

The Impact of Education on Society in the Novel *Ahad* by Zakaria Salleh

Halis Azhan Mohd Hanafiah, PhD

Department of Language and Humanities Education, Faculty of Educational Studies,
Universiti Putra Malaysia
Email: halis_azhan@upm.edu.my

Muhammad Alif Redzuan Abdullah, PhD

Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication,
Universiti Putra Malaysia
Email: muhammadalif@upm.edu.my

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Abstract

This study was conducted with the aim of discussing the impact of education on society in the novel *Ahad* (1959) by Zakaria Salleh. The novel revolves around the lives of three identical twins named Amin, Hasan, and Dahalan during the time before, during, and after World War II. As educated characters, these three brothers play an important role in assisting their respective communities. The study outlines three objectives to be achieved. First, to identify the educational streams followed by the protagonists in the novel *Ahad* by Zakaria Salleh. Second, to describe the role of the protagonists in their respective communities in the novel *Ahad* by Zakaria Salleh. Third, to synthesize the relationship between education and the effectiveness of the protagonists' roles in their respective communities in the novel *Ahad* by Zakaria Salleh. This study utilizes the Sociology of Literature Theory proposed by Hippolyte Taine to achieve these three objectives. The findings of the study reveal that while in school, the character Amin received an English education, the character Hasan received a Malay education, and the character Dahalan received a religious education in a traditional religious school. The education received by the three of them enabled them to serve their communities in different fields, with Amin becoming a police officer, Hasan a modern farmer, and Dahalan a soldier/principal of a modern religious school. The study also found that with the education they received, the twin characters Amin, Hasan, and Dahalan were able to excel in their chosen professions and establish themselves as respected figures in their respective communities. The findings of this study suggest that the novel's portrayal aligns with the

aspirations of the government and society in the 1950s, which sought to make education a tool for progress.

Keywords: Novel, Society, Education, Children, Adolescents.

Introduction

The 1950s witnessed a series of significant events in Malaysia's history. Among these, the most historic event for all Malaysians is usually marked by the proclamation and declaration of the country's independence on August 31, 1957. However, it is important to clarify that before this date, movements demanding and preparing for independence were already actively underway. One of the key movements at that time was the reform in the field of education. This area became a focus due to the implementation of new syllabi in schools nationwide, which emphasized the comprehensive use of the Malay language, as outlined in the 1956 Razak Report. Simultaneously, in line with this call, the Writing Bureau operating at the Sultan Idris Training College in Tanjung Malim, Perak, organized two novel-writing competitions in 1951 and 1954, aimed at obtaining potential Malay-language fiction books to be used in schools. The first novel-writing competition featured *Chinchin Rahsia* (The Secret Ring) by Muhammad Hashim Amir Hamzah as the winner, while the second competition presented *Bahagia Sesudah Derita* (Happy Days After Suffering) by Mohamad Akhir Leman and *Ahad* by Zakaria Salleh as the first and second-place winners, respectively. According to Mas (1981) in his writing titled "Marilah Menciptakan Novel Melayu" (Let Us Create Malay Novels) (pp. 120 – 122), writing competitions can serve as a platform to advance the thoughts of the nation. He argued that through such competitions, writers could highlight the social, economic, and political conflicts occurring in society and propose rational solutions.

Initial observations revealed that the need for such works to be produced as reading material for school students was indeed a concern for members of society at that time, particularly among Malay teachers. These calls were, among others, raised by two educators who wrote in *Mujallah Guru*: Daud (1953), in her article titled "Bachaan Lemah Murid² Di-Sekolah Melayu" (Poor Reading Skills of Students in Malay Schools) (pp. 113 – 115), and a writer named Nan (1953) in his article titled "Buku² Karangan Tua di-Sekolah² Melayu" (Old Books in Malay Schools) (pp. 157 – 158). Both articles raised awareness among the community about the need to update literary materials in schools as they were outdated, stereotypical, and considered not to meet the students' needs. In other words, these literary materials also functioned as educational tools and had the potential to shape new social, economic, and political directions for society. This view aligns with Puteh's perspective (1957, pp. 217 – 218), another educator who wrote in *Mujallah Guru* about the education problems in Malaya during the 1950s. In his article titled "Malaya Merdeka Memerlukan Pendidikan Yang Sempurna" (Independent Malaya Needs Perfect Education), Puteh (1957) emphasized that the challenge of education at that time was to ensure that all students had equal opportunities to develop their potential and take on the responsibility of building the nation.

