



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

MODERN MALAY LITERARY CULTURE

A Historical Perspective

Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir

MODERN MALAY LITERARY CULTURE

A Historical Perspective

Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Research Notes and Discussions Paper No. 62
INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES
1987

Published by
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang
Singapore 0511

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

© 1987 Institute of Southeast Asian Studies

The responsibility for facts and opinions expressed in this publication rests exclusively with the author, and her interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or the policy of the Institute or its supporters.

Cataloguing in Publication Data

Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, Ungku

Modern Malay literary culture: A historical perspective

(Research notes and discussions paper / Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; no. 62)

I. Malay literature -- 20th century -- History and criticism.

I. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies

II. Title.

III. Series.

DS501 I596 no. 62 1987

ISBN 9971-988-52-6

ISSN 0219-8828

Printed in Singapore by General Printing & Publishing Services Pte Ltd

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
The Impact of the West: Education in Colonial Malaya	2
The Beginning of Modern Malay Literature	20
Literary Conventions in Pre-War Writing	25
Post-War Literature: ASAS 50	32
Conventions in Immediate Post-War Literature	43
The Literature of Independence	46
Conventions in Post-Independence Literature	53
Malay Literature in the 1970s	56
The 1970s: Literary Conventions	68
Conclusion	70

Introduction

An approach often adopted in the study of modern Malay literature is to separate literary texts from the environment which produces them. Literature is seen as discrete, whose understanding calls for scrutiny of its structural elements only such as theme, technique, rhythm and the like. Context, is often peripheral to the study of literature. This paper, however, contends that both aspects are important and attempts to integrate them in its survey of modern Malay literary culture. It traces the socio-political changes which the country underwent from the period of British colonialism to the present nation state, and sees this historical context as an extra-textual factor which influenced the literature produced. No less important as a formative force are the literary conventions which writers inherit, how they adopt and adapt their literary heritage in the process of evolving a literary mode for their own situation and also their own unique role as they, as writers, influence the literary environment in which they operate. The survey also highlights writers' response to their immediate social realities and how this shapes and colours their perceptions of their society. Couched in literary expression, these perceptions draw attention to the prejudices, in short, the value orientations

evident in modern Malay literary works. In discussing these factors, this study seeks to point out developments which take place as well as show continuity which persists in modern Malay literature.

The paper is organized into periods, not as an attempt at periodization of modern Malay literary history, but merely to facilitate understanding. However, the basic assumption remains that appreciation of specific historical and cultural bases is crucial for a clearer understanding of modern Malay literature on its own terms.

The Impact of the West: Education in Colonial Malaya

The various policies introduced into the Malay states by British colonial administration wrought a major transformation especially of the social and economic landscape of the Malay peninsula. In particular its education policy was to have far-reaching implications on the production of Malay literature and culture. This was especially true of the early years when secular education was introduced into the country. In order to appreciate the impact of British presence in general and their education policy in particular, it is necessary to have an understanding of the structure of Malay society prior to British colonialism.

Traditional Malay society exhibited a rigid division between the ruling élite (bangsawan) and its subjects (rakyat). This division was based on birth and was strengthened by belief and custom. It was believed, for example, that rulers were vested with divine majesty (daulat) and that any infringement (derhaka)

on this daulat would incur a tulah (retribution). This served to consolidate the rulers' position as one which admitted no challenge. Custom also helped to perpetuate the stratification by laying down as desirable and proper such conduct as absolute obedience and respect for elders and chiefs. The subject class was therefore obliged to serve their superiors without question. In this highly stratified society, control of virtually all aspects of life lay in the hands of the ruling élite.

This élite class in traditional Malay society was made up of two groups, the ascriptive and functional, which sometimes overlapped. The former were royal kinsmen who automatically belonged to the Malay upper-class by virtue of birth. The latter exercised administrative and political functions, and as such enjoyed the authority and power which attended their social role. Within this functional élite, the sultan constituted the supreme authority as the head of state, the largest territorial unit consisting of districts which, in turn, were composed of villages. As the head, he had rights to land under his jurisdiction and was empowered to collect revenue from his subjects, usually in the form of goods, tolls and taxes on trade and produce. He was assisted by a number of greater and lesser chiefs who were heads of districts. These chiefs in turn were assisted by several officials, the lowest being the penghulu (headman) who was in charge of a kampung (village), the smallest political unit. A penghulu served, by and large, as a mediator between the ruling and subject classes, and was responsible for maintaining order in his village, assisting revenue collection and organizing compulsory labour (kerah) for the ruling class. Within this system, mobility from the lower to the upper strata, while not altogether impossible, was rare. When British presence was first felt in the Malay states, in the mid-nineteenth century, social structure within those states had become

prescribed, and was resistant to change (Roff 1967; Kennedy 1962; Tilman 1964; Syed Husin Ali 1965, 1977).

