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## From Atas Pokok to Sawah Padi: A Critique on Malaysian Political Malfunction and Social Oppression by Dinsman

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### Abstract

The resurrection of Malaysian modern drama began with the revitalization of Malaysian theater after 1930s. Since then, Malaysian modern drama has expanded values to various forms in terms of narrative, issues, genres and performance elements. Many research have been done in general by focusing on individuals dramatic work but none of the documentation is collected comprehensively to show the contributions and values of the published drama that activated by the modern theater groups movements construction of its upsurge glorious of Malaysian social development. In addition to individuals, there are several groups that appear in the evolution of the drama movements in Malaysia peculiarly in the 1970s. These group are the main stimulus of active and open social commentary. The only active dramatist who enthusiastic emersion from the inception until to this date is Dinsman. Since the 1970s, Dinsman and his group calling themselves the *Grup Teater Elit* (GTE) have astounded the country's theater industry with experimental and controversial works that shows freedom of discourse in addition served as current social and political commentary. Many works identified and procure attentiveness by the Malaysian political opposition press of the dissident party. The latest two play that directed by Dinsman were *Teater Atas Pokok* (TAP) and *Teater di Sawah Padi Muzika Uda dan Dara* (TdSPMUD). These play were made to show the subaltern voce of the repression in current situation which is caused by economic pressures and current urban development. It aims to highlight a matter of serious discussions amend for the imbalance of Malaysian political malfunction and social oppression hegemony in various sphere especially inward developing countries.

**Keywords:** Malaysian Modern Drama, Malaysian Theatre, Socio Political Arts and Literary, Criticism.

### Background

The empirical study of the emergence of modern drama in Malaysia which was arise in the 1930s until now has been largely devoted to the play and performance structures in terms of

presentation forms. Although some researcher try to look at the variance of the form, the studies are still based on the narrative discourse through the existing secondary references. Beginning from *sandiwara* genre, the Malaysian drama has begun modification from traditional to modern form. The presentational style performance conventions have been exchanged to representational and there is also a combination of both. According to Ahmad (2000) there is no in-depth study in plays. For that, he has documented the form of drama in his study that published in the Malay Modern Drama Performance book. Moreover, Ishak (1992) in her research that changes in political and social environments have brought significant changes to the modern Malay theater during that period. He added that events such as the 1969 Riot have raised local drama players in their response to government and society. They become more sensitive to the changes that exist in society. Anger, despair, chaos and commonplace chaos in their society are reflected in the absurd drama of this decade. He predicted that dramatic at the time acted to find meaning and to direct the broken and broken environment. Racial riots lead to recognition of identity to the country's goals. This event has affected the lives of many Malaysians. Therefore, Ahmad (2013) concludes that absurd drama (in Malaysia context) has been an alternative tool for channeling the response, view and feeling of drama players to social change in society at that time. Likewise with dramas and theater that was born afterwards. Among the famous Malaysian dramaturg such as Nur Nina Zuhra, Mana Sikana, Zakaria Ariffin, Syed Alwi, Kee Thuan Chye, Solehah Ishak, Rahmah Bujang, Krishen Jit, Dinsman and Noordin Hassan mention the appearance groups that activates the drama in the 1970s have discussed various social, economy and politic issues in their playwright across the nation and period.

### **Statement of Problem**

Freedom of speech is of paramount importance to all other fundamental rights and freedoms in the constitution. As a country that adopts a parliamentary democracy system, freedom of expression that includes freedom of the press, media, literary, arts and performance is an important concept. Without freedom of speech, this democratic society's life cannot be done perfectly. Newspapers and other media, as a means of conveying thoughts are part of the concept of freedom of speech. Meanwhile, freedom of work is a major issue in the performing arts and literary in Malaysia. The mainstream media often says it does not happen. However, the inner basics put some of these terms into account.

Working is to create an idea of an upheaval that plays in the city of mind in art. But in any form, arts requires freedom and artist need it to generate ideas. But not all states believe in freedom given to it. What more is a work that touches on social or political criticism? In most countries, artists have the freedom to create but those created are not permitted to the public. Various restrictions enforced to revolutionaries work. In countries with elevated art appreciation, employees are always dubious.