In conclusion, these calls highlighted the need for the acquisition and publication of literary materials to be used in schools. In this regard, this study discusses the impact of education on society in the novel *Ahad* by Zakaria Salleh. The selection of this novel as the subject of study is considered significant because its content is found to document social, economic, and

political issues involving the Malay community before, during, and after World War II—a period that coincided with the above-mentioned calls. Although *Ahad* is described by Siu (1975), as having a loose plot and moderate language, the novel is still considered suitable for schoolchildren, as he explains: “The language used in this novel is untidy and the plot is disorganized; but as a reading matter for school children, this book is better than some novels for adults at that time, because many of the latter were pornographic” (p. 38). In other words, the novel *Ahad* is considered to meet the needs of society members at that time (in the 1950s), most of whom had not yet understood that books had the potential to become important tools for intellectual development.

Scope of Discussion

This study was conducted with the aim of examining and discussing the impact of education on society as presented in the novel *Ahad* (1959), by Zakaria Salleh. In line with this objective, the study utilizes two methods: close reading and text analysis. The close reading method is used to explain the use of language and symbols in the literary work under study. In this context, the novel *Ahad* presents a story about the roles and involvement of three protagonist twin brothers who assist their respective communities before, during, and after World War II. The roles and involvement of these characters—Amin, Hasan, and Dahalan—are highlighted because they are depicted as having a good level of education and utilizing the knowledge they possess for their personal and societal advancement. Subsequently, the text analysis method is employed to further examine and explain the impact of education on society at that time. To explain these details, the study adopts the sociology of literature theory proposed by Hippolyte Taine.

Sociology of Literature Theory by Hippolyte Taine

The sociology of literature theory developed by Hippolyte Adolphe Taine emphasizes that a literary work is crafted based on the writer's awareness and meticulousness in addressing individual or societal issues within the context of a particular race, environment, and era. This theory is based on Taine's (1992, p. 609) notion that the elements raised in literary works are not merely products of the writer's imagination and creativity. Instead, literature is seen as recording the effects of historical events in human life. For Taine, a literary work that is relevant and significant as a social document is created with clear and mature thought. With this understanding, literature rich in information is considered capable of explaining important events that have either changed or reinforced the human life system. In other words, the information in literary works can be used to explain how subjects, systems, mechanisms, causes and effects, and the impact of significant events function in human life. For Taine, such information is valid and legitimate as a social document. Therefore, Taine links this understanding to the importance of understanding the aspects of race, environment, and era found in literary works. Taine (1992) explains this as: “Three different sources contribute to this elementary moral state – the race, the surroundings, and the epoch” (p. 609). Based on this explanation, the audience is seen as having the opportunity to explore past lives that are no longer visible in contemporary life.

Furthermore, the sociology of literature theory proposed by Taine clearly emphasizes the need for writers to investigate the aspects of race, environment, and era when creating

literary works. For Taine, although these aspects have different characteristics, all three must be utilized together to study and understand the lives of the society depicted in literature. In this context, the aspect of race refers to lineage or ancestry, which is characterized by customs and physical structure. Taine further explains that each individual within the context of "race" typically shares a language, ethos and beliefs, literature, philosophy, genealogy and bloodline, intellectual capacity, and adherence to origins, even when separated by time and geography. A race is also said to maintain its way of life, manners, culture, and customs, and is prepared to pass them down to subsequent generations. Therefore, Taine (1992, p. 610) believes that if the facts about a race are studied in depth, similarities will be found, even though there is a time gap separating one generation from another.

Next, the aspect of environment is considered significant in linking a literary work to the factors present in society. Referring to the environment, Taine believes that the human life system is not determined solely by weather or terrain. Instead, this system is also shaped by rules, laws, beliefs, and spiritual practices that systematically provide guidance and direction for human life (Taine, 1992, p. 615). Thus, it can be said that the aspect of the environment is an external force that compels humans to adhere to the life system that underpins their society.

