1973)**

*Statement 1* (1973) is a mixed media photomontage and installation artwork shown at the National Art Gallery’s *Man and His World* exhibition in 1973, which won Nirmala the Major Award.

This artwork is made up of three sections: the first section is a single board showcasing a compilation of charts, photos, articles, newspaper clippings and diagrams detailing critical information to educate and raise awareness on prevailing environmental concerns locally and internationally due to urbanization and industrialisation.

The second section features a series of twenty black and white photo prints lined up in a matrix of four by five grid format depicting heaps of rubbish found by a roadside and in the stream.

The third section includes a sample collection of industrial waste and rubbish transported from the actual site of pollution to be exhibited at the gallery space.



**Figure 4.1: Nirmala, *Statement I*<sup>42</sup> (1973), Mixed Media (photography, newspaper, photo copied documents on board), 73 x 91 x 124 cm. National Visual Arts Collection. Source: Author's Photograph.**

*Statement I* is a statement against environmental destruction taking place at the Old Damansara road, which saw indiscriminate dumping of industrial waste and pollution of the nearby stream. Chu Li confidently notes this award-winning piece as “the first ‘installation art’ in Malaysia, and the first documentation presented as a conceptual statement on pollution and environmental destruction.”<sup>43</sup> Piyadasa further adds that this

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<sup>42</sup> Shown here are the first section on the left and the second section on the right. The third section of rubbish display is not shown. Photo taken at *Mapping: Malaysia Modern Art History* exhibition in National Art Gallery on April 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Li, "Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator - a Review," 8.

ground-breaking work “must be recognized for the liberating influence that it helped bring about in the Malaysian art scene” during a time when mainstream art was dominated by Abstract Expressionistic painterly works.<sup>44</sup>

Provocative and avant-garde as it may be, this piece of artwork is unique in that it invites the viewer to traverse the three stages of grappling the environmental issue at hand, hence the three sections. I argue that these three sections could be seen as corresponding with the three distinct stages in the passage of life seen in *wayang kulit* plays. To better understand this, a careful examination of these three sections is warranted.

The first section of *Statement 1* displays an array of newspaper writings on the dangers of increasing population in America resulting in excessive waste generation, uncontrolled mining activities, air pollution in Malaysia, Japan and America, effects of the Vietnam war on the forested environment, lost of cultural heritage in Italy due to floods and pollution and dangers of the contamination of Malaysia’s rivers. Interestingly enough, these bleak portrayal of modern living is supplemented by insightful sharing on the importance of clean water and the role forests play in a healthy ecosystem.

Nirmala also included snippets of nostalgic and leisurely excursions into the pristine region of Tasik Bera in Pahang, as though hinting the deprivation of such pleasures if environmental destruction and pollution is not checked. This interplay of story telling between gloom (depiction of rubbish and pollution) and hope (beauty of a natural getaway) serves to educate, inform and provoke the viewer, thus mirroring the *Patet Nem* stage of *wayang kulit* that speaks of “the dawning of what life will offer.”<sup>45</sup> This

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<sup>44</sup> Piyadasa, "The Art of Nirmala Shanmughalingam," 10.

<sup>45</sup> Shita Prawirohardjo Edward C. Van Ness, *Javanese Wayang Kulit: An Introduction*(Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1980), 52-53.

corresponds with the first part of a “three-part parable of the life-cycle, showing man in his youth.”<sup>46</sup> Essentially, what Nirmala attempted to do was to contextualize her narrative and set the dawning stage as an early precursor to what’s to come.



**Figure 4.2: Nirmala, *Statement 1* (1973) (DETAILED), Mixed Media (photography, newspaper, photo copied documents on board), 73 x 91 x 124 cm. National Visual Arts Collection. Source: Author’s Photograph.**

If the first section is somewhat “distant” in one’s grasp of the environmental concerns at both the local and international context, that’s by virtue of the inherent detachment as a result of reading these events through textual accounts. In other words, this first stage has been an “overview” that sets the tone for the appreciation of the rest of the sections.

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<sup>46</sup> Brandon, *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*, 18.

What started out as compilation of “written” account referring to the prevailing pollution problem in the first section is subsequently distilled into a concentrated visual imagery presented as a grid layout of monochromatic photos in the second section (Figure 4.2). This serves to focus the attention of the viewer at the mass of man-made accumulated waste with apparently no end in sight. A detailed reading of this section would require critical analysis of the use of grids as more than a mere compositional tool.

At the outset, a glimpse of this grid-formatted photo documentation suggests this formal representation as an organized storyboarding tool that invites the viewer to methodically investigate every frame as though surveying the landscape of *lakon* sequences in a *wayang kulit* performance. Modern filmic production uses the storyboarding tool in a grid format to define flow of scenes to be shot or narrated. Thus, such resemblance can be drawn to that of a live theatrical performance of the *wayang kulit* during which different scenes unfold in an orderly manner. While the *dalang* in a *wayang kulit* performance doesn’t consult his ensemble and plan out his performances before hand with the aid of a “storyboard”; the idea of performing from the various compartmentalized scenes stored in his repertoire and the audience’s mental reception of this performance represented in its abstracted grid form deserves consideration.

Although the constructs of a *lakon* sequence are composed, performed and passed down to many generations within an oral tradition, “performance guides” named as *pakem* have known to be in use as recent as a few hundred years ago.<sup>47</sup> The *pakem* – in contrast with the Western notion of a play script written for the performance of a play – is a “shorthand record of the way a *lakon* already has been performed.”<sup>48</sup> Therefore, it

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

can be suggested that the use of *pakem* as a documentation of plot outline resembles the structural grid layout of a “storyboard”.

On closer observation, these stacked twenty photos conveys a sense of “allover-ness” with no particular focus on any part of the artwork as though rendering no one area as more important than another. By boxing each individually distinct photograph in their cell, they create a growing tension of both intimate and distant qualities.<sup>49</sup> This wavering between intimacy and distance creates a sense of rhythmic progression and movement that guides the viewers’ eyes to draw connections between one image to the next as the individual images no longer stands on its own.<sup>50</sup> This very act corresponds to the manner with which various *wayang kulit* scenes are often built one upon another to achieve coherence and unity. To a certain extent, this randomness of multiple entry points into this second section of the *Statement 1* artwork mirrors the myriad ways with which the *dalang* improvises his performance to reflect the dynamics of his audience and the different narratives as he thickens the plot and builds his momentum from scene to scene.

On this note, I would suggest that each photograph is a crying voice – that is ineffective on its own – working hand in hand with the rest in unison to produce a clarion call for change, thus affecting a more impactful message as a collective whole. This cumulative effect rendered by a mass of gridded display of many different time and spaces effectively conveys a serious tone of urgency and despair. This hopelessness is perceived by the multiple arrays of bleak scenes that suffocate and drown the viewer in a sea of tragedy. The seriousness with which this artwork is viewed is also felt with the

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<sup>49</sup> Simon Soon, "Photography and the Grid," in *Ismail Hashim: Essays, Interviews & Archives*, ed. Carmen Nge Wong Hoy Cheong, Jason Tan (Kuala Lumpur: Fergana Art Sdn Bhd, 2015), 33.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

employment of a symmetrically balanced layout that commands stability and gravity of the matter at hand.

While *Statement 1* is a static image, the element of motion and space is suggested via its grid layout. Every single photograph is distinct as they were captured over a six months period along different sections of the Old Damansara road. Even though no display of time is mentioned in this piece, the variation in timing and micro-locations speaks of a progression of events that testify the presence and actions of perpetrators at their particular moments. They represent various acts of pollution taking place through time and space, albeit without the presence of the perpetrators, as if inviting the viewers to conjure themselves physical characterization of the people and events responsible for this transgression. This reflects the unfolding of events through the many *lakons* in a *wayang kulit* that stretches from early evening till dawn as the audience identify themselves with the various protagonists and villains depicted. Nirmala's patient and methodical approach in building this narrative through time and space is akin to the story-telling course and concept of time in a *wayang kulit* performance. Nirmala will soon expand on this depiction of time and space in her subsequent *Statement 3* (Figure 4.5).

The usage of a grid layout by Nirmala is seen as a compositional tool to achieve a sense of focused order or system as theorized by the French Philosopher, Michel Foucault.<sup>51</sup> Soon says this essentially presents the subjects or happenings in each box as "classifiable and understandable,"<sup>52</sup> thus achieving a semblance of the said order of representation in an event that has ironically gone out of order. The grid seems to be employed as an attempt to contain this display of chaos.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

Similar to Soon's observation of the usage of grid to promote order, Rosalind Krauss states that the "flattened, geometricized, ordered" nature of the grid conveys an impression of "antinatural, antimimetic, antireal."<sup>53</sup> What she suggests is the apparently bland and unnatural representation of space using lines in repetition invalidates claims that only natural objects have order to themselves.<sup>54</sup> This "unnatural" art form is thus seen as being employed to review and understand a "natural" real-world event. The former can be appreciated in the mythical and highly stylized puppet figures of the *wayang kulit* while the latter is reflected in the moral realities humans encounter in their everyday lives. Alternatively, this divide may lead one to potentially read *Statement 1* as the systematic and orderly, albeit unnatural, destruction of the natural environment.

Krauss further explains that the advent of the grid "is an emblem of modernity being just that: the form that is ubiquitous in the art of our century, while appearing nowhere, nowhere at all, in the art of the last one."<sup>55</sup> The usage of the grid is unseen prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century (deemed as the birth of modern art) except in the works of Leonardo and Durer who merely used grid layout in the study of perspectives.<sup>56</sup> Hence, the introduction of the grid is seen as a defining turning point in the art of our century, an emblem of modernism, no less similar to the notion of its employment by Nirmala (an emblem of post-modernism) in stamping her social commentary voice and stirring the local arts scene like never before in Malaysia.

The lack of colour has also helped *Statement 1* command greater level of gravity. Without colour, the viewer's eyes are only drawn to the subject matter and forms as

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<sup>53</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9, no. 0 (1979): 51.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*



outlined by the haphazard debris. This typical black and white approach lends further focus to the work and helps seal the message of destruction and despair.

Interestingly, the grid layout of black and white photos resembles that of a typical black and white newspaper print representation. Such “emotional detachment” resulting from mass-produced imagery achieved by the mechanical reproduction of media as argued by Walter Benjamin creates a sort of “distancing” that functions in two ways. Firstly, the critical distance facilitates Nirmala’s objective analyses and commentaries on socio-political events. Secondly, repeated black and white images serve as a form of counter-narrative to the “jubilant” colors of abstract expressionism.

Nirmala sought unconventional methods to express herself artistically, especially in light of the then prevailing two artistic mainstream directions of modern Malaysian art in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>57</sup> Abdullah notes that the Abstract Expressionist painters, the likes of Syed Ahmad Jamal, Choong Kam Kow, Chew Teng Beng and Latif Mohidin were dominating the art scene on one hand while the other saw Malay artists conforming to strict Malay/Islamic identities in their art works. As a result, Nirmala’s postmodern inclination in subject matter, approach and techniques was not appreciated.<sup>58</sup> It was only around this time in the 1970s that the grid took off as an emerging means of representation in the avant-garde art practices of 1970s Malaysia.<sup>59</sup>

Interestingly enough, the earliest depiction of the usage of the grid is seen in Tang Tuck Kan’s *49 Squares* (1969), which satirizes the Abstract Expressionist’s formalist

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<sup>57</sup> Abdullah, "Postmodernity in Malaysian Art: Tracing Works by Nirmala Shanmughalingam," 37.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Soon, "Photography and the Grid," 35. There could be several factors that led to the coming of the grid in the 1970s. Firstly, the grid was potentially seen as an expedient photojournalistic tool to advance a social commentary message where facts are clearly presented without prejudice especially during a time of rapid urbanization and development in Malaysia. Secondly, the period coincided with the New Scene art movement privileging the use of hard-edge styles and constructivism. Finally, another likely possible reason concerns the large number of artistic development gaining ground involving new printmaking technologies, especially photography.

approach deemed meaningless.<sup>60</sup> Thus, it appears that an apparently simple square shape(s) has finally been utilized beyond its formalistic aesthetics to advance a more meaningful cause, which was to champion social and political injustices as Nirmala did. It is also worth noting that Ismail Zain's gridded-presentation of *Surface Painting No. 3* (1971) was done two years before Nirmala's *Statement 1*.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, it appears that Nirmala may be the first Malaysian postmodernist artist to employ the grid structure in *Statement 1* as a means to convey a social commentary message.

Soon further adds that Ismail Zain's painting portrays the grid as a "structuralist trellis" that hold "competing visions of the world" in tension as though postulating the possibility of "consociation of discrete units."<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Nirmala's *Statement 1* can be seen as provoking one to question the delicate balance between the positivity of progress (i.e. scenes of roads, consumer goods) and the negativity of negligence (i.e. pollution) in the process of development in this highly charged depiction. This dichotomy corresponds with the portrayal of battle between the forces of good and evil in a *wayang kulit* performance. Truly, the grid used in *Statement 1* has been imbued with a moralistic narrative serving as a unique storytelling tool.

Soon has also interestingly draw comparison between the grid layout employed to that of photography contact prints.<sup>63</sup> Film photography requires film negatives to be laid out in a grid-like format in the dark room for further processing. The photographer would have to examine each and every frame in the grid carefully and make the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 39.

necessary processing (e.g. cropping, tinting, dodging) before passing them off for development.

Soon explains that the “physical engagement with the materiality of contact prints” makes photography a very technical and hands-on practice with the grid “thought of as the ‘negative’ [process] of the developed print [result]”.<sup>64</sup> On this note, one can possibly infer that the grid display of Nirmala’s pictorial stories necessitate careful examination and contemplation of each and every frame (i.e. process) as though they were film negatives under the loupe, before making the relevant decision to proceed with a particular course of action (i.e. result), be they further editing or development into a photograph. The action herein in question would undeniably be a desired outcome in favour of heeding the call to saving the environment. This action could well resemble that of *wayang kulit* audience participating in their very own interpretation of the moral learning imparted as the performance unfolds.

Thus, the grid layout of *Statement 1* – or the various scenes in a *wayang kulit* for that matter – could be seen as inviting the viewer to minutely examine and take action appropriately. This metaphorical invite extends into placing considerable control and power in the hands of the photographer or viewer as one who chooses to “edit away” the unpleasant properties in the negative films (i.e. taking action to prevent environmental damage) or not taking action by developing them straight into photographs (i.e. indifference). Similarly, the *wayang kulit* audience would have been nudged into reacting accordingly as the play progresses with its various twist of plots. Understanding this, one could see how Nirmala has used the grid format in not only creating awareness to a social issue but has made this a provocative and active statement calling for change and intervention.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

It is with great interest to note that metaphorically speaking, the grid is likened to that of a window.<sup>65</sup> Just as how the concept of a photography contact print implies invitation to a sort of engagement from the audience, Krauss suggests that artworks employing the grid makes it feel as though the viewer is drawn into staring out at a landscape through a window.<sup>66</sup> This limited viewpoint suggests that the grid-like artwork is a fragment of a larger piece of fabric that extends infinitely in an Omni-directional manner as a nod to a world existing beyond the borders of the frame.<sup>67</sup> On this note, one can't help but have a certain feeling of expectation when one views Nirmala's *Statement 1*, as if surveying a landscape of destruction, while asking 'Is there more to this, beyond the mere borders of the frame of that which I cannot see?' The limited tiled and gridded display of environmental destruction teases the viewer to a possibility that the extent of pollution may be more than what was presented.

This notion of within and without a pictorial space engages the viewer on two fronts. Firstly, at a symbolic level, the divergent reading of *Statement 1* is akin to viewing a *wayang kulit* performance and its allusion to unseen associative parallel events conveyed by the play. For example, a *wayang kulit* performance highlighting a king's insensitive rule over his people manifested by mismanagement of resources would conjure imagery of greed in the minds of the audience. Basically, the symbolic level urges the viewer to question, 'What is this painting trying to say beyond the confines of its frames?' Hence, in this context of *Statement 1*, the association is made that pollution equals to greed.

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<sup>65</sup> Krauss, "Grids."

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 60.

Secondly, at the physical level, a *wayang kulit* performance is more than just that which is shown on the shadow-side screen of a stage with a limited viewpoint that is “truncated” both horizontally and vertically. A *wayang kulit* show is an elaborate setup made up of an orchestra of musicians, puppeteer and his intricately crafted shadow puppets. What goes on behind the screen is often as equally important as that on the screen. Additionally, shadow puppets are deemed to have a life of their own; when not in used, they are carefully kept in a chest after each play in reverence of the various spirits they embody. There are simply many factors happening outside the screen that contributes to a successful *wayang kulit* performance; music, rhythm, transition of scenes, comedy, passion and intrigue. Similarly, a grid-like artwork suggests multiple layers of readings that either support or question the limited viewpoint of a scene. Hence, in this context of *Statement 1*, the evidence of pollution presented is just an end point amongst a vast network of people, events, systems and policies that are not immediately evident on the surface.

Krauss states that the “centrifugal argument posits the theoretical continuity of the work of art with the world” thereby forging the artwork’s relationship with its surrounding environment.<sup>68</sup> I contend that the aforementioned symbolic and physical levels of reading *Statement 1* agree with this observation by Krauss. Hence, the grid offers one a sample of reality, the full comprehension of which is contingent upon investigating a multitude of factors beyond its frame, not unlike that in a *wayang kulit* performance.

*Statement 1* came at an opportune time in view of the then recently formulated New Economic Policy (NEP) that spans 1970 – 1990 which saw rapid economic growth and

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 63.

the restructuring of Malaysian society as a result of increased development.<sup>69</sup> This development was accompanied by the incessant propagation of the *Bina Malaysia!* Slogan touted by the government in the midst of environmental destruction occurring then.<sup>70</sup> Thus, *Statement 1* was essentially a “counter-statement” or observation of the effects of NEP.



**Figure 4.3** Nirmala, *Pollution Piece* (1974), Photographic documentation, 47” x 30”. Collection unknown. Source: *The Condition of Being 1981 Exhibition Catalogue*.

*Statement 1* was followed shortly thereafter by *Pollution Piece* (1974), a four by three grid layout of photographs documenting the environment destruction happening around the Batu Caves and Jinjang areas.

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<sup>69</sup> The World Bank, "Reducing Poverty, Sustaining Growth-What Works, What Doesn't and Why a Global Exchange for Scaling up Success," ed. Economic Planning Unit, Malaysia: 30 Years of Poverty Reduction, Growth and Racial Harmony (Putrajaya: Economic Planning Unit, 2004).

<sup>70</sup> Li, "Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator - a Review," 8.



**Figure 4.4: Nirmala, *Statement 2* (1975), Photographic documentation, Dimension unknown. Collection unknown. Source: *The Condition of Being 1981 Exhibition Catalogue*.**

The use of grid was continued into *Statement 2* (1975) whereby Nirmala focused on portraying the innocence and living condition of the children living around these polluted areas in a three by six grid layout of photographs. This highlight was made because Nirmala felt “these are the people who are the first to suffer the effects of pollution” hence it was only logical for her to cast a light on humanity in this piece.<sup>71</sup> Even though *Statement 2* showed photographs of “people living simply, in relatively happy ignorance, accepting conditions as they are...”, the presentation is a sad and disturbing depiction of ongoing exploitation of their wellbeing to which they are oblivious.<sup>72</sup> Piyadasa maintains that this is Nirmala’s attempt at wielding the display of a tragic occurrence to provoke discomfort in the viewer.<sup>73</sup>

These 3 successive artworks culminated with the fourth’s *Statement 3* which saw conservation and anti-pollution groups calling attention to these environmental ills

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<sup>71</sup> Piyadasa, "The Art of Nirmala Shanmughalingam," 11.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 13.

plaguing Malaysia toward the end of 1970s. This somewhat belated realization of the gravity of the matter led to the much-lauded formation of the Ministry of Environment.<sup>74</sup> As such, I contend that Nirmala's efforts in highlighting environmental concerns in her artworks from the early 1970s may have contributed greatly to this positive development.

I argue that the eight points discussed above with regards to the second section of *Statement 1* artwork employing the grid layout, namely: storyboard, allover-ness, motion through space, naturalness in order, colour, dichotomy of good and evil, photography contact prints & centrifugal reading of a "window" correspond with the second stage of the wayang kulit performance called *Patet Sanga*; the "passage into true maturity."<sup>75</sup> This corresponds with a middle-aged man "attempting to find the right path of conduct as he meets and conquers external evils."<sup>76</sup>

The different aspects of appreciation exposed by the discussion on this second section of *Statement 1* reveals a multi-faceted understanding of the underlying spirit of the work, which is consistent with the profound and momentous revelation of the *Patet Sanga* stage. This understanding of the grid's functions is applicable toward understanding other artworks employing the grid layout as discussed in subsequent chapters.

While the first section of *Statement 1* sets the overview mood of grasping the environmental concerns and pollution taking place as an establishing tone, the second section exposes the crux of this environmental disaster via photographic evidences that

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>75</sup> Edward C. Van Ness, *Javanese Wayang Kulit: An Introduction*, 53.

<sup>76</sup> Brandon, *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*, 18.



suggest its happening being closer than one thinks. *Patet Nem* mirrors the first section; during which the major characters of the scene are introduced with a central problem and their attempt at solving it resulting in an impasse.<sup>77</sup> The presentation of existing data on pollution concerns worldwide balanced with the notion of a better world to look forward to represents a tension between the forces of good and evil. An attempt to reconcile this tussle leads to the *Perang Gagal* scene of an inconclusive battle, which rarely results in mortality.<sup>78</sup>

*Patet Sanga* mirrors the second section; during which the tension intensifies with advancement of important perspectives amidst cognizance of wisdom and profound revelations.<sup>79</sup> A sudden closing of distance and the collapse in view of the artwork; from a macro to a micro point of view represented by the closed up grid shots of the rubbish found at the road side and river represents an escalation in events. Upon seeking advice and blessings from a prophet, the hero is plunged into his first real battle involving enemy mortality as seen in *Perang Kembang*.<sup>80</sup>

The third and final section of *Statement 1* is the installation work of rubbish and industrial waste taken from the pollution site to be exhibited at the gallery space alongside the other two sections. Unfortunately, there is no surviving photographic record of this exhibit. Nonetheless, I suggest that this section corresponds with the final stage of the *wayang kulit* performance called *Patet Manyura*, which “symbolizes the experience of maturity and old age.”<sup>81</sup> During this last part of the three-part parable,

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<sup>77</sup> Edward C. Van Ness, *Javanese Wayang Kulit: An Introduction*, 49.

<sup>78</sup> Brandon, *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*, 23.

<sup>79</sup> Edward C. Van Ness, *Javanese Wayang Kulit: An Introduction*, 53-54.

<sup>80</sup> Brandon, *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*, 25.

<sup>81</sup> Edward C. Van Ness, *Javanese Wayang Kulit: An Introduction*, 53.

man in his “old age, having defeated his enemies” finally “achieved inner spiritual harmony.”<sup>82</sup>

During this final and concluding stage of the *wayang kulit*, the final battle is fought between good and evil, the outcome of which sees victory going to the former, thus leading to moments of *Bima*’s victory dance and the Pandawa’s celebration. Before the end of the play signified by the planting of the *Kayon*, sometimes the *dalang* introduces the *golek* doll-puppet, which serves to remind the audience of their return to the “real world” in a soul-searching manner for the truth in the play.<sup>83</sup> This three-dimensionality and physicality of narration is consistent with the presence of a tangible object like rubbish in *Statement 1*, as though inviting the viewers to “self reflect” and search for the right thing to do. Essentially, the rubbish extends the two dimensionality of Nirmala’s “stage” – signified by the first and second sections of *Statement 1* – into the real world of three dimensions.

However, it appears the presence of rubbish in this context is not a cause for joy and celebration – as though in an anomaly of instances<sup>84</sup> in a *wayang kulit* performance – for evil has triumphed in the form of filth and neglect. If *Statement 1* and its three sections are viewed as a linear progression of unfolding the various *lakon* sequences in a *wayang kulit*, it seems to have dished out a message of hopelessness and destruction in favour of the “Ogres” masked behind unbalanced policies, governmental rulings and greed of selected quarters in the name of development. The key takeaway from

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<sup>82</sup> Brandon, *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*, 18.

<sup>83</sup> Edward C. Van Ness, *Javanese Wayang Kulit: An Introduction*, 55.

<sup>84</sup> *Wayang kulit* performances are usually depiction of contention between forces of good and evil manifesting itself through various forms, from upholding law of justice to the ultimate search for truth in a moralistic dilemma. *Wayang kulit* performances often end with good triumphing over evil.

*Statement 1* is the resounding conclusion and culmination of man-made waste and its accompanying negativity.

Nirmala's appropriation and incorporation of rubbish into her artwork suggests an alternative reading into the world of consumerism, urbanization and displacement of the needy in a widening gap between the rich and poor. Garbage is seen as the manifestation of social prestige as "wealth and status are correlated with the capacity of a person (or a society) to discard commodities, i.e. to generate garbage."<sup>85</sup> In other words, only the wealthy in surplus possession of worldly materials are able to dispose of things while the poor improvised on these discarded trash on economical purposes. The dichotomy between these two social classes is inevitable in light of rapid development Malaysia experienced in the 1970s.

If indiscriminate garbage dumping were ironically seen as an indicator of unrestrained and irresponsible affluence, it also offers a link into the spiritual realm. In citing Wyatt MacGaffey's analysis of African culture and literature, it is noted "the rubbish heap is a metaphor for the grave, a point of contact with the world of the dead."<sup>86</sup> This suggests a heap of rubbish as the final resting place for trash at the end of their former useful lifespan. This is consistent with the allegorical qualities of *wayang kulit* performance as being able to transport one to a world beyond the physical reality via mythical folklores to appease the spirits. Thus, Nirmala's presented heap of rubbish may be deemed a living connection to the underprivileged community suffering from the ill effects of development. On this note, one can view the heap of rubbish employed

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<sup>85</sup> Robert Stam Ella Shohat, "Narrativizing Visual Culture: Towards a Polycentric Aesthetics," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 1998), 43.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

by Nirmala as a story-telling tool to suggest the symptoms of a debilitating societal order that witness the death of conscience and morality.

The haphazard order and heaping of rubbish also suggest a kind of integration and proximity of their corresponding events over a period of time compressed into a single space.<sup>87</sup> Similar to the manner with which a grid presentation of rubbish thrown by the roadside and river signify multiple occasions of such compartmentalized acts, a pile of rubbish serves as a confluence of the objects' back-story that led to their eventual dumping ground (i.e. the gallery space). This dumping was done as if it was the only way to warrant an audience for had they been left as they were by the roadside, indifference would only render their presence unnoticeable to the general public. This collapsing of time and erasure of the boundaries of grid into a single location invites the viewer to more carefully investigate the relationship between the different waste and their various owners.

Taking this rubbish as an extension of the perpetrators themselves, Nirmala hopes that a semblance of the wrongdoers would be presented before the public as a manifestation of their filthy personalities and shameless traits. Thus, the rubbish can be seen as a form of figural "masks" fused together in a single time and space to allude to the various individuals responsible for the pollution that occurred along the Old Damansara road. This fusion can also be read as similar to a *wayang kulit*'s performance in recounting the multiple scenes simultaneously occurring at the same time by sharing the same "stage" space.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 43.

## 4.2 *Statement 3 – A Comparison 1975-1979 (1979)*



**Figure 4.5:** Nirmala, *Statement 3 – A Comparison 1975-1979 (1979)*, Mixed Media, 128 x 53 cm. National Visual Arts Collection. Source: *The Condition of Being* 1981 Exhibition Catalogue.