According to Fan (2014), people should not expect governments and national institutions to determine the freedom framework of the artwork. The primary goal of any ruler is to maintain power and one of the shortcuts to achieve that goal (practiced by authoritarian and dictatorial governments worldwide) is the process of division and deception of the people. Therefore, government institutions are unlikely to lead the real freedom. In a democratic country,

democratic spheres such as justice, human rights, freedom of speech and work need to be prosecuted and enforced. The state constitution should be respected and maintained. But at the same time, we must realize that freedom cannot be presented to us by the authorities; freedom should be practiced by the people themselves, by every individual and community.

In this matter, freedom which refer to arts is an ideal that is not easy to achieve especially in a cultural composite society where differences in background, custom and worldview sometimes lead to disagreement over artistic and artistic freedom. However, she believe that the creator should work in a completely free space. As for her, we must start from the premise of freedom, rather than the application of limitations and limits on freedom of speech or constraints. Freedom of work also includes the freedom to declare 'what is not to be heard'. For example, in Malaysia, sensitive issues and criticize answered by a ban or censorship. For example, the list of illicit books<sup>1</sup> has reached several thousand titles, including scientific essays anthologies.

Despite what is said about the right of expression should not be underestimated. We must have anxiety over the current serious issue. Malaysia is now becoming a developed nation with various governmental plans, particularly in the 11th Malaysia Plan<sup>2</sup>. Now, the economy and the development of modern infrastructure are more focused. While things that are often considered unproductive and do not benefit greatly as agriculture, fisheries, heritage, arts and culture are no longer considered important in society. It is evident that in the next 5 years this matter is not mentioned and given attention. Moreover, globalization has opened up new mediums such as social media to the present generation. Social media has a very powerful role either from pro or counter factors. Various reading and viewing materials are easily accessible without restrictions. Whilst young generation diverse with a variety of entertainment that does not imply the mind, the adult struggle for living. Indirectly, the interest of the hodiernal generation of Malaysians is increasingly far from the reading and discussion of social and scientific discourse. People are no more read the books nor virtuous readings material.

These imbalance factors has contribute to social oppression in various circumstance. Due to the problems dumped, the government and political parties became nauseated against social problems. They blame each other and it causes political failure and social integration. These dominos factors seems contributing to the failure of the national social system. It is a loss to the people and the country. It seems the political will have dominate and hegemonies most Malaysia thought. It causes imbalance in life.

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<sup>1</sup> These examples are Islam dan Pluralisme prepared by Al-Mustaqeem Mahmud Radhi and Khairul Anam Che Menteri, *Asal-Usul Spesis* (adaptation from claasic book by Charles Darwin, The Origin of the Species), and novels by Faisal Tehrani which is perceived as spreading Shi'ite understanding.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to Eleventh Malaysia Plan, 2016-2020 at <http://www.epu.gov.my/en/rmk/eleventh-malaysia-plan-2016-2020>

### Objective of Research

The objective of this research is to identify the function of these two plays by Dinsman as a social commentary drama. It aims to justify the issues of social oppression that occurs in *Teater Atas Pokok* (TAP) and *Teater di Sawah Padi Muzika Uda dan Dara* (TdSPMUD) drama narrative. Moreover, a synthesis will be analyze the main issue of TAP and TdSPMUD reliable to show the role of theater as a critic's agent of social commentary imbalance. This research capitalizes on drama function to strengthen audience eminence on intellectual discourse towards equipoise the political role in the current social essence in Malaysian political malfunction. Nowadays, the political malfunction seems to lead the social oppression in the society.

### Methodology

In pursuance of Kasten (2012), referring to Calderonian formula, the drama of ideas, of cognitive forms rather than of social or political theses, is being reborn. They are very different things. Drama is either passion or idea. In the modern renaissance, the rational, abstract idea has superseded passion. This research lead a qualitative study. Ethnography and structuralism theory will be apply as the basis of the research framework. This original study has documented a list of Dinsman (a Malaysia prolific writer and theater activist) work. But in this particular research discussion will be focused on the two latest theater discourse that directed by him. The next phase of this study will justify the purpose of the writer and director interpretations of the drama narrative based on the aspects of exploration of thought, history, social context and background. It aims to understand and fulfill human needs in the context of culture formed by the social reflection of a theater activist.

