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Nurain bte Khoo Kian Hua, Sim Chee Cheang

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## **Millenia Literary Indie Authors: A Review of Selected Indie Novels (1990-2017)**

Nurain bte Khoo Kian Hua, Sim Chee Cheang  
Fakulti Kemanusiaan, Seni dan Warisan Universiti Malaysia *Sabah*

### **Abstract**

According to John (1997), a novel is considered a "social symptom". Lucas's interpretation based on Jacques Lacan's concept that a work is a text of one's psyche is evident when the novel or literary work is scrutinized according to the changes in this case; the Indie literature of Malaysia. The latest literary phenomenon in Malaysia a "new" creative work that defies form but appears to be familiar. Although the works produced are novels and poems, they differ in form and content especially in the style of writing. According to Muhammad (2016), "Indie literature" is understood as a stream or culture that seeks freedom from any authority and mainstream. This definition is emphasized by mainstream Malay literary critics who view Malaysian Indie Literature as "protest literature" whose objective is freedom of expression. The majority of these literary works are written by young authors from between the ages of 20 and 35 years old. This research hopes to uncover the ideological aspect of Malaysian Indie Literature with the intent to move its definition from a binary opposite of mainstream Malay literature to a literary genre that should be regarded as a literary form through a textual analysis of a selected number of Malay Indie novels from 1990s until 2017. It is hoped that this article will reveal the purpose of novel creation according to the thoughts of the authors as reflected through the plot, themes, characters and messages that will throw light to the rise of Indie literature in the ethos of Malay Literature.

### **Introduction**

According to Rafidah (2016), who is the writer of *Dewan Sastera* claims that Malaysian Indie literature is a work written by young authors who are relatively new to creative publication. Among the hypothesis surrounding Malaysian Indie literature is that it is "an alternative space to posting leisurely work that is not bound by strict and stifling publishing rules or censorship". The focus of this article will be the rebellious and aggressive writing style that Malay Indie literature has multiplied as a binary opposition to the mainstream literary tradition bound by the ethics of writing and publishing. The narrative styles has been described as "radical has elements of liberalism, agnostic, narcissistic (excessive love), undermining religious, moral and cultural values" and the tone often sarcastic, protesting, opposing, mocking and aimless (Rashidi, 2016).

*Nazi Goreng* by Marco Ferrarese's (2015), *Perempuan Politikus Melayu* by Faisal Tehrani(2016) and *Budiman* (2017) by Regina Ibrahim have been selected as a cross section that reflects to a certain extent the description of Malay Indie novels written by both young and older authors of the Malay Indie movement.

Critical comments on the writing styles include those from Ramlee (2017), who claims that Malay indie works are in conflict with the aesthetic value of literary works because of its free expression (language used) and its non-binding literary structures. Malay Indie literature finds its birth in small groups of young Malays who according to Biro Tatanegara (BTN) (2016), chose together at *pasar malams* or night markets at particular areas such as Shah Alam district in West Malaysia to share their thoughts, feeling and ideas about the current administration before the 14<sup>th</sup> Malaysian General Election when the ruling party Barisan Nasional was toppled by the present Pakatan Harapan government in a historical moment of Malaysian political history. Syed Saddiq (2018) also confident the changer of 14<sup>th</sup> Malaysian General Election because of the youth wave. With multiplying numbers, this became a movement which was monitored by the BTN as it was political and sensitive in nature. The impact of this youth movement even led some to acruce the change of government to this silent followers in the election (Rashidi, 2016).

### **Rise of Malay Literature**

The history of Malay Literature has undergone a process of expansion and growth, developing under the influence of political and social change of the nation. Beginning from the 1920s until the 1940s, the number of authors with radical perspectives as opposed to conventional Malay novels increased. The selection of new themes and writing techniques emerged which the *History of Malay Literature* (Volume II, 1992) divides into two levels namely the stage before independence which encompassed the works from 1946-1950s and after independence from the 1960s-1970s. The first era which is from 1946-1949 after the Second World War saw the consolidation of the Malay community that culminated with a national spirit expressed through *merdeka* or independence. The first literary body that united Malaysian writers was "*Sahabat Pena*"(1934) piloted by Jymy Asmara. This consolidation became stronger in 1950s when they formed ASAS50 who wrote exclusively in the Malay language. Writers such as Harun Aminurrashid, Abdullah Sidek, Ahmad Murad Nasaruddin and Ahmad Bakhtiar from the pre-merdeka era, were joined by the new Malaysian writers such as Keris Mas, Ahmad Lutfi, Wijaya Mala and Adibah Amin. The thematic concerns of Malay novels at this time were highly influenced by social and political issues that arose prior to and after the retreat of the colonials and the formation of Malaysia. With novels that were in different languages, styles and themes, the struggle to find an identity of a new nation became the focus of national literature. After *merdeka* in the 60s, the development of the authorship surrounded the role of the Malay Language resulting in the formation of *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (DBP) in 1956 to ensure the sovereignty of the major Malay language through the development of literature in *Bahasa Malaysia*. The changes in the literary scene was affected by the changes in government, politics, race relations, economic upheavals, social and educational reforms. The turbulence has raised authors like A. Samad Said, Ruhi Hayat, S. Othman Kelantan and Shahnnon Ahmad, whose works