British penetration of Malaya began with the foundation of Penang in 1786. In 1826, the British grouped Penang with Malacca and Singapore to form the Straits Settlements. In 1874, the British signed the Pangkor Treaty with the Sultan of Perak, and this saw the appointment of a British Resident to advise the Sultan on all matters of government except those which pertained to Malay religion and culture. The British recognized that political stability was necessary for the development and subsequent exploitation of the country's natural resources and wealth. As such, they saw as their principal purpose the creation and maintenance of law and order along the lines of Western-type governments. Alongside this aim, but of less importance, was the principle of responsibility for the "advancement" of the Malays, a policy which was to be achieved without destroying the traditional fabric of Malay life. This dual purpose, introducing innovations where necessary on the one hand, and preserving traditional Malay life on the other, was to characterize British occupation of the Malay states, especially Perak, Negri Sembilan, Pahang and Selangor which came to be known as the Federated Malay States in 1896.

In implementing their colonial policy, the British retained, and indeed, reinforced the demographic pattern prevalent in the country. Prior to the coming of the British, the bulk of the indigenous population, ethnically Malay, were engaged in semi-subsistence agricultural production of wet rice in the rural areas. Some were fishermen and petty traders, while a few lived in the towns, especially around the royal courts, and worked as petty bureaucrats and artisans. Initially, some Malays were engaged in tin-mining. However, when the Chinese entered this

field, the Malay's traditional method of panning for surface tin was soon rendered economically unviable beside the Chinese water-pump which was able to mine tin underground. Further improvements in methods of mining and cheap labour imported from China, accompanied by greater world demand for tin, led to greater expansion of the industry, a process accelerated by British economic infiltration which relied heavily on Chinese middlemen. By the middle of the nineteenth century tin-mining was a large scale enterprise virtually controlled by the Chinese and employing Chinese labourers. These mining areas soon developed into urban centres such as Taiping and Ipoh with an overwhelmingly Chinese population.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century rubber was introduced into Malaya. The Malays, however, were discouraged from entering this new field both by their rulers and the British, and laws to this effect were passed. Tamil labourers were thus imported from India to work the rubber estates, and rubber industry soon expanded, accelerated especially by the pre-war rubber boom. With the intensification of British capitalist infiltration, tin-mining and rubber industry became full-scale capitalist enterprises with their commercial centres in the urban areas. Meanwhile, the Malays remained in their semi-subsistence economy which was confined mainly to the rural areas.

The growth of urban centres and a settled population resulted in the development of educational institutions for the children of the urban dwellers. At first, and as had already occurred in the Straits Settlements during the 1830s, schools were established by Christian missionaries for the primary purpose of disseminating their religion. In setting up schools in the Malay states the London Missionary Society sought to

promote Christianity through education. Bryson, for example, observed that "the missionaries were there to preach the Gospel and seek converts to Christianity as a first duty; education was merely a means to that end" (Bryson 1970, p. 14). The association with Christianity of schools in general, and English-medium schools in particular, was not without its effect on the Muslim Malays. It engendered hostility and opposition to education and effectively alienated the Malays from the only "modern" education available to the general population. So strong was the opposition that even when mission schools offered secular education, Malay suspicion could not be allayed.

Alongside the mission schools, the British colonial government also started government-aided English schools. This came about in the need for English-educated low-level clerical and subordinate staff, both in the government service and the private sector. Such posts thus far had been filled by clerks and other functionaries expatriated from the Indian Civil Service and from Sri Lanka (Ceylon). With increased British involvement in the Malay states, the need for such staff became more acute, and it was considered economical to train local people to fill these subordinate posts. So between 1883 and 1885 a few government English schools were opened in Perak and Selangor. In opening these schools, however, the British were careful to do so sparingly and, more importantly, to confine them to the urban areas. It was clear that the British tended to tread carefully in the sphere of education, a caution reflected in the stern warning of the Resident-General, Frank Swettenham: "The one danger to be guarded against is an attempt to teach English indiscriminately" (cited in Loh 1975, p. 15). In view of the demographic pattern already referred to, the concentration of schools in urban areas meant that they were not available to the bulk of the indigenous population. In effect, it was mainly

members of the immigrant communities who were able to avail themselves of the modern education offered by these schools.

The passing of the Elementary Education Bill of 1870 in Britain, however, signified British adoption of the principle that the state was morally and legally entitled to provide education for its people, a principle which was also gaining ground in Europe. In line with these developments in Britain, the colonial administrators in late nineteenth century Malaya began to turn their attention to the question of an expanded state education system for the indigenous population. Significantly then, for the colonial administrators state education meant education for the Malays. Furthermore, in conformity with their policy of preservation and innovation, the British devised an education policy which would retain intact the class division and the demographic pattern existing in the country. This meant the provision of two quite separate and distinct education systems, one for the élite and another for the masses.

