

Racial Rift and the Rhetoric of Civic Nationalistic Ethos in Lee Kuan Yew's Memoir

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Abstract

Singapore's former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's From Third World to the First: The Singapore Story 1965-2000, an internationally acclaimed political memoir, accounts his nation building narrative as he asserts that he had never seen a how-to-book for building a nation. This paper examines the way he narrates the story of managing the severe racial strife in Singapore during the initial phases of the nation being fermented in the 1960s and 70s. He recounts the rhetoric of evoking the civic ethos in bolstering the civic nationalism and managing rooms for the multiple racial communities through the nation building discourse. Yew's remarkable struggle to settle the racial rifts has been one of the dominant contents of his narration that reveals the sense of the exigencies of telling the story of the racial rift and its ultimate resolution by and large in giving shape to a harmonious multicultural nation of his dream. Taking the theory of civic nationalism evolved as early as from Rousseau's The Social Contract (1762) to Hans Kohn's notion of civic nationalism as the theoretical reference, the paper concludes that, by way of a broader nation building discourse, showcasing his conviction on civic nationalism, Yew's narrative evokes the civic national ethos as a therapeutic remedy to heal the racial trauma as Singapore was taking the shape of a nation state.

Keywords: Civic nationalism, multiculturalism, nation building, racial rift

Introduction

As Singapore's first elected prime minister Yew took office at the age of 35 in 1959, when Singapore was a part of Malaya with the vast majority of Chinese followed by Malaya, Indian and other ethnic groups. As per the Singapore Department of Statistic, there were 77 percent Chinese, 14.8 percent Malaya, 7 percent Indians and remaining others back in 1970. Singapore was united with Malaya in 1963 with an assumption that the future of Singapore doubtlessly lies in the union. However, Lee and his People's Action Party (PAP) were disillusioned from the assumption when Singapore bore a historical trauma caused by Malay-Chinese race riots within a year after the unification in July 1964. The next year, they seceded from the union pertaining to the historical race riots and the communal violence. An engaging story of this racial rift and his herculean task of building a nation,

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out of the initial state of a racial commotion forms one of the significant parts of Yew's life narrative which recounts that the rift was resolved ensuring the racial harmony as one of the essential dimensions in building a modern Singapore.

This paper examines Yew's narrative accounts to trace how he builds his statesmanship in proving to be successful in promoting racial and communal harmony as the racial conflict was the core reason behind the secession from Malaya and the internal social unrest. More particularly, the paper seeks answers to what worked as the remedy for the cure of the racial unrest. The researcher argues that Yew's act of evoking the civic national ethos furnishes his key leadership intervention in social engineering of modern Singapore that ultimately leads to the solution of the problem. In recounting the personal experiences, the aim of this paper is to reveal how a tactful leadership like Yew's could generate a narrative discourse in handling the sensitive issue of racial conflict that could be a lesson for the conflict of similar nature, in the similar context in the world.

After a brief literature review, the first part of the paper opens with the conceptual basis of civic nationalism developed primarily as the Western socio-political discourse originating from the romantic tradition of Rousseau that advocates secularism, liberalism, rule of law and representative democracy, with the key emphasis on Kohn's version of civic nationalism. The second part demonstrates how Yew's narrative advocates the tenets of civic virtues in resolving the social rift managing room for the cultural representation of the Chinese, Malaya, Indian and others in building the modern Singapore.

According to Philip Holden Yew's nationhood is based on the foundation of exclusively "masculine subjectivity" (411). Reading from the gendered perspective, Holden claims that Yew's memoirs provoke a sense of national ethos based on the unique form of Asian masculine subject. However, Lawrence J. Lau declares Yew as Singapore's founding father who single-handedly created "a nation and a people with shared values, with a harmonious multicultural, multiracial and multi-religious society" (2). Similarly, Regina Hong Cheng Yee in her observation of state's response to Yew's mourning immediately after his death writes that rituals like Lee's funeral are not merely symbolic but strong enough to build the historical discourses and historical truth for that matter. She argues that as he was "regarded as Singapore's founding father long before his death" (117) his state funeral made him "an actual ancestor through the forms of memorialization accorded to him" (117). Moreover, analyzing Yew's memoirs Hong Lysa argues, "Singapore is a brand name for a meritocratic, multicultural, cohesive and prosperous social formation" (550). As per her view Singapore was founded on the capabilities of auditioned talents that Yew aims to highlight in his memoirs.