particularly in the novels genre reflected the reality that they lived in. The themes and issues of poverty, political corruption, unfairness and racial bias were boldly and clearly unleashed in their novels, skillfully weaved into the extrinsic part of the narratives that often attracted international attention.

The Development of Malay novels visible through the pattern. According to Mohamad (2010) the 1970s saw the development of novelty in terms of quantity, near the 1980s instead. These changes are due to political, economic, social, educational, or even a change in author's thinking and writing techniques. The Development of Novel-Malay the 1970s and 1980s highlighted the changes in writing techniques and creative expression that was used by Shanon Ahmad in his novels *Shit* (1999), *Tok Guru* (1988) and *Tikus Rahmat* (1963) the individualism that was missing in the previous decade of Malay novels. The creative style in grasping the politically sensitive issues that were highlighted through imagery, allegories, character and place of a post-structural style marked a departure from the formal realism of a post-merdeka 60s. From the 70s onwards, the post-structural styles of writing merged with realism and return to religiosity that was suddenly shattered by the entrance of Malay literature that were independently publishers like Dubook and Fixi at the dawn of the millennial.

Among the first novels or short stories published by Dubook is *Rubina* by Abbas (2008), *Kelabu* by Nadia Khan (2011), *Kasino* by Saifulizan Tahir (2011) also by Fixi and Ridwan Saidi's *Cekik* (2011) followed by *Amerika* (2011) and *Stereo Genmai* (2011). Themes ranged from homosexuality, astro travel, unicorns and deviant behaviour that were in direct contrast to the thematic concerns of the main stream literature particularly those published by DBP. Using obscene language and vulgar language these Indie writers appear to have fashioned their literature with the intention shock, vilify, disgust or criticize the government, established norms, religious bodies marking them as protest in nature and anti-establishment in objective. The characters are dark and negative individuals broken by life's experiences like Mr. Porn in *Sasar* (2016) which also encourages homosexuality, glorifying free sex like in *Gantung* (2013) and *Kelabu* (2011), both of which are Nadia Khan's writings. There are two distinct category of Indie novels that include the anti-establishment and the anti-government such as *Sekolah Bukan Penjara Universiti Bukan Kilang* (2015), *Cerpen-cerpen Underground* (2016), *Orang Ngomong Gong Gong Anjing* (2015), *Mentaliti jamban* (2016) and *Kakitokrasi* (2016). Some of them touch on racism or discrimination against other nation such as *Nazi Goreng* (2014). According to Adi Namri Sidek the appearance of these literature which has some critics attributing it to spurring the reading habits of the millennial generation referencing it as a phenomenon by Adi (2016). The diverse response from critics such as Muhammad (2016) who refer to it as an "alternative cultural discourse" as opposed to Dr Salwah Hani's condemnation of it as "rude vomit for self satisfaction to fulfill the appetites of a people (Bernama, Lifestyle & Youth, 2016). This diversity begs the question of the content in Malaysian Indie literature or its literary structures that beget such diverse reactions from critics to the point of its phenomenal state. This article will review these literary structures within a selected Malaysian Indie novels representative of the descriptions as outlined above.

### Research Approach

Through a structural approach, the texts will be subjected to a textual analysis of Rhetorical Criticism to describe, analyse, interpret and evaluate the messages embedded within the texts by focusing only on the language and narrative styles of the selected 3 novels. They are *Nazi Goreng* by Marco D. Ferrarese (2015), *Perempuan Politikus Melayu* by Faisal Tehrani (2016) and *Budiman* (2017) by Regina Ibrahim publications from Dubook and Fixi. In defense of Malaysian Indie writing, ZF Zamir (Bernama, Lifestyle & Youth, 2016) encouraged critics not to disavow their writing techniques but focus on the content and messages delivered by the authors on a national context. He calls on literature to serve as the tongue of the people as it falls on the type of literature that will encourage a higher readership in this case the millenials.