### Literature Review

Malaysian literary movements and ideas before independence play an important role in inoculating intellectualism into building a paradigm of society on the reality of colonization and independence. In addition, it also serves as a critic that equalizing political power and policies that steered to the leadership of the country. As a nation that is moving towards independence, many things need to be monitored. According to Abadi et al. (1984), during the rise of ASAS 50, literary works became agents of criticizing the society. Addressing the artistic slogan for society, many of the works produced at that time became a commentary on opposition to the upper class and to defend the fate of the workers, fishermen and farmers.

Besides, Young (1990) in his view upon the way of creating society is inimical to the traditional social bond and of social functions. It enact society a hunting ground, with persons as legitimate prey for extortionist who use both society and persons for highly personal contentment. This is a point of view of society in which only parasites make out and only to the extent that the social bond of reciprocal good faith on the part of others can ensure a fraudulent dramaturgy at the personal level. The intellectual consciousness of the whole world goes hand in hand with the assimilation of civilization. In the meantime, literary works played a huge role in the social system at that time. For example, Ariffin (1984) in his research mentioned about the rise of a young dramatic group in the 1970s in Malaysia has reinforced the notion of concepts and forms initiated by Noordin Hassan. The works produced by these groups are seen to have their own direction. Obviously Zakaria Ariffin once again believe they are trying to explore a new

dimension, new quest with other possibilities that are more challenging their imagination, creativity and intellect. The imagination, creativity and intellect that is intended at the beginning of its appearance is convicted by the forms and questions raised. This still explains the essence of a presentation is still closely related to the script. It does not include the form that condones the use of exploration outside the proscenium or arena space. The presentation frame is still playing in the same stage space.

Likewise with dramas and theater that was born afterwards. Among the famous Malaysian dramaturg such as Nur Nina Zuhra, Mana Sikana, Zakaria Ariffin, Syed Alwi, Kee Thuan Chye, Solehah Ishak, Rahmah Bujang, Fazilah Hussin, Mohamad Nazri Ahmad, Krishen Jit, Dinsman and Noordin Hassan mention the appearance of two a group that activates the drama in the 1970s, namely Malaysian Arts Theater Group (MATG), *Grup Teater Elit* (GTE) and *Anak Alam* Group. However, there is no documentation of drama activities by these three major groups while they are among the major contributors to the condensed history of modern Malaysian drama and theater development in Malaysia. The big names that move these three big groups are Syed Alwi, Krishen Jit, Dinsman, Sutung Umar RS and Latiff Mohiddin. The four names of these characters are often referred to in the modern drama and theater studies (Malaysia) in general but none are specifically examining their drama activities especially on the performance contribution. Many studies focus on the contribution of few selected works.

Examples of great contributions to Malaysia modern drama content is Dinsman. He is a renowned drama activist in the rise of the modern Malaysian drama era in the 1970s till present. In addition of writing drama, poetry, short stories and cultural essays, Dinsman also actively pursues political critics and published books and series of documentaries (Dinsman, 2009). Among his famous works were *Protes* (1972), *Jebat* (1973), *Diri* (1974), *Ana* (1976), *Di Pulau Sadandi* (1977), *Izie Project* (1982) and many more. So far Dinsman has directed and produced more than 50 plays since 1970s.

According to Ishak (1987), the form of Malay contemporary drama produced during the post-independence era has highlighted events based on the reflection of the social scenario and political polemics that took place in Malaysia at that time. This study shows that the authors' minds are very sensitive to the development and the policy of the country's government that is alarming. The situation at that time showed social imbalances led to the issues being voiced through the copies of the drama. The rumors of the issues from the writers at that point clearly brought people's voices criticized at the time. Indirectly this reflects on politics and state leadership. Whereas Sikana (1985) explains that the issue is quite basic in a drama when the work discusses the concept of justice, the definition of humanity, human responsibility towards god, self, society and religion and the struggle against tyranny and trying to uphold justice.

Probing the theatre and drama historical in the 80's and 90's, Husin (2010) explains the occurrence of changes in the structure of the drama to an experimental form. The results of this study summarize the new forms have emerged in the experimental texts created by the young dramatists at that time. However, this study only examines dramatic texts without specifying this research into the form of staging. According to Aston (2015) to reconstruct a new meaning in

staging, the stage drama script needs to be continued in the showroom. However, the study of Husin. does not cover aspects of the presentations that explain the new meanings that arise in the show. Therefore, seeing an experimental structure will not be holistically assessed. Hence, the documentation of scripts and drama activities is very important in the development of performing arts before the study of presentation forms and other perspectives can be carried out. It is a recording, opinion and criticism in contributing to balancing existing social and policy development.