This depiction of the merger of various times into a single spatial location is more evidently seen in Nirmala's *Statement 3 – A Comparison 1975 – 1979 (1979)*, a similar photo documentation piece charting the condition and well being of children living along a Damansara road over a four-year period. In this instance, Nirmala compressed the happenings of both before and after states of the underprivileged on a planar surface as a story telling attempt to mark the progression of journey from the beginning to the end.

*Statement 3* is also a photomontage of black and white photographs done in the same style as *Statement 1*. However, instead of the latter's square and proportionately balanced layout, the former depicts photographs of various sizes stacked on top of each other. Despite this asymmetrical order, one can easily make out the largely three major parts of the work, flowing from a left to right motion.

The first caption on the left section reads KANAK-KANAK DARI KAMPUNG BATU 4 JLN DAMANSARA (Children from Mile 4 Village, Damansara Road), the second caption on the top right section reads BAGI KANAK-KANAK INI PERUBAHAN TIDAK BANYAK...BATU 4 JALAN DAMANSARA (To this children, there are not many changes...Mile 4, Damansara Road). The third caption at the bottom right section reads BERBANDING DENGAN PEMBANGUNAN DI BUKIT DAMANSARA/BANGSAR (In comparison with the development at Damansara Heights/Bangsar). Each of these sections depicts the children and their surrounding environment during the year 1975 and 1979 comparing their existence with the development of a nearby urban housing project.<sup>88</sup>

As one reads the work from left to right, one notes the spartan, neglected and poor living conditions of these children's homes along Damansara road even after four years of development at a neighbouring township. Some of the photographs of the children appeared posed while others showed them in candid postures and expressions. They appeared very much at ease with the presence of the photographer. The children were all very simply dressed with a few naked figures seen. Adult figures were apparently absent from the photographs and the photographer may have consciously chosen to focus on the children. Some children appeared to be smiling innocently while others just stared blankly at the photographer. The basic constructs of their homes made with wooden materials contrasted against the modern brick and mortar homes being constructed nearby. The rapid physical development at Damansara Heights and Bangsar apparently made no positive impact on the children living along Damansara road, the main road that leads to the areas being developed. On the contrary, the bottom right

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<sup>88</sup> Due to its disparaging undertones, this artwork was rejected by the National Art Gallery for being too socialist; this happening at a time of ISA arrests.

section depicted the total transformation of an area from a barren land to one seen with newly built terrace houses.

Just as with *Statement 1*, *Statement 3* is a composite of black and white photographs in a photomontage and photo documentary style. The photographs lined up in a straightforward, geometric and sequential manner resembling that of a “presentation board” with a grid format, thus suggesting Nirmala’s approach in drawing from her graphic design background in attempting to convey a specific message across to the viewer.<sup>89</sup> However, I maintain that such ordered compositional strategy in the form of a grid offers Nirmala the means to methodically guide the viewer’s attention through the motion of a logical course of story development; thus, hereby resembling a *wayang kulit* performance.

For example, the concept of motion through time and space and duality of the forces of “good” and “evil” first explained earlier as part of the grid analysis for *Statement 1* can be shifted towards understanding *Statement 3* through a *wayang kulit* lens. If the three major divisions of a *wayang kulit* performance are seen as separate manifestations in *Statement 1*, *Statement 3* embodies the three divisions in a single execution, though not necessarily in the logical left-to-right order as presented.

The portrayal of children in the left section represented by the first caption serves to establish the characters at stake in this artwork. Close examination of the photos reveals children of different age, race and gender with a myriad of expressions. The caption above these photos aptly describes the subject matter as simply children. This could be associated with the *Patet Nem* stage where key characters are introduced.

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<sup>89</sup> Abdullah, "Postmodernity in Malaysian Art: Tracing Works by Nirmala Shanmughalingam," 37.

The next section to the top right reveals living quarters as what appears to be homes of these children. Nirmala describes this section as being of little changes happening to these children. By “little changes” she was alluding to the insignificant transformative process by which the children experienced in the period of four years, as evidenced by the roughly similar living conditions seen as dilapidated wooden shacks. In this section, focus is given to the condition of homes with a hint of the presence of children at the doorway or porch of the houses.



**Figure 4.6: Nirmala, *Your Beautiful Home* (1975), Collage and acrylic on board, 76.5 x 61 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: OurArt Projects Catalogue.**

It is also worth noting at this juncture Nirmala’s focus on the homes of these children as though rendering importance to the conducive role a good home or proper shelter plays in a child’s development and growing years. *Your Beautiful Home* (1975), a loosely gridded representation of newspaper clippings collaged on a board and painted with broad and loose Abstract Expressionist brushwork in acrylic is a piece by Nirmala



in circa 1975 (the very same year *Statement 3* was made) possibly bearing testament to her notion of the desired “home”.

Nirmala seems to point to the fact that the very living spaces of these children comes into question as the very element that would put these children’s social welfare in jeopardy. The allusion to the living condition of the children suggests a somewhat critical developmental stage or important journey every child goes through: that of having a decent space to nurture.

This process<sup>90</sup> in their early years can be understood in light of the *Patet Sanga* stage during which the *gara-gara*<sup>91</sup> scene unfolds leading to the search for a solution to the main crux of contention. The point of contention refers to the quality of life afforded by the current living condition of their homes. The “solution” could very well lie in the innocence of the children whose vulnerability could potentially lead to improvement in their living condition.

In other words, their innocence could be used to elicit sympathy towards the restoration of a more balanced development. It is also worth noting that both the first and second sections discussed corresponding to the *Patet Nem* and *Patet Sanga* stages respectively are not mutually exclusive. I maintain that these two closely knitted sections are fluid and the analysis of the second stage draws upon the first; i.e. quality of life connoted by the children’s homes in the second stage can only be improved by recognizing the quality of “innocence” of children in the first stage.

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<sup>90</sup> The process concerns that of the life’s journey and nurturing a child experiences at home, which is at stake given the unequal development occurring, thus calling for the need to search for an answer to this problem.

<sup>91</sup> The *gara-gara* scene introduces the four *Punakawan* clowns, one of which is *Semar*, whose wisdom and guidance helps the protagonist in his search for answers to his problems. These clown servants inject a dose of light heartedness in an otherwise intense conundrum. This balance between comedy and tragedy is akin to the children’s innocence surrounded by their dire homes.

The lack of colour in *Statement 3* has enabled the viewer to focus and dwell on the gravity of the subject matter. The induced left-to-right motion in viewing constitutes a journey that culminates in a poignant message toward the bottom right section. For *Statement 3* to make logical sense, the viewer has to progress through this lateral flow to get a grasp of varying conditions.

The visual narrative of *Statement 3* culminates with the bottom right section depicting a scene at the nearby Damansara Heights and Bangsar contrasting a barren hilly land with one that is filled with newly built houses. Nirmala observed that this wave of development occurring over a period of four years did not seem to benefit the children living nearby. This climactic representation of unequal development baffles Nirmala into questioning the difference between these two neighbouring areas, a scene that is aptly linked with the third and final division of the wayang kulit performance: *Patet Manyura*. This finale communicates the reality and maturity of the entire turn of events that seem to render “victory” to certain quarters of society over others. Some children seem to be on the losing end when it comes to the wave of modernization and development sweeping Malaysia in the 1970s.

What made *Statement 3* work so well was Nirmala’s clever use of the “elements of site and time specificity,”<sup>92</sup> owing to the specific declaration of the site: “Mile 4, Damansara Road” and the time: “A period between 1975 – 1979”. The provision of this textual information helps create the context that assists the viewer in vicariously living out this condition as though they were there with the children. The dimension of the message is thus tangible and made more personal.

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<sup>92</sup> Abdullah, "Postmodernity in Malaysian Art: Tracing Works by Nirmala Shanmughalingam," 38.

While *Statement 3* is clearly still a photo documentation offering no movement and sound as opposed to a *wayang kulit* performance, the basic clues of location and moments of relativity offer a semblance of motion akin to a *wayang kulit* performance. The viewer upon reading the captions may automatically “fill in the blanks” and draw upon their own connections during the four years period of events experienced by the children in their wooden homes. I maintain that these drawn conclusions and closure of the story sit well with the *Patet Manyura* stage.

*Statement 3* was literal, pragmatic and simplistic, perhaps even avant-garde as the use of photography in this documentary genre of Malaysian art as a postmodern approach was still relatively new in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>93</sup> At its very core, *Statement 3* asks: What is the cost of pursuing excellence in the name of national development and globalization? *Statement 3* stands as a provocative piece inviting viewers to question the cause and effect of development that impacts society.

The lack of a focal point in *Statement 3* suggests that the work should be viewed in its entirety and perhaps even engaged in a non-stop continuous loop of living in the “before” and “after” state of mind between 1975 and 1979, as though asking oneself, “If this is happening here, is it happening elsewhere?” This ordered thought process is made possible as the eyes roam freely from grid to grid as though viewing through a window of possibilities.

#### **4.3 *Statement Series : Of Impetus, Reality, Children & Anticipation***

Nirmala’s representation of children and home as profound subject matter grew more frequent in her subsequent series on squatters, refugees and war. For example, the

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

innocence associated with children is clearly seen in *Squatter Landscape Documentation* (1974/1979).



**Figure 4.7: Nirmala, *Squatter Landscape Documentation* (1974/1979), Photographic documentation, Dimension unknown. Collection of Rohan Shan. Source: Author's Photograph.**

In this photomontage of twelve black and white photographs laid out in a grid format, most of the children appeared smiling, laughing or curious at their photograph being taken. Nirmala seems to suggest that if these children living in the slums can be happy and contented, perhaps it shouldn't take much to live a fulfilling life then. Despite this notion, why the greed that drives the irresponsible and unbalanced development? Alternatively, it could be that their very innocence<sup>94</sup> has been taken advantage of and manipulated like puppets.

Piyadasa opines, "Nirmala is also inclined to romanticize the 'naiveté' and 'innocence' of the people of the slums" by quoting an accompanying description to *Statement 2* in Nirmala's first solo exhibition in 1981 which reads: "A people living

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<sup>94</sup> In depicting children of war (as both victims and child soldiers), Nirmala alludes to this vulnerable quality of children in *Innocence Violated – Children of War* (1991) (See Figure 8.1 in Appendix).

simply, in relatively happy ignorance, accepting conditions as they are, not aware of being victims of other men's greed or profiteering, not blaming anyone: easy to please or amuse, trusting where little trust may be deserved."<sup>95</sup>

While Piyadasa seemed to trivialize Nirmala's observation as potentially exaggerating, it may appear that Nirmala was merely venting her frustration at the squatters allowing themselves to be subjected to such conditions. Nirmala has recounted her close relationship with the squatters, some of whom she kept in touch with until their relocation.<sup>96</sup> Thus, there's a high likelihood that Nirmala was aware of the squatters' feelings towards their own situation. Nirmala would like to think that she's identified one (if not a few) cause of this dire condition the squatters find themselves in: gullibility. It is for this reason that Nirmala was likely "enraged" resulting in her construction of *Statement 1*, *Statement 2*, *Statement 3* and *Squatter Landscape Documentation*.

Nirmala's sentiments demonstrate a highly invested inclination towards pursuing a social cause in her artworks. She had personally hinted to Piyadasa that social commentary was a pertinent theme that drove her artistic endeavor as she was not able to find "adequate emotional or spiritual meaning" in her earlier works.<sup>97</sup> I argue that this dedicated commitment likens Nirmala to being a highly-charged and "possessed" *dalang* in narrating their stories as earnestly as they could in hopes of realistically moving the audience in the desired mood just as how she paints "a disturbing picture of

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<sup>95</sup> Piyadasa, "The Art of Nirmala Shanmughalingam," 12.

<sup>96</sup> In an interview with Nirmala on 5 May 2016, she has revealed to the researcher a number of children's names whom she was fond of. It is indeed amazing how she could still remember the names after more than forty years, thus suggesting her level of attachment to them.

<sup>97</sup> Piyadasa, "The Art of Nirmala Shanmughalingam," 8.

humanity” with the aim “to provoke the viewer into discomfort” in *Statement 2*.<sup>98</sup> By doing so, Nirmala might have viewed her endeavours as spiritually fulfilling, perhaps in no different to that of a *dalang* in maintaining spiritual balance with the cosmic universe and spirits of the dead. She was simply consumed by this spiritual commitment.

Additionally, Piyadasa notes that Nirmala’s venture into social commentary works serve to satiate her hunger for “emotional self-realization.”<sup>99</sup> Even though Nirmala’s earlier Abstract Expressionist-influenced landscape artworks under the tutelage of Ismail Zain offered many opportunities to churn out “properties of ‘good’ painting”, they were executed at the expense of attachment with the soul of the work portrayed.<sup>100</sup>

To address this sense of detachment from the works, it appears Nirmala was searching for a means to get more involved and close to the issue by attempting to incorporate elements of reality into her artworks in the 1970s. This possibly explains the integration of real rubbish and presentation of factual records in *Statement 1* and the portrayal of real victims of urbanization in *Statement 3* in an attempt to engage, empower and energize the viewer-artwork interaction that is highly characteristic of how a *dalang* works. In doing so, Nirmala has demonstrated her yearning to be connected with the essence of her artworks, just as how a *dalang* would have been. For example, a *dalang* is known to be capable of vocal mimicry to lend voice to more than fifty puppets in his play.<sup>101</sup> This injects reality and richness to the characters portrayed.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. Nirmala has also indicated to this researcher in July 2016 that no good work will shine forth if one doesn’t personally invest strong feelings into the subject matter being painted. She notes that this emotional attachment as being equally crucial in producing good music or writing.

<sup>101</sup> Brandon, *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*, 62.

Nirmala could have achieved emotional self-realization from having linked viewers to pressing issues warranting immediate awareness and action. Similarly, a successful *dalang* would have exposed his audience to a certain moralistic lesson by way of communicating the story's elements through different events, scenes and diverse characters of the puppets used in hopes of eliciting the desired realization, reaction and response from the audience. At this juncture, it is suggested that the rubbish, statistical findings, timestamp, location referencing and portraits of real victims used in Nirmala's artworks discussed in this chapter, among others, are likened to the various maneuvers and puppet pieces used by a *dalang* in their *wayang kulit* performance.

These absolute objects and situational elements employed by Nirmala add layers of dimension and certain richness to an otherwise flat two-dimensional representation of artwork. They provide a semblance of scale, urgency and depth in the artworks just as how gamelan music, vocal narration, speed of shadow movement across the screen and various puppet configurations contribute to a wholesome appreciation of the *wayang kulit* performance. Most importantly, they served to heighten the sense of reality in the artworks.

This injection of reality in the artworks was an important breakthrough in Nirmala's attempt to solve the problem of accurately conveying her passion in what appears to be a statement against social injustice; a breakthrough "solution" which she attributes to being exposed to Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa's unconventional and conceptual art practices in the early 1970s.<sup>102</sup> The challenge remains for Nirmala to animate her envisioned stories without physical motion and narration to convey reality. Nevertheless, the representation of reality is made possible primarily by way of

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<sup>102</sup> Piyadasa, "The Art of Nirmala Shanmughalingam," 8.

photographic record to depict a certain level of vicarious actuality that is central to Nirmala's empathetic vision.

Piyadasa notes that Nirmala's empathy for the squatter children in *Statement 2* bears a certain degree of directness resembling a Neo-Realist perspective seen in the early films of Italian director and actor, Vittorio De Sica.<sup>103</sup> Italian Neorealism refers to a genre of film made during post-World War Two featuring local non-professional actors especially children and lower working class people on the streets as opposed to being in a studio. The squatter children depicted in *Statement 2*, *Statement 3* and *Squatter Landscape Documentation* could very well have been inadvertent actors in Nirmala's play.

Neorealist films deal with the harsh condition after the war that often saw intense struggle for survivability amidst difficult social and economic circumstances surrounded by poverty and desperation. This was especially a critical period in the recovery and rebuilding of Italy in the post-war era, signifying a momentous point of change in history. Similarly, Malaysia as a young nation in the aftermath of Independence was witnessing rapid development and growth in the 1970s. These squatter children were potentially sitting on the brink of change for a better life.

This notion of being on the verge of a crucial or critical point, beyond which the road ahead branches either toward positivity or negativity is highly characteristic of the *Statement* series of works. Not only are they "alternative view points" or living records of a particular moment in Malaysian history in contrast to mainstream media of a glorious nation heading toward excellence and modernization, they serve as a call-to-action for viewers to decide the possible fate of these children.

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 13.



In other words, the documentation of these squatter children in the 1970s is a conscience-piquing milestone or rest stop for anyone to pause and reassess one's priorities and social bearings. Children may be deemed as living hope or key to a future that has yet to be written. Children are raw and pliable agents of change in society. As potent components and building blocks that shape humanity's existence, children are seen as determinants to right the wrongs of an inadequate past.

At this juncture, I suggest that, the very nature of these *Statement* series in attempting to get viewers to self-reflect in a limbo is akin to a *wayang kulit* performance, where the *dalang* provokes the audience to draw similarities with their own difficult conditions when presented with an unfolding drama on stage. Witnessing the children in these photographs, one may be transported back to the past via reflecting on the children's parents or catapulted to the future via envisioning the children's children. This oscillation between past, present and future constitute a form of motion that is evident in *wayang kulit*.

The nature of a pivotal event symbolized by the documentation of these squatters poised between the past and future is also synonymous with the *wayang kulit*'s use of the triangular *Kayon* as an intermission device, which will be explained further in Chapter 5 and 7. Suffice to say, Nirmala's photo documentation of environmental pollution and squatters put viewers in an anticipatory stance for what's to come, as though signifying the conclusion of one episode while heralding the opening of the next.

#### **4.4 South East Asia Conflict : Of Implied Grid, Appropriation, Repetition, Dreams & Brushwork**

While *Statement 1*'s use of the grid has been symmetrical and somewhat static, *Statement 3*'s use of the grid may be considered as asymmetrical and dynamic. It is

dynamic in a manner that guides the eyes in a particular successive order, thus, suggesting the use of grid as a motion-creating tool to indicate change and progression as evident in *Statement 3*. Regardless of the qualities of symmetry in *Statement 1* & *Statement 3*, it is obvious that they both employed clear delineation of separation between the various photographs. This however, will soon changed in the course of time.

A number of Nirmala's subsequent works in the 1980s still maintained a certain format of grid use, even though their styling may have evolved somewhat. Not only have the boundaries between the grids and their content blurred or overlapped, the position of the grids themselves seemed haphazard. Take for instance, *Children of Asia I* (1980) (part of the *Children of Asia* series), a large square format painting filled with imagery of suffering children and wordings silkscreened on the canvas in a rather loosely gridded structure.



**Figure 4.8 : Nirmala, *Children of Asia I* (1980), Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 153 x 153 cm. Collection of Tan Sri Kamarul Ariffin. Source: *The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator 1998 Exhibition Catalogue*.**

In this painting depicting children war refugees, Nirmala has covered the canvas with three different sets of emotionless children images interspersed among some textual write-up of what appears to be newspaper clippings. At a glance, the photographs are organized in a 3 x 3 implied grid layout with generally nine perceived sections. One set of images at the upper left corner depict a child staring blankly at the viewer, the images on the upper right corner depict a child huddled up behind barb wires amidst some rubble and the third set of images at the bottom row showed a child with a battered face and bandaged head.

These photographs are of various sizes slotted amongst themselves with either a clear line of separation between them or some hard-edged strips of nothingness. Otherwise, the photographs are made to overlap each other at the edges as seen with the bottom 3 similar photos resulting in no clear discernible boundaries.

What began as highly structured geometric representation of Nirmala's own photographs in *Statement 1* and *Statement 3* seemed to have evolved into a more organic layout of appropriated imagery in *Children of Asia I*.

At this juncture, it is worth noting a number of new techniques Nirmala introduced into her work. They are media appropriation, repetition and broad brushworks.

These images of children have been extracted from the media and it appears that Nirmala have been scouring for suitable imagery to creatively portray indifference (child staring blankly), lost of freedom and hopelessness (huddled child behind barb wires) and suffering (battered child with bandaged head). Together, these three calmly exuded sentiments invoked by *Children of Asia I* suggest that the children are taking it all in their stride as helpless objects. Nirmala has juxtaposed the necessary set of images to invoke the desired response in the viewer just as how a *dalang* would have by

manipulating and projecting the relevant puppets' characteristics. Nirmala seems to be suggesting our role as passive subjects observing these children from afar. Additionally, textual information is also superimposed on the imagery as if to add further background story. More importantly, Nirmala seems to allude to our potentially growing indifference to such circulating news of human tragedy as a result of our increasingly being desensitized by media saturation.<sup>104</sup>

Marshall McLuhan has described this numbness to overexposure of media or technology, as a defensive mechanism to inhibit new sensations. It is one's natural reaction to slip into a state of unresponsiveness. To break free from this stale mate, a re-presentation of visual forms is necessary.

A re-orientation of the three different images of children has been done to create visual interest. Together in this painting, they now serve as a new form of medium. This is achieved by lifting them out from their original context of a newspaper medium and rearranged on the canvas surface in various intensities and sizes so as to appear as a new form of stimuli amongst a complex interplay of grids and brushwork.

As a result, the Cubist-like composition of *Children of Asia I* commands a total and "instant sensory awareness of the whole."<sup>105</sup> Each implied grid of image portrays a different facet of the original image of the child. Together in unison, it announces, in McLuhan's words: "The medium is the message". This three-part mantra; *medium*, acting as a "tool" or agent of change to engender a *message*, signified as the change process as a result of the medium's attributes, in a relationship that delivers *content*,

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>105</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *McLuhan: Understanding Media*(London: Routledge, 1964), 13.

signified as the “payload”. He believes that it is “the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.”<sup>106</sup>

Drawing upon these defined parameters, it is hoped that the fragmented visual representation of terror and hopelessness on the canvas of *Children of Asia I* (medium) leads to a concerted effort to protect innocent victims of war in a nation (message) with vulnerable children suffering from the escalating horrors of war (content). McLuhan cautions against being blinded by the obvious content and urges for the engagement with the qualities of the medium’s characteristics instead (message), as the medium is an extension of the creator. By the same token, this painting serves as an extension of Nirmala’s vision to put an end to war. This understanding is applicable to all of Nirmala’s social commentary artworks.

By way of mechanical reproduction, Nirmala was able to use repetition to replicate the same image over and over again across the canvas. These reproduced imagery appear with diverse range of tonality and visibility; a phenomenon likened to the manner with which a leather puppet’s distance from the screen is adjusted to produce varying shapes and strength of shadows. The repeated images are also punctuated at random intervals with negative spaces as though to disrupt the chaotic cycle that permeates the visuals.

Repetition may also convey a sense of urgency and gravity. It also reveals the enormity and anonymity of the mass public. Interestingly, Hal Foster, in his analysis of the Pop artist Andy Warhol’s use of repetition notes that repeating a traumatic event wavers between merging it with the “psychic economy” as a means to come to terms

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 9.

with it and immersing oneself in “obsessive fixation on the object in melancholy.”<sup>107</sup> The former, similar to McLuhan’s observation of mass media and technology desensitizing the senses while the latter, a form of engaging with the *punctum*<sup>108</sup> of the image as one’s means to vicariously live out the identity of the person or event depicted.

The repeated and appropriated mass imagery has also raised concerns regarding authenticity. Walter Benjamin in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* opines that such duplicated images strips originality and “aura” from the artwork thereby making them impersonal. I argue that this may not necessarily be the case.

Nirmala’s complex art making process involving careful juxtaposition of visual and textual elements in her layered compositions incorporates uniqueness. The attempt to include time and space specificity seen in *Statement 1* and *Statement 3*, and the insertion of implicit and explicit traditional forms seek to contextualize and ritualize the artwork despite the appropriation of found images. Even though certain images have been repeated across a number of artworks over the years, the silkscreen process renders micro differences in their depiction thereby lending uniqueness and presence of aura. Perhaps, Nirmala was suggesting the importance of an artwork’s ubiquity and accessibility to effect change in a wider audience by her appropriation of media images as a means to democratize art. As such, the apparent trivial question of authenticity pales in comparison.

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<sup>107</sup> Hal Foster, "Death in America," *October* 75(1996): 42.

<sup>108</sup> A connection with Roland Barthes’ concept of *punctum* in images bearing abjection, horror and tragedy enables one to question their would-be presence in the events instead of the depicted subjects themselves as a form of empathetic simulation. Repetition simply reinforces this interaction, which brings about feelings of vulnerability. The reading of *punctum* is essential to analyzing Nirmala’s social commentary artworks that deal with human sufferings.

*Children of Asia I* also saw Nirmala's integration of brushworks into her signature photomontage technique, which was to prove iconic in her subsequent works especially the *Vietnam* and *Kampung Polo* series. Broad brushworks are carefully smeared perpendicular to the picture plane, at times intersecting the grid boundaries at particular intervals. These brushworks further add suspense and hesitancy to the organic constructs of the visual representation. They are also suggestive of Nirmala's attempt to personalize her vision via gestural brushworks, perhaps signaling a fallback on her early years of Abstract Expressionist inclinations.<sup>109</sup>

Nirmala's re-engagement with the canvas in the 1980s after almost a decade<sup>110</sup> using intense brushwork, silkscreen and/or collage demonstrates her predisposition to assuming total ownership and control of her artworks.<sup>111</sup> This level of random physicality, manipulation and "fusion" with the materials is somewhat akin to a *dalang*'s deep involvement with the leather puppets creation, maintenance and improvised orchestration of the *wayang kulit* performance.

Both repetition and application of broad brushworks in this painting contribute to a perceived sense of motion; a vital ingredient in Nirmala's story telling. The marriage of these two techniques result in a "ghosting" effect as if depicting the children cutting randomly across the canvas, just as how a *dalang* moves his leather puppets to create shadowy streaks across the screen. By doing so, Nirmala imbues the characters in this

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<sup>109</sup> Piyadasa, "The Art of Nirmala Shanmughalingam," 14.

<sup>110</sup> Redza Piyadasa, in chronicling Nirmala's early works in *The Condition of Being* exhibition catalogue in 1981, opines that the point of departure into conceptual art and photographic documentation away from Abstract Expressionist body of works began in 1973 with *Statement I*.

<sup>111</sup> Interestingly, Nirmala's reverting to an emphasis of Abstract Expressionist brushworks and collage, along with her discovery of the silkscreen process in the 1980s triggered a proliferation of works employing such techniques especially evident in her artworks on the war in Vietnam, Cambodia, Ethiopia and Beirut. It appears Nirmala's newfound social cause affording her emotional self-realisation and spiritual fulfillment outlined in Section 4.3 has vindicated her re-adoption of gestural brushworks.

painting with an element of mobility and multiplicity as if to suggest some sort of shared relationship between these children and their compounding plight.

The muted purplish monochromatic colors and intermittent brushworks mimic a smoky atmosphere in an environment of chaos and destruction. Together with the flattening of visual and textual narrative on a single plane and calculated repetitions, they project a poignant case for reflexive consideration among viewers. I reckon these are among techniques Nirmala use to heighten the visual sensory perception at the lack of vocal narration and real movement especially pronounced in a *wayang kulit* performance.

While the conspicuous grid denotes the progression of time in *Statement 3*, perceived-motion as suggested by repetition in an implied grid format in *Children of Asia I* could also signify growing tension and attempt to make sense of a developing phenomenon. To a certain extent, *Children of Asia I* reflects a questioning of the reality of ordered chaos in motion. This tendency of using implied grid as a representational tool to capture “movement in episodic succession” is also palpable in the works of Zambri Embi’s *Satu Ilusi 78* (1978) and *Satu Apisod ’77* (1977).<sup>112</sup>

The micro differences in Zambri’s photographs are seen as contributing to a form of motion when viewed in quick succession, just like rapidly flipping the edges of a book. Even though the grid boundaries are obviously marked, what’s evident in this work is the smearing or “ghosting” effect of the dancers.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Soon, “Photography and the Grid,” 40-41.