### Indie Writers

Malaysian millenia writers who wrote from between 1999 until 2017, wrote against a social, political and economic backdrop that was (before the 14<sup>th</sup> General Election) rife with corruption, political upheavals, economic oppression and religious moral collapse. The dark and negative conflict is best served by equally dark and foul language as a reflection of the current reality. Ariff (2016) described the language used as an essential bridge between the millennial writer and the readers who are also millenials. Abdul (2015) observes that Malaysia literature is derived from the reality of a period where there will arise a group of people who influence or form a literary stream because literary system is born of a society. His view is supported by Tainie (Albrecht, 2019) who classifies literature and changes as being influenced by race, environment and time. Spengler (2019) adds to Hegel's view of literature and society by viewing the development of literature in three phases namely growth, maturity and the destructive phases. Literature is influenced by art that reflects culture, religion, attitudes, symbolic, formal, conventional and technical styles which Sorokin (2019) points out imply that literary developments are influenced by norms and values within society itself. Problems and pressures surrounding the environment caused by oppression of the dominance of the State will lead to a community response in the form of writing. In fact at the forward to *Perempuan Politikus Melayu* (2016), Faisal Tehrani admits to his manuscript being rejected by "*penerbit besar*" (2016:6) or big publishers because it "*touched too much upon particular persons*" ("*terlalu menyentuh pihak tertentu*") requesting him to wait for a change in government before he could see his novel published. He also described how he was moved by a report in a local alternative newspaper about the plight of a farmer who was forced to send her child to an orphanage when her land was seized for a government project. Unsurprisingly, Faizal refers to his objective for the novel as a form of help ("*bentuk bantuan*") (2016:6) that is minimal at most.

### Analysis

#### Themes

Nazi Goreng (NZ)(2015), *Perempuan Politikus Melayu* (PPM) (2016) and *Budiman* (2017) are works that represent the millennial writers' interaction with his or her surroundings, reacting and responding in their own fashion to the social, cultural and political climate of 1998-2017. All the themes appear to champion the plight of socially, economically and politically marginalized



groups. Faizal Tehrani's novel highlights the plight of the poor, uneducated grass root Malays like Haji Chenon and his family who are displaced from their land because of the greed for power, wealth and status of disreputable politicians promising monetary gain that is far below the market price in exchange for the land of their ancestors. Regina Ibrahim's novel *Budiman* (2017) is about the plight of the coming out of a homosexual young Malaysian male while an unprejudiced view of Malaysian racism and social, economic consequences of globalization in *Nazi Goreng* (2015) by Marcose Ferrarese, an Italian musician cum global travel writer who has lived in Malaysia since 2004, is included in this analyses. The poor, downtrodden, the homosexuals, the immigrants, women and the old are the subjects are not only championed or critiqued by these novelists but among the objectives is an exposition of reality ensuring their characters were depicted as closely to the Malaysians who speak in their own lingo as possible. The novelists all appear to pick themes that were designed to shock Malaysian readers politically, socially and economically through issues pertaining to previously taboo subjects such as political critique of the present government, different sexuality, sensitive economic issues through a narrative style that exposes, uncovers or reveal a sacred "truth" like the holy grail of their narrative. Faisal Tehrani's main character Irfan is described as a "complete journalist" (2015) from the beginning till the end of the novel who believes that "Truth is an action" PPM 2016: 326). Malaysian politics often influenced the development of a country's literature which explains the deliberate deviant focus and characterization of talented writers among whom have won accolades for their writing such as Faisal Tehrani, a former recipient of the highest Artistic award in Malaysia by Faizal Teharani (2006) and Marco Ferrarese who's novel *Nazi Goreng* won the Popular Reader's Choice awards (2015). It is observed that the plot and themes raised by the three Indie writers greatly mirrored the social political and economic climate before the change of government.

The "truths" that the authors' endeavoured to uncover include, a blatant critique of the abuse of power by particular people in power such as Faizal Tehrani's Malay politician, *Datuk Zuri* in PPM (2016) who is the epitome of a corrupt politician who has no qualms in undermining, murdering and conniving to get more money and power (2016). The criticism of these attitudes appear in the equation of the politician to a prostitute who has lost her moral compass because of unchecked hatred arising from her past. The writer Faisal Tehrani's disgust at the blatant oppression of the poor people like Haji Chenon and his family is also tempered with his anger at those who choose not to allow the oppression to persist such as the character Jora whom he describes as "*Buta Politik*" or politically blind to the rampant disregard for the people's welfare, wellbeing of his own family members. Datuk Zuri's development project to build condominiums and 18-holes golf courses on the paddy fields at the foothills of Gunung Jentayu village in exchange for low compensation, threatening and arresting villagers against his plans, is implemented by Jura. The betrayal, abuse of power in pursuit of wealth for personal gain, bribery among top leaders, political murders and oppression of the poor people in the name of development are among the ugly truths implied by the main character, Irfan's book which he entitles "*Cerminan*" or Reflections.