However, Stephen McCarthy makes a sharp critique of Lee's interventions in building Singapore as a nation state. He criticizes Lee on the theoretical ground of Aristotle's *Politics* and on the basis of his rhetoric as well. McCarthy uses the term "survival rhetoric"

that Lee and his People's Action Party (PAP) in general employ to sustain what McCarthy terms as "benevolent despotism" or tyranny. McCarthy claims, "Lee has consistently claimed that Singapore could not survive unless all the major ethnic groups – the Chinese, Malays, and Indians – thought of themselves as Singaporeans. Forcing them to live together was, for Lee, a policy of survival" (71). In provoking the premonition of the external threat, Yew was successful to impose a bond among Chinese, Malaya and Indian for the sake of solidarity and national defense.

The critics mentioned hereof are primarily concerned with Yew's nation building narrative examined from gender perspective, shared value perspective and from the perspective of soft dictatorship but not explicitly based on the notion of civic nationalism. Unlike McCarthy's examination, the researcher argues that Yew brings Chinese, Malaya and Indian together not in the name of tyranny but on the ground of civic national ethos based on liberal values and secularism managing rooms for the races. This observation is primarily based on the library research and textual analysis limited to the issue of racial and cultural representation based on Yew's narrative discourse set by his personal stories and anecdotes accounted in his memoirs. Moreover, the notion of civic nationalism has been the key theoretical reference for the analysis.

Civic National Ethos

Civic nationalism is a concept in which the basis of the common feeling to imagine a nation (Benedict Anderson 6) is not drawn from the origin of birth, ethnicity, race, language or religion but from the liberal principles of liberty, constitutionalism, secularism and "an active participation of [the] citizens, as free members of a democratic polity" (Tharoor 31). This concept has been originated from the political philosophies of Locke and Rousseau. Particularly, Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762) articulates the idea of the civic character that constitute the civic national ethos of a nation state.

The civic character takes its birth from what Rousseau calls "general will" (Dunn 10). Actually, the general will is a collective will of the people of a polity devoid of any prejudices like origin, ethnicity, language or religion. The 'general will' is completely based on the common interests and common good. Rousseau, however, relates it with the sovereignty. The sovereignty is the sum of the general will. The general will forms the foundation of this sovereignty which is absolutely based on the idea of self-governing. The self-governing means abiding by the rules established by the 'general will' or the common good for all. It is like Ernest Renan's "present consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form" (261). General will is the collective consensus to live together under the rules made through the collective consensus. This is a social contract to live together under the rules that ensure common good for all. This is therefore the foundation of representative democracy and rule of law. Though there are multiple varieties of nationalism, this furnishes the foundation of the civic nationalism.

Though there are robust debates on several characters of nationalism, Sashi Tharoor mentions at least nine border varieties: ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, territorial, radical or revolutionary, anti-colonial or liberal, diaspora and civic nationalism (21). The most border categories are however ethnic versus civic nationalism. The key debate surrounding the nuances between the ethnic and the civic nationalism has been watershed in its significance in Hans Kohn's *The Idea of Nationalism* (1944) than in any other writers'. Kohn draws a distinct boundary between ethnic and civic nationalism categorizing ethnic roughly into the eastern and the civic into the western form of political philosophy. Critics go as far as to categorize ethnic as 'bad' and civic as 'good' nationalism since ethnic is perceived as parochial and narrow while civic as liberal and all encompassing (Tharoor 79-80).

Tharoor brings the reference of Kohn "who distinguished between 'good' and 'evil' nationalism" (79) associating the 'good' with the civic and 'evil' with the ethnic. The essential spirit of the civic nationalism according to Kohn is rooted in the spirit of French Revolution. French Revolution opened the way forward for the end of the rule of one or other form of dictators not only in Europe but worldwide with its global reverberations in the subsequent centuries. Kohn defines nationalism as "a state of mind, an act of consciousness, which since the French Revolution has become more and more common to mankind" (58). This consciousness is expressed in the form of 'supreme loyalty' toward the common group consciousness (59).