<sup>113</sup> This is achieved either with the camera’s long shutter speed, or the speed of movement of dancers far exceeding the speed of the camera’s ability to freeze motion.





**Figure 4.9: Zambri Embi, *Satu Apisod* (1977), Photographs on board, 61.0 x 78.5 cm. Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Source: *Photography and the Grid* Book Section.**

Strangely, the complex human eyes do not capture movement as the above depicted smearing. The human eye is capable of registering movement at high frame rates thus rendering movement as multiple discrete objects in a smooth motion. As such, *Satu Apisod* is juxtaposing humanly possible reality of eyewitness account (or at least deemed realistic) with that of an “out-of-this-world” impossible representation of ethereal motion. In other words, Zambri seems to be questioning the “truth value” of photography that wavers between illusion and reality in his photo documentation works of performing arts.<sup>114</sup> Soon’s understanding of Zambri’s use of the grid to witness the quick changing forms of questionable illusion (dream-like blurred imagery) and reality (static form) in the study of dancers can be transposed to a similar appreciation of *Children of Asia I*.

*Children of Asia I* conveys a sense of flickered memories and flashbacks as surreal manifestations of the subconscious. They provoke one to question the reality of these happenings and if they were just a dream, as though one views these scenes in disbelief with hopes of discounting their reality. This unique style of Nirmala in achieving the

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<sup>114</sup> Soon, "Photography and the Grid," 40-41.

effect of “a dream” disorientate the viewer and thus, further adding to the tension and chaos. Abdullah notes of Thomas Crow’s claims that the screened image produced carries an aura of denial and struggle with qualities of human memories that fluctuate between being vivid and elusive thus further reinforcing the aforesaid postulation that they resemble dreams.<sup>115</sup>

Brandon notes of a poignant remark appearing in *The Meditation of Ardjuna* written by a court poet of King Airlangga (1035 – 1049) where it observes how engrossed audiences’ authentic and sympathetic reaction is to the plots of the shadow theatre as though they were real, thus reflecting their yearning for an illusory existence.<sup>116</sup> This simulated experience when viewing Nirmala’s artworks could work for or against her objective. One may find the “safe” and detached viewing distance appropriate to discern the issues championed while on the contrary, one may not fathom completely the seriousness of the issue. This wavering between simulation and real poses a prevalent tension in her artworks in no different a manner than dreams.

The addition of random strokes of black paint, smeared ghostly double images and warped, faded texts amidst the smudged silkscreened images is especially pronounced in *Anak Asia* (1980), *Vietnam Refugees I* (1980) (Figure 4.15) and *Vietnam* (1981) (Figure 4.11). The visual analysis discussed for *Children of Asia I* is applicable to viewing and understanding *Anak Asia*. However, the latter exhibits a number of differences over the former in terms of composition, colour, subject matter and use of stenciled headlines.

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<sup>115</sup> Abdullah, "Postmodernity in Malaysian Art: Tracing Works by Nirmala Shanmughalingam," 41.

<sup>116</sup> Brandon, *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*, 3.



**Figure 4.10: Nirmala, *Anak Asia* (1980), Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, Dimension unknown. Collection of Rohan Shan. Source: Author's Photograph.**

Firstly, the most striking feature of this rectangular painting is the central black and white region of roughly 2 x 3 implied grid layout of silkscreened images pulled into focus surrounded by two dark brown framing strips on each side.<sup>117</sup> A number of these images at the centre have been repeated at the top and bottom row. The image of the child staring blankly that appeared in *Children of Asia I* is also found in this painting. Not only has this been repeated on the canvas; some of the cloned copies at the left and right section of the bottom row appeared highly solarized and rendered almost unrecognizable, perhaps alluding to the indescribable plight experienced. This could also be suggestive of the fragility of life and impending death in times of war.

Closer examination at the upper left corner reveals a lady whose face have been split equally by the left dark brown strip, as though revealing a section of her face in light and the other in darkness, thus suggesting the immediacy of life and death or a struggle

<sup>117</sup> The compositional approach of using lateral framing borders on the left and right side of paintings also witness their alternative use as vertical framing borders, such as that found in *Anak Asia IV* (1983) (See Figure 8.2 in Appendix). Such vertical framing borders are more evident in Nirmala's subsequent paintings of the *Membalak*, *Bakun* and explicit *Wayang* series of works in the late 1980s and late 1990s.

between the forces of good and evil. The entire central black and white region of visual space serves as though a loupe investigating film negatives against a light box is in progress while bringing to attention a particular episode of Nirmala's intended narrative under close scrutiny, a practice evocative of her earlier photography inclinations. The framing strips on the sides conjure an atmosphere of watching shadow projections on a *wayang kulit* stage as the repetitious imageries waver across the center screen in motion, while other partially visible figures lie obscured in wait by the sides. The inspective and framing device posed by these lateral strips reinforce Nirmala's photographic and cinematic borrowings.

Instead of *Children of Asia I*'s purplish hue, *Anak Asia* finds a tinge of dark earthy brown. This muted colour along with black project a very somber atmosphere, one perhaps made direr with the inclusion of what appears to be wailing mother holding her dead child. The presence of a living child staring uncertainly at the viewer and an embraced crying child amongst images of corpse questions the fleeting nature of life.

A portion of an actual article headline from a Malay newspaper reads: "MANGSA KEGANASAN POL POT DIKENAL LUBANG MAUT", which means "Pol Pot's victims of violence known as death hole". A snippet of a side bar reading reveals a child's first-hand harrowing experience of recounting how they tried waking their mother up but to no avail; wolves were soon eating their mother's bloated corpse. It reads: "*Aku cuba kejutkan ibu tapi ibu tak bangun...*" which means, "I tried waking up mother but she's not responding..."

The former can be related to a *wayang*'s *djanturan*, *tjarijos* and *suluk* combined: the third person narrative elements while the latter resembles the *ginem*: the first person

spoken dialogue of each puppet.<sup>118</sup> It appears these written words of appropriated news articles serve as Nirmala's storytelling voice as a *dalang*; a widely used convention in all of Nirmala's artworks employing juxtaposition of text and visuals.

It's interesting to read this one account from a living child of their dead mother while an entirely inverse point of view is presented visually by the wailing mother over her dead child, thus suggesting the totality of atrocity committed by the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia.<sup>119</sup> It seems Nirmala was trying to augment and enrich the visual experience by presenting a varied perspective with both image and textual narratives.<sup>120</sup>



**Figure 4.11: Nirmala, *Vietnam* (1981), Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 102 x 201 cm. National Art Gallery Collection. Source: *The Making of An Artist As Social Commentator 1998 Exhibition Catalogue*.**

Nirmala's manipulation of article headlines silkscreened on her canvas is also seen in *Vietnam* (1981). Here to the left, the English news article headline reads: "My Lai and

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<sup>118</sup> Brandon, *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*, 29-31.

<sup>119</sup> The *Children of Asia* series is Nirmala's depiction of the children refugee of the Vietnamese Boat People who fled Vietnam by sea after the Vietnam War in 1978 and 1979 until the early 1990s. Strangely, the provenance of these images is questionable as they are also used to represent the conflict in Cambodia.

<sup>120</sup> I would reckon the presence of this textual piece of story telling resulting in the viewer's own "inner voice" as they read them, being potentially likened to that of a *dalang*'s vocal narration. A varied perspective is also common in *wayang kulit* performance where a story is told from both the Pandawa or Kurawa sides with that of the Ogres.

the judgment that was made at the Nuremberg courts” questioning “how is it that the Americans who condemned Nazi war criminals could subsequently drop napalm bombs on Vietnamese villages?”<sup>121</sup> This is a powerful allusion by which Nirmala provokes the viewer into an ethical and moral crossroad seeking justification for actions taken through the linking of two wars separated by a mere two decades, thus suggesting the regrettable switch of role Americans played from a savior to a destroyer.

The inclusion of this article provides a window to the past, upon which the present is better understood, thereby demonstrating an attempt at compressing two different times in a single space. Interestingly, a similar total number of three sets of images have been used again in this painting: huddled child behind barbed wires, grieving mother over dead babies and what appears to be a child soldier wearing a helmet.

Nirmala has stretched *Vietnam* to an unusually large landscape space as though intending to offer an immersive viewing experience for the audience. At two meters frame-filling width, the previously seen dark brown border strips on the sides of *Anak Asia* disappear to reveal more bold and expressionistic black broad brush strokes streaked across the scene at random intervals. These brush strokes weaving through the region of implied grids of stacked images at the center is among some of Nirmala’s most prominent features in her war series of artworks. It’s even possible that these brush strokes be seen as the stench of death and misery binding all the disparate organic and geometric elements of this fragmented painting into a unifying picture of broken human relations. The resulting brushwork, warm colours, repeated imagery of wailing mothers in anguish over loss of lives have a certain disabling sense of violence, chaos and hopelessness.

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<sup>121</sup> Li, "Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator - a Review," 11.

Nirmala attributes her use of the silkscreen process to her attempt at lending prominence to her brushwork; had collage been used instead, her brush strokes would have been lost or obscured under the pasted surface.<sup>122</sup> She seems to suggest the unique and central role her brushworks play in her artworks. Nirmala's strong identification with traditional Chinese brushwork, poetry and history is indeed interesting. Cheong Lai Tong first recognized such links with influences of Chinese brush painting when he was shown some of Nirmala's paintings.<sup>123</sup> Nirmala has also rendered strong recognition toward 17<sup>th</sup> century Ch'ing Dynasty painters who practiced social commentary; this being in stark contrast to the often-associated social criticism with the West.<sup>124</sup>

In a personal conversation with the researcher in July 2016, Nirmala also expressed her fascination with the single-handedness of Chinese brush strokes requiring full concentration and unrestrained execution; known as the "One Breath" effect.<sup>125</sup> Suffice to say, Nirmala's preoccupation with Chinese painting demonstrates her inclinations toward Asian values and tradition in recognition of its power to mystify and energize the works.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>125</sup> Da-Wei Kwo, *Chinese Brushwork: Its History, Aesthetics, and Techniques*. (London: George Prior Associated Publishers Ltd., 1981), 65.

<sup>126</sup> Chu Li, in "Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator – a Review", 10-11, describes how Nirmala overlaps the planes to obscure the "distinctive grid system" employed in her works and use "broad raw brushwork to distort and tear away the rectangularity" of the silkscreened photo prints. On this note, I maintain that the brushwork used enhanced the sorrowful atmosphere through its organic qualities in creating tension, motion and a semblance of dynamism thereby linking all the events depicted in a more intimate manner to achieve reality.



#### 4.5 *Kampung Polo Series : Of Homes & Mothers*



**Figure 4.12: Nirmala, *Kampung Polo* (1983), Silkscreen and acrylic on canvas, 122 x 206 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: Author's Photograph.**

Nirmala's usage of stenciled news article headlines suggested deeper seriousness in *Kampung Polo* (1983). In this painting, the surface is roughly divided into three panels with the first headline at top left panel and the second headline at bottom right panel, framing a slightly brighter middle panel bringing it to focus. The former reads: "*Masalah di Kampung Polo: Dewan Bandaraya 'membisu'*" which translates to "Problem in Kampung Polo: City Hall 'keeping mum'". The latter reads: "NO REPRIEVE". A smaller in-set call out reads: "They have to go back where they came from".

Together, these bi-lingual headlines connotes an unceasing and relentless ruthlessness on the part of City Hall in demolishing houses belonging to twenty two Malay families despite a one-week eviction notice.<sup>127</sup> The supplement of these news

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<sup>127</sup> A balanced view calls for more careful scrutiny. Close study of the news piece revealed mud slinging between City Hall officials and advocacy groups calling for access to more affordable homes or temporary shelter. The squatters deplored the short one-week notice. A squatter family confessed that personal dire circumstances forced their settling into the present space. City Hall



articles painting differing stance from the opposing parties involved makes for micro viewpoints supporting the larger narrative that seems to suggest a constant struggle between “good” and “evil”. These viewpoints however construct a rather neutral reporting as evidenced by these headlines, even though the visuals seemed to suggest the squatters being wronged. It appears Nirmala’s strategy was to invite viewers to scour the large painting surface and engaged with the information presented to seek the truth for themselves.

Three types of imagery dominate the largely monochromatic surface via a number of repetitions interlocked in a representation of implied grid whose borders have been brushed over in some areas, rendering a tangled mass of confusion, destruction and despair. The first set of imagery depicts portraits of two mothers holding their babies. Their names are revealed;<sup>128</sup> one of which showed a concerned self, pondering over an uncertain future, while another held a 6 months old baby reportedly suffering from heart disease. The second set depicts a collection of what appears to be demolished houses reduced to a heap of rubble with children in the vicinity. This differs in stark contrast with that seen in the second section of *Statement 3*, where the houses are still intact. The third set of images depicts a mother feeding her four children amidst the rubble and debris of demolished homes.

Together, these three inter-connected imagery convey the sacrifice and warmth of motherly love to protect and nurture the next generation in the face of adversity signified by destroyed homes. This is consistent with Nirmala’s attempt at portraying

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in defense of their harsh measures deemed barbaric and inhumane maintained that they would not tolerate “new” squatters – who were not registered in previous year’s census – to simply “build houses where they like”. They have also accused the squatters of ill intent in a syndicate involvement that rent out their properties to settle in slums with the old and the young to “arouse sympathy”.

<sup>128</sup> Perhaps to demonstrate reality and promote experiential context in drawing intimacy between viewer and “key characters” involved in this saga, the ensuing battle between “good” and “evil” continues. The alleged perpetrator behind this squatter crisis, the Minister in The Federal Territory Ministry has also been named.

the significance of a home as a basic necessity in the healthy growth of a family unit as first demonstrated in *Statement 3*. Perhaps, the right question to ask is how will equal opportunity in terms of housing be ensured for the socially and economically challenged society in Malaysia then in the 1980s especially in the face of rapid development and modernization. What is an acceptable compromise between the “servile” poor and needy with that of the “authoritarian” middle upper class? The ongoing tension between these two segments of society is an indisputable perennial theme that is central to Nirmala’s artworks.

The aforementioned presentation of objective journalistic reporting in *Kampung Polo* was merely descriptive and neutral; until Nirmala decided to personalize the readings by injecting her own thoughts. One year later, Nirmala scribbled the words “*hati binatang*”, which translates to “heart of an animal” across *Kampung Polo II* (1984).



**Figure 4.13: Nirmala, *Kampung Polo II* (1984), Silkscreen and acrylic on canvas, 122 x 206 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: OurArt Projects Catalogue.**

Nirmala seems to be alluding to the inconsiderate and heartless acts of City Hall and their high-handedness in driving out the squatters. This caustic sentiment blended

seamlessly into the middle panel on a canvas layout that is similar to *Kampung Polo*. For the first time apparently, Nirmala made legible her abstract and gestural brushworks that served as an extension of her indictment against the powers that be.

Three notable differences are present in this piece. Firstly, only the headline “NO REPRIEVE” has been maintained and given a more prominent focus at the middle as if highlighting the gravity of the fate suffered by the squatters.

Secondly, the silkscreened image of the mother feeding her four children has been enlarged and emphasized as though they matter greatly. Perhaps, Nirmala felt this image best exemplified the magnitude of repercussion experienced by four young siblings in a closed and shared space. It provokes one to think of a multitude of other children affected as well. Alternatively, this image could also suggest positivity; the effects of a mother’s lost of her home may not be as profound on the young ones as they still have their mother as a pillar of strength and hope. Interestingly, this mother feeding her 4 children has been identified as the poet and writer, Adibah Amin, a close friend of Nirmala.<sup>129</sup>

Thirdly, one of the portraits of a mother holding her baby has been enlarged and placed to the middle left of the painting, while another photo of an embraced baby shown up close on the bottom right. The former silkscreened somber-looking photo is seen staring into what appears to be an adjacent notice board bearing the words, “CADANGAN MEMBINA SE-BUAH RUMAH BUNGLOW DI ATAS LOT 25 OFF JALAN AMPANG HILIR BATU 4 MUKIM OF AMPANG, KUALA LUMPUR UNTUK ...”. It translates as “Proposal to construct a bungalow house on Lot 25 off Ampang Hilir road at Batu 4, subdistrict of Ampang, Kuala Lumpur for...”. The name

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<sup>129</sup> Daryl Goh, "A Legacy of Exposing Social and Political Concerns," *The Star*, 8 January 2017.

of the new homeowner is partially obscured but sufficiently legible to make out an individual's identity.



**Figure 4.14: Nirmala, *Kampung Polo II* (1984) (DETAILED), Silkscreen and acrylic on canvas, 122 x 206 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: OurArt Projects Catalogue.**

Traces of this notice board has been repeated 4 times in *Kampung Polo* and only now made prominent in *Kampung Polo II* as if to suggest the hugely different fate faced between the underprivileged and elite society of Kuala Lumpur. Along with the inclusion of Nirmala's friend in the painting and her scribbled opinion across the surface area, she has finally gotten personal in her war against injustice. The scribbled words across the painting is consistent with a *dalang*'s attempt to narrate his thoughts as

though reflecting a sort of soliloquy voiced by the king shortly before he enters his inner chambers in *adegan gapuran*.<sup>130</sup>

#### 4.6 Breaking Through the Edges

The visual analysis and underlying *wayang kulit* concepts discussed in this chapter cover artworks from the early 1970s until mid 1980s. The style exhibited is largely monochromatic and composed of hard line vertical and horizontal geometric edges enclosing a montage pictorial space.

Static grids first seen as photo documentation gave way to dynamic grids bathed in streaks of apparent spontaneous but carefully executed brushworks to convey a sense of motion, dream and emotional distress. This representation of implied grid also witnessed a merge with a number of techniques, namely, media appropriation and repetition; both of which made more effective with the silkscreen process. All these are aptly seen in *Vietnam Refugees I* (1980) bearing testament to Nirmala's successful hybridized adoption of the aforementioned techniques into a single painting. An undeniable constant referral to children, home and mothers prevails.

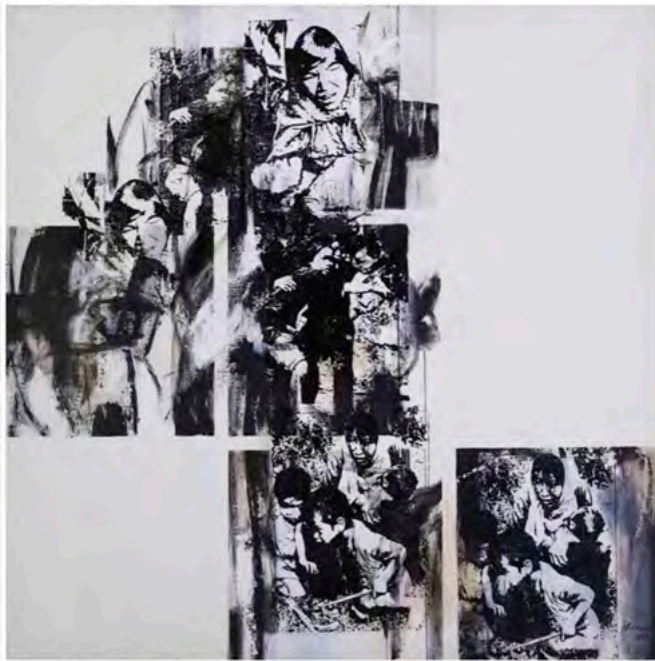
In recognition of the maturing process Nirmala's creative journey has taken, *Vietnam Refugees I* is a tribute to *Statement I* and a silent nod in celebration of mankind's perseverance seen in *Anak Asia* and *Kampung Polo II*. It's a manifestation of a decade-long search for reality. This reality is characterized by the silkscreened imagery overflowing the confines of the grid, as if struggling to break free like a puppet yearning for freedom of expression. The highly gestural brushstrokes vibrates along the grid's edges as hints of movement amidst surrounding empty spaces that reverberate like a

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<sup>130</sup> Edward C. Van Ness, *Javanese Wayang Kulit: An Introduction*, 50.



*wayang kulit* screen. They contribute to a viewing experience with no particular order of entry into the surface area.



**Figure 4.15: Nirmala, *Vietnam Refugees I* (1980), Silkscreen and acrylic on canvas, 122 x 122 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: OurArt Projects Catalogue.**

All in all, Nirmala's works in this period represents a gradual shift from geometric concerns to a more organic and unstable aura infused with an unsettling grapple with the human psyche; a wrestle that often pits together right and wrong. This basic conundrum of the human condition found in her *wayang*-inspired narratives in this chapter would soon take full form in the mid 1980s.

## CHAPTER 5: EXPLICIT WAYANG KULIT MOTIFS

Nirmala first researched on Kelantanese *wayang kulit* and *wayang purwa* of Java sometime in 1984 before spending some time in Jakarta and Bali collaborating with the *dalang*, Pak Herman Pratikto on some projects in 1986.<sup>131</sup> *Wayang kulit* is believed to have registered its first mention in eastern Java Kingdom's court literature written between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries.<sup>132</sup>

Discovering *wayang kulit* as a potent and effective creative expression offers an excited Nirmala, unlimited possibilities in articulating her caustic commentaries on a wide range of pressing social issues. It appears as though she's found mankind's evil contemporary in the shape and form of mythic beings. Despite knowing the epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana, Nirmala attributes her involvement with *wayang kulit* out of passionate love for the art form that is aesthetically driven and not due to religion.<sup>133</sup>

The inherent qualities of *wayang kulit* in painting complex essence of the human condition appeals to her opinionated demeanor, wits and humour. This "human condition" resulting in the undesirable events she's trying to highlight stem from men's ability to make choices. This power to choose confronts every person thereby making the presence of choice as being central to shadow puppet theatre; a precursor to the perennial struggle between good and evil.<sup>134</sup> Essentially, the artworks in this chapter deal with the repercussion of choices made.

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<sup>131</sup> Li, "Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator - a Review," 11-12.

<sup>132</sup> Brandon, *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*, 2-3.

<sup>133</sup> Li, "Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator - a Review," 12.

<sup>134</sup> Sri Mulyono Djojopadmo, *Human Character in the Wayang: Javanese Shadow Play*, trans. M. M. Medeiros (Singapore: Gunung Agung, 1981), 16.

Interestingly, Nirmala's portrayal of the three-dimensional and motion picture qualities of shadow puppet theatre into a two dimensional plane on the canvas in bringing social and political issues to life is potentially highly characteristic of the role of a *dalang*. Similarly, a *dalang* would have imbued his *wayang* storytelling with inspirational elements borrowed from the real world. This bridging across different medium and realms deserves examination. Is Nirmala the *dalang* of the stories that unfold in her artworks?

In attempting to situate Nirmala as one of the early postmodernist artists in Malaysia, art historian Sarena Abdullah asserts Nirmala's usage of montage and allegory among others as key defining factors that sealed Nirmala's postmodern approach.<sup>135</sup> Montage, discussed in Chapter 4 was first used together with photo documentary technique in *Statement 1* to more objectively and realistically portray a social comment. For a richer story telling of associated hidden layers of meaning, a slightly more nuanced and indirect approach calls for an allegorical representation, often under the guises of parody and satire. This technique is best seen manifested as explicit *wayang kulit* motifs, which saw prominence in Nirmala's artworks especially from the mid 1980s until late 1980s.

Nirmala's usage of *wayang kulit*-inspired motifs and characters in her artworks involves eight paintings utilizing representation of Ogre and clown characters from *wayang purwa* of Java. They touch on issues of war, racism and an eclectic mix of world peace and consumer rant.

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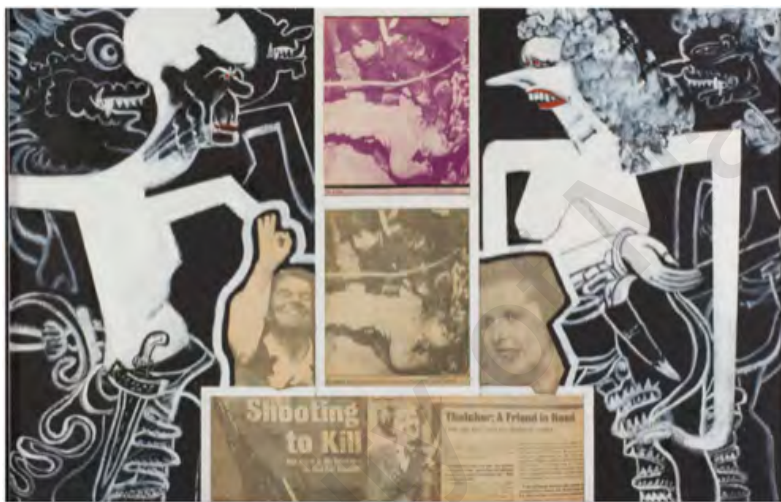
<sup>135</sup> Abdullah, "Postmodernity in Malaysian Art: Tracing Works by Nirmala Shanmughalingam," 36.



This research will first look into two of Nirmala's landmark *wayang kulit*-inspired artworks in 1986, owing to their provocative and political nature at the global stage, before moving on to more regional and local references.

### 5.1 Accomplished Accomplice

Submitted as one of Nirmala's two paintings to be exhibited at the "Side by Side: An Exhibition of Contemporary British-Malaysian Art" at the National Art Gallery, *Friends in Need* (1986) is an anti-war criticism against Britain-backed US bombing of Libya.



**Figure 5.1: Nirmala, *Friends in Need* (1986), Acrylic and collage on canvas, 121 x 121 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. Source: National Gallery Singapore via Google Arts & Culture.**

This painting features two *wayang kulit* characters armed with daggers facing each other while being separated at the middle by a number of newspaper clippings collaged on the surface. The central column is made up of two identical photos, below which a caption reads: "The victims: Extracting a child's body from the rubble in the capital". Cutout smiling figures of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher wrap the base of this column, which extends further downward to a rectangular newspaper clip showing a smiling and clapping Thatcher. This piece of news clip shows a warplane next to the words "Shooting to Kill" on the left, while the right features the headline: "Thatcher: A Friend in Need", from which this painting most likely got its name.

*Friends in Need* reveals a perfect symmetry as though suggesting the puzzle-like fitting friendship these two world leaders shared. In fact, there are three figures shown on each side of the painting. Reagan's smiling and smug-looking cutout figure with raised hand signifying an approving gesture on the left (first level) is connected to a somewhat "hybridized" stylization of a *wayang kulit* character; half human, half shadow puppet. This creature armed with a dagger, sports a frowning red-shot eye and lip with caricatured facial features and hair style suggestive of Reagan himself (second level). Behind this creature, deep in the shadows, is seen a more *wayang kulit*-like figure, a full-fledged manifestation of the ogre with fangs referred to as the *Raksasa Cakil* or *Buta Cakil* (third level).

On the opposing side, Thatcher's passive but smiling collaged figure (first level) is also seen connected to a bare-breasted characterization of herself with highly stylized elongated arms and voluminous curly hair. She is seen armed with a dagger and attempting to cover her breast. She has red lips and eyes with a strange longish nose (second level). This character's "shadow" is seen projected backwards to what appears as the evil *Raksasi*, or the demon's wife with fangs (third level). The predominantly black colored *wayang* figures at the third level could be attributed to their immense anger and unrestrained strength.<sup>136</sup>

Thatcher's long nose<sup>137</sup> could potentially be linked to her changing of stance as suggested by the Newsweek interview of her for the news piece at the bottom of the painting. She was quoted as opposing "retaliatory strikes" against Libya as being "against international law"; but eventually approved of US strikes as being not illegal.

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<sup>136</sup> Brandon, *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*, 50.

<sup>137</sup> The long nose could possibly be a reference to the lying tendencies of the cultural icon and wooden puppet named Pinocchio, whose nose grows in length every time he lies.