### **The Synthesis from Atas Pokok to Sawah Padi**

*Teater Atas Pokok* (TAP) is a site specific theater that shows the object discussed by the text natty to the audience. The idea of TAP based subject matter begins with a variety of intertextualities that talk about social issues during the most important but despised by the government and a handful of people. The TAP deals with the taking of inherited land by the royal aims to awaken the village to its modern development. What is the interest of development hence that it is able to take this inherited land that has been inhabited by some people of origin for more than 100 years? That's where the pods are, the land is bloody and most of them are only from the non-high-income subordinates. Referring to one of the legacy land acquisition cases not reported by the main media of the realm, the source of social media is regarding the taking of inland lands for development.

According to Alau (2008) reported in 1996, the village was raided by the decision of the Kuala Lumpur Airport Council (DBKL) to justify the developers to develop several apartment blocks in the respective area. His intentions, to defend their village, were crowded amongst the inhabitants who had been staying overnight at the assembly because they organized an association to deter developers rather than continue the coaching work. More sadly, DBKL has categorized the village as an adjacent placement in the Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan (KLCP) 2020 which was launched in 2008 along with five more villages. According to Foley (2016). Dinsman developed this piece as a response to the forces pushing for development in Kampong Bandar where his writers' group *Seniman Paksi Rakyat*, Artists' Axis of the People (PAKSI), holds monthly poetry readings at Madrasah Tarbiyah in Kuala Lumpur on themes linked to civil society. The play was bookended by two poems of Malaysian National Laureate Usman Awang (1929–2001). "*Balada Terbunuhnya Beringan Tua di Pinggir Sebuah Bandaraya*" (Ballad of an Old Banyan Tree on the City Outskirts) and "*Surat dari Masyarakat Burung kepada Datuk Bandar*" (Letter from the Birds to the Mayor) both represent the rights of the natural world and local in the face of human greed, global forces, and government-enforced development. Community members who scale the tree are preserving it from forces of development.

Furthermore, in TAP Program Book an article by Chin (2016) discussed infer that Dinsman's idiosyncratic idealism through the TAP was a symbiosis of Dinsman latest work which passes through Malay post modernism theatre. TAP is a manifestation of protest against capitalist globalization that is increasingly threatening culture, heritage and humanity for profit. From one imagination of ideas to wishful thinking, ideals and so on realize to an experimental art form that tells of a failure of the ideals grabbed by the gluttony of capitalist greediness. Instead of performed theatre in theatre itself, is more successful and meaningful when it is played in the

specific site where the issue is concerned. The staging will bring the audience to navigate the prevailing story of the place while thinking of the fate of the people who want to be defended. It is an act of protest against capitalist greed and misuse of power engaging government that marginalizes the poor (Dinsman, 2017). In the same way, TAP evolved the similar issue of Kampong Cubadak. TAP fights for the fate of Kampong Banda Dalam which will forefront the same fatality as Kampong Cubadak. Kampong Banda Dalam is one of the few subsist village in the midst of the development flow in Kuala Lumpur.

For instance, until 2017 there are several kampong has been taken for development purposes. Among the kampongs, a possession had been taken by the Kuala Lumpur City Council (DBKL) towards Kampong Cubadak which has caused controversy in 2006. Kampong Cubadak opened by Malays in the 1880s, located about three kilometers from the Kuala Lumpur airport as the Malay settlement although the surrounding area is undergoing rapid development. Hatijah (2006) said it was not opposed to the project but instead reserved two alternative ranks to the mobilizer to evade the highway through the village of Cubadak. According to her, the concerned parties do not give a satisfactory answer towards that matter. In this matter, TAP it is not just a theatre performance, but an agenda genre to move the paradigm shift of the society.