The supreme loyalty is closely related with what Kohn call "corporate will". According to Kohn the most essential factor necessary for the formation of the nation is "a living and active corporate will" (62). This 'corporate will' has a direct connection with Rousseau's 'general will'. Kohn's idea of civic nationalism is largely inspired by Rousseau and The French Revolution. The civic nationalism is therefore based on this corporate will. Differentiating the two kinds of nationalism Kohn writes, "one [is] based upon liberal middle-class concepts and pointing to a consummation in a democratic world society" (444) implying to civic and "the other based upon irrational and pre-enlightened concepts and tending towards exclusiveness which were to supply the ideological background of the great conflicts of the contemporary world" (444), implying to the ethnic. Further distinguishing between the two forms of nationalisms, Kohn writes:

The one was basically a rational and universal concept of political liberty and the rights of man, looking towards the city of the future. In it the secularized Stoic-Christian tradition lived on: in England, in its Protestant form; in France, in its Catholic form. It found its chief support in the political and economic strength of the educated middle classes and, with a shift of emphasis, in the social-democratically organized labor movements. The other was basically founded on history, on monuments and graveyards, even harking back to the mysteries of ancient times and of tribal solidarity. It stressed the past, the diversity and self-sufficiency of nations. It found its support, above all, among the aristocracy and the masses. (547)

The notion of civic nationalism was grounded in the rational and universal concept of civil liberty and growth however the ethnic notion of nationalism is regressive that harks back to what Kohn calls graveyards and monuments. Remarkable distinction is on the different classes of mass support that owes to the two types of nationalism. The educated middle class owes to the civic nationalism; however, the ethnic nationalism finds its support from the aristocracy. Civic nationalism looks forward to the future, towards the modern cityscapes. Tribes, clan and ethnicity are parochial which is limited to indigenous spaces whereas the middle-class migrant masses find their place in the modern cosmopolitan spaces i.e., the city. Now what follows is the discussion of how Yew's memoirs evoke a civic form of national ethos in Singapore in managing the racial strife, stepping upon the ground of civic nationalism that provides room for the people of all races in the modern cityscape of Singapore.

From the Racial Rifts to a Cosmopolitan Singapore

This section reveals how Yew's rhetoric deals with the nation's shift from the racial conflict to cosmopolitan Singapore therefore, one of the remarkable issues, among others, that Yew narrates in building Singapore into a nation, is the racial issue. He narrates it as a big bone of contention and a hot cake during the nation's formative years. The only reason for the secession with Malaya is the race riot. He claims that the exigency of building an independent, multiracial and prosperous nation was intensified by the inherent racial division that had worsen the social and political milieu of the contemporary Singapore. He insists in the preface of the memoir that, "The traumatic experience of race riots also made my colleagues and me even more determine to build a multiracial society that would give equality to all citizens, regardless of race, language, or religion" (xiv). This remark is to imply how he was sternly committed to the civic national ethos for the establishment of racially neutral society that could propel Singapore to the harmonious future.

The significant step towards the establishment of just and harmonious society was his fight against Malaya Ultras who resisted for the establishment of Malay dominated Singapore. Yew is assured of his policy as he claims, "Although divided into several races, I believe a fair and even-handed policy would get them to live peacefully together" (8) as this policy is none other than the policy of civic nationalism. Next, he and his colleagues were careful enough to build a national army; Singapore Armed Force (SAF) devoid of any racial indictment. This was done by the proportionate recruitment from the races of all kinds like reducing the numbers of Malaya soldiers "mainly by recruiting more non-Malays" (23). Yew deliberately renders civic character to the national army as it was not balanced from the racial perspective due to Malay domination as preset by the old British system (16).

Yew narrates this as the hypersensitive factor as Singapore is a multiracial society in an essence. In this backdrop, the birth of Singapore Armed Force (SAF) based on a

balance but inclusive recruiting policy was essential to ensure its multiracial character symbolizing the nation at large. As Tharoor asserts, “Key to civic nationalism is the celebration of diversity, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and political” (130). With an aim to professionalize the national army, Yew brings forth a plan to find the most talented youths among the recruits and to send for the attractive but conditional scholarship in the best university in the world like Harvard, Oxbridge or Stanford. This had a tremendous chain effect in professionalizing the army in a civic line.