The “frowning” creature that is Reagan himself suggests his belligerent stance as the dominating force in this “partnership” with Britain and a connected raised arm hints at his direct action in the war. Thatcher’s rather reserved stance in this equation portrayed her subservience to US on this matter by playing a “friend in need” as though Britain benefits from the support shown to US. US on the other hand drew upon Britain’s affirmation of its action as nod of encouragement to justify its continued attack on Libya in the international stage. Thus, the mutual “friends in need” fusion.

This collaborative mix could also be interpreted as the coming together of two beings in the procreation of death and destruction, instead of life, as indicated by the child’s body being “extracted” from the rubble. It appears this “marriage” is giving birth to lost of lives as paradoxical as that may sound.

The allusion to a union between the male and female gender fits perfectly with the observation of an apparent central obelisk (marked by the extraction of the child’s body) rising from a curved mound at its base (marked by the collective figurative curves of Reagan, Thatcher and rectangular news piece collaged at the bottom). The former is akin to the phallic structure while the latter resembles the female sexual organ.



**Figure 5.2: Nirmala, *Friends in Need* (1986) (IMPLIED LINGA YONI STRUCTURE), Acrylic and collage on canvas, 121 x 121 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. Source: National Gallery Singapore via Google Arts & Culture.**

This supposed shape is consistent with the Hindu worship object of Shiva “represented by his symbol, the phallic lingam, often placed above a yoni, representing the female principle.”<sup>138</sup> As an embodiment of virility, Shiva – the volatile god and Destroyer of ignorance and illusion – is recognized by a crescent moon in his hair.<sup>139</sup> The presence of this moon to a lesser-known extent associates Shiva with the female principle of fertility.<sup>140</sup> Hence, at this juncture, one can surmise the implied *linga yoni* structure as a monumental object of virile and fertile partnership between Reagan and Thatcher in the promotion of war and destruction.

Interestingly, Nirmala completed *Monument* (1991), in which similar preoccupation with the structural forms of an implied *linga yoni* is explicitly seen. However, this eerily silent structure stood in stark contrast from its pitch black surrounding, lending full focus to the outlined geometric shapes at the middle containing silkscreened images of children apparently in physical labour and despair.

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<sup>138</sup> Fiona Kerlogue, *Arts of Southeast Asia*, World of Art (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2004), 71.

<sup>139</sup> Lynn Mackenzie, *Non-Western Art: A Brief Guide*, 2 ed.(Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001), 61.

<sup>140</sup> Kerlogue, *Arts of Southeast Asia*, 71.



**Figure 5.3: Nirmala, *Monument* (1991), Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 91.5 x 61 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: OurArt Projects Catalogue.**

The commotion conveyed by broad abstracted brush strokes and black dripping acrylic paint compressing a multitude of figures necessitates their entrapment within the confines of a hard-edged bulbous projection. In the same vein of a productive notion, Nirmala seems to suggest the proliferation of child labour amidst a bleak backdrop of abject neglect.

Nirmala's use of the implied *linga yoni* structure could potentially be traced back to Ismail Zain's black and white etching also titled *Monument* (1964) (See Figure 8.3 in Appendix). Having spent a number of years under the guidance of Zain shortly after her return from the US in 1971, Nirmala could have been influenced by the Slade-trained painter's approach said to be "marked by an essentially cerebral and formalistic outlook."<sup>141</sup> Such keen intellectual and academic borrowings from philosophical ideas and Southeast Asian arts are reflected in both student and teacher's works. In decoding

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<sup>141</sup> Piyadasa, "The Art of Nirmala Shanmughalingam," 6.

Zain's *Monument*, Piyadasa has also remarked of Zain's preoccupation with past cultural history in rendering a grim and somber imprint that is evocative of "metaphysical ideas."<sup>142</sup> Such mystical and spiritual qualities are clearly evident in both *Friends in Need* and *Monument* (1991).

Nirmala's effort in orchestrating the visual elements in *Friends in Need* by associating the human forms with their corresponding mythical arch villains from the *wayang kulit* story endows her the role of a *dalang*. She dramatizes the "unholy" Reagan-Thatcher matrimony<sup>143</sup> by giving evil a face to behold, a "face" that befits their true colours. She cleverly positions the larger-than-life intimidating beasts towering over the helpless child and unsuspecting worldly perpetrators. What she is really doing here is to draw parallel between the real world with that of an ancient folklore and mirror the level of ruthlessness and destruction. Ironically in a reciprocal manner, by virtue of their size and position, it appears the beasts are *dalang* as well, attempting to influence the actions of the world leaders as puppets themselves.

## 5.2 Racial Discrimination

Riding on the established link between Thatcher and the *Raksasi*, the motif of this female beast is repeated in *Save the Seed That Will Save the Black People* (1986), which was also exhibited in the same exhibition. Here, Thatcher takes center stage with outstretched arms encircling a square enclosure of newspaper clippings collaged together in a tight grid. The newspaper cuttings reveal white supremacist and neo-Nazi members of paramilitary organisation, the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) or

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<sup>142</sup> "Ismail Zain: Retrospective Exhibition 1964-1991," ed. National Art Gallery(Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1995), 34.

<sup>143</sup> Oddly enough, in a pure stroke of coincidence, placing both characters side by side in this painting surface disrupts the notion of a "Side by Side: ... British-Malaysian..." relationship as conveyed by the exhibition title, thereby questioning Malaysia's diplomatic relations with a country that condones acts of aggression.

Afrikaner Resistance Movement,<sup>144</sup> some of whom seen brandishing weapons while justifying their defiant cause against the native South Saharan Africans represented by the ANC (African National Congress).

Instead of Thatcher's previously white painted body; she's now painted with a red brownish hue and blonde hair. Black and white strips of border line the top and bottom frames of the painting as if to draw further focus to the events "on stage". Thatcher is seen affixed dead center in a background mix of black, brown and grey filled with faded white acrylic drawings.



**Figure 5.4: Nirmala, *Save the Seed That Will Save the Black People* (1986), Acrylic and collage on canvas, Dimension Unknown. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: OurArt Projects Photograph.**

This is essentially an anti-apartheid work inspired by Kathe Kollwitz's *Seed*<sup>145</sup> *Corn Must Not Be Ground* (1942), a lithograph whose title was drawn from German poet

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<sup>144</sup> William Worger Nancy Clark, *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, reprint, revised ed.(Routledge, 2013).

<sup>145</sup> By "seed", a grieving Kollwitz referred to her youngest son who lost his life in the First World War resulting in her subsequent protest of youth enlisting in the War. Similarly, Kollwitz feels the young generation is seeds that should be nurtured to realize their full life and potential instead of being "squandered" and planted in a bloody battlefield of a meaningless War. Admittedly, she regrets for not strongly opposing her son from joining the army.



Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's famous quote of the same name.<sup>146</sup> Kollwitz's piece depicts a protective mother embracing her three children to shelter and shield them from harm's way, an action she believes all loving mothers would take to protect their precious ones in the face of adversity.<sup>147</sup>



**Figure 5.5: Kathe Kollwitz, *Seed Corn Must Not Be Ground* (1942), Lithograph, Dimension Unknown. Collection Unknown. Source: Web.**

On this account, Nirmala is suggesting that Thatcher plays the role of harboring and encouraging South African white militants as though they are valuable to her political objectives. The sarcasm stands that the very seeds that she's saving will go about saving the lives of black people. This criticism could largely be due to Thatcher's refusal to impose comprehensive sanctions on South Africa and her opposition to complete isolation of the regime.<sup>148</sup> Despite these criticisms, Robin Renwick, former British ambassador to South Africa between 1987 and 1991 maintains that Thatcher's policies

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<sup>146</sup> Li, "Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator - a Review," 12.

<sup>147</sup> This lithograph resembles another of Kathe Kollwitz's work entitled *The Mothers* (1921) (See Figure 8.4 in Appendix)..

<sup>148</sup> Robin Renwick, "Margaret Thatcher's Secret Campaign to End Apartheid," *The Telegraph*, 11 February 2015 2015.



did in fact contribute to ending apartheid contrary to popular belief.<sup>149</sup> Investigating Renwick's claim would require returning to the painting's background.

Of particular interest in this anti-racism work is the bleak background drawing featuring a number of dagger-armed *wayang kulit* figures with ogre-like *kasar* qualities marching against each other from both sides as if converging on Thatcher at the middle. The gross-featured *kasar* qualities seen are their large body mass, straight-out gaze, exposed gum, rounded nose and eyes which suggest their Ogre-like appearance.<sup>150</sup> Beneath them is seen a twisted pile of several human figures in contorted positions as if in agony, their position suggestive of being trampled upon by the soldiers above them. These evidences seem to link the Ogre figures with that of the AWB.

One possible explanation could be that this imagery resembles the bas-relief of "The Churning of the Ocean of Milk" found in the East Gallery of Angkor Wat, depicting Asuras on the left tugging the serpent Vasuki with Devas on the right. However, judging by the direction of Thatcher's head (presumably representing Vishnu) and the evil role she plays, those behind her could be the demon Asuras, thereby hinting at the warring AWB faction (a figure with a drawn sword on the right reinforces this notion), while those she's facing possibly belong to the Devas of the ANC. If this were true, the entire viewing orientation of this painting should be reversed to maintain accurate correlation with the bas-relief panel. This is likely possible as a *wayang kulit* performance is normally viewed on both sides of the screen.

At this juncture, it's worth noting that Thatcher did help influence the legalization of ANC and secure the release of Nelson Mandela, leading to his winning the presidential

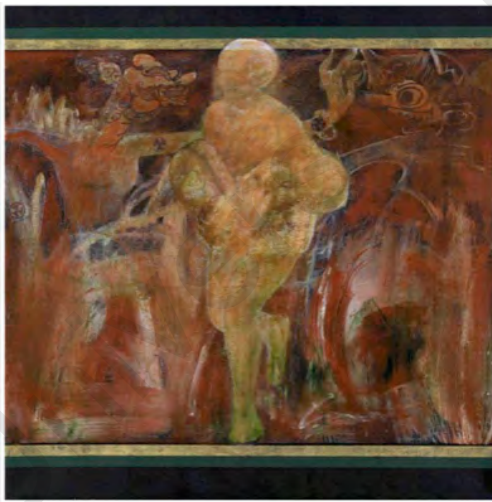
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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Brandon, *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*, 48-49.

election in 1994 and abolishment of apartheid.<sup>151</sup> These events seem consistent with the possible similarities found at the bas-relief panel because Vishnu's orchestrated churning action led to the creation of life. In other words, Thatcher was potentially instrumental in the forging of a democratic South African nation, thereby lending a deeper appreciation of *Save the Seed That Will Save the Black People* in its literal sense. What began as a negative connotation in this work may have assumed positive light eight years later.<sup>152</sup>

Nevertheless, in contemporary times of a post-Apartheid era, this work still holds high relevance albeit a somewhat difference in correlation in view of AWB's appealing to "18 to 35-year-olds to join the party's youth wing".<sup>153</sup> On this note, the *Raksasi's* actions of harboring the younger generation to promote racism by sowing seeds of hatred is certainly cause for concern.



**Figure 5.6: Nirmala, *South Africa* (1987), Acrylic and collage on canvas, 122 x 122 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: OurArt Projects Catalogue.**

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<sup>151</sup> Renwick, "Margaret Thatcher's Secret Campaign to End Apartheid."

<sup>152</sup> This is indeed ironical given that this painting along with *Friends in Need* were removed on the opening day of the exhibition "Side by Side: An Exhibition of Contemporary British-Malaysian Art" in the National Art Gallery for fear of offending the visiting VIPs from Britain. However, they were quickly re-hung the following day as a result of a flurry of defensive comments in the media from the art community in support of Nirmala.

<sup>153</sup> Yolandi Groenewald, "Ek Is Wit En Trots Daarop," *Mail & Guardian*, 12 October 2008 2008.

In *South Africa* (1987), a similar composition of elements is seen. A central yellowish figure is in motion with a child slumped over its arms – head tilted back as if unconscious – and flanked by two facing-off *wayang kulit* figures. The racial and gender identity of these two central individuals are unclear and greatly obscured by the economic brushwork filled with a mixed tinge of green and black shadings. However, the adult's diminutive and rounded shoulders, laborious weight-balancing gait and urgency in posture suggest a mother scurrying with her dead child.<sup>154</sup>

She is seen running away from two *kasar*-looking *wayang kulit* figures in the background amidst a chaotic atmosphere rendered with mainly broad vertical abstract expressionist brush strokes of red and white. Red suggests the furiousness of the conflict while white signifies youth or innocence; the latter potentially refers to the child.<sup>155</sup>

The top part of the painting is lined with three stripes of borders in black, green and yellow. They echo the colours of the official ANC party flag. They are also reflected at the bottom; together with the top borders, they offered a viewing platform similar to a *wayang kulit* screen as though alluding to an episode experienced by the repressed ANC signified by the central figure.

The puppet on the left with outstretched arm is seen intruding across the canvas space in a sort of aggressive stance causing the defensive puppet on the right to lean back. The AWB triskelion symbol composing of three black revolving sevens are seen on the arms of the former puppet.

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<sup>154</sup> Kathe Kollwitz's eerily similar *Woman with Dead Child* (1903) (See Figure 8.5 in Appendix) resonates with this image.

<sup>155</sup> Brandon, *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*, 50.

The aptly named *South Africa* portrays a racially divided country in turmoil and suffering at the expense of the younger generation. The central image of a helpless mother protecting her young child – hypothetically a perished seed – seems in vain and stands in stark contrast to the *Raksasi*'s embracing of white militants seen in *Save the Seed That Will Save the Black People*. Both these iconic anti-racism works of Nirmala bear testament to the crucial role children holds in being the basic building block of a nation who wields the power to effect positively and being susceptible to negative effects.

A year later, Nirmala widened the scope of her criticism against racism to encompass Australia, Sweden and UK in *Racial Violence* (1988). This work is segmented into three major horizontal regions. The top horizon has a series of repeated geometric patterns, shapes and lines flanked by two *wayang kulit* figures; an unidentified *wayang* figure on the left while the two figures on the right are *Petruk* and either *Gareng* or *Bagong*.



**Figure 5.7: Nirmala, *Racial Violence* (1988), Mixed media on canvas, 97 x 137.5 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: OurArt Projects Catalogue.**

The middle horizon is a collage of newspaper cuttings on international media coverage reporting on racial violence, its history, call for change and sentiments of

racial victims among others. Of particular focus was the central piece of news with the headline: “Violence Against Asians”.

The bottom horizon features a grid of five images of children, likely of Asian descent. A central unique image of three boys is surrounded on each side, by two identical images consisting of seven children each. *Racial Violence* seems to connote the multitude of young generation of Asians being affected the most while growing up in an increasingly polarized world as a result of globalisation. The presence of the Ogre-like figure at top left with the *Punakawan* clowns of *Petruk* and *Gareng* suggests that racism is a serious issue not to be trivialized.

The usage of *wayang kulit* motifs in this visual representation could also signify the undying perseverance, fortitude and unity of tenacious Asians at large to withstand evil rearing its ugly head in the form of racism, in view of the many trials and tribulations depicted in the Hindu epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. As if snubbing defiantly at Western civilization and some of their racist policies, *Racial Violence* stands firm to remind Asians of the rich cultural heritage that have contributed to human civilization for a collective good.

As such, Asians can draw strength, patience and hope from this “social confrontation” that should turn out “good” in their favour as a result of triumphing over “evil” as evidenced in *wayang kulit* plays.

### 5.3 Time Bomb

In that same year, Nirmala participated in an international art exhibition organized by the IPPNW. This non-governmental organisation is made up of healthcare professionals lobbying for a peaceful and safer world free from all forms of nuclear threat.<sup>156</sup>

She submitted a large painting of President Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev holding nuclear bombs in their hands titled *Anti-Nuclear Piece (Commemoration of Hiroshima Day)* (1988). Reagan's image is a similar copy first seen in *Friends in Need* represented as the second level caricatured warring Ogre then.



**Figure 5.8: Nirmala, *Anti-Nuclear Piece (Commemoration of Hiroshima Day)* (1988), Acrylic on canvas, 206 x 122 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: OurArt Projects Catalogue.**

This enormous two meters tall symmetrical painting depicts the presidents resting on a spherical orb containing multiple colourful lines of repeated geometrical patterns, in which swirls of brushstrokes are seen disrupting the uniformity of order. This brewing

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<sup>156</sup> IPPNW, "International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War: Practising Peace since 1980," IPPNW, <http://ippnw.org/index.html>.

of colours is enclosed in a thick mass of lines. The churning seen in this orb seems to suggest an ongoing synthesis of latent energy. This seems to resemble the atomic bomb. Their overall vertical position on a curved mound hints at the *linga yoni* structure, which suggests the union of Reagan and Gorbachev as a recipe for disaster.

Gorbachev at the middle stares straight at the viewer while being flanked by a mirrored image of Reagan. Three *Kala* heads are aligned in this centerline extending through Gorbachev's head. Veering laterally from this line are two similar sets of *wayang kulit* figures representing *Batara Kala*<sup>157</sup> on each side yielding a total of four in this painting. In addition to a pair of legs, each of the six stylized puppet arms with bangles holds a bomb and it's unclear if they belong to *Batara Kala* or the human figures. Thus, we have three levels of depiction here signifying the human figures, the *Batara Kala* mythical creature and finally its corresponding representation in shadow puppetry.

The entire surface area of the painting is predominantly basked in a fiery red with the various figures outlined in black and bright yellow, bearing a striking contrast against the background. This fierce and violent scene creates a rather unsettling and fearful foreboding feeling. Brandon notes, "red indicates tempestuousness or fury,"<sup>158</sup> a phenomenon likely referring to the belligerence and aggressive stance of these world powers boasting nuclear capabilities.

As a Sanskrit term for "time", *Kala* also means "time which destroys all things."<sup>159</sup> Being the god of time and destruction in Javanese and Balinese mythology, *Batara Kala*

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<sup>157</sup> Studying a sample image of *wayang kulit* figure of *Batara Kala* found in Tropenmuseum confirms this (See Figure 8.6 in Appendix).

<sup>158</sup> Brandon, *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*, 50.

<sup>159</sup> Roshen Dalal, *Hinduism: An Alphabetical Guide*(Penguin Books India, 2010), 185.

is born of Shiva and sent to earth to teach humanity a lesson but instead ending up attacking the human race.<sup>160</sup> As a man-eating demon god and ruler of the underworld, *Kala* is normally found atop entrances to house, temples and hotels guarding and protecting against evil.<sup>161</sup> How is it possible that a god of destruction be tasked with protection?<sup>162</sup> This could perhaps be explained by the constant “check and balance” role exercised by the US and Soviet Union leading to the end of Cold War in 1991 and hence achieving a sort of “world peace”.

The portrayal of *Kala* in this painting is likely not by chance. In 1988, the metaphorical doomsday clock<sup>163</sup> moved down three minutes away settling itself at six minutes from the midnight mark. The further away from the midnight mark it is, the more favourable the outcome. This positive development came about as a result of the signing of the “historic Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the first agreement to actually ban a whole category of nuclear weapons” between Reagan and Gorbachev, an act that was inspired by public opposition in Western Europe.<sup>164</sup>

Thus, it could be surmised that this work is a living monument no different from the iconic doomsday clock that shifts in accordance to the tide of time reflecting the sentiments of the tenuous Reagan-Gorbachev relationship being held sway by *Batara Kala*. Perhaps in a stroke of pure coincidence, the six bomb-holding hands is consistent with the six minutes to midnight position of the doomsday clock in 1988.

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<sup>160</sup> Khoon Choy Lee, *A Fragile Nation: The Indonesian Crisis* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd., 1999), 209.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> The duality of roles *Kala* plays here is indeed baffling. Note the position of the *Kala* on top of the spherical orb. Had this been a protective gesture, this suggests the fate and preservation of mankind rest on US and Soviet Union’s role to prevent total annihilation resulting from a nuclear arms race. Conversely, *Kala*’s destructive nature is reflected by the 44 years of Cold War, which saw growing friction between the two world’s superpower that threatened an all-out war.

<sup>163</sup> Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, “Doomsday Clockwork,” Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, <http://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clockwork8052>.

<sup>164</sup> “Timeline,” Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, <http://thebulletin.org/timeline>.



From the early works highlighting the plight of underprivileged squatter children, displaced children in war-torn countries and dead children in the arms of weeping mothers, Nirmala appears to be painting children as constantly being woefully disadvantaged. If *South Africa* and *Save the Seed That Will Save the Black People* helped advanced the idea that children is a nation's natural resource for growth and a second chance for a better future, they also introduced a rather gloomy outlook of how they too can be exploited.

#### 5.4 Transacting Children



**Figure 5.9: Nirmala, *World Peace Day “Baby Marines”* (1988), Silkscreen and acrylic on canvas, 122 x 206 cm. Collection of Shirene Shan. Source: Author’s Photograph.**

In *World Peace Day “Baby Marines”* (1988), the golden shimmering surface of the canvas is roughly divided into three sections framed by black strips at the top and bottom edges. The darkened first section on the left features what appear to be child soldiers armed with rifles and clothed in military uniform; they are laid out in an implied grid format. A number of them stand in attention while some poised ready for

combat. The words “BABY MARINES” (a newspaper headline appropriated from the media) are written across the silkscreened photos.

The second section depicts a large central circle in which several silkscreened photos of children are clustered, some of whom have been reused from earlier *Children of Asia* and *Squatters* series. All of these children photos establish eye contact with the viewer. A child’s photo on the right of the circle has been taken from another unidentified work documenting children of refugee camps in 1985. This seems to be a convergence of the primary images of children she has used in previous works. The entire circle and its content have been overexposed as if made brighter to render separation from the darker left section. This together with the children’s eye contact establish a crucial connection to draw the viewer into the painting. The white rendition of the children in the circle likely alludes to their youth and innocence while the *Punakawan* clowns in gold suggests a sense of “dignity and calmness.”<sup>165</sup>

The final section on the right depicts the *Punakawan* clowns, led by, from left to right, *Semar*, *Petruk*, *Gareng* and *Bagong*. They are lined up facing the direction of the central circle enclosing the children. *Semar*’s left arm is pointing to the phrase below: “DAN MEREKA TIDAK LAGI MENGENAL PERANG”, the translation of which is also provided for in the painting below it which reads: “AND THEY SHALL NOT LEARN WAR ANYMORE”. The English version is only repeated below while the Malay version is repeated above *Petruk*’s head lining up the top and bottom borders.

This phrase (appropriated from the media) is likely inspired from the biblical verse found in Isaiah 2:4: “And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning

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<sup>165</sup> Brandon, *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*, 50.

hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” Essentially, Nirmala is renouncing war and solidifying her stance by empathetically expressing it through the innocent eyes of these children, in great hopes that they will not see, hear or experience war in their subsequent lives, hence the protective bubble in which they are found. The bible verse also reveals another important clue of how this may be done.

The phrase “they shall beat their swords into plowshares” has been internalized and reinterpreted into a bronze statue titled *Let Us Beat Swords Into Plowshares* (1959) by the Russian sculptor Evgeniy Vuchetich signifying the symbolic call to convert weapons of war and destruction to useful tools of peace and productivity. Perhaps echoing *Semar*’s wisdom and advice often given to his noble master, Nirmala is projecting the call to whomever is willing to listen, to stop exploiting children as tools for waging war and death and instead, rehabilitate or reshape them into worthy seeds of life. These seeds of life – similar to Kathy Kollwitz’s “Seed Corn”– could then be planted and their growth and fruition witnessed for greater good.

A cursory glance at this painting does remind one of its resemblances to a monetary bill of modern day currency. The arching repetitive patterns of triangular spear heads over the child soldiers correlates with the Marching Army puppet’s (also known as *ampjak*, *prampogan* or *rampogan*) motifs found at its borders (See Figure 8.7 in Appendix).<sup>166</sup> This suggests a multitude of child soldiers marching for battle, as is the case of *Perang Ampjak*.<sup>167</sup> Instead of a main visual representing an important individual

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>167</sup> The *Perang Ampjak* is a scene whereby the army marches to battle only to be halted by thick forest undergrowth normally represented by the large *Kayon* puppet. They would then be depicted as embroiled in a struggle to free themselves from this hindrance, as though slashing and chopping away the trees. This action would be conveyed by the *dalang* by striking the *Ampjak* against the *Kayon*. Here, I would like to suggest that the *Kayon* represents the circle of innocent children, as though existing as a conscience to be dealt with in one’s gravitating towards evil.

as in most currency notes, the white circular depiction of children's innocence takes centre stage. The *Punakawan* clowns are seen as if nudging this circle into battle against the child soldiers, as a show of support.

Against this backdrop of events, the numeric currency value is missing in this metaphorical money. Perhaps the value lies in a somewhat gruesome representation of enumerated dead children, a currency concept first suggested by Scott Siskind. He proposed that the monetary denomination be changed from dollars to dead children as an outrageous means to make one pause and think twice before spending unnecessarily. Essentially, he's provoking one to think of how many children's lives can be saved when we spend money fulfilling our daily needs.<sup>168</sup> Thus, in this artwork, Nirmala may be questioning the use of child soldiers as an expendable monetary resource and means to an end.

In fact, as of 2009, there was an estimated 120,000 child soldiers in Africa alone, accounting for 40% of child soldiers worldwide that formed both regular and irregular armies.<sup>169</sup> In the aftermath of the Sudan civil war, "*Lokwo dano*" – people thieves – prowl the countryside to steal children where "the boys are traded for cattle and made to work, and the girls are also sold off for a dowry of cows" during a time when cattle are prized possessions.<sup>170</sup> A child is known to be exchangeable for a cow.

*World Peace Day "Baby Marines"* may be questioning the extent to which humanity goes to transact for peace or material gains. Are dead children worth the sacrifice, regardless of them being the aggressor or the victim? Most importantly, Nirmala is

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<sup>168</sup> Scott Siskind, "Dead Children Currency," 80,000 Hours, <https://80000hours.org/2012/06/dead-children-currency-51/>.

<sup>169</sup> Claude Rakisits, "Child Soldiers in the East of the Democratic Republic of the Congo," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (2009).

<sup>170</sup> Tracy McVeigh, "Guns, Children and Cattle Are the New Currency of War in Southern Sudan," *The Observer (The Guardian)*, 21 June 2009 2009.

alluding to the price of war and peace. This conundrum is best crystallized between the dual concept of Barthes' *studium* and *punctum*.

At first glance, this painting pits two highly contrasting visuals; one of the child soldiers as aggressor and the other, innocent children as victims of war. This understanding represents the *studium*'s allusion to a photograph's historical, social and cultural meanings. Children here could almost instantaneously be deemed as a source of regenerative life that warrants protection; and yet the very similar age group of human beings is driven to cause harm. This absolute disconnect in itself represents an incisive *punctum* that piques one's conscience to question the logic behind this relationship. I argue that such difficult but specific question (the symbolic embodiment of life and death in a child, the tussles of good and evil among events) is prevalent in Nirmala's social commentary artworks as a *punctum* that "punctures" the viewers and catches them off guard.

## 5.5 Evil Has a Face

Nirmala's practice of social commentary is well known to expand beyond the boundaries of her home country into more regional and global issues. Her works do not discriminate against creed, race, religion, social standing or even royalty status.