Finally, Taine emphasizes that the aspect of time governs the operation of the aspects of race and environment. In other words, something that happens in two different eras is said to leave different effects. In this regard, Taine (1992), believes that earlier literary works can serve as significant models to influence subsequent literary works (p. 616). However, the original ideas or concepts in early literary works must also be adapted to the contemporary context of race and environment to determine the form of literature that is accepted by society. Taine further strengthens the connection between these three aspects with the goal of racial history. He explains this as: "So much we can say with confidence, that the unknown creations towards which the current of the centuries conducts us, will be raised up and regulated altogether by the three primordial forces; that if these forces could be measured and computed, one might deduce from them as from a formula the specialities of future civilization" (Taine, 1992, p. 616). In essence, Taine believes that a literary work created at a certain time can serve as a social document that can be utilized in the future.

Based on Taine's notion, it can also be said that this sociology of literature theory is based on the concept of "imitation" (mimesis), and thus, literature is capable of serving as a social document that records the history of human life at a particular time. In this context, this study believes that the key principle that can be applied in this discussion is that a literary work produced in a didactic manner is capable of explaining the effects that arise from the matters surrounding a society at a particular time and environment. Consequently, this study outlines three principles deemed important for explaining the impact of education on society in the novel under study. First, literature reflects the tendencies of a society at a particular time and environment. Second, these tendencies shape general attitudes that align with the norms of the society in the relevant literary work. Finally, third, literature explains the impact that arises from the actions of the characters within the society concerning these tendencies.

These three principles are comprehensively utilized in discussing the impact of education on society in the novel *Ahad* under study.

Objectives of the Study

This study lists three objectives to be achieved, as follows:

- i. to identify the educational streams followed by the protagonists in the novel *Ahad* by Zakaria Salleh.
- ii. to describe the roles of the protagonists in their respective communities in the novel *Ahad* by Zakaria Salleh.
- iii. to synthesize the relationship between education and the effectiveness of the protagonists' roles in their respective communities in the novel *Ahad* by Zakaria Salleh.

As previously stated, the novel *Ahad* participated in the second Novel Writing Competition organized by Pejabat Karang-Mengarang (a Writing Bureau established in Sultan Idris Training College) in 1954 and was announced as the second-place winner. The novel was later published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 1959 under the label "Siri Perpustakaan Sekolah DBP Bil. 3." The novel *Ahad* revolves around the lives of three identical triplets named Amin, Hasan, and Dahalan (hereafter collectively referred to as the "Ahad triplets") during the time before, during, and after World War II. This means that the stories in this novel encompass the involvement of these characters in society during their childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Referring to the impact of education on society, which is the focus of this study, the novel portrays Amin, Hasan, and Dahalan as protagonists with high aspirations to advance in life by making education a tool for progress. This tendency is clearly shown in the novel as the Ahad triplets, from a young age, have a strong desire to attend school and strive to perform well in examinations. The novel describes that the Ahad triplets initially attended the same Malay school. However, Amin was later transferred to an English school, Hasan continued studying at the same school, and Dahalan was sent to a religious school. It is important to explain that during the 1930s and 1940s, these three educational streams—English schools, Malay schools, and religious schools—were very dominant and were the choices of the Malay community when sending their children to school. The novel does not emphasize that any one educational stream is superior to the others, but it does explain that studying in an English school required a higher financial commitment compared to studying in a Malay school or a religious school. With this understanding, the novel justifies the decision of the Ahad triplets' parents, Yusof and Safariah, to choose one of their three children to study at an English school. Consequently, the novel goes on to tell how the Ahad triplets successfully completed their schooling and obtained good jobs in their respective fields. In the novel, Amin becomes a police officer with the rank of inspector, and after completing training in Singapore, he is posted to Kota Bharu, Kelantan. Hasan, on the other hand, has the qualifications to apply to become a trainee teacher at Sultan Idris Training College, which was the only higher education institution for Malay school graduates at that time. However, in the novel, Hasan is depicted as a child who frequently suffers from health problems, and thus, he is only able to work as a farmer in his hometown of Pulau Pinang (after failing the qualification test for teacher training

college). At the religious school, Dahalan becomes a student who consistently garners the attention of his religious teacher and is expected to take over the management of the school where he studies. Additionally, Dahalan is chosen by his religious teacher to further his religious studies in Mecca, and at the same time, he has the opportunity to perform the hajj pilgrimage with his parents (Yusof and Safariah). Based on these academic qualifications, the novel develops stories about the Ahad triplets, highlighting their abilities and readiness to lead their respective communities. Furthermore, the novel uses the different careers of Amin, Hasan, and Dahalan to separate these characters into three different settings. This allows the novel to explain how these protagonists utilize their knowledge as leaders of their respective communities.