Moreover, in dismantling the misconception about serving in army, esp. in Chinese community, Yew’s government forwarded the concept of national cadet corps in “all secondary schools so that parents would identify the army and police with their sons and daughters” (18). Equally important is his memory of the first National Day celebration parade in 1966. People’s Defense Force (PDF), “under the leadership of a motley collection of civil servants, members of parliament (MPs), and ministers” (18) was deployed to officially display the national unity among the diversity. He narrates how “community leaders representing all races took part in the parade ... [including] Chinese, Indian, Malay, and British business leaders” (18). In this sense PDF functioned as what Tharoor calls “connective tissue allowing diverse communities to thrive” (131) in a civic national ground. Yew deals this as a prestigious issue in demonstrating Malay, who Singaporeans are, and claims that it was impactful in boosting the people’s morale high at home and leaving a remarkable impression upon Malay in showcasing them how spirited Singaporean are in their mission at large.

Similarly, Yew’s narration on the national service campaigning is rhetorically powerful in evoking the civic sense of national ethos in incorporating diverse range of people in the nation building venture. He accounts:

National service has had a profound impact on Singapore society over the last 30 years. It has become a rite of passage for our young men and a part of our way of life that has helped to unify our people. They learn to live and work closely with each other, regardless of race, language, or religion. Food taboos of Muslims and Hindus are respected, as are all religious rites, from Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh to Christian and Zoroastrian. (27)

He presents this policy as one of the key interventions upon the public in bringing them together to form the civic spheres placing everyone’s stake towards the national community and promoting a sense of belongingness towards the nation. In narrating this, Yew’s rhetoric is to showcase how his robust policy in forming such a mechanism has been instrumental in cementing the racial divide and giving shape to a multiracial and harmonious society. He writes that SAF has been made responsible to train and deploy “school principals, teachers, parents, employers, and community leaders” (27) under the concept of civil defense called ‘Total Defense’. Yew recounts this as a system, which according to Tharoor, creates “a

sense of mutual commitment among citizens to a common set of ideals, values, and rules” (129). Yew presents this as a strategic intervention in keeping public morale intact and high.

According to Rousseau, “every authentic act of the general will, binds or favors equally all the citizens; so that the sovereign recognizes only the body of the nation, and singles out none of those who compose it” (175). For Rousseau, the genuine act of sovereignty as an outcome of the social contract, is an act of a general will. From Rousseau’s perspective, Yew’s deliberate and crucial step towards mixing the ethos of the multiple races into a single civic national ethos to form a general will is inherent in the policy of national service in which the “SAF has to mobilize and involve the whole society in defense activities” (27). This demands the involvement of people from all walks of life like teachers, student, parents, community leaders etc. Yew’s insistence on this service has a tremendous impact in rendering mixed but harmonious society in bolstering the civic ethos.

Rousseau’s ‘general will’ is a cornerstone of democracy since it is “an agreement of the collective body with each of its members; a lawful agreement, because it has the social contract as its foundation; equitable, because it is common to all; useful, because it can have no other object than the general welfare; and stable, because it has the public force and the supreme power as a guarantee” (175). This is therefore a liberal and secular principle upon which the foundation of the modern democracy is laid. It rules out any form of superiority or inequality in the name of power, origin, ethnicity, religion or so but regards the rule of law made by the sovereign general will that forms the basis of the civic nationalism. On this very ground, Yew narrates how national service had been instrumental in furnishing a general will in which, people from a diverse racial communities work together (27). He narrativizes national service policy not merely to depict it as a means to mechanically engaging people together but as a profound act of evoking the national ethos in building a nation that ensures rooms to settle the uniqueness of the racial identities as well as maintains communal harmony.

Yew’s next public intervention in racially harmonizing the society involves creating semi-governmental public institutions. Examples of such institutions are People’s Associations (PAs), community centers, goodwill committees, Citizens’ Consultative Committees (CCCs) and residents’ committee (RCs) (122-23). These are the public units formed incorporating people from all sectors of a society, like senior citizens, activists, local leaders, “corporate members, many clan associations, chambers of commerce, recreational clubs, and arts, leisure, and social activity groups” (122). Yew’s such strategic public intervention is what Robert D. Putnam calls ‘civic engagement’ in which “associations and less formal networks ... instill in their members habits of cooperation and public-spiritedness, as well as the practical skills necessary to partake in public life” (367). The aim behind deploying such institutions is to ensure civic solidarity. The fundamental task assigned to them were engaging them in the productive works like running literacy class to sewing, cooking and repairing among others. Moreover, they are responsible to maintain

communal harmony preventing any sort of racial offences to occur. Yew brings this context to justify how he worked both ways, top down to bottom-up approaches in defining the common goals and fostering the civic ethos.