In 1987, the 24<sup>th</sup> Ruler of Johor and 8<sup>th</sup> High King of Malaysia was alleged to have killed a golf caddy with his golf club in Cameron Highlands because the caddy laughed when Sultan Iskandar missed a hole.<sup>171</sup> Unfortunately, the Sultan escaped the long arm of the law due to the immunity enjoyed by all royalties then. This event along with numerous other misdeeds by the King and his two sons, some of which amount to

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<sup>171</sup> Harold A. Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia*, Illustrated ed.(Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), 146.

assault and culpable homicide stirred public outcry.<sup>172</sup> It wasn't until March 1993 that a proposed bill pressing for the removal of legal immunity from royalties was enshrined in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, thus making them prosecutable if they violate the law.<sup>173</sup>



**Figure 5.10: Nirmala, *Petruk Becomes King* (1988), Acrylic on canvas, 82 x 61 cm. Collection of Rohan Shan. Source: Author's Photograph.**

It is on this background of controversial events surrounding Sultan Iskandar that prompted Nirmala to satirize and immortalize the King's image in *Petruk Becomes King* (1988). The title of this work is inspired from a famous *lakon* entitled "*Petruk Dadi Ratu*" (*Petruk Becomes King*) which served as a subtle criticism of the Dutch colonial powers who exploited Indonesia for their own gain without regard for the welfare of the

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<sup>172</sup> Mark R. Gillen, "The Malay Rulers' Loss of Immunity," *Occasional Paper*, no. 6 (1994), [http://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/capi/assets/docs/Gillen\\_Malay\\_Rulers.pdf](http://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/capi/assets/docs/Gillen_Malay_Rulers.pdf).

<sup>173</sup> Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia*, 147.

locals.<sup>174</sup> In contemporary times, this phrase has also been used to convey “real social and political conditions of disorder, corruption, and black farce.”<sup>175</sup>

*Petruk* is seen here with a crown at the usual *wayang* side pose. His hinged puppet arms with bangles are hanging by his side. He seems to be ornately dressed befitting a King, save for the pointed black shoes and tutus he’s wearing, a giveaway of his underlying clownish tendencies. There’s a blue crooked dagger by his left waist while his right arm is holding a golden golf club, alluding to the alleged murder weapon used.

“*Petruk* has gone mad, like the mad Sultan,” says Nirmala. Nirmala also commented that he held the golf club like a scepter. This full profile depiction of the King in all his glory framed neatly in surrounding red, gold and black borders seems incongruent with the immensely colourful strips of colours in the background, as though questioning the Sultan’s role as King. His red body signifies his fury while his golden face, the apparent calmness and dignity with which he commits the purported aggression.

In a personal conversation in July 2016, Nirmala often speaks fondly of the funny-looking, tall and clownish *Petruk* and characterize him as “different, foolish, rude” and even “ridiculous”.<sup>176</sup> She recalls with profound enthusiasm that *Petruk* is someone who can readily be used “the most to comment” on issues by nature of his personality. She seems to suggest that some social injustices can easily be linked to *Petruk*’s inconsiderate behavior.

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<sup>174</sup> R. Rio Sudibyoprono, *Ensiklopedi Wayang Purwa*(PT Balai Pusaka, 1991), 401.

<sup>175</sup> Benedict Anderson, "Cartoons and Monuments: The Evolution of Political Communication under the New Order," in *Political Power and Communications in Indonesia*, ed. Lucian W. Pye Karl D. Jackson(University of California Press, 1978), 298.

<sup>176</sup> In Sudibyoprono’s “*Ensiklopedi wayang purwa*”, 398, he describes *Petruk* as someone who likes to joke, a good orator, a powerful warrior with magical powers and one who always picks a fight.

In a *wayang kulit* performance, the *Punakawan* clowns primarily serve two purposes: to provide comic relief and as *dalang*'s "mouthpieces for contemporaneous satire and criticism directed straight at the audience."<sup>177</sup> The former is accomplished within the embedded story line while the latter offers an external interface to parallel existing events occurring in the real world. Through this "mask" as an outlet, Nirmala's sentiments as a *dalang* are manifested via *Petruk* as a symbolic tool. Thus, the mask serves as a conduit that "mediates its creator's *dalang* consciousness."<sup>178</sup>

The grotesque *Punakawan* clowns are intimately subservient to their masters who are also known as *satria* with *alus* qualities. Despite this dependence, they often make fun of and joke about their masters.<sup>179</sup> Nevertheless, they exhibit "great sources of solace and advice to their masters" demonstrating the level of democratic close-knit relationship between masters and servants, leaders and followers in Javanese culture where reciprocal relations are built.<sup>180</sup> Unfortunately, this was not to be the case with Sultan Iskandar.

Similarly, the general public being the subordinate element<sup>181</sup> stands in a position to mock the King but yet offer advice to how he should set straight his ways. In the same vein, this painting serves as a call for Malaysians to reassess their relationship and dependence on the rule of law. Alternatively, as ludicrous as it may be, this work when

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<sup>177</sup> Anderson, "Cartoons and Monuments: The Evolution of Political Communication under the New Order," 296.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>179</sup> The depiction of Sultan Iskandar here (as a subordinate) could also be construed as a mockery of the system that makes up the respected and powerful royal institution (as a master).

<sup>180</sup> Edward C. Van Ness, *Javanese Wayang Kulit: An Introduction*, 54.

<sup>181</sup> Anderson, "Cartoons and Monuments: The Evolution of Political Communication under the New Order," 297.



viewed in contemporary times as a visual obituary serves to honour the King as a show of respect for who he really was despite his failings.<sup>182</sup>

Brandon observes that the puppets and their actions are “merely the external, symbolic representation of the conflict which takes place within every man’s spirit, with the puppets standing for different aspects of a single personality.”<sup>183</sup> Thus, it can be suggested that *Petruk* in this painting stands as an iconic symbol of Sultan Iskandar’s ludicrous but regrettable personality. In other words, Nirmala’s portrayal of *wayang kulit* motifs alludes to the various personalities of human beings that engender conflict. Her *wayang kulit* paintings may be seen as representation of human personalities.

The flamboyant *Petruk Becomes King*<sup>184</sup> essentially stands as an “official” portrait by the public irked by the vile actions of a hubristic Sultan Iskandar who seems to live with impunity; a portrait no different from those commonly seen hung on hotel lobbies or government offices. The wide-open shrugging arms, protruding belly – an Ogre-like quality – and raised head suggest disapproving personalities of an unrepentant Sultan. However, the undiscerning public may not readily understand such allegorical approach to social commentary artworks had they not been aware of the caddy’s death.<sup>185</sup> Perhaps, what the work lacks in facility of understanding, it makes up for with tremendous accessibility to a wider audience, by virtue of its “encrypted” state.

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<sup>182</sup> Jo-Ann Ding, "Obituarising the Sultan of Johor," The Nut Graph, <http://www.thenutgraph.com/obituarising-the-sultan-of-johor/>.

<sup>183</sup> Brandon, *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*, 18.

<sup>184</sup> Interestingly, Nirmala has also indicated of doing a similar piece entitled *Petruk Becomes Sultan* in commemoration of Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah, the 35<sup>th</sup> Sultan of Perak.

<sup>185</sup> In a personal conversation with this researcher on July 2016, Nirmala expressed disappointment over the apparent non-reaction to *Petruk Becomes King* (1988) showcased at a group exhibition in the late 1980s. She opined that should anyone not understand the underlying iconographical representation, they should take the initiative to ask, find out and learn about the painting. Hence, it appears she’s suggesting that her artworks should be seen as a trigger to cause one’s launch into their own investigative exploration for a richer and informed experience. This, to her, is the essence of social commentary artworks: an educational opportunity to be enlightened.

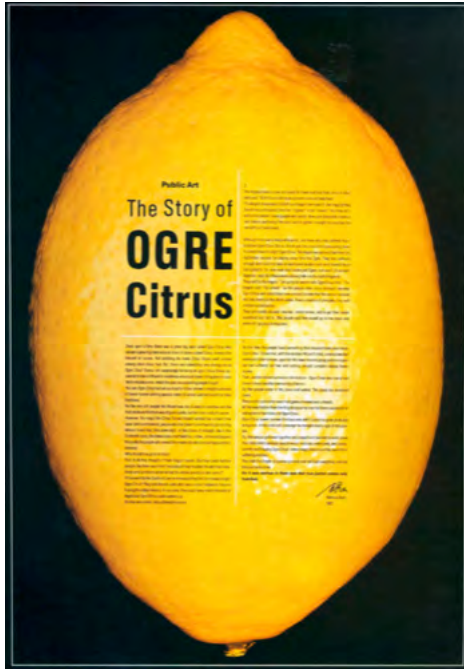
## 5.6 Epic Wars

Being the ever defiant and provocative social commentator she is, encrypting her works is perhaps the way forward to champion her cause for social injustice. At the risk of being slapped with a lawsuit, Nirmala resorted to publicising her grievances against the French Citroen AX-inspired automobile – which was locally produced as Proton Tiara – by hiding behind *Public Art: The Story of Ogre Citrus* (1997), a public art poster (of which 1,000 copies were made) which was sent to the masses via snail mail. In this work, she engaged a professional photographer to photograph a bright yellow lemon<sup>186</sup> – the surface upon which a story is intimately written – against a black background. Despite the absence of obvious *wayang* motifs in this work, the use of the “Ogre” concept suggests undertones of *wayang kulit* borrowings.

As a user of Proton Tiara herself, she had encountered numerous problems with the car, which was, according to her, manufactured for the lower-income group. She started compiling a list of complaints about the poor user experience while also gathering feedbacks from similar users as well. When the complaints that were sent went unanswered, Nirmala decided to turn to the press to put pressure on the automaker. However, she was warned to stop writing about the matter or else she would be sued.

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<sup>186</sup> “Citron” is French for the citrus fruit “Lemon”, hence the association with the automaker “Citroen”.



**Figure 5.11: Nirmala, *Public Art: The Story of Ogre Citrus* (1997), Coloured Poster, 59.5 x 42 cm. Collection Unknown. Source: *The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator 1998 Exhibition Catalogue*.**

Hence, she resorted to resume her actions albeit, this time distilling the essence of her grouses through a fairy-tale-like saga involving a noble King, a deceitful capitalist named Ogre Citrus, an evil Wizard and a bunch of country men representing the group of unhappy consumers. An international chain of stores named Citrus led by the great big evil Ogre Citrus selling rotten lemons to the people takes centre stage in this fictitious kingdom. The manner with which Nirmala vivifies this story in writing puts her squarely in a position to be deemed as a skillful *dalang*.

In supporting the hypothesis that Nirmala as a social commentator artist plays the role of a *dalang* in her artworks, three relevant observations are evident in this work. Firstly, the masterful manner with which Nirmala maps the real world events into an analogized rendition of tragedy, intrigue and suspense surrounding the various orchestrated events and characters is highly characteristic of how a *dalang* weaves his story around present issues of the day. Essentially, Nirmala blurs the line between fiction and reality to create an immersive and engaging experience for the viewer.

Secondly, the portrayal of an innocuous and inert object such as the curvy lemon to symbolize the “enemy” reveals Nirmala’s attempt to introduce humour and parody into her narration. By doing so, she belittles and objectifies the perpetrator by giving it a quotidian existence. While the reference to lemon is purely inevitable given the approximation to the original French automaker’s name, the depiction of a small piece of fruit seems to have emasculated the Ogre, thereby making it look helplessly small and within grasp. It could also be suggested that the foolishness and irrationality of Ogre Citrus rival that of the *Punakawan* clowns, though in a negative way.

Thirdly, it could be suggested that three out of the four-quadrant grid layout represent the three major divisions of a *wayang kulit* play – *Patet Nem*, *Patet Sanga* and *Patet Manyura* –, which were first explored in *Statement 1* and *Statement 3*. Together, they form particular acts or *lakon* in this *wayang kulit* story, which methodically guides the viewer towards a denouement.

The quadrant on top left announces the title of this story. The next quadrant of text below it begins with “Once upon a time there was...”<sup>187</sup> followed by description of the locale and introduction of all the characters involved. A clear delineation between the disadvantaged poor faction and the Ogre Citrus backed-rich faction is made. Nirmala then jumps straight into the crux of the matter<sup>188</sup> (rotten lemons made to look good under the evil magical spell to only revert to their original state at the stroke of midnight) before rounding off with a cul-de-sac: whom else can they turn to for help if

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<sup>187</sup> For full text on the entire story, please see Figure 8.8 in Appendix.

<sup>188</sup> The first part of a *wayang kulit* performance opens with a scene at the king’s audience hall in his palace accompanied by a description of his kingdom. He would be seen addressing his ministers, allies, officials and relatives before the king enquires about the state of his country. This leads to a defining of the “statement of problem” (rotting lemons by the cheating Ogre Citrus), a central theme that drives the play forward. The play subsequently sees two warring kingdoms (one of which is normally a foreign kingdom of Ogres) clash.

not the King or the Court of Law? This is an impasse, which corresponds with the *Adegan Perang Gagal*<sup>189</sup> that concludes *Patet Nem*.

The next scene begins with supernatural beings of weeping Angels – after having consulted God – being sent down to earth to search for and help victims of Ogre Citrus. The introduction of the Angels in dilemma also seems to be in agreement with the hermitage scene of *wayang* witnessing the entrance of a hero “usually none other than the great *Arjuna*, is described as being in a state of great sadness and confusion” whose troubling mind reverberates across the universe.<sup>190</sup> The story follows that the people eventually decided to try confronting Ogre Citrus in hopes of demanding an answer and arriving at a solution. This mirrors the descent of *Arjuna* and the *Punakawan* clowns from the mountain through the forest to battle the Ogres. This culmination of a clash between the people and Ogre Citrus parallels that of *Perang Kembang*,<sup>191</sup> which concludes *Patet Sanga*. Unfortunately, unlike the *wayang* tale, the people’s “uprising” was quashed. Nirmala in the text says as a matter-of-factly: “For, who ever had challenged Ogres and won? (In ancient legends – yes). But these were ordinary folk not the stuff of legends.”

The final scene opens with a horrific discovery of Ogre Citrus creating another variety of rotten lemons for the people. In this finale, “the kingdom of the protagonists usually reappears here, and is usually portrayed as preparing for a final retaliatory battle against the enemy.”<sup>192</sup> The breaking of the news to the press marks the climax of this

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<sup>189</sup> *Adegan Perang Gagal* literally means “Scene of Failed Battle”, or an inconclusive war with no victor. While the dominating Ogre Citrus seems to be the victor in this clash, the fact is his deceitful scheme has been exposed, a revelation in favour of the people. However, a solution is yet to be discovered.

<sup>190</sup> Edward C. Van Ness, *Javanese Wayang Kulit: An Introduction*, 53.

<sup>191</sup> *Perang Kembang* literally means “Blooming Battle” or “Flower Battle”, a scene where *Arjuna* battles and normally wins against the Ogres. However, the people, and not the Angels, confronted Ogre Citrus and lost instead.

<sup>192</sup> Edward C. Van Ness, *Javanese Wayang Kulit: An Introduction*, 55.

event; but even then yielding no favourable outcomes for the people. While this scene's outcome may not directly conform to *wayang* conventions in *Patet Manyura* where the protagonist (the people) would have triumphed, Nirmala ended it with a message of hope found in the bold phrase: "For it was obvious to them now that true justice comes only from God". This suggests not surrender but resolute determination to refer to God who will help them fight the final *Perang Amuk-Amukan* in which the mighty warrior named *Bima* runs amuck and vanquishes his enemies. This effectively renders the artwork an indeterminate quality whose closure remains to be seen.

Perhaps, the minor inconsistencies with the conventional flow of *wayang kulit* stories are Nirmala's admittance that reality may be harsher than myth or dreams. Nevertheless, her continued reference to the *wayang* realm demonstrates her beliefs in hoping for the best and utilizing it as an avenue to galvanize and encourage the oppressed community.

Thus, based on the aforementioned discussion on Nirmala's perceived qualities of a *dalang* in story telling, *Public Art: The Story of Ogre Citrus* is more than just a two-dimensional piece of poster describing an event. The manner with which she dramatizes and satirizes her "enemy" reflects structural traces of a *wayang kulit* story.

## **5.7 Layers of Intrigue**

While Nirmala's earlier works discussed in Chapter 4 are characterized by their photo documentary realities involving organizational concerns of the painting's surface area, her subsequent newfound passion in *wayang kulit* as a potent tool has further enriched her creative expression. Explicit incorporation of *wayang* motifs into her paintings has added multiple layers of dimension and iconographical representation. This exposes viewers to various possible interpretations for a deeper engagement.

By articulating social injustices through the veil of shadow puppetry as an allegorical technique, a wider reach in the public domain is made possible due to their encoded nature. The depiction of *Punakawan* clowns as effective mouthpieces representing the regular folks in the consumption of issues of daily affairs has perhaps made these artworks more endearing and relevant to the masses.

The manner by which Nirmala depicts *wayang kulit* forms to advance social comment differs greatly from another earlier Malaysian artist whose artistic career was largely defined by a similar traditional art form. Nik Zainal Abidin is well known for his depiction of *wayang kulit* paintings done in watercolor, and some in oil.



**Figure 5.12: Nik Zainal Abidin Nik Salleh, *Wayang Kulit* (1961), Oil on Board, 116 x 56 cm. Collection of National Art Gallery. Source: Web.**



**Figure 5.13: Nik Zainal Abidin Nik Salleh, *Wayang Kulit* (1969), Watercolor, Dimension Unknown. Collection of Bank Negara Malaysia. Source: Web.**

However, in contrast with Nirmala's "layered" approach to concealing particular messages regarding social, economic or political issues in her *wayang kulit* paintings, Nik Zainal Abidin's renderings of this traditional art form seems to waver between illustrating the intricate aesthetic aspects of it and evoking nostalgic sentiments of a highly communal art practice. While Nirmala uses *wayang kulit* as a means to an end by drawing deep on its storytelling mechanism, Nik Zainal Abidin uses *wayang kulit* as a terminal portrayal of national culture; the former wields a class-centered view and the latter, a nation-centered approach.

Even though allegorical in nature, it is suggested that the controversial tone of *Friends in Need* (1986) and *Save the Seed That Will Save the Black People* (1986) depict "the realities among political powers."<sup>193</sup> This harsh reality is evident as readings of these artworks revealed Nirmala's attempt at storytelling. This is to communicate a particular pressing socio-economic or political issue by matching real world figures and

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<sup>193</sup> Abdullah, "Postmodernity in Malaysian Art: Tracing Works by Nirmala Shanmughalingam," 42.



incidences to their corresponding evil characters as well as tumultuous episodes of the shadow puppet story line.

One notable feature of Nirmala's artworks in this chapter is to render some sort of visibility and prominence to the alleged perpetrators involved in the social commentaries. By giving them form, Nirmala attempts to isolate and place the "problem" in focus, thereby allaying any fears of uncertainty in dealing with a somewhat nebulous phenomenon often deemed larger than life.

Finally, Nirmala's Hindu parentage and familiarity with the epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana served as fertile ground for her creative inspiration to flourish. The inherent constructs of a *wayang kulit* play as a platform for social commenting that "offers unimaginably rich potential in visual art" met its match in Nirmala's "organic intellect and sense of humour" which, when coupled with her intensive study of the art form propelled her artworks to greater heights.<sup>194</sup>

When these *wayang*-infused artworks are made to speak out in collaboration with potential traces of Hindu-inspired forms such as *linga yoni* and "The Churning of the Ocean of Milk", they offer a different dimension through which the social issues can be uniquely appreciated and explored. Essentially, Nirmala as a *dalang* is articulating her story telling endeavour by building layers upon layers of characters, plots and soliloquys on her version of the *kelir* or wayang screen found on her canvases.

It seems Nirmala is employing the fundamental cultural elements of Asian civilization as a key to unlock, define and understand humanity's failings in an increasingly fractious and globalized world. This return to one's roots saw Nirmala

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<sup>194</sup> Li, "Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator - a Review," 11.

turning to explore socio economic conditions of beleaguered native Malaysians bearing the brunt of developmental waves sweeping Malaysia in the 1990s.

University of Malaya

## CHAPTER 6: THE INDIGENOUS VOICE

Nirmala's exploration of the plight of indigenous tribes in Malaysia in the early and late 1990s signified a return to home-brew issues after having trained her lens on world events in the 1980s as seen in the previous chapter. The artworks in this period feature displaced communities of indigenous people as a result of encroaching modern development resulting in environmental destruction.

Sarena Abdullah, in discussing the environment as a theme in Malaysian art, notes of the three general phases of depiction of natural landscapes in Malaysia: the post-colonial-influenced documentary paintings of Malayan scene by the British artists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the artworks of an idyllic pre-war British Malaya by local artists like Yong Mun Sen and Ariff Abdullah and finally the 1960s and 1970s abstraction and expressionistic renditions of the environment seen in Yeoh Jin Leng's *Rice Fields* (1963) and Syed Ahmad Jamal's *Gunung Ledang* (1978).<sup>195</sup> Abdullah remarked that an emergence of artists in the 1990s exhibited a shift from earlier idealization of beautiful local sceneries to one that highlighted environmental changes due to rapid urbanization, possibly as a result of the NEP.<sup>196</sup>

Nirmala's depiction of the "Malaysian landscape" in her artworks may not be pretty. They are a startling reminder of the fate of the indigenous people in the face of modernization Malaysia experiences as she ushers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Not only is the subject matter involved being of the indigenous people, the approach of using indigenous motifs and their associated traditional forms and interpretations are also evident.

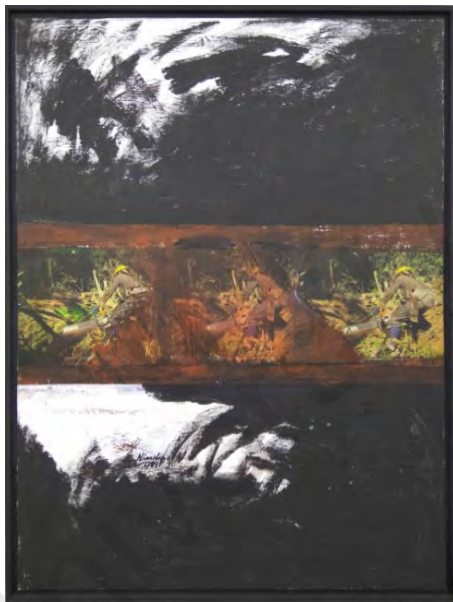
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<sup>195</sup> Abdullah, "The Environment as a Theme in Malaysian Art," 261-62.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

## 6.1 Sarawak Woes

In highlighting widespread logging in Sarawak, Nirmala narrowed the focus of her painting to centrally depict a man cutting through a fallen timber in *Illegal Logging in Sarawak* (c.1989). This coloured image of a logger using a chain saw is collaged and repeated three times across the mid section of the painting. It is being sandwiched at the top and bottom by what appears to be abstracted black brush strokes of acrylic paint on white. The loose and apparently random brush works fused into a mass of darkness that permeates most of the top and bottom strips – reminiscent of the “smoky” and chaotic effects seen in *Vietnam* and *Squatters* series – as though suggesting a sort of gloomy and bleak existence of hopelessness.



**Figure 6.1: Nirmala, *Illegal Logging in Sarawak* (c.1989), Acrylic and collage on canvas, 122 x 91 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: Author’s Photograph.**

The surrounding borders of the middle strip in which the image of the logger is seen is further delineated by brown brush strokes, which coalesced into a mass of transparent triangular shape that hovers at the center. The deep contrast of earthy and brown disturbed soil on which the logger stands and the surrounding green environment of the

forest stood in stark contrast against the blackness that seems to dominate the surface of this painting.

Such vivid disparities seen in *Illegal Logging in Sarawak* portrays the unsettling and unnatural relationship between man and his destructive machine with the life force of nature. On closer observation, the division of the surface area into 3 segments suggests an espousal of the tripartite concept of the universe based on a prevailing cosmological belief system that is inherent in most traditional cultures of Southeast Asia.<sup>197</sup>

Riding on this notion, the middle section of the logger signifies the earthly realm in which the “transgression” is taking place. Both the top and bottom strips of darkness and the unknown signifies the heavenly skies and the subterranean realms respectively. These spiritual regions are inhabited by malevolent and benevolent spirits – often residing in natural flora and fauna fixtures such as birds, rock, trees and streams – which when disturbed, may impact the physical lives of humans.<sup>198</sup> The obvious contrast in colour between these “ambiguous” regions of spirituality and that of the “known” visible world alludes to humanity’s oblivion to unseen repercussions as though the maintenance of the dominance of materialistic existence is all that matters.

The central image of the fallen tree being sawn stands at this crucial juncture of cosmic proportions. The image of a tree is interpreted differently in various parts of Southeast Asia: the Barito people of southern Borneo consider the earthly tree as a unifying element with its “roots being connected with the lower world and the upper branches with the world above.”<sup>199</sup> Hence, the image of natural order being violated

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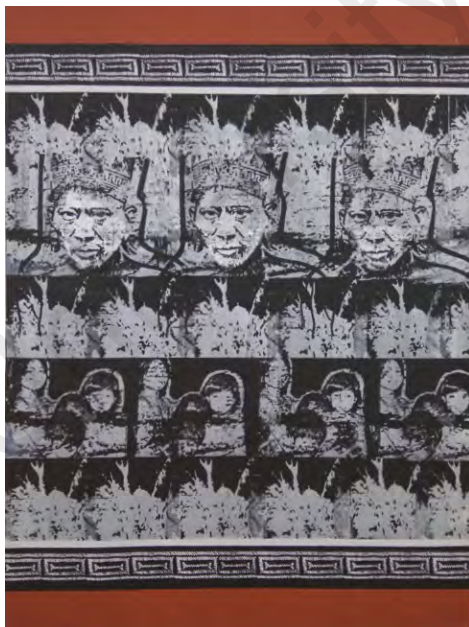
<sup>197</sup> Kerlogue, *Arts of Southeast Asia*, 46.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

shown by a fallen tree suggests an upsetting of this cosmic balance which would prove detrimental to rousing the ire of the spirit world resulting in calamities most feared by the indigenous people. Perhaps, it is more a question of “*When* will this happen?” than the troubling uncertainty of “*If* this would happen”. The faint brown triangular motif noted earlier hovering at the middle – an exemplification of the *wayang kulit Kayon* that signals a transitory phase – hints at the latent tendencies to advance into a new course of action, as if poised for the next occurrence of undesirable events.

In short, *Illegal Logging in Sarawak* serves as a voice in defense of the indigenous people’s harmonious livelihood with nature that constantly hangs in the balance. It is a statement of preserving the sensitive ecosystem that is also rooted in spiritual affairs. More importantly, it is a cautionary tale – though somewhat mythical – against wanton illegal logging for fear of a negative reaction. This “tooth-for-a-tooth” retaliatory backlash is explored in the following work.



**Figure 6.2: Nirmala, *Membalak Jangan Sebarangan Nanti Ditimpa Balak* (1989), Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 122 x 92 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: Author’s Photograph.**

*Membalak Jangan Sebarangan Nanti Ditimpa Balak* (1989) is a Malay-titled work most likely resembling and taken after the Malay proverb: *Sudah Jatuh Ditimpa Tangga* (Once fallen from the ladder, one is hit by the ladder) to denote double tragedy. Chu Li notes that the English translated version of the artwork: “Do not log carelessly, lest misfortune befall you” forms a body of work “inspired partly by the situation in South America, the Chico Mendez<sup>200</sup> death, and mainly by indiscriminate logging in certain areas in Malaysia” to serve as a “gentle reminder of our own Asian values and attitude toward Nature.”<sup>201</sup> Essentially, it’s a clarion call of potentially reaping what one sows.

I’d reckon that the aptly named artwork is a humorous attempt at parodying the actions of illegal loggers who would be hit by falling trees if they were not careful. Alternatively, if that doesn’t happen, Nirmala hints at nature’s mystical way of finding restitution by subscribing to age-old adage and indigenous belief systems.

This artwork is mainly characterized by three sets of monochromatic images consisting of an indigenous individual in traditional headgear, a group of four children and a vague mass of tree-like vegetation. These three different black and white images are silkscreened and repeated in a stacked grid format intermittently across the canvas. The depiction of both the old and young generation seems to suggest that indiscriminate logging would have adverse effects for generations to come.

Nirmala’s portrayal of children and an individual that establishes eye contact in this painting lends intimacy and imprints a sense of identity to the intricate relationship between people and land. Just like the series on *Vietnam* and *Squatters*, inclusion of facial expression adds to the sensitivity that speaks directly to viewers.