Where education for the masses was concerned, the British held fast to their policy of preserving the fabric of Malay traditional society and its peasant base. Introduction of education, especially English education for the masses, would be seen as a breach of this policy. Moreover, the British were anxious to avoid what had come to be seen as "Macaulay's 'singularly tactless and blundering championship' of the English education" which had resulted in the anglicization of India and, as the British saw it, the problem of over-education which it entailed (cited in Loh 1975, p. 15). Given their Indian experience, the British shrewdly adopted a policy of vernacular education for the Malay peasantry.¹ As R.H. Kenion, an unofficial member of the Federal Council remarked:

The great object of education is to train a man to make his living You can teach Malays so that they do not lose their skill and craft in fishing and jungle work. Teach them the dignity of manual labour so that they do not all become kranies (clerks) and I am sure you will not have the trouble which has arisen in India through over-education (cited in Roff 1967, p. 126).

The adoption of this principle meant that Malay vernacular education remained, at best, at a rudimentary level. Catering mainly for boys,² the schools provided a four-year primary education, and teaching was confined to the "three Rs". Alongside these subjects, school vegetable plots were used to provide elementary instruction in agriculture. Pupils were also taught habits of cleanliness, punctuality and obedience. Aside from its poor intellectual content, Malay vernacular education was to suffer from other handicaps, not the least of which was government neglect. Housed usually in makeshift premises, schools were badly equipped with instructional material, the only reading material available being Sejarah Melayu [The Malay Annals], Hikayat Hang Tuah [The story of Hang Tuah] and the daily Utusan Melayu. The dearth of reading material appalled Wilkinson, the Federal Inspector of Schools from 1903 to 1906, who arranged for Malay romances to be copied down. This move notwithstanding, shortage of reading material remained a critical problem. To augment the situation, teachers were ill-trained and were poorly paid. However, in spite of, or indeed, because of this poor standard, Frank Swettenham was satisfied with it, considering it "sufficient for the ordinary requirements of Malay boys, who will become bullock-wagon drivers, padi growers, fishermen, etc." (cited in Chai 1964, p. 249).

The British efforts to keep the Malay masses tied to the

fields were clearly successful. With their Malay education, they were effectively cut off from employment opportunities in the government, the professions and the commercial world, all of which made knowledge of English compulsory. Of the 2,900 boys who graduated from Malay schools in 1903, only one became a clerk.³ The efficacy of the education policy in minimizing the aspirations of the Malay masses was to occasion Birch, the Resident of Perak, to comment: "It is very satisfactory to know that this system does not over-educate the boys ... (who) almost all followed the avocations of their parents or relations, chiefly in agricultural pursuits" (cited in Roff 1967, p. 25).

If Malay vernacular education met with the approval of the British, clearly it did not satisfy the bulk of the Malay population who began to realize its limited scope and barriers. The fact that it wrought little economic benefit was thrown into greater relief by the economic prosperity enjoyed by the other ethnic groups. In the light of this reality, Malay demand for English education soon became vocal. In 1913, the Malay villagers in the Lenggong and Krian districts of Perak, asked for English schools to be established in their villages. R.O. Winstedt, then the District Officer of Matang, Perak, rejected the request. In 1916, the residents of Klang, Selangor, petitioned for an English class to be started in the Malay school in Klang. This petition was approved, and an English class was started in January, only to be closed in April of the same year. The reason for this sudden termination was given by David Bishop, the then Inspector of Schools for Selangor, as: "There was apparently some misunderstanding as to the nature of the experiment, it being regarded as an unauthorized innovation in educational policy" (cited in Loh 1975, p. 53). In 1919, another petition was forwarded, but it was similarly turned down. Despite these repeated failures, Malay demand for English

education increased and the British found themselves faced with voices of protest which could not be ignored.

The British were not unaware of the contradictions inherent in the Malay vernacular education. As early as the 1890s, W.H. Treacher, then the Resident of Selangor, pointed out the marginal prospect of government employment for graduates of Malay schools, a situation clearly inconsistent with a Malay state. Further, as Wilkinson made clear, Malay vernacular education had not produced a core of highly-educated Malays who could lead the mass of the population. Education such as deemed worthy for the Malay peasants clearly could not produce civil functionaries. In spite of this, the British remained unbending in their policy, determined not to over-educate the Malay peasantry. However, faced with growing protests, the British conceded that Malay vernacular education needed improvement. At the same time, they were determined not to alter the prevailing policy of keeping the masses tied to agricultural pursuits. To see to the "improvements", Winstedt, who was then an Assistant Director of Education (Malay), was charged with the responsibility of making recommendations for Malay vernacular education. Sent to Java and the Philippines in 1916 to study the situations there, Winstedt's recommendations were to have far-reaching implications on Malay education and modern Malay culture as a whole.