Regarding the formation of the general will, for example among such public institutions in Yew's case, Kohn claims that concept of nation or the supreme loyalty is not associated with the ethnicity. He opines that ethnicity existed since the time immemorial, the nation in the modern sense did not. He claims, "Nationalities are the product of the historical development of society. They are not identical with clans, tribes, or folk-groups bodies of men united by actual or supposed common descent or by a common habitat. Ethnographic groups like these existed throughout history, from earliest times on, yet they do not form nationalities" (60) since there exist the nations not founded on the ground of ethnicity. However, he agrees that it may be one of the several factors igniting the sense of nation but not the ultimate one.

As Kohn rules out the role of race and ethnicity in the formation of modern nation, Yew adopts the policy of interracial marriage. The interracial marriage promotion policy helped to intermingle the race and produce talented offspring than ever before in Singapore. He claims that it not only helped in enhancing the talent pool and fostering meritocracy but in creating a cosmopolitan society as he mentions, "quite a number of our men who were educated abroad have married Caucasian, Japanese and other Asian girls they met at university. Their children are valuable additions to our talent pool" (143). His aim behind such policy is to erase the rigorous racial boundaries and create a secular harmonious society rendering a cosmopolitan character. Similarly, Yew sounds proud of his talented cabinet crew which was multiracial in character as he narrates, "In my first cabinet of ten, I was the only one born and educated in Singapore. Keng Swee and Chin Chye were born in Malaya, Raja in Ceylon. Our present chief justice, Yong Pung How came from Malaysia..." (144). Yew's vision on cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism corresponds to what Edwin Lee writes Yew's People's Action Party's "strategic vision to create a global city of excellence" (660). This means, Yew represents himself as fairly aware that the parochial nature of racial consciousness leads to communal divide and it is regressive which is against his dream of future cosmopolitan Singapore.

The remarkable action that Yew took for the true representation of major racial blocks-Chinese, Malay and Indian is the 'many tongues and one language' (145) policy. This policy did not allow any language to dominate others but flourish equally. Yew managed ample spaces for the three languages Chinese (Mandarin), Malay and Tamil to flourish primarily in the schools where the respective students opting for the learning of their mother tongues and rendering them official. Moreover, the most remarkable policy Yew adopts is not valorizing any of these mother tongues to work as the dominant language so that the communal rift is prevented. For this, he adopted the policy of promoting English as the official language which is not the mother tongue of any of the races in the country.

As Anna Stolz confirms, “civic nationalists should be aiming for... [the policy] in which no language or culture is specially favored or privileged by the state” (292). Yew was successful to reinforce this policy despite the extreme pressure from the dominant Chinese community attempting to establish Chinese school, university and making it an official language in expense of other minority languages. However, as Stolz emphasizes for the common language that “helps to secure rights of economic opportunity and democratic participation” (291), Yew demonstrates his due regards to all the languages and cultures however he intrinsically promotes English as the common and functional language of day-to-day use.

Though Yew belongs to the Chinese descent, as he narrates, he and his wife Choo could not get opportunity to learn Chinese language during their formative years of schooling. He accepts that they realized the urgency of learning one’s own language and culture when they were pursuing their higher studies abroad. Later they decided to compensate this loss by educating their children in Chinese language and informal learning by themselves. Despite the fact that they are of Chinese descent and their children were taught in Chinese, he claims not to have imposed the language of his own descent as the lingua franca since Chinese was already demographically dominant. However, his insistence on discouraging monolingual policy over a decent multilingual and multicultural policy is to demonstrate his unwavering determination upon the civic ethos that he claims, have ushered Singapore to a modern civic nation state.

Conclusion

Yew’s narrative establishes that settling the hypersensitive issue of racial conflict during the prime time of nation building was a herculean task that Yew managed to undergo successfully. This paper concludes that Yew implicitly or explicitly advocates the principles of civic nationalism that accommodates rooms for all the races on the basis of equal rights to enjoy and be represented in the national life whether in national army, national service policy, interracial marriage and language or education policies. Yew’s statesmanship in managing the racial issue was built in evoking the sense of civic national ethos. There are still rooms in Yew’s narratives for the profound research on the several dimensions of statesmanship building like economic and diplomatic issue including several others. The significance of this research lies in building insights, through the critical analysis, on the ways how the sensitive agenda on race is addressed by the leaders in demonstrating the statesmanship like that of Yew.

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