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<sup>200</sup> Chico Mendez was a Brazilian environmentalist who vehemently fought for the preservation of the Amazon rainforest while advocating for the human rights of Brazilian peasants and indigenous people. He was assassinated in 1988.

<sup>201</sup> Li, "Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator - a Review," 13.

Two strips of brown borders located at the top and bottom sections frame the painting. Also seen at this border edge is a repeated rectangular geometric motif of what appears to be a fabric-like design pattern. Overall, the entire structured organisation of visual elements in this painting suggests a presentation potentially resembling that of a traditional textile.

This textile-like illusion is often executed with the use of either predominantly vertical or horizontal framing borders with motifs that are repeated and alternated in different shapes, sizes and color. Such reference to textile forms is evident in most of Nirmala's artworks documenting the plight of displaced Sarawakians as also seen in the following work.



**Figure 6.3: Nirmala, *Penan Landscape* (1989), Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 91.5 x 81 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: Author's Photograph.**

Utilizing horizontal framing borders that extend down the sides of the canvas, Nirmala attempts to heighten a sense of discomfort by cramming a number of silkscreened portraits of indigenous Penan people at the middle section of *Penan Landscape* (1989). A number of these portraits have also been seen in *Membalak*



*Jangan Sebarangan Nanti Ditimpa Balak*, with the addition of a few more children and adult images of various gender. This work bears resemblance to Kelvin Chap's *Belawing, Keramen, Mamat* (1995) featuring the Iban people. Piyadasa notes that this representation of densely packed images "allows for a broader definition and understanding of Malaysian indigeneity" which offers a counter narrative to the NCC's "more strident and rigid Malay-centred definitions of indigenous culture."<sup>202</sup> On this note, perhaps Nirmala was emphasizing her notion of a true indigenous culture.

The lateral framing borders used in *Penan Landscape* contains a particular vegetal motif with curling tendrils, which resemble those found in traditional textile. An almost full profile depiction of a young indigenous man in traditional headgear is seen on the lower left corner. Directly opposite this on the right is a depiction of plant forms. Together, they appear to be standing guard as though in protection of their natural landscape. Alternatively, their positions at the fringe of this painting along with the organically shaped vegetal motif<sup>203</sup> reveal their protective effects<sup>204</sup> to safeguard the age-old traditional culture (signified by the elderly), efforts of which that can only be continued by the younger generation (signified by the children).

While such correlations may be purely coincidental, this research notes that further study (beyond the scope of this research) should be made to discover the significance of these painted fabric-like motifs in relation to actual motifs<sup>205</sup> found in *pua kumbu*<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Piyadasa, *Rupa Malaysia: A Decade of Art 1987 - 1997*, 38.

<sup>203</sup> This vegetal motif resembles some equivalents found in *pua kumbu* textiles which are known to contain spiritual powers used in hunting, wedding, childbirth and funeral events among others.

<sup>204</sup> Some *pua kumbu* motifs act as protective barriers to contain "power" or malevolent forces in a confined space.

<sup>205</sup> Traude Gavin, *Iban Ritual Textiles*(NUS Press, 2004), 2. The study, identification and understanding of *pua kumbu* motifs is particularly challenging due to their non-objective and non-representational states being without a stable meaning. For instance, Traude Gavin notes, "Designs that are called 'deer' or 'hawk' do not necessarily depict, or represent, these animals." Thus, what appears here in *Penan Landscape* as a vegetal motif may simply just be not being a form of vegetation. Gavin attributes this apparent disconnect in identification to the "fundamental differences between oral and literate cultures" which stems from attempting to situate art forms driven by oral culture into a literate mindset. For more information, see Traude Gavin's *Iban Ritual Textiles* (2004) by Singapore University Press.

textiles. Their manner of inclusion in this artwork could suggest Nirmala's attempt to play a weaver's role in weaving traces of social comment into the "fabrics" of her canvas.<sup>207</sup>

The largely monochromatic surface representation also shows Nirmala's further engagement with the silkscreened images by her loose abstracted deep red brush strokes; at times carefully obscuring the figures. Her attempt to disfigure some of the silkscreened portraits suggests the ongoing threat to jeopardize the existence of the Penan people.



**Figure 6.4: Nirmala, *Membalak Jangan Sebarang Nanti Ditimpa Balak II* (1990), Acrylic, silkscreen, ink and mengkudu dye on canvas, 122 x 102 cm. Collection of Encik Nizam Razak. Source: *The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator 1998 Exhibition Catalogue*.**

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<sup>206</sup> *Pua* meaning "Blanket" and *Kumbu* meaning "Cover" is a blanket-sized cloth traditionally woven from wild cotton and dyed using the *Ikat* method; by tying off sections of cloth to resist dye imprints. These ceremonial cloths are made for headhunting and shamanic purposes.

<sup>207</sup> Audrey Low, "Ceremonial Cloth (Pua Kumbu) from Sarawak," in *Powerhouse Museum Collection* (Sydney, Australia: Powerhouse Museum Collection, 2008). Audrey Low, in detailing her description of a *pua kumbu* artifact (registration number 85/206) housed in the Powerhouse Museum of the Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences in Sydney maintains that the motifs found are "very personalized expression of creativity" that often draw inspiration from weaver's "real life events and encounters" reflecting "a person's fears, hopes or aspirations". For more information, see <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=37762>

The vertical hard-edged segmenting of the surface area into tripartite divisions as first seen in *Illegal Logging in Sarawak* is also repeated in *Membalak Jangan Sebarangan Nanti Ditimpa Balak II* (1990). In staying true to reflecting the correspondence with cosmological belief system, the heavenly realm is now depicted as a lush greenery of repeated flora motifs. The earthly realm – populated by humans – is represented by a child, mother and her children and finally the same image of an elderly indigenous individual with traditional headgear. The underworld is depicted with the same flora motifs in black and white, but now shown against a fiery red sky. The apparent charred figures of trees and shrubs hints at destruction.

The overall structured layout in this artwork signifies textile forms. Hypothetically, should this be the case of a *pua kumbu* personification, the familiar repeated rectangular geometric pattern – as a *pua kumbu* motif – is seen separating the underworld from the earthly realm as if cocooning the latter from the former in a “protective barrier”. By the same token, the entire potentially *pua kumbu* inspired artwork could have somewhat exuded its magical properties in “shielding” the indigenous people from the threat of illegal logging.

The uniqueness of this work lies in its media: the usage of natural dye made from the roots of the *Mengkudu* plant (*Morinda Citrifolia*). The rusty red dye extracted from the *Mengkudu* plant has also been widely used in the making of *pua kumbu* textiles. On this note, this artwork owes its significance to two fronts: the use of natural dye and the projection of an ancient tradition of cloth making.

Nirmala found herself experimenting with this natural dye in great difficulty when she embarked on her research into the *ikat* and *pua* textiles-making leading to an awe-

inspiring sentiment of the challenging craft.<sup>208</sup> Mastering both dye making and cloth weaving among the Iban people makes for a sophisticated and proud tradition. This realization has somehow deepened her appreciation for the artisanal appeal of this traditional practice that drew upon resources from the natural environment, resulting in a newfound respect for the beauty of the people's practice and their place.

By incorporating natural materials into the canvas surface, Nirmala attempts to bring nature somewhat closer to the audience and provoke one to think about how natural resources can be harnessed for one's creative expression – and hence, the need to protect these natural resources by combating illegal logging. Essentially, Nirmala was lending prominence to the materiality of her artwork as a salient demonstration of conserving a tangible cultural heritage.



**Figure 6.5: Nirmala, *Membalak Jangan Sebarangan Nanti Ditimpa Balak – Rumbia* (1990), Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 122 x 92 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: Author's Photograph.**

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<sup>208</sup> Li, "Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator - a Review," 13.

In the third rendition of the *Membalak* series, Nirmala's possible reference to textile forms takes full manifestation. The cloth-like appearance of *Membalak Jangan Sebarangan Nanti Ditimpa Balak - Rumbia* (1990) spots the usual monochromatic and ochre colour scheme that adorns the surface area filled with repetition and alternation of geometric motifs, punctuated by the occasional organic forms.

The layout assumes the vertical stacking format beginning from top, the familiar rectangular motif encasing a strip of line. A methodical lying of dots and hatchings in varying diagonal and wavy permutations follows thereafter, before the composition opens up to what appears to be motifs of palm leaves. An examination of the artwork's title reveals a hint. These are likely wild sago<sup>209</sup> palm leaves. The monotony of these horizontally repeated motifs is broken by the presence of organic figures partially bathed in shades of ochre as if questioning their state of existence. Women cradling children and an elderly indigenous person are seen amongst these figures. The canvas below ends with another strip of sago palm leaves in monochrome.

The portrayal of sago palm leaves in this work symbolizes the threat to the indigenous people's livelihood. Sago tree is deemed the "tree of life" that ensures the Penan's survivability.<sup>210</sup> As a highly versatile natural resource, its availability is threatened by encroaching logging companies, forest burning for oil palm plantations and the more recently operational Murum hydroelectric dam in mid 2015.

In 1990, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia in addressing an international meeting of European and Asian leaders said: "It is our policy to eventually

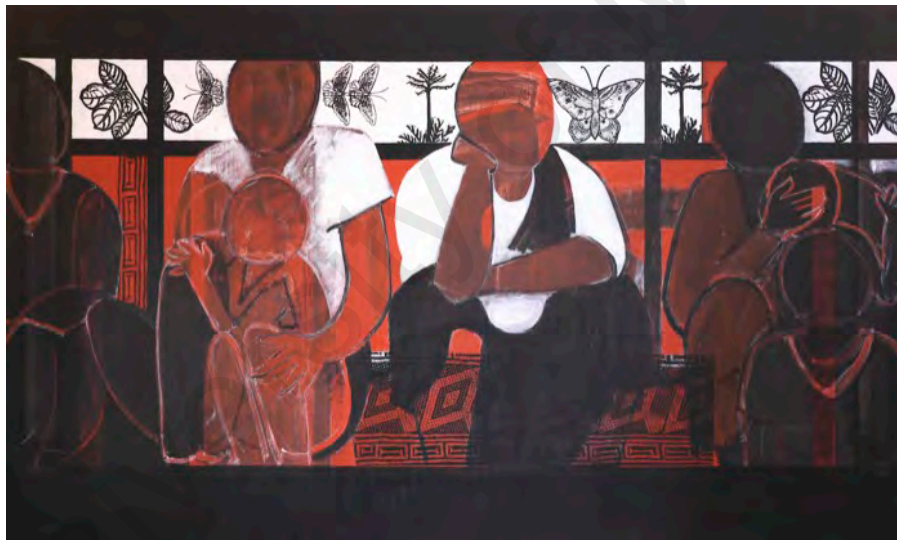
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<sup>209</sup> Sago is produced from the *Rumbia* tree (Metroxylon Sagu) and is a major staple food for the Penan tribe. Besides being a food source, different parts of the Sago tree are used for building and basket-making materials. For instance, the leaves are used to make thatched roof for homes. For more information, see <http://www.theborneopost.com/2012/03/25/the-amazing-sago-palm/>

<sup>210</sup> Wade Davis, *Light at the Edge of the World: A Journey through the Realm of Vanishing Cultures*(D & M Publishers, 2009), 136-38.

bring all jungle dwellers into the mainstream...There is nothing romantic about these helpless, half-starved and disease-ridden people.”<sup>211</sup> The anthropologist, David Maybury-Lewis remarks that while genocide is greatly frowned upon, ethnocide has been “advocated as appropriate policy”<sup>212</sup>

Set against this background of events, *Membalak Jangan Sebarangan Nanti Ditimpa Balak – Rumbia* may stand as a living testament of the purported “impediment” indigenous people pose to the development of a nation.<sup>213</sup> Viewing this artwork in contemporary times two and a half decades later – during which period, hardly any change occurring for the better – is enormously and numbingly puzzling. This has however made the timeless artwork even more relevant.



**Figure 6.6: Nirmala, *Bakun (Work in Progress)* (1999), Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, Dimension Unknown. Collection of Shirene Shan. Source: Author’s Photograph.**

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 141-42.

<sup>213</sup> The crux of the matter remains; in our constant push towards urbanization and development, are indigenous people seen as hindering this progressive wave or should they be seen as a rich cultural heritage that contributes to a sense of national identity? How can a nation risk “losing itself” in its drive for material wealth? This will be explored in Chapter 7.

In *Bakun (Work in Progress)* (1999),<sup>214</sup> Nirmala depicts several adults (likely indigenous people) seated and squatting nonchalantly with their children in the usual ochre and somber monochromatic colour scheme. The two adult individuals on the left and right are seen as if consoling and shielding the children from something as the young ones snuggled up in their embrace. The individual at the middle seems to be propping up its head, probably thinking or waiting. Clearly, it's difficult to accurately identify what's happening without any facial expression. The deliberate stripping of personalities or any semblance of identity in these figures corresponds with the authorities' demonstration of total disregard for their welfare.<sup>215</sup> This leads to a discomfiting and unsettling tension that permeates the scene.

Black filmic border strips line the top and bottom canvas. Together with the grid lines in the background resembling windows, they offer an episodic and voyeuristic peek into the quotidian living of indigenous people threatened by modern development. Nirmala seems to be asking will their plight be no more than viewed from a distance.

The inclusion of vegetal and butterfly motifs remain unclear but could possibly denote the lost of biodiversity in the face of adversity due to the large flooding of landmass. More symbolically, the depiction of vegetation and a sensitive biological organism that relies on it as a food source for continual survival could have been alluded to. This delicate relation ensures an ongoing state of metamorphosis that

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<sup>214</sup> Peter Kallang, "Sarawak's State Level Conference against Mega-Dams," news release, 13 February 2012, 2012. The title of this work refers to the Bakun hydroelectric project that was commissioned in 1996 and completed since 2011. The construction of the dam displaced about 10,000 indigenous people. The Bakun dam occupies an area roughly equivalent the size of Singapore and is the largest dam in Southeast Asia, according to a press release by Save Sarawak's Rivers Network (SAVE Rivers) on 13 February 2012.

<sup>215</sup> Malaysia The Coalition of Concerned NGOs on Bakun (Gabungan), "The Resettlement of Indigenous People Affected by the Bakun Hydro-Electric Project, Sarawak, Malaysia," (The Coalition of Concerned NGOs on Bakun (Gabungan), Malaysia, 1999), 7-8. As fuzzy as their appearances may appear to be, the indigenous people have been denied the full picture of the impending consequences of the damming project. Findings revealed that the indigenous people have not been properly informed and consulted with regards to the hydroelectric project and their resettlement, resulting in great distress. For a list of documented grievances, see page 7-8 of "The Resettlement of Indigenous People affected by the Bakun Hydro-Electric Project, Sarawak, Malaysia" report to the World Commission on Dams dated December 1999.



characterizes the various stages of a butterfly's life history, which the indigenous people can be likened to, thus suggesting their constant evolvement into the unknown in view of these developing circumstances.

On closer observation, they seem to be seated on floor mats with indigenous motifs; thus suggesting their likely location to be a long house at Sungai Asap.<sup>216</sup> It's been reported that the condition of this resettlement has been deplorable with shoddy workmanship and poor sanitary, sewerage and drainage systems. Interestingly, the "Work in Progress" which makes up part of the artwork's title fits aptly in this context.



**Figure 6.7: Nirjala, *Bakun I* (1999), Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 102 x 91.5 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: OurArt Projects Catalogue.**

A similar composition of human figures is also depicted in *Bakun I* (1999), only this time painted in vibrant primary colours. Both the individuals on the left and right appear to be female,<sup>217</sup> judging by their bodily composition and their bundle of hair. The

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>217</sup> The arrangement of these women bears resemblance to those found in Kathe Kollwitz's *The Mothers* (1919) (See Figure 8.9 in Appendix).



outlines are more distinct and the middle figure's face seems to be casted downwards. He looks like a man judging by his physique. Altogether, the men, women and children; a representation of the family unit, seem to be depicted as vulnerably helpless in their plight.<sup>218</sup>

The depiction of women flanking the men is by no chance. The resettlement has adversely affected the roles and lives of the now increasingly housebound women who rely on men for labour, material resources and transport in a monetized livelihood.<sup>219</sup> The secondary and supportive roles women play put them at great disadvantage to be exploited, which contrasts against their former status in an egalitarian way of life for the indigenous people living in the jungles. In short, *Bakun I* speaks of an affront to the fabric of the traditional social and cultural cohesion.

A narrow strip of news article is silkscreened to the top section of the artwork. Overlaid on this is a map indicating the vast expanse of South China Sea separating Peninsular Malaysia and that of Sarawak. Description of electricity transmission lines sourcing from the dam to the Peninsular is mapped out in the detailed report. This involves some 1,500 km overland wires and four 650 km long undersea cables,<sup>220</sup> the construction of which never materialized.<sup>221</sup> There seems to be a great disconnect in the juxtaposition of the indigenous people against this backdrop of a mega project from which they will unlikely benefit, as though hinting at the insulated and mysterious

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<sup>218</sup> To quote from a study report: "The trauma of the move, the lack of continuity in lives and culture, the lack of alternatives and of course the lack of work see the emergence of an apathy, a disenchantment and straightforward depression within the whole community. Social problems and indulgence in destructive activities like gambling and drinking have resulted." For more information, see page 15 of "The Resettlement of Indigenous People affected by the Bakun Hydro-Electric Project, Sarawak, Malaysia" report to the World Commission on Dams dated December 1999.

<sup>219</sup> The Coalition of Concerned NGOs on Bakun (Gabungan), "The Resettlement of Indigenous People Affected by the Bakun Hydro-Electric Project, Sarawak, Malaysia," 13.

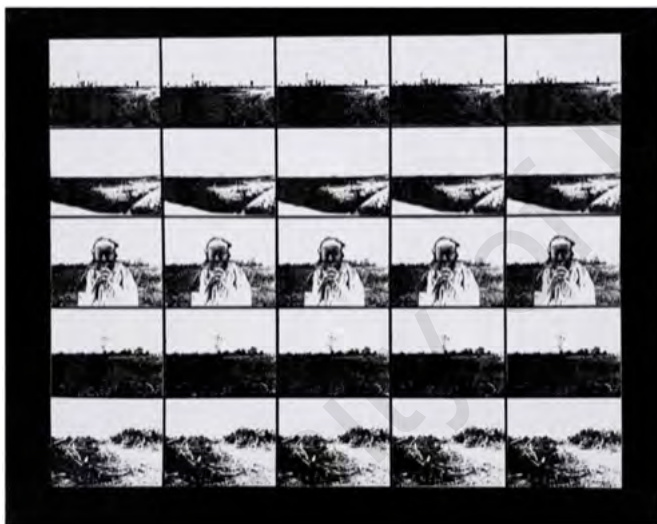
<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>221</sup> Yu Ji, "Sarawak Unlikely to Export Power to the Peninsula," *The Star*, 26 October 2015 2015.

world of the indigenous people compared to the vast-reaching influence of modernity that extends far beyond the scope of their livelihood in the jungle.

## 6.2 The Mah Meri Legacy

Nirmala also highlighted the indigenous tribes of the animistic Mah Meri hailing from Carey Island located at Peninsular Malaysia. The indigenous Mah Meri people from the Senoi subgroup are well known for their traditional spirit carvings of sculptures, masks, animal-themed craftworks, weaving and ritualistic dance, all of which lends them their distinctive identity.



**Figure 6.8: Nirmala, *Mah Meri Landscape II* (1999), Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 91.5 x 107 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: OurArt Projects Catalogue.**

In *Mah Meri Landscape II* (1999), Nirmala emphasizes the presence of a masked Mah Meri person surrounded by barren landscape in what appears to be vast tracts of cleared land. This could possibly be due to heavy deforestation in making way for aqua farms and oil palm plantations which have rapidly exhausted the supply of *nyireh batu* (*xylocarpus moluccensis*) and *pulai* (*alstonia spathulata*) trees, the latter of which is

used in the carving of ceremonial masks.<sup>222</sup> The masks when worn by dancers in the *Jo-oh* dance ritual allow the wearer to interact with the *moyang*.<sup>223</sup>

The black and white representation of the silkscreened photos arranged in a 5 x 5 grid layout offers a simple and symmetrical visual organisation. Every cell is cleanly divided into an upper sky and lower earth – a reflection of the intangible spirit realm and the tangible physical world – as though signifying the absolute existence of their intricate connection with the land.

The representation of odd numbers in five rows, five columns and a total of twenty five-boxed photos may serve more than just aesthetical balance. It is widely believed that in Southeast Asia, even numbers denote closure and end to things while odd numbers “demand a continuation, signifying dynamism and thus life.”<sup>224</sup> However, what “life” is there to be celebrated in the face of environmental destruction for the Mah Meri people?

Within the worldview of the Mah Meri tribe, even numbers are considered bad and odd numbers are good. Odd number means that events or situations would take a turn for the better. On the contrary, even numbers are associated with things that are “fixed, final or complete.”<sup>225</sup> The social anthropologist Karim explains, “In the context of illness or other kinds of misfortune, the Mak Betisek<sup>226</sup> always ensure that ritual objects,

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<sup>222</sup> Peter Crowe, *Spirit Carvings of the Mah Meri of Malaysia: The Collection of Peter and Rohani Crowe* (Subang Jaya: Center for Orang Asli Concerns, 2016), 45. As a result of depleting supplies of the lighter *pulai* wood, the heavier *nyireh batu* wood is used instead; even this raw material is on the decline, prompting urgent initiatives to replant both these trees on the island.

<sup>223</sup> The term *moyang* roughly translates to “ancestor”. The Mah Meri people believe that every animate and inanimate object has a living soul or spirit, which are good, bad or neutral. These spirits influence their worldly existence and they interact with the people via dreams or trances.

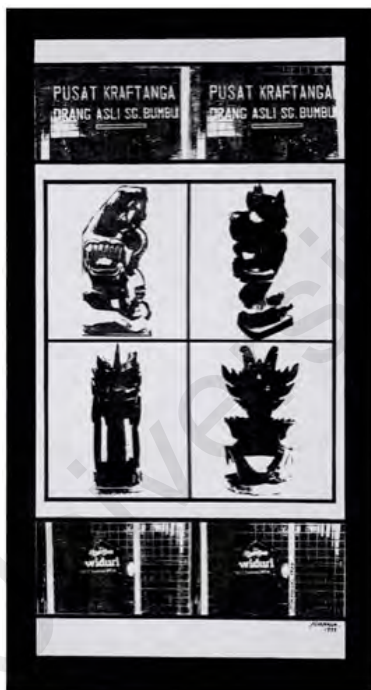
<sup>224</sup> Kerlogue, *Arts of Southeast Asia*, 66.

<sup>225</sup> Wazir-Jahan A. Karim, "Mak Betisek Concepts of Humans, Plants and Animals," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 137, no. 1 (1981): 53.

<sup>226</sup> The Mah Meri indigenous people were once known as Mak Betisek in the 1980s by Temuan people and researchers.

items of food and the numbers of people attending the séance appear in odd rather than even numbers. This is indicative of the idea that the situation will change for the better.”<sup>227</sup> Thus, it can be suggested that despite the deforestation and negative impact on the lives of the Mah Meri tribe, the artwork’s representation encoded in the odd number is an optimistic voice of courage for the indigenous tribe in hoping for the best.

On the contrary, an even number representation of objects is seen in *Mah Meri Landscape* (1999) where a grid layout of four different spirit carvings is displayed. The top section shows two identical photos stating, “Pusat Kraftangan Orang Asli Sg. Bumbun” which means, “Handicraft Centre of the Indigenous People of Bumbun River Village”.



**Figure 6.9:** Nirmala, *Mah Meri Landscape* (1999), Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 102 x 61 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: OurArt Projects Catalogue.

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<sup>227</sup> Karim, "Mak Betisik Concepts of Humans, Plants and Animals," 53.

The highly priced spirit carvings can fetch up to a couple of thousand ringgit each,<sup>228</sup> which makes for a good and lucrative source of income for the Mah Meri people who derive a great source of their livelihood from tourism. These profitable woodcarvings have been recognized by UNESCO as world heritage and even awarded the Seal of Excellence. On this positive note, it is likely that this situation be deemed “final” and unchanging, hence the even number representation.

Both these artworks on the Mah Meri remain a poignant reminder of the constant threat indigenous people face.<sup>229</sup> In 2017, barely two decades into the artworks’ creation, plans for a massive RM 200 billion port-industrial city project looms on the horizon, once again posing a potential disruptor to the lives of the Mah Meri.<sup>230</sup> Viewing them in 1999 would have provoked one to think, “This has happened. What’s in store for them in the future?” Fast forward to present times, one is immediately faced with the future: What’s next?

### **6.3 From Then to Now**

The artworks highlighted in this chapter share a number of common characteristics. Firstly, the portrayal of mother, children and prospect of a disintegrating social unit revolving around a home is evident as first seen with the *Squatters* series.

Secondly, most of these artworks employ monochromatic and ochre-coloured layout – befitting the somber and earthy state of affairs – that is constructed by repetition, grid, appropriation, silkscreen and abstract expressionist brushwork techniques. The compositions are rather symmetrical and formed by hard edge blocks of vertical and

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<sup>228</sup> Rouwen Lin, "Mah Meri Carvers Do It with Spirit," *The Star*, 2 February 2016 2016.

<sup>229</sup> Rabindranath, "Malaysian Visions: Exploring Identity, Ethnicity and Gender in the Case of Three Contemporary Women Painters," 80. Interestingly, Ariana Leon Rabindranath who interviewed Nirmala on 22 December 1998 found that the Mah Meri people “are being treated badly by the government because they don’t want to convert to Islam.”

<sup>230</sup> Ho Wah Foon, "Giant Carey Island Port in the Works," *The Star*, 9 January 2017 2017.

horizontal constructs that split the canvas surface into a handful of ordered segments. These geometric confines are balanced with a number of self-contained organic elements.

Thirdly, by virtue of this compositional approach and the indigenous subject matter being portrayed, it is plausible the artworks possess traditional textile-like qualities in formal presentation filled with iconographic symbolisms, whose stories have been weaved into its surface area. As such, they could be read like a rich tapestry of events.

Lastly, the balance of naturalistic human figures and plant forms with stylized human forms and abstracted brushworks hints at a duality that is inherent in Nirmala's work, thus suggesting the tension between the known physicality and a nebulous spirituality. The perceived duality suggests a sort of motion in progress, as if having arrived from a previous state or in the process of moving to another. This state of balance between certainty and uncertainty will be further examined in the next chapter, which will look into how this ambivalence defines or is defined by national identity.

## CHAPTER 7: A TUSSLE WITH THE NOTION OF NATION

An inquiry into Nirmala's artworks discussed thus far – ranging from the early 1970s until late 1990s – reveals three instrumental ingredients that lead to the plight of the underprivileged society. They can roughly be categorized into questionable rapid development, perceived greed and apparent abuse of power. Regardless of the various formulaic permutations these ingredients appear in her works, they contribute toward socio-economic injustices.

Despite the wide ranging geographical coverage of her thematic works surrounding environmental, pollution, squatter, children, refugee, war and racism concerns, it could be suggested that failure to address these issues would invariably undermine the nation of Malaysia and its people.<sup>231</sup> In response to this “threat”, I hereby propose that Nirmala's social commentary artworks are living historical statements that trace the journey of the country and its aspirations, as a means to counter social injustices. By chronicling national and world events into her visual art, she immortalized them into permanent records that offer unique viewpoints and help engender critical discourse.