Winstedt's ideas were put into force in 1917, and showed an unswerving fidelity to the British policy of preservation of Malay traditional life. As the Federal Council Proceedings of 1920 indicated:

It is no real education that qualifies a pupil in reading, writing and arithmetic and leaves him with a distaste, or perhaps even a contempt, for the

honourable pursuits of husbandry and handicraft. It will not only be a disaster to, but a violation of the whole spirit and traditions of, the Malay race if the result of our vernacular education is to lure the whole of the youth from the kampung to the town (cited in Roff 1967, p. 138).

It was thus that Winstedt's proposals were to institutionalize the concept of "rural bias" in the education of the Malay population of the colony. Central to the scheme adopted by the colonial government was a teacher-training college whose graduates would return to the villages to influence the general well-being of the Malay peasantry.

This college, the Sultan Idris Training College (SITC), named after Sultan Idris Ibni Iskandar of Perak, was opened at Tanjung Malim in 1922, following the closing down of the existing teachers' training colleges in Matang and Malacca. It drew its students from the peasantry, mainly sons of fishermen and peasant farmers. Selected by an examination, students came from all over the country, and by the 1920s SITC was taking in about 120 students a year. The curriculum for its three-year course remained elementary and included arithmetic, drawing, Malay language, Malay literature, hygiene, geography and history. In addition, students were given two hours a week of Muslim religious instruction. In conformity with the rural bias laid down, handicraft, basketry, gardening, especially the latter, became essential features of the curriculum (Awang Had Salleh 1980, pp. 89-104).

Under O.T. Dussek, the first principal of the college, who was to remain in the position for seventeen years, SITC was to take on a distinct character. Dussek had a great love for the

Malay language and culture and saw in SITC a potential for an educational centre far bigger than that envisaged by Winstedt. Thus, while adhering to the rural and practical biases, he widened considerably the scope of the college's activities. In 1924, on his initiative, the Malay Translation Bureau was transferred from Kuala Lumpur to SITC. Both he and Za'aba, the principal translator, had envisaged the role of the bureau to be like that of the Netherlands Indies' Balai Pustaka. When the idea was mooted, however, Winstedt turned it down, reportedly refusing to be seen as "imitating" the Dutch. In spite of its several handicaps, between 1924-32 the bureau produced forty-eight textbooks in its Malay School Series. In 1929 it started the Malay Home Series which made available to the now literate peasantry classical Malay stories and translations of popular English literature such as Robinson Crusoe, Treasure Island and the like. In addition, the staff produced a fortnightly newspaper which featured their own literary writings and those of the able students. In concert with these efforts to foster indigenous language and culture, Dussek insisted that all teaching should be in Malay, and categorically forbade the teaching of English: "The Malay schools must be run for those Malays who will and must remain in the villages. They must have no connection and no point of contact with English; English and Vernacular make very poor bed-fellows" (Straits Times, 15 August 1935).

With this emphasis clearly marked out, Dussek strove and succeeded in instilling in his students a sense of responsibility towards their language, literature and culture. A common theme in his speeches to the college students was the need to preserve the dignity of one's religion, culture, language and literature in order to ensure the perpetuation of one's race. Thus, under his tutelage SITC emerged as a centre for literary activity.

Students and staff alike, almost all of whom were Malays except for the principal and his assistant, became involved in the literary and cultural life of the college. Debates, speeches, literary writings and cultural performances were some of the activities which the college diligently fostered. Of this aspect of college life, Dussek wrote: "every activity that is genuinely cultural and genuinely Malay has flourished in an astonishing manner" (cited in Roff 1967, p. 143).

Whilst SITC may symbolize a concrete effort to improve Malay vernacular education, and Dussek's own initiatives in widening the scope of the college curricula were commendable, it must be borne in mind that the position of Malay education in terms of employment opportunities remained very much the same. Students with Malay education went back to the fields or were employed as labourers and gardeners, whilst employment in the government and the professions remained completely sealed off from them. Graduates of SITC went back to their villages to teach in rural schools from whence they themselves originated. Winstedt's "vision" of a strong peasantry capable of providing continued supply of staple food and adept at making waste-paper baskets and trays, handicrafts whose marketable value he himself doubted, was to remain a decisive factor in the colonial education policy for the Malay peasantry.

If the education policy for the masses tied them to their land and the villages, that for the élite was decidedly different. British penetration of the Malay states had always followed the logic of recognizing the ruling position of the traditional élite. Alliances concluded with them ensured their co-operation and by extension that of the masses. This was especially true in the context of a society in which the élite provided leadership for a subservient mass. The prudence of such