In 2017, Dinsman once again stages the Theater di *Sawah Padi Muzika Uda dan Dara* (TdSPMUD) in a paddy field located at Sungai Besar, Selangor. It is a version of *Muzika Uda dan Dara* a playwright by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Malaysian National Laurate Usman Awang. TdSPMUD ia a drama about the love of two people of different degrees, namely Uda and Dara. The drama is characterized by his main character, Utih, a man who is considered to be crazy to fight against land sharks that breathe in the village business. For a character who always appears in the society's conflicts see all the oppression that has taken place. According to Zakaria (2017) Utih character is characterized as a peculiar, unique, special and extraordinary Malay character. It is the character of an independent, free-standing village man with nature, who is astute like a poet, who conceals the character of the warrior behind the disorder of his behavior (Dinsman, 2017). Utih is the forgotten unsung warrior who wants to liberate his people from the shackles of oppression and ignorance of the oligarch. The villagers became poor and colonized by the local loan shark. With a peculiar personality of Utih, the character be depicted as a unique and crazy. Utih is a symbolism of independent partisan character. In his constant appearance in the scene, he challenged the supremacy represented by Alang Bakhil. Alang Bakhil is a swindler who chained the villagers by debt and taxes over the price hike of land and paddy. It is the partially metaphor towards the realm of reality. Every time Utih arises, he will burn the spirit of the kampong people to continue to wake up against

Again, Yusuf (2017) referred this matter showed by the repetition appurtenance of Lebai in TdSPMUD who always backed up arguments and his advice on rosary and robe. Dinsman who is also a good friend of Usman Awang saw Utih's character as representing the character of Usman Awang himself. People are always looking at and fascinated with the adventure of the Uda and Dara youths, who are treated so beautifully and romantic by Usman Awang whereas ignore the post after the death of the romance hero Uda whilst that was the part that raises the struggle of the peasants, which may be considered as stunning crusade and not just a romantic scene solely. This is the most important issue that need to be raised in TdSPMUD. Uda and Dara



are a persona and metaphor in a life. The poor are often oppressed and if the fight is finally abolished by the wealth and authority especially the power of hegemony that oppresses weaknesses. Likewise to Abuza (2018), looking at the current Malaysia political scenario, the level of corruption has caused significant disgust amongst Malays ethnic. For example, opposition figures are now routinely campaigning in FELDA land grant areas, where land is distributed to indigene at exceptionally low cost. These were once the absolute heartland of UMNO. While the *Malay tsunami* predicted by the opposition may be over stated, the government has never had the loyalty of the Malay constituency this in doubt. In his review, Abuza also contended, it's important to understand just how far Malaysia has fallen in terms of its democracy and electoral integrity, according to seven different independent watchdogs and international organizations. This has had a deleterious effect on Malaysia. In its 2017 Democracy Index, The Economist rated Malaysia the third-most democratic country in Southeast Asia, but far behind Indonesia and the Philippines. The Economist ranked Malaysia is media freedom status has "largely unfree," and that was before the government passed its controversial Fake News Law.

### **Benefit to the Nation**

Arts, culture and literature play a very important role in balancing the interests of society in the context of intellectual development. Although often seen backwards in this day and age, we cannot deny that this medium is a social offsetting agent in society. The filling of this medium is very bold and important in presenting the people's sense and manifestation of the political, economic and developmental reflections of the country. As is known, after independence, the state had faced a critical situation during the May 13, 1969 riots.

This riot is a picture of the basic failure of the nation that has caused social pressure to society affected by the failure of predominant functions in government. As a result, people conscious and carry out riot. According with that condition, artists and writer begin to rise the ability to speak the voice of the people through their artwork. As discussed in the initial rankings in earlier writings and studies, Malaysian writers at the time consisted of intellectuals and grads warning the kingdom with their artwork.

In addition, the findings of this research shows that Dinsman is a play writer that produced drama from his sensitivity based on community reflection issues. He touched on the question of the social commitment is solely stimulated by a deep love for the people, the nation and the homeland. This caused by his desire to make the country as a great developed nation who grows social justice and become a sovereign country with the most secure place to be occupied. As for him literature such drama by means of virtuous desire in balancing the political malfunction. This research indicates that drama and artwork have its own function in terms to balance the cultural will commensurate with the political will. It aims to uphold a social and political undefiled for stimulating a healthier society and country. Furthermore, it provides a contribution to the importance of drama as a criticism compere form in the effort to mere the subjugated issues which disrupting the society. It attempts to motivate the artist to perform reflections of their work independently. The fair criticisms in art works without any restrictions able to balance the problem that afflicts the nation.

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