Nirmala achieves this through the use of traditional culture: the use of *wayang kulit* motifs and narrative style coupled with the incorporation of indigenous subject matter and motifs. Hypothetically speaking, by alluding to cultural identities in her works, she forges a notion of national identity leading to prevailing sentiments of a sense of belonging to a nation and attachment with its traditional practices. On this note, Nirmala's artworks can be deemed as embodying a certain degree of “Malaysian

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<sup>231</sup> While some works allude to issues which were not directly involving Malaysia (e.g. war, refugee), the local, regional and international scope of her works constantly represent a degree of rectitude that most Malaysians would and should be able to identify with. For instance, any right thinking Malaysians would not condone the atrocities of the Bosnia or Vietnam War; by not taking a stand against this is tantamount to succumbing to insidious elements that would affect peace and order in Malaysia.

identity” in accordance to the call of the NCC. However, this nation-centered approach to art making is not without its problems.

Unfortunately, the prescriptive nature of the NCC’s cultural framework fails to take into account certain quarters of Malaysian society. The limiting “mold” of the NCC’s ethnic-based recommendation was partly in direct response to a young nation recovering from the racial riots of May 1969. This prescription of multi-cultural discourse to achieving national identity and unity doesn’t consider anything at all about the socio-economic condition of different communities living in Malaysia. Thus, perhaps in recognition of this, Nirmala was attempting to shine the spotlight on these marginalized people by adopting the class-centered approach in art making, as evidenced in her truly globalized coverage of social issues. Essentially, Nirmala’s social commentary artwork deconstructs the very notion of national identity that is contingent upon the existence of a “nation” by focusing instead on the fundamentals of human existence to live in a peaceful and fair society; an existential need that transcends national boundaries.

Hence, the first segment of the discourse in this chapter will explore the manner with which Nirmala conveys the Malaysian identity in her social commentary artworks on three premises: firstly, a mindfulness of the future by revisiting the past in section 7.1, secondly, the safeguarding of physical domains for posterity in section 7.2 and finally, the creation of socially conscious art for the Malaysian people in section 7.3.

The second segment of the discussion in section 7.4 offers an alternative viewpoint by which Nirmala’s artworks are emptied of their identities connected to the notion of a nation, and instead viewed largely in the context of the “human identity”. Together, both these segments represent the dichotomy between the former’s nation-centered (national identity) and the latter’s class-centered (human identity) approaches to



achieving harmony and unity which results in an inevitable need to exceed the notion of a nation.

### **7.1 Introspection: Stop, Look and Listen**

Visual analysis will be undertaken to explore five selected artworks from Nirmala's *Great Leap Forward* series. These artworks are deemed a culmination of all previous artworks discussed thus far by virtue of resemblances found in the use of artistic techniques, adoption of traditional forms and the subject matter concerned.

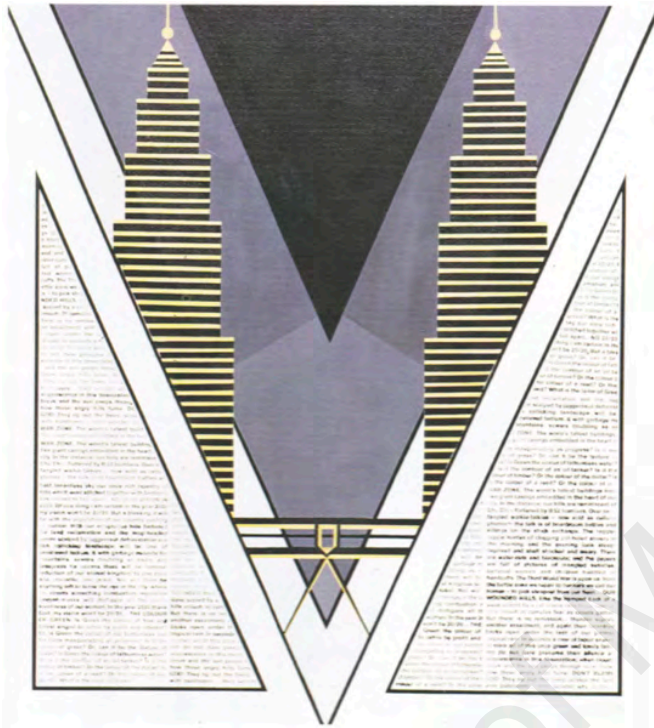
This series of artworks was Nirmala's attempt to criticize the wave of rapid social and economical transformation sweeping Malaysia in the 1990s under the then Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's administration that saw massive environmental degradation and unbalanced developmental policies affecting both urban and rural folks. The title of the series, "Great Leap Forward" is inspired by Mao Zedong's failed economic campaign of a similar name, which ran between 1958 – 1962.<sup>232</sup> Nirmala notes the rather contradictory nature of the rallying call for ultimate progress and attempts to draw parallel between the lopsided economic development driven by Chairman Mao and that by Mahathir.

In lamenting the cost of progress in an increasingly sprawling urban concrete jungle in Kuala Lumpur, Nirmala features the iconic Petronas Twin Towers in *Great Leap Forward V – Twin Towers* (1998). This artwork sets the Twin Towers and its distinctive sky bridge against the background of an inverted triangle. Together with two other triangles (in which newspaper articles are silkscreened) located at the bottom left and

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<sup>232</sup> The "Great Leap Forward" campaign was spearheaded by the Communist Party of China, which aimed to rapidly transform China from an agriculture-based economy to a socialist state through rapid industrialization and collectivization. This ill-conceived and lofty campaign focused heavily on both grain and steel production activities and is widely believed to have caused widespread famine, which claimed millions of lives.

right of the canvas, the artwork's composition hints at the letter "M" as it crisscrosses in between the building and text.



**Figure 7.1: Nirmala, *Great Leap Forward V – Twin Towers* (1998), Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 102 x 92 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: *Two Women Exhibition Catalogue*.**

While the letter "M's" allusion to "Mahathir" or "Malaysia" may be purely coincidental, this artwork is a testament to all that is "Modern" about Malaysia. Launched by Mahathir in 1999 and holding the record for the world's tallest building between 1998 – 2004, the Twin Towers helped put Malaysia on the world map.

The bold geometric lines yielding unnatural man-made shapes and symmetrical objects band together to hint at the Cubist-inspired fragmented Kuala Lumpur skyline. This modern marvel also tends to be reminiscent of the glamour and luxury of the Art Deco style of the 1920s and 1930s.

Darker shades of black and grey in the background contribute to a perception of shallow depth of field that suggests the multiple layers of structures in the vicinity.

Nirmala considers these “great shiny buildings” of national pride a stark contrast against what Chinese dynasties had done by investing money into arts and education instead.<sup>233</sup> While modern progress characterized by the portrayal of national icon spells positivity, this class-centered observation ultimately demonstrates her keen approval of benefits for the general public.

*Great Leap Forward V – Twin Towers* is the only artwork in the series, which uses an inverted triangle. As a continuation of Nirmala’s criticism against the Bakun hydroelectric project, she uses the upward pointing triangle in *Great Leap Forward VI – Bakun* (1998).



**Figure 7.2: Nirmala, *Great Leap Forward VI – Bakun* (1998), Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, Dimension Unknown. Collection of Shirene Shan. Source: Author’s Photograph.**

In this highly symmetrical work, a black triangle rises from the base of the canvas. This is filled with abstracted brush strokes of dripping red paint over black, and in some areas, random black brushes over little white patches. The focus of red against black at

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<sup>233</sup> Rabindranath, "Malaysian Visions: Exploring Identity, Ethnicity and Gender in the Case of Three Contemporary Women Painters," 81. Nirmala questioned, "Why not build the greatest university in Southeast Asia instead of the Petronas Towers?"

the pinnacle of the triangle conveys a foreboding sense of horror and tragedy. The triangle punches above and cuts into halves, the identical silkscreened newspaper articles detailing the power transmission lines from the dam to Peninsular Malaysia. Both the news articles seem to suggest the possibility of differing viewpoints regarding the controversial project.



**Figure 7.3: Nirmala, *Great Leap Forward III* (1998), Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 102 x 98 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: OurArt Projects Catalogue.**

In *Great Leap Forward III* (1998), the same triangular motif takes centre stage, the content of which houses swirling and abstracted brown and black brush works. The two triangular halves created at top left and right by the splitting central triangle represent similar images appropriated and silkscreened from the Kampung Polo series. They are roofs of demolished houses destroyed by the city council. In this regard, the triangle seems to have connoted the role of a bulldozer in crushing the houses of the squatters.

Below the base of the triangle is seen repeated silkscreened imagery of a pregnant lady pushing a wheelbarrow of her belongings against a backdrop of barren wasteland

and destruction.<sup>234</sup> Essentially, Nirmala is questioning the presence of modern progress and “greatness” in this chaotic scene of despair and poverty.



**Figure 7.4: Nirmala, *Great Leap Forward I* (1998), Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 102 x 98 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: *The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator 1998 Exhibition Catalogue*.**

A similar composition is also seen in *Great Leap Forward I* (1998). The motif of demolished roofs at top left and right is especially pronounced in this artwork, which shows an elongated triangle with its base collapsing through all the way to the bottom of the canvas. The brown abstracted brush works are more vibrant as if to lend more prominence to the disfigured and unstable triangle.

To signify unrestrained greed and desire for excessive wealth, Nirmala returns to her borrowing from the Hindu-Balinese inspired mythological creature of *Rangda* in *Great Leap Forward IV* (1999). The demon queen *Rangda* is seen merged and wrapped tightly within the confines of the central triangle. The head of this fanged creature with its

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 84.



goggled-eyes and protruding tongue extends downwards from the pinnacle of the triangle.



**Figure 7.5: Nirmala, *Great Leap Forward IV* (1999), Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 102 x 92 cm. Collection of OurArt Projects. Source: *Two Women Exhibition Catalogue*.**

A particularly unique feature of this artwork is the mixed media qualities found in the incorporation of five circular mirrors on the creature's tongue.<sup>235</sup> The Rangda is seen here with its most commonly associated colours: red, black and white. It dominates the canvas surface and stands in between two silkscreened newspaper articles with the words "THE CRASS CLASS" repeated at the top border; an article written by the prominent Malaysian economist, Jomo Kwame Sundaram to question the source of the

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<sup>235</sup> In a personal interview between Nirmala and this researcher on 5 May 2016, she revealed that the mirrors are for the viewers to feel guilty about being greedy when they see themselves in the mirror. She wanted a startling shock to viewers when they see themselves superimposed on the evil and horrific looking *Rangda*. She noted that the long tongue resembles the insatiable appetite of greed for more [power and wealth]. Essentially, the interactive and self-reflective nature of this work aims to remind one of the horrors and evil of uncontrollable greed and wealth, thus hoping to help set straight one's moral compass. This apparently benign characteristic of the *Rangda* is consistent with the creature's sometimes considered protective force in certain parts of Bali, as opposed to its more common personification of evil.

Malay's wealth.<sup>236</sup> The implied "M" alphabet constructed by two adjoining triangles serves as lower body limbs of the *Rangda* that gives it stability.

The triangle depicted in the *Great Leap Forward* series possesses an energetic and ominous aura due to the violent swirls of brushwork that convey a sense of unrest and of the unknown. This loose brushwork with bleak and monochromatic colours are inspired by Chinese calligraphy, owing to Nirmala's strong interest in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Ch'ing Dynasty social commentator artists.<sup>237</sup> Nirmala also remarked that the frequent use of "black and white" as the "beauty element" is preferred over color as the latter's use would be "too garish" for social criticism.<sup>238</sup>

The triangle shape has also been associated with "a sense of speed and dynamism" linking it with an unrelenting motivation to push forward for progress regardless of the cost.<sup>239</sup> It symbolizes positivity in aiming high toward excellence. In Nirmala's opinion however, the triangle seems to be signifying the rise of evil, greed and corruption. This antithesis demands further scrutiny. It could also be suggested that the triangle plays a more neutral emblem in communicating a state of change in between.

To understand this wavering, a quick review of the *Great Leap Forward* series is necessary. The Twin Towers, demolition of squatter settlements and rise of the urban class refer to rapid modern development and urbanization at the cost of displacing certain quarters of society. Similarly, the Bakun hydroelectric dam was realized at the

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<sup>236</sup> Rabindranath, "Malaysian Visions: Exploring Identity, Ethnicity and Gender in the Case of Three Contemporary Women Painters," 83.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 83-85. Nirmala has revealed to Rabindranath that she prefers to use Chinese brush with "big inaccurate strokes", further adding that she prefers spontaneity resulting from divine inspiration and the subconscious. Nirmala has also confirmed with Rabindranath that she uses broad Chinese brush painting not just for depicting the triangles of the *Great Leap Forward* series, but also fleshing out the general compositions of her *Vietnam*, *Beirut* and *Bosnia* war series. This suggests Nirmala's adoption of a form of hybridized Western-based Abstract Expressionist brushwork with that of Chinese-influenced brush painting.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>239</sup> Simon Soon, "Great Leap Forward," ed. OUR ArtProjects(Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: OUR ArtProjects, 2017).

great cost of irreversible ecological damage and displacement of vast numbers of indigenous people. For every purportedly positive cause, there is a questionable effect.

It appears development invariably yields conflicting consequences. Progress would almost certainly always mean benefitting a segment of society at the expense of the other. These artworks of the *Great Leap Forward* series embody traces of the earlier mentioned ingredients contributing to social injustices: questionable rapid development, perceived greed and apparent abuse of power. In fact, it could be argued that the entire oeuvre of Nirmala's artworks can be distilled and simply understood as possessing these three key ingredients, which culminated with the *Great Leap Forward* series.

Nirmala's artworks document a certain pivotal event that has occurred as a notable milestone in Malaysia's history. It signals a pause in Nirmala's visual story telling as a *dalang*, a "respite" from all the activity thus far and a lull before any subsequent actions are to begin. Alternatively, it could also signify an end by itself. For example, the Twin Towers may serve as a concluded scene of how it ushered positive impression of a visionary country. However, the ensuing socio-economic and political impact resulting from its construction remains to be seen, the effects of which one can only surmise or anticipate in the proverbial "next *wayang* scene" to be revealed in years to come. Thus, Nirmala's social commentary artworks are not closed narratives; rather they are open discourses that invite viewers to engage and anticipate their outcomes.

This imprinted "querying" effect on the psyche of the viewer is reminiscent of the "*Apa? Siapa? Kenapa?*" exhibition (literally means "What? Who? Why?") held in 1998 by the art collective Artis Pro Activ (APA) to transform "statement into interrogation, facticity into ambivalence" in light of the political upheaval caused by the unceremonious sacking of the then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, under the



gloomy climate of Asian financial crisis.<sup>240</sup> The perceived interrogative quality similarly seen in Nirmala's artworks nudges the viewer into probing the actual reality of an event in as much as themselves are being "probed" by the powers that be.

On this note, the triangle in the *Great Leap Forward* series can be likened to the *Kayon* puppet used in *wayang kulit* performance. Considered the most important puppet figure, this mystical "tree of life" (also referred to as *gunungan* meaning "mountain") is used to signal the start or end of a particular scene in the *wayang kulit* play by its placement at the middle of the stage, in addition to it being used to represent places in a play such as mountain, forest, palace gates or natural elements.<sup>241</sup>



**Figure 7.6: Artist Unknown, *Kayon Puppet*, Buffalo hide, Dimensions Unknown. Collection of Tropen Museum, Netherlands. Source: Web.**

Having drawn this parallel, the viewing perspective of Nirmala's artworks is significantly altered. The latent potential for "motion" in a state of change is not just confined to artworks bearing the *Kayon*-inspired triangular shape; this notion possibly applies to all of Nirmala's artworks. As a result, the works carry with them transient

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<sup>240</sup> "Converging Extremes: Exhibitions and Historical Sightlines in 1990s Malaysia," *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 13, no. 2 (2014): 92.

<sup>241</sup> Brandon, *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*, 40.

qualities of indeterminacy and ambivalence that vibrate between certainty and uncertainty, the known and the unknown. This dichotomy between the certain and uncertain mirrors that in a *wayang kulit* play where the plot line and characters are fixed but the dialogue not, thereby allowing a “*dalang* to react to his audience” or vice versa.<sup>242</sup> What has occurred may have been cast in stone but what’s to come is certainly pliable, thus lending an air of hope for the better. At this juncture, it is worth noting that the *Kayon* is sometimes “twirled and fluttered violently to portray nature’s turmoil,”<sup>243</sup> a motion that is likely reflected by the unsettling and chaotic swirls of brushwork seen within the triangles of *Great Leap Forward VI – Bakun*, *Great Leap Forward III* and *Great Leap Forward I*.

Set against this background, firstly, I propose that Nirmala’s portrayal of negativity and plight of the under privileged in her artworks demonstrates her commitment and concern for Malaysia. By doing so, she upholds and exudes a sense of national identity through her implied optimism that things would change for the better through education and awareness. Her highly engaging artworks reveal a nation poised between the past and future, a country having arrived at some negativity and as if gearing up for a change in fate.

National identity has an innate ability to arouse “feelings of closeness to and pride in one’s country and its symbols.”<sup>244</sup> This pride begets motivation to right the wrongs seen especially in a young nation. Nirmala certainly felt a certain degree of connection and

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<sup>242</sup> Jit, "What It Takes to Make a Dalang Great..." 125.

<sup>243</sup> Brandon, *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*, 40.

<sup>244</sup> Cara Wong and Brian Duff Jack Citrin, "The Meaning of American National Identity: Patterns of Ethnic Conflict and Consensus," in *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict, and Conflict Reduction, Volume 3*, ed. Lee Jussim Richard D. Ashmore, David Wilder, *Rutgers Series on Self and Social Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 74.

bond with Malaysia that had brought about her championing for social justice and change by focusing on issues that pertain to the Malaysian landscape and its people.

Secondly, a desired and potential change in situation also speaks of the fluidness of identity. Identity is not fixed. It is not absolute. One may aspire for material wealth and pursuit of unbalanced development, but may opt for a more sustainable approach, hopefully in one's later awakening.<sup>245</sup> People grow and change through time with varying aspirations. These aspirations reflect a collective notion of a national identity.

For instance, Nirmala's subject matter ranges widely from urban and regular consumer folks to the indigenous people while touching on environmental concerns, governmental policies and racial sensitivities. The wide spectrum of concerns and aspirations reflects a portrait of a true multi cultural and multi ethnic Malaysia, all of which contribute to a perceived sense of national identity.

In short, Nirmala's artworks serve as one's introspective tool to reassess oneself through three stages. Firstly, one "stops" to identify the documented event. Secondly, one "looks" to internalize and make sense of the social messages. Lastly, one "listens" to the call for action by taking the necessary remedial steps in heeding the call for change.

## **7.2 Cornerstone of a Nation**

A review of all social commentary artworks discussed has revealed a recurrent theme in the portrayal of both refuge and people. The former is communicated via the concept of a home and land, while the latter is alluded to primarily via the depiction of women, child and culture.

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 73. Identity is an elusive concept that seeks to liken and differentiate oneself to others in an attempt to identify shared characteristics [aspirations] so as to answer the questions, "What is your identity?", "Who are you?" or "What do you believe in?" It's an exercise that both integrates and divides. In crafting her social messages, Nirmala seems to be questioning, "Which 'camp' are you in?"

Close scrutiny of most of Nirmala's artworks inevitably refers to the plight of the younger generation who suffered the same fate as their caretaker mothers, either through pollution, poverty, squatter, war or environmental issues. There seems to be an invariable representation of "something" being taken from them (demolished housing, bombed village), or an incursion into their home ground as evidently seen in the documentation of Sarawak's indigenous people and the Mah Meri tribe.

It is hereby postulated that both homes and the land on which they situate serve as important shelter sites that act as basic units of nationhood in the fabric of modern society. This underlying social support structure helps give form to a nation. Together with the right environment, they form a crucial development framework to nurture children.<sup>246</sup>

The success of a nation very much depends on its people, more specifically, the younger generation who will drive social, economic and political growth of a nation. It appears Nirmala is suggesting that a healthy integration of national assets or family unit consisting of women, children and homes are important in developing national unity. The social cohesion resulting from a stable home contributes to a strong national identity as well.

By the same token, the destruction of indigenous lands and eviction of squatters by demolishing their homes, or the displacement of refugees of war are seen as not only being in direct offense against a country's sovereignty, but an undermining of a nation's identity as well. On this account, I propose that Nirmala's artworks safeguard Malaysia's identity by calling for the protection of women and children as these

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<sup>246</sup> Rabindranath, "Malaysian Visions: Exploring Identity, Ethnicity and Gender in the Case of Three Contemporary Women Painters," 80. Nirmala seems to place notable emphasis on the role of women, or mothers in taking care of their young. As revealed to Rabindranath, Nirmala and Adibah Amin once financially adopted two Palestinian boys in the late 1980s.

components are deemed as denoting “a group of people seeking or possessing a common homeland.”<sup>247</sup>

Nirmala’s highlighting of the plight suffered by the natives demonstrates her commitment to defend the very underlying cultural values upon which a “common homeland” is built and recognized. Perhaps Nirmala feels that a nation risks losing its identity if the country is stripped of its many flora and fauna. This may run counter to the belief that national identity may be a nebulous constructed feeling as in the case of Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities”. However, Anderson does attach physical boundaries of land to a nation in his concept. Similarly, I argue that a sense of belonging begins from the recognition of “home” with defined physical spaces. Thus, it may be suggested that environmental destruction is an affront to the physicality of a country from which seminal sentiments of national identity stems. The emotional attachment rises from an invested bond with a land in which one calls home. No sane individual would stay mum when his or her home is being threatened.

In short, Nirmala’s artworks reveal that a country’s integrity is maintained by the preservation of its people, culture and home, all of which constitute the cornerstone of a nation.

### **7.3 Socially Conscious Art**

The practice of Malaysian artists during the Post-Independence years has largely been driven by Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism movements that emphasize the emotional and gestural aspect of art making. A dominance of “Art for Art’s sake” syndrome seen in these romanticised and celebratory artworks contain elements of

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<sup>247</sup> Jack Citrin, “The Meaning of American National Identity: Patterns of Ethnic Conflict and Consensus,” 74.

euphoria, optimism, innocence, simplicity and exuberance that seem to pay “homage to the land and her tropical environment.”<sup>248</sup>

In noting this phenomenon, Professor Ungku Aziz in his Judges’ Report for the Salon Malaysia art competition held in 1968 remarked: “There seems to be a relative lack of consciousness about social, economic and political tensions, that in the national and international aspects, compose the matrix of the Malaysian nation. Socially conscious art is one thing, social protest is another. Patriotism or heroism<sup>249</sup> or pessimism are other examples of emotional conditions that our artists and their patrons may yet arrive at in their full maturity.”<sup>250</sup>

The Professor’s concern is indeed a modern day conundrum. Long before the secularization of art where form and function were divorced, art objects; whether be they *Moyang Gadang* totems by the Mah Meri tribe or European painting of the Madonna of 13<sup>th</sup> century, perform a social function.<sup>251</sup> Both form and function were indivisible before the advent of modern art galleries and art collectors who advocated for the development of “Art for Art’s Sake”.

Prof. Ungku A. Aziz, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the National Art Gallery subsequently proposed in the NCC meeting in 1971 that “Art for Art’s Sake” should make way to considering “Art for Society” to ensure art plays a more inclusive role in the economic and political development of Malaysia.<sup>252</sup> His championing for “socially

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<sup>248</sup> Piyadasa, *Rupa Malaysia: A Decade of Art 1987 - 1997*, 23-24.

<sup>249</sup> It remains to be seen if Nirmala’s artworks can be considered as patriotic or even heroic: the former exhibited by her portrayal of love for a resource rich and beautiful country, the latter exhibited by her unrelenting fight for justice in lending her voice to the voiceless.

<sup>250</sup> Aziz, "Salon Malaysia Open Art Competition and Exhibition (Exhibition Catalogue)."

<sup>251</sup> National Art Gallery, "Man and His World [Exhibition Catalogue]," ed. National Art Gallery (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1973).

<sup>252</sup> Sabapathy, "Merdeka Makes Art, or Does It?," 71.

conscious art” sought to address tensions in social, economic and political subject matter.

Juxtaposing the Professor’s 1968 statement alongside Nirmala’s artworks beginning as early as 1973 – a mere five years later – would reveal her adherence to this call on a number of aspects even though she may not be directly influenced by it.<sup>253</sup> Nirmala’s national and international coverage of issues explore social (racism and child refugees), economic (rapid development and urbanisation) and political events (wars in the Middle East and Southeast Asia) in a tight-knit manner that appears to weave them into the conscience matrix of a young nation, who would appear to do well to benefit from them as fodder for moralistic underpinnings.

By recognizing the tension of social, economic and political elements as “defining conditions of the Malaysian state”, Professor Aziz believes they reflect “complexities and realities that are closer to the foundation of the construction of Malaysia.”<sup>254</sup> Perhaps, Nirmala knew this too well in her attempt to construct a Malaysian identity judging by the wide range of complex issues that she tried tackling to exhibit reality on the ground.

Unfortunately, the brewing tension on the ground culminated with the May 13, 1969 racial riots, leading to the formation of the National Operations Council (NOC), which assembled the NCC at the University of Malaya in 1971. The Congress was tasked to propose means to unify and mend an increasingly fragmented society, which was deemed as one of the causes for the riots.

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<sup>253</sup> "Vision and Idea: Afterthoughts," 108.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 107.

As a result, the Congress gave birth to two key developments that would forever change the fate of Malaysia. Firstly, the NCP was prescribed which essentially established Malay cultural values, forms and identity as the basis of artistic expression.<sup>255</sup> Secondly, the NEP was advocated. As a social re-engineering and affirmative action program running 20 years, it was to be succeeded by the National Development Policy (NDP).

Visual analyses done in this research have revealed that Nirmala's artworks are primarily driven by the adoption of traditional folk art influence. They include (not exhaustively) allusions to animistic and Hindu-inspired art forms (outlining tripartite divisions of the cosmic, depiction of *Kala* and *Rangda*), Javanese *wayang kulit* conventions and Malaysian indigenous practices (*pua kumbu* textile of the Iban people, spirit carvings of the Mah Meri). Perhaps the only approximation to Malay art form is the depiction of textile-like motifs in Nirmala's *Membalak* series and her usage of *wayang kulit* motifs. Otherwise, it appears she does not seem to be affected by the NCC rulings as communicated to Rabindranath during an interview conducted.<sup>256</sup>

Upon closer scrutiny, one can surmise that Nirmala's artistic approach couldn't get anymore inclusive of all the ethnic races in Malaysia. The *Statement* and *Kampung Polo* series depict squatters of Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnicities. Her originally Abstract Expressionist-inspired brushworks are fused with traditional Chinese painting tendencies which seems to permeate throughout her body of work employing abstracted

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<sup>255</sup> Piyadasa, *Rupa Malaysia: A Decade of Art 1987 - 1997*, 26-28. This led to a reassessment of traditional Malay "roots" that branched into emotionally-driven interest in Malay legends, myths, history and literary forms. Feeling renewed by this official sanction, Malay artists adopted Malay-centred aesthetic principles, artistic techniques and sensibilities while sourcing inspiration from woven textiles, traditional jewellery, ceramics and folk art among others. These events subsequently found themselves coinciding with international Islamic revival movement stemming from the successful Iranian revolution in 1979. While it's unclear if this global event affected Malaysian artists, what is evident is that Malay artists being Muslims felt reaffirmed of their identity as being simultaneously Malay and Muslim. Such newfound identity largely drove the artistic production of Malaysian art in the 1980s up until 1990s, alongside mainstream Abstract Expressionism-inspired art making.

<sup>256</sup> Rabindranath, "Malaysian Visions: Exploring Identity, Ethnicity and Gender in the Case of Three Contemporary Women Painters," 92.



brushworks. In fact, her artworks on racism suggest strong undertones of disapproving the divisive nature of policies that segregate races.