To manifest the impact of education on society, the novel consistently portrays the positive characteristics of Amin, Hasan, and Dahalan from the time they start school until they enter the workforce. However, the novel also hints at the aspirations of these three protagonists from the beginning, as reflected in the title *Ahad*, which is an acronym of the first Jawi letters of Amin ("alif"), Hasan ("ha"), and Dahalan ("da"). The choice of this title, derived from the Arabic root word "wahid," meaning "first" in Malay, can be seen as referring to the competitive nature of the Ahad triplets, who strive to achieve first place in whatever fields they pursue. In line with this objective, the novel reinforces the impact of education on society through stories about the diligent and hardworking nature of Amin, Hasan, and Dahalan, even before they set foot in school. This is expressed in the novel through the guidance they receive from their parents at home. In this regard, the novel presents Yusof and Safariah as exemplary parents for their children to emulate. In the novel, Yusof is depicted as a hardworking, pious farmer, and Safariah is portrayed as a wife who is skilled in managing the household and, like her husband, is devout in her religious practices. With such parental characteristics, the novel describes how the Ahad triplets grow up to be polite, well-mannered children who always respect their elders, as explained in the following excerpt:

Tengah laku kanak-kanak itu telah menjadi penglipor hati ibu bapa, rasa-nya tidak ada perkara yang lebih seronok dan riang lagi daripada mempunyai anak-anak yang hidup sihat, pantas dan chergas serta cherdek-cherdek pula. Kanak-kanak ini-lah sebenar-nya hati jantung ibu bapa dapat mengubatkan hati ketika berdukachita.

(The behavior of the children had delighted their parents. It seems that there is nothing more enjoyable and gratifying than having children who are healthy, lively, and intelligent. These children are truly the heart and soul of their parents, bringing them joy during times of sorrow.)

(Zakaria Salleh, 1959: 4 – 5)

However, despite these equal developments in biological, physical, and cognitive aspects, the novel also narrates the different inclinations of Amin, Hasan, and Dahalan, with the aim of placing each of these identical triplets into the appropriate educational streams. For instance, Amin is portrayed with a rugged, brave, and resilient character, Hasan with a gentle and generous demeanor, and Dahalan with a personality that prefers solitude and values

cleanliness. With these differences, and after the Ahad triplets are sent to study in three different schools with different educational streams, the novel strengthens the theme of the impact of education on society through the experiences of the Ahad triplets in their respective schools. This is shown in the novel through Amin's ability at the English school to lead his school's football team and direct a play performed by his friends. At the Malay school, Hasan's leadership skills are displayed through his ability to lead the editorial board of the school's magazine. Despite frequently facing health issues, Hasan remains active in extracurricular activities and is chosen as the head of the school's scout troop. Meanwhile, at the religious school, Dahalan's leadership qualities are highlighted through his ability to speak on behalf of the religious school students at the school's ihtifal (appreciation ceremony). The stories about the involvement of the Ahad triplets in various extracurricular activities naturally complete their development as versatile and leadership characters in the novel. These stories about the achievements of the Ahad triplets also clarify that there was no significant gap between the forms of education received by students, whether in English schools, Malay schools, or religious schools at that time.