Should Nirmala's artworks be seen as a response to the NCC rulings, I would postulate that they trump the Malay-centric policy on two premises. Firstly, not only does Nirmala visibly adopt some Malay traditional forms in her artworks, she extends its uptake to include their possible interpretations in an implicit manner. For instance, *Statement 1*, though not exhibiting any explicit *wayang kulit* forms can be read according to its three major divisions in a play. Her use of Malay titles for *Membalak* series and inclusion of Malay language newspapers reflects her borrowings and acknowledgements of Malay idioms and values. These are all hidden manifestations of the Malay cultural forms.

Secondly, Nirmala's explicit portrayal of these traditional forms extends beyond their mere depiction at face value. The artworks harbor social comment and underlying tension that seeks to be engaged and addressed for the benefit of all Malaysians without regard to any particular race. This approach differs from the mere depiction of traditional motifs and values privileging the preservation of a singular racial heritage. Essentially, Nirmala was using the cultural heritage of various races rich in different moralistic values to cultivate her social comment via traditional forms. On this account, Nirmala was demonstrating a perfect example of truly championing a "socially conscious art" for the masses.<sup>257</sup> Nirmala's "socially conscious art" connotes "social commentary" for the people rather than the "establishment of dominance and privileged

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<sup>257</sup> Sabapathy, "Vision and Idea: Afterthoughts," 108. Professor Ungku Aziz sought to "resite artistic practice in terrain other than the purely aesthetic or private" and advocated for the veering away from "the self or ego". Interestingly, despite the eventual confirmation of the Malay-centric policy as the cultural basis, it was he who fought for a broader social basis and reality in art making during the NCC in 1971. Strangely enough, he wrote the brief of the 1979 *Rupa dan Jiwa* exhibition, in which he approves of the exhibition's portrayal of "the authentic Malay tradition in visual form" as though it stands as a valid "socially conscious art" for the people; albeit, social to a particular race in its strictest sense. Perhaps, he felt the portrayal of Malay-Muslim tradition and sensibilities was stark enough a contrast from earlier Abstract Expressionistic pre-occupations to warrant a tinge of "social realities". Nirmala on the other hand, thought otherwise.

spaces” privileging a particular racial tradition.<sup>258</sup> Sabapathy notes that the employment of ethnic roots may lead to “tolerance and understanding of otherness” which would enrich the cultural map of a society or nation by pluralism.<sup>259</sup>

The social identity theorist, Henri Tajfel maintains that a mere sense of attachment to a group creates a sense of communal accountability that would see one’s actions as collectively representative of the entire group, despite having no personal connection with anyone within the group.<sup>260</sup> Similarly, the philosopher David Miller postulates that the “moral value of a strong sense of national identity” encourage “diffuse feelings of sympathy and obligation towards fellow citizens.”<sup>261</sup> Therefore, it can be suggested that Nirmala’s sympathetic artworks exude traces of national identity by virtue of her demonstrating a connection with the people and aspirations of Malaysia. In the same vein, Shariff situates this understanding with his postulation of a “Malaysian situation” from which a sociologically contextualized Malaysian art organically rises.<sup>262</sup>

In trying to understand the inspiration that drives artists to express themselves, the issue of identity is often discussed as the lynchpin that characterizes an artist’s body of work. It conveys the internal signature, passion or ethos of the creator and transforms them into tangible statements speaking up for or against surrounding issues. Zakaria Ali maintains that the recognition of identity is conditional upon an artwork’s ability to evoke via its powerful content, which in turn, allow an audience “receptive enough to be

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Jack Citrin, "The Meaning of American National Identity: Patterns of Ethnic Conflict and Consensus," 74.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Zainol Shariff, "Towards an Alter-Native Vision: The Idea of Malaysian Art since 1980," in *Vision and Idea: Relooking Modern Malaysian Art*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy(Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994), 97.

provoked”.<sup>263</sup> This could very well allude to a diverse range of subject matter from paintings of idyllic rural life, the national flower or beautiful landscapes to portrayal of traditional handicraft or food. These motifs are very often wielded as demonstration of national identity, which sourced from the artist’s personal identity. But how do paintings of discomfiting social commentary works be seen as contributing to a national identity or even potentially surpassing entirely the notion of a nation?

Ali further suggests that the question of identity may be a post-Independence conundrum, a period during which Malaysians asked what really defines them as a young nation. The NCC was formed in the aftermath of the May 13, 1969 racial riots to decide on a universal cultural value in artworks to promote unity as embodied in the NCP. The resulting formulation of NEP spanning the 1970 – 1990 period also coincided with Nirmala’s most prolific artistic career.

On this note, I argue that Nirmala’s artworks in this period is a reaction to the events in Malaysia that resulted in her artworks to be as much espousing a Malaysian identity as other mainstream non-controversial artworks. Equally important is the fact that the very “globalized” nature of Nirmala’s subject matter in her artworks seems to question the notion of a nation. The universality and highly socially centered flavours of Nirmala’s artworks potentially places her in a position to venture beyond the confines of a perceived nation by focusing on the very basis of human existence: compassion and life.

Nirmala opined that given the relative youthfulness of Malaysia as a nation, its art would therefore take time to mature into a distinctive identity; however, she believes

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<sup>263</sup> Ali, *The Malaysianess of Malaysian Art: The Question of Identity*.

that “if artists reflect the life of their country, a definite ‘Malaysian’ art will emerge.”<sup>264</sup> Perhaps that is what Nirmala has been doing all this while: to reflect and ponder on the lives and fate of Malaysians, hence slowly distilling a matured identity that is truly Malaysian in due time. This suggests that constant portrayal of a country’s events, practices and its people, regardless of their state inevitably projects a semblance of national identity.

Further to this, Nirmala adds, “If you’re not painting about what is going on around you, how are you going to develop an identity?” thereby suggesting that creation of “Art for Society” will likely lead to the development of an identity.<sup>265</sup> This opinion, now lacking referencing to a “country”, seems to suggest the discernment of one’s general surrounding and wider social context as simply crucial to developing a form of identity or stance. Of particular interest would be a reading into how Nirmala’s portrayal of world events fuels a Malaysian identity.

Going by the aforementioned assertion for being aware of one’s surrounding environment extending beyond national boundaries, I argue that an international mindset demonstrated in her social comments makes for a well-informed and discerning Malaysian in tuned with worldly affairs to reflect the nation’s partaking of globalization.

At this juncture, it is worth noting that the discussion thus far has explored the nation-centered approach of Nirmala’s art making with regards to the discourse on national identity. The following section will discuss how and if, the notion of a nation can be overlooked to reveal the underlying essence of Nirmala’s struggle.

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<sup>264</sup> Rabindranath, "Malaysian Visions: Exploring Identity, Ethnicity and Gender in the Case of Three Contemporary Women Painters," 89.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

#### **7.4 Transcending the notion of a nation**

The previous three sections have clearly demonstrated the manner by which Nirmala's artworks engage with the discourse on national identity. Most if not all of the events and subject matter relate to that in Malaysia and its people. This discourse about national identity is even possible because the notion of a Malaysian nation is assumed, and Nirmala's actions seem to project national culture and its natural environment, all of which constitute the makeup of a modern nation.

What the aforementioned three sections have established is that the artworks could be read and interpreted from the perspective of a nation. The artistic efforts that go into upholding socio-economic justice exhibit Nirmala's valid concern and perhaps, even love, for a fair and better Malaysia. However, just by confining the discussion of her works as "Malaysian art" and of how they conform to a national framework, especially with regards to situating her works in light of the NCP's recommendations (a nation-owned initiative) is rather restrictive and problematic. While a semblance of national identity – albeit one that is rather unconventionally discomfiting in stark contrast to other mainstream non-provocative works – is evident in her works, visual analysis performed and interviews conducted with Nirmala does not seem to reveal her overwhelming nationalistic fervor and pride for Malaysia.

Instead, there appears to be a recurring and prevailing theme of passion for the human suffering seen in her body of artworks spanning the 1970s – 1990s. On this note, it could be argued that her rightfully nation-centered artworks also bear an inherently deep-seated ethos for a class-centered proclivity. From displaced squatter communities and war refugees in Asia to racial victims in South Africa and victims of war in the Middle East and Bosnia, Nirmala's artworks transcend national boundaries.

The overarching theme dealing with the dire experiences of quotidian people in modern society permeates Nirmala's entire oeuvre of artworks. This "class of people" under siege of difficulties remains as Nirmala's most prominent subject matter. The wide spread circulation of mass media facilitates this consciousness.

Tragedy, in all its various forms, does not discriminate geographically; it is a prevalent threat that affects everyone regardless of nation. On this account, the globalized representation of people as a subject matter suggests a body of work that surpasses national identity to embrace a larger notion of human identity that deals with compassion, life, peace and justice.

In short, this research has shown that the class-centered concerns and international elements make up the essence of Nirmala's struggle; a struggle to be the voice for the voiceless that goes beyond the call for national culture and unity as dictated by the NCP. Not only does Nirmala's works uphold national identity, they seek to deconstruct the notion of a "nation" by distilling the very essence of social, economic and political plague down to its coextensive qualities.

This transcendence is realised by the use of traditional culture such as *wayang kulit* and indigenous motifs. The use of such forms as somewhat belonging and being close to a people since time immemorial demonstrates an attempt to "speak their language" and identify with their cultural norms, so as though to create statements by the people and for the people.

In other words, Nirmala recognizes that traditional forms (e.g. *wayang kulit*) and its modalities (e.g. allegory, storytelling, intrigue) act as social binding agent to close up the ranks of people from all walks of life irrespective of nation. In this respect, Nirmala

considers herself very much as one of the general mass, hence her class-centered approach to art making.

As a result of this universality, Nirmala's artworks is easily understood by virtue of their explicit and implicit messages for being relevant and timeless. For instance, the *Membalak* series of works in the 1990s still stand in good stead to speak against illegal logging activities that still plague Sarawak today. Similarly, the issue of environmental destruction highlighted in the 1970s is even more impactful to present day discourse on global warming concerns. Clearly, illegal logging and pollution aren't phenomenon unique to Malaysia.

To explicate this further, take for instance the following works: *At the Kampung Shop* (1959), *The Last Fight – Hang Tuah & Hang Jebat* (1961), *Pertarungan* (1989), *Kelantanese Wayang Kulit* (1958), *Bumi Yang Bahagia* (1960) and *Penang Waterfront* (1958) (See Figure 8.10 – 8.15 respectively in Appendix). These works are arguably rather distinctively related to Malaysia. From the economic activity within architectural forms of an old Chinese shop lot in *At the Kampung Shop*, a traditional Malay martial art form seen in both *The Last Fight – Hang Tuah & Hang Jebat* and *Pertarungan* to the Kelantanese shadow puppet theatre of *Kelantanese Wayang Kulit* and landscape sceneries of *Bumi Yang Bahagia* and *Penang Waterfront*; they all offer a glimpse into various social, economic and political constructs that constitute national identity. In contrast, the issues portrayed by *Statement 1* on pollution, *Vietnam Refugees* on war victims, *Illegal Logging in Sarawak* on ecological destruction and *South Africa* on racism are class-centered concerns that transcend national boundaries.

On this note, I maintain that while Nirmala's artworks engender traces of national identity despite the discomfoting visuals as seen from a nation-centered lens, they have

also exceeded the notion of a nation by grappling with difficult issues that are largely central to the concerns of regular people as seen from a class-centered lens.

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## CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

Nirmala's social commentary artworks are filled with stark reality. To convey such grim intentions, Piyadasa in 1983, notes that she employs a distinctive "composite" effect infused with "bold and violent brush strokes" that weave through the repeated photos or silkscreened mass media visuals of appropriated text and images to create "powerful and disturbing" effects.<sup>266</sup> Having analysed Nirmala's works from the 1970s until 1990s, this research has added more depth and understanding to the aforementioned observation.

In view of the appropriation of media images and use of photography in Nirmala's artworks, the perception of "authenticity" isn't a valid concern due to the degree of uniqueness forged by a variety of methods. Firstly, the depiction of time and space specificity in some artworks by the inclusion of textual information provides context. Secondly, the use of traditional forms ritualizes the artworks to lend relevance to the preservation of specific cultures. Thirdly, the laborious effort and randomness of silk-screening engages with the materiality of the media to create micro-distinctive features of visual forms resulting in no two silkscreened images alike.

Together, these 3 reasons imbue Nirmala's artworks with an aura or even a form of *punctum* to create a "shared personal relationship" by which an audience is engaged in an awe-inspiring contemplation.<sup>267</sup> The discernment of *punctum* in her works correlates with the understanding of how audiences are drawn to a *wayang kulit* play to relate the various *lakons* with the specific moments in their lives, hence the shared personal

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<sup>266</sup> Piyadasa, "Nirmala Shanmughalingam," 158-59. Sabapathy, in a personal conversation with the researcher on 17 March 2017, has even questioned if this "painstaking layering of imagery" involving intricate techniques that constitutes the fabrication process, serves to define and reflect the painful content as well. In other words, it could be suggested that the complexity of the creation process through which the artworks undergo to completion depicts the sufferings of the people in the issues represented.

<sup>267</sup> Walter Benjamin speaks of the reception of art in present times to be increasingly distractive – where a viewer's mind is prevented from thinking by prevalence of modern cultural forms such as photographs and television – as opposed to being contemplative in traditional works of art like painting and sculptures.

relationship. In short, the extensiveness by which the raw ingredients of appropriated images have been changed warrants their eventual form to be deemed as a new “original”.<sup>268</sup>

A commanding composite effect in composition is primarily achieved with the static, dynamic and implied grid technique. These methods are raw and direct; just as how she deemed photography as being expedient to her cause<sup>269</sup> in capturing as real as possible an imprint of reality. The tightly structured juxtaposition of geometric and almost Cubist-like fragmented elements evokes an uncomfortable, congestive and unsettling feeling.<sup>270</sup> The use of repetition not only creates motion and narrative flow but also adds to a sense of intense drama and chaos.

By the early 1980s, the usage of grids in her practice evolved to that of an implied representation where the lines of the grid structure are intentionally blurred. The content of “boxes” are seen overflowing and overlapping with neighbouring ones, as though struggling to come alive in various organic forms. Together with well-placed negative spaces, an allusion to the “three-dimensionality” of a *wayang kulit* play can be suggested. The flickering dream-like quality of these biomorphic forms resembles that of shadow puppets dancing on screen. This energetic effect is further heightened by executions of gestural brush strokes in yielding masses of abstracted forms that seem to “glue” all the disparate segments on the canvas into place. The effect of three-dimensionality is also felt in the collaged surfaces and protrusions of dabs of abstracted paint in some paintings.

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<sup>268</sup> In a personal conversation with the researcher on 5 May 2016, Nirmala attributed *Monument* (1991) to Ismail Zain. She also noted of Van Gogh in taking after Millet. She opined that there’s nothing wrong in appropriating the forms of other artists as long as one renders due credit and change them enough to be distinctively different from the original.

<sup>269</sup> Piyadasa, "Nirmala Shanmughalingam," 157.

<sup>270</sup> Nirmala has indicated to this researcher on 1 July 2016 that provoking discomfort serves to remind people of the resulting tragedies so that people can remember not to repeat the same mistakes again.

The use of grids in various scales has remained largely evident throughout three decades. They often exist alongside execution of robust and hard-edged delineation of lines or rectangular strips to frame the picture. Such geometric representations evolved into Nirmala's signature triangular motif seen in the *Great Leap Forward* series. These largely symmetrical compositional styles are consistently presented with muted and monochromatic colors. Piyadasa notes that such use of colors "only reiterates the cold reality of such painful situations."<sup>271</sup> Coincidentally, the earthy colors used along with the relevant techniques seem to be agreeable with the depiction of traditional forms.

It has also been demonstrated how Nirmala's *Statement*, *Kampung Polo* and *Children of Asia* series could be indirectly read through the *wayang kulit* convention,<sup>272</sup> before a fully matured explicit representation of *wayang* forms are seen beginning the mid 1980s. Nirmala's use of allegory, parody and humour in these explicit *wayang*-inspired artworks, together with the storytelling means with which she layered the interpretations of the implicit *wayang*-inspired works demonstrate her *dalang*-like abilities to inspire and intrigue. Nirmala is indeed a visual storyteller like a *dalang* who imbues her artworks with rich expression ranging from joy, innocence, fear, lost, uncertain, humour and death.

Nirmala also has a tendency to merge Hindu cosmic worldview and its folklore with the *wayang kulit* forms and traditional indigenous motifs or subject matter in her artistic practice. By doing so, the works have rich and varied dimensions through which they can be interpreted.<sup>273</sup> Perhaps, Nirmala was paying tribute to her ethnic roots and

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<sup>271</sup> Piyadasa, "Nirmala Shanmughalingam," 159.

<sup>272</sup> For example, some images of children and Ogres from previous series are reused in subsequent series. This is similar to *wayang* characters reappearing in subsequent *lakons*.

<sup>273</sup> The various possible interpretations and inquiries resulting from the decoding of iconography represent one of the most significant findings of this research. A large number of these artworks have never been subjected to rigorous visual analysis, which is what this research has achieved. Further to that, most of the artworks discussed here are in private or gallery collections that have not been exposed to academic research. By looking at a period of three decades worth of selected artworks, this research has

rendering recognition to Malaya's cultured and shared indigenous past, a time long before modern Malaysia was born. As Kerlogue puts it: "It is the characters and stories of the Hindu epics, however, that represent the most powerful unifying force in Southeast Asian art."<sup>274</sup> More interestingly, the surface of the canvas paintings – regardless of their singular or co-existent representation of *wayang* or indigenous subject matter – can be seen as the *kelir* stage screen upon which "shadows" are projected. For instance, the highly stylized human forms of the *Bakun* series resemble puppet-like figures.

The portrayal of local, regional and international issues in Nirmala's artworks represents a suggestive desire for an inclusive existence in an increasingly globalized world. The nation is very much defined by its international relations and diplomatic policies with other countries. Such expansive regional visions exceeded "earlier more parochial nationalism of the region" in view of the formation of ASEAN thus allowing for a "new rediscovery of shared regional commonalities and identities."<sup>275</sup>

By immortalizing world events and the country's history in the artworks, Nirmala is essentially capturing the essence of Malaysia's evolution as a young nation; similar to maintaining a visual diary. Not unlike museum artefacts or ceramic objects that bear traces of worldwide trade in their life's journey, Sabapathy maintains that archaeological objects "inform a nation's growth and journey."<sup>276</sup>

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successfully string together a consistent pattern of meaning development and consumption that possibly alludes to Nirmala's psyche as a socially-conscious artist. Sabapathy, in a personal conversation with the researcher on 17 March 2017 has remarked of scholarship's role to "enliven inert art objects to add to its interpretation. This will inevitably make our relation with the world, self and region intelligible as description forges connection between things."

<sup>274</sup> Kerlogue, *Arts of Southeast Asia*, 93.

<sup>275</sup> Piyadasa, *Rupa Malaysia: A Decade of Art 1987 - 1997*, 39.

<sup>276</sup> An insight noted via personal conversation with T.K. Sabapathy during his visit to University Malaya's Museum of Asian Art on 17 March 2017 to host a seminar on the "History and Role of Museums Within an Education Institution" organized by Dr. Simon Soon.

She documents a slice of time in hopes of offering a portal through which one can make sense of the present by revisiting the past and explore the multiple possible inquiries into difficult socio-economic issues as the country progresses. In short, it appears her artworks are a counter-narrative statement in response to the nation's NEP, which ran in tandem to her most artistically prolific years of the 1970s to 1990s.

While she may not have consciously conformed to the recommendations of the NCP privileging the Malay and indigenous traditions as officially endorsed national cultural tenets, Nirmala's social commentary artworks are "socially conscious art" as though nodding in agreement with Professor Ungku Aziz's call for "Arts for Society". They speak for the people, and act as – in the words of Ezra Pound, the American poet and critic – "an antennae of the race".<sup>277</sup> Nirmala's artworks function as instructive art to right the wrongs of society. Wong notes of Nirmala's observation that such moralistic and "divine" purpose of art is being no different than that of a rallying-cry of the "propaganda" machine of Buddhist or Church art.<sup>278</sup>

It appears Nirmala's borrowing of the traditional forms may have been primarily driven by the very nature of the subject matter she was inclined to champion, not because she wanted to assert her personal identity or express as a preferred artistic device. For instance, by virtue of the sensitive issues, she has to resort to encoding her works in allegory, which is highly characterized of the *wayang kulit* play. The highly refined aesthetics, nuances, intrigue and humour associated with *wayang* fitted well with Nirmala's attempt to satirize and emasculate perpetrators. Similarly, there are no more suitable ways than to directly depict the indigenous people, their lives and cultural

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<sup>277</sup> Ali, *The Malaysianess of Malaysian Art: The Question of Identity*.

<sup>278</sup> Wong Hoy Cheong, "Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator - a Review," in *Let the bamboo grow in your heart: A conversation with Nirmala*, ed. Valentine Willie Fine Art (Kuala Lumpur: Valentine Willie Fine Art, 1998), 1.

tradition on the canvas surface; all of which suffer the fate of potential erasure. Hence, the need to make tangible their forms as a gesture of preservation is only logical. After all, “cultural uniqueness of the nation” contributes to national unity and harmony.<sup>279</sup>

Nirmala’s artworks yield similar role as the *wayang*-inspired *Kayon* puppet used to depict the start or ending of a scene. As an intermission device, it provokes one to question the continuity of an event depicted; perhaps signifying a transition from evil to good, or vice versa. This suspended duality puts viewers in an anticipatory stance as if bracing themselves for whatever there is to come. Essentially, the works are frozen in time; being timeless and relevant even till present day where meaning is constantly constructed and reconstructed.

Nirmala’s hinting at an ongoing transition of events speaks of her desire for change. Framing this thought within McLuhan’s declaration that “the medium is the message” provides an understanding between a given object and its resulting effect. McLuhan establishes that the “message” refers to the “change of scale or pace or pattern” that a medium or technology “introduce[s] into human affairs” to engender “psychic and social consequences.”<sup>280</sup> By the same token, Nirmala’s paintings can be deemed a form of artistic tool or agent of change (medium) that carry with them the potential to modify perceptions (message).

The visibility of mother and child as a prevalent theme that seems to consistently permeate Nirmala’s works suggests the importance placed on this important element of family unit that can be deemed as constituting the very basic setup of a nation. As a

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<sup>279</sup> Kallang, "Sarawak's State Level Conference against Mega-Dams," 2.

<sup>280</sup> McLuhan, *Mcluhan: Understanding Media*, 8.

symbol of “the regenerative force of life,”<sup>281</sup> Nirmala portrays mothers as a safe refuge for posterity. The emphasis on the young generation alludes to a pressing need to preserve and nurture the future leaders of a nation.

On this note, Nirmala’s artworks bear the aspirations of a better Malaysia for everyone. Their balanced representation of subject matter involving a wide range of races and issues pertinent to the social, economic and political dynamics of a nation demonstrates the indisputable semblance of national identity in Nirmala’s artworks. More importantly, they reflect the fate and sentiments of the Malaysian people.

While this seems to cater to a nation-centered discourse of Nirmala’s artworks, at this juncture, it is important to note of the prominence of Nirmala’s class-centered approach which seeks to surpass the notion of a nation by virtue of the representation of different nationalities across the world and their subject matter. In short, Nirmala is not just necessarily a Malaysian artist exuding a Malaysian identity in her own respect; she is a global artist attuned to portraying issues close to the hearts of people regardless of race, creed and nationality.

This surpassing of the notion of nation can best be supported by three observations. Firstly and generally, there’s nothing distinctively “Malaysian” in her artworks, at least when all contextual information is stripped. The subject matter portrayed is not unique to Malaysia.<sup>282</sup> The concerns in her artworks extend well beyond the nation as they involve its people.

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<sup>281</sup> Li, "Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator - a Review," 11.

<sup>282</sup> In the absence of expressed or background information attributed to the artwork, no one would be aware that the events or activities portrayed pertain to Malaysia as a nation, thereby rendering a more universal appreciation for its content. For instance, looking at the *Kampung Polo* series of artworks, one would be able to relate to the homeless people or slums as a common phenomenon in any countries. However, when it is made known that Kampung Polo is a place in Malaysia, the artworks distinctively assume a Malaysian identity, and thus making the artwork unique to Malaysia in accordance to the given details.

Secondly, she does not eschew the attempted portrayal of national identity in her artworks. Neither is she espousing the attempted reflection of nationalistic pride in her artistic expression. This perceived ambivalence is deemed as her unconscious conversation with national identity because eventually, her engagement of underlying social issues naturally drives her artistic creation. To use a culinary analogy, she has chosen a universal ingredient (social, economic and political issues plaguing the people) to cook a meal, the garnishing of which symbolize the perceived visual presentation of the dish (nationalistic outlook).

Thirdly, there's been a dearth of writing attempting to discuss Nirmala's works in the context of a "nation" especially with regards to the recommendations of the NCP. Perhaps, the subject matter portrayed makes this a difficult task. I would reckon why would there even be a need to create a "national culture"? By doing so, especially when it involves the prescribed privileging of racial tradition, certain quarters of society would definitely be left out.

In contrast, Nirmala's focusing on the issues faced by the people appears to be a more inclusive overture. On this account, Nirmala's class-centered view is an all-encompassing approach to unite common goals, desires and needs instead of relying on a nation-owned initiative. This differentiation places her apart from most of her peers at least in the 1970s and 1980s.

Set against these three observations and their resulting discussion, I conclude that Nirmala's class-centered use of cross-cultural traditional forms such as the *wayang kulit* and indigenous motifs is aptly suited to engage people at the grass root level in a way that surpasses the confines of an "imagined" national discourse – consisting of governmental-prescribed solution – to achieve unity and shared identity among humanity. It appears that Nirmala may have been arguably the only – if not one of a few



– Malaysian artist utilizing traditional forms (specifically the *wayang kulit* and indigenous motifs and themes) to advance her social comment in highlighting the plight of the underprivileged and disadvantaged at least in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>283</sup>

While Nirmala's use of traditional forms may be conveniently construed as an assertion of the Malaysian identity in heeding the NCP's stipulation,<sup>284</sup> she is not necessarily jumping on the bandwagon of romanticizing nationhood. I maintain that the notion of national identity she thrusts is largely driven by the people's welfare and the environment's condition more than the mere borrowings of tradition. In other words, her use of tradition is by virtue of its immediacy as a – in McLuhan's maxim; medium – being the message to effect social change. On this ground, the use of tradition as by the people and for the people superseded national pride.

Essentially, tradition belongs to the people. Tradition normalizes perceived national boundaries and carries attention straight into the heart of the guardians and practitioners: the people. After all, there will be no nation without its people.

More importantly, Nirmala has used traditional forms to bridge the Barthesian synthesis between *studium* (appropriated mass media imagery and photographs of descriptive elements) and *punctum* (personal attachment to wounding elements of conscience-piquing and arresting details) to go beyond the call for national identity.

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<sup>283</sup> Moving beyond the 1980s, it remains to be seen the extent by which Nirmala may have subsequently directly or indirectly influenced other Malaysian artists in their creative practice of portraying social commentary messaging by way of representing tradition in the 1990s. It is worth noting the proliferation of tradition-infused social commentary artworks by other Malaysian artists in the 1990s, as evidenced by the likes of Bayu Utomo Radjikin's *Bujang Berani* (1991), Tengku Sabri Tengku Ibrahim's *Pandir Daik* (1991), Kelvin Chap Kok Leong's *Belawing, Keramen, Mamat* (1995), Kung Yu Liew's *Perayaan Cheng Beng, Kedah, 1996* (1996) and Jegadeva Anurendra's *Looking Forward* (1997). These artists' involvement with traditional forms could very well be due to a compelling need to assert their identity especially in view of a rapidly modernizing Malaysia in the 1990s that led to environmental destruction and dislocation of certain segment of society.

<sup>284</sup> Shariff, "Towards an Alter-Native Vision: The Idea of Malaysian Art since 1980," 88.

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