Furthermore, it is significant that the novel also explores the potential of the Ahad triplets that was developed within the larger societal group, after they completed school and entered the workforce. As mentioned earlier, Amin achieved his ambition of becoming a police officer, Hasan became a successful farmer, and Dahalan had the opportunity to delve into religious studies in Mecca in preparation to take over the management of his religious school. With these abilities, Amin was sent to serve as a police officer in Kota Bharu, Hasan managed farms and plantations in their hometown, and Dahalan studied in Mecca while also taking care of their parents (Yusof and Safariah) who were performing the Hajj pilgrimage. Furthermore, by taking advantage of the Japanese occupation of Malaya during World War II, the novel describes how the Ahad triplets emerged as leaders in their respective places. Amin's leadership, for example, is manifested through his actions in controlling Kota Bharu (which was in chaos after being captured by the Japanese) after his English superior fled to safety. Amin then led a group of young men stranded in Kota Bharu to return to their respective states through the dangerous routes in the interior of Kelantan and Perak. In the Ahad triplets' hometown (in Seberang Perai, Penang), Hasan, who had become a successful modern farmer, is described as volunteering in an emergency team to help the local community injured in the war. Hasan's leadership is further highlighted through his involvement in the Seberang Perai Malay Welfare Association and the People's Security Front, which fought for the welfare of the local community under Japanese rule. Additionally, Dahalan joined the Allied paratroopers operating in India, and later conducted guerrilla warfare in the jungles of Pahang. After the war, Dahalan reappeared in the local community and was hailed as a war hero. Through the stories of the different experiences of each of the Ahad triplets during World War II, a commonality shared by the three can be understood: education became the foundation for making the best decisions for themselves and for society. In the context of the protagonists' relationships with such responsibilities, the novel reinforces the theme of the impact of education on society that underpins its narrative.

Furthermore, it is significant that the stories of the Ahad triplets' leadership within society do not end with the depiction of conflicts during World War II. More importantly, and in an effort

to emphasize the impact of education on society, the novel then reintroduces a peaceful atmosphere in Malaya (after Japan's surrender), albeit not as orderly as before and with many social conflicts, aiming to maintain the leadership and involvement of the Ahad triplets within their respective communities. In this regard, although the responsibility for maintaining the safety and welfare of the people was handed back to the original administration (i.e., the British colonizers who had not yet relinquished control over Malaya to local leaders), the Ahad triplets are described as continuing to help society through their respective positions during the war. Moreover, by maintaining the characters of the Ahad triplets as they were in childhood, the novel adds value (added values) to the three when they are depicted as role models for the entire society. In this regard, Amin's authority as an efficient and brave police inspector is further highlighted through his involvement in solving major criminal cases, such as piracy in Langkawi and the kidnapping of a Chinese tycoon. Amin's efficiency and bravery led the government to send him to England for two years to study criminal investigation. In the Ahad triplets' hometown, Hasan, characterized as gentle and generous, used the wealth he accumulated as a successful modern farmer to open an orphanage for war victims. At the same time, Dahalan, who had a background in religious education, was tasked by his former teacher with organizing the management of the modern religious school (i.e., his former religious school) in a more organized and planned manner, as seen in Mecca. The strategy of elevating the positions of the Ahad triplets as extraordinary characters in the eyes of the local community further confirms the theme of the impact of education on society that is the core of this novel. Additionally, it is clear that in this novel, leadership is associated with the level of education, regardless of the different educational streams that existed in Malaya at that time.

Conclusion

Overall, the study concludes that the issue of the impact of education on society in the novel "Ahad" reflects the general tendencies of Malay society in the 1950s. As a literary work crafted to raise this issue to society, the novel presents Amin, Hasan, and Dahalan as graduates of English, Malay, and religious schools who possess the knowledge and skills to advance themselves and society. Although they come from different educational backgrounds, these characters are found to play important roles in their respective communities during the period before, during, and after World War II. In this regard, the novel presents Amin as an efficient, brave, and responsible police officer, Hasan as a diligent and generous modern farmer, and Dahalan as a determined and resilient national soldier, who also has the leadership qualities of an educator (as the principal of a modern religious school) after the war. In line with the stories about the roles and involvement of these characters, it is clear that there is a close relationship between education and the effectiveness of the roles played by educated members of society within their communities. In this regard, it is clear that the stories about the Ahad triplets' characters are also aligned with the aspirations of Malaysian society in the 1950s, which emphasized education as a tool for progress.

Overall, this study makes significant contributions to two fields of knowledge. Firstly, and based on the discussion of the novel's content, this study explains the history and early development of education in Malaysia, creatively presented in the form of children's literature. The study provides a detailed explanation of the characteristics of three types of

education: education in Malay schools, education in English schools, and education in religious schools. Secondly, this study indirectly contributes to the discussion on the history and development of young adult novels in Malaysia. The novel "Ahad" presents a story about three protagonists, namely Amin, Hasan, and Dahlan, who spend their teenage years gaining useful knowledge to enhance their potential as important members of society during the Second World War in Tanah Melayu (before Malaya in 1957).

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