Other “truths” uncovered are the consequences of globalization resulting in Malaysia’s economy swamped and developed by immigrants such as Bangladeshis, Iranians, Vietnamese and Indonesians whom Asrul and Malik the main characters of NZ (2015) discover in their journey to material success. They realize that their dreams of making it big in the world without working hard or through legal means like becoming helpers and doing menial jobs which they associate with immigrants, is to deal illegally such as being involved with drug trafficking. Their sojourn into the underworld of Iranian and African drug lords is fueled by Malik’s racist sentiments that border on fascist hence the title “Nazi Goreng”. Due to Asrul’s unpleasant experience of being robbed by Chinese gangsters in Penang, he is influenced by Malik’s racist stance on not working with foreigners especially the Chinese or non-Malays whom he blames for corrupting society, contaminating the race and monopolizing the Malaysian economy. The ultimate death of Asrul, Siti and Tan Moi and the subsequent imprisonment of Malik underlines Ferrarese’s intention which he says is created “to symbolise the STUPIDITY of globalizing, lost in cultural translation, too young to care, RACIST Malay/Malaysian identities” (2015). Ferrarese through his characters appear to be exhorting Malaysians to rise above their focus on racial politics and focus on developing our own country without having to rely on external forces.

Regina Ibrahim’s main character Budiman, clarifies Marco’s “lost” characters with greater forthrightness in dealing with the taboo subject of sexuality. She does not only uncover the different types of homosexuality but appear to portray the “suffering” of a homosexual who is unable to prevent how he feels and thus lives a life of denial until death sets Budiman free of the farce that he has been living as man and wife and father to a child that does not belong to him. Regina wants to divulge the “truth” of a homosexual life and at the same time imply through her characters that homosexuality is widely practiced among politicians, artists and university students who conceal their sexuality to avoid judgement and sanctions by religious and social bodies. These themes entangled with the “truth” objective of these Indies writers who touch upon previously unsanctioned, undiscussed and provocative subject matters with clear moral objectives of helping the victimized, sidelined and unacknowledged subalterns to be acknowledged, identified and empowered to say the least.

### **Narrative Style**

Datuk Seri Md Saleh Yaapar, a previous Manager of Dewan Bahasa Pustaka, the Malaysian literary institution has claimed that Indie works can destroy the Malay language and the Malay identity (*karya ‘indie’ boleh merosakkan bahasa Melayu dan jati diri bangsa Melayu, 2016*). His criticism is reiterated by academics such as Dr. Sharil Nizam from the Malay Language department of the Faculty of Modern and Communication Languages at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). Their critique is aimed at the trivializing, watering and mixing of other languages when speaking and writing in Bahasa Melayu. Admittedly the language used by Indie literature is often a “rojak” or mix between foreign, dialects, ethnic language and foul language. Undeniably, this dialectic language mixture is not “Bahasa Melayu” but a narrative style of a literature determine or is determined by its content and objectives of the author. The expression or style of language is the

way that an author conveys his or her ideas in accordance with the purpose and effect they want to achieve. [16]. In describing his style of writing in NZ, Marco says,

“We tried to reproduce the sounds of Malaysia, the feel of being there and hear way too many languages spoken all at once, using English to mass-communicate, while the smell of curries and incense fills the city streets and prayers float up in the sky in three different languages to way too many gods and ancestors.” (2015).

It appears that some of the Indie novelist adhere to Albertine’s (2005) observation that by using different language styles, the imaginative rendition becomes more effective. In this particular case, the eclectic language mix that also appears in the translation is closer to the reality of Malaysia’s multicultural society that is prone to speak in colloquial Malay specific to a region as the main characters Asrul and Malik does with a smattering of English when conversing with foreigners as well as other languages they have picked up in the course of their work. It is not a deliberate insult to the national language but rather a “tool” to enhance the reality or “truth” that is the ultimate aim of these authors. In spite of literary and academic outrage, the language eclecticism displays the versatility and rich diversity of multicultural society that has been globalized.

### Foreign Language

Among the narrative styles adopted by the Indie writers to portray the multiracial society is the myriad of languages used by the characters at the expense of formal rules of publication. Regina Ibrahim has a foot note at the bottom of her foreword page that explains the presence of English not italicized as required in formal publication as a reflection of the urban spirit (“*semangat urban gitu*”) (2017:6) The use of foreign languages is widely used in Indie literature books but not acceptable to mainstream publishers who view their roles as gatekeepers of the national language very seriously. Below is an example of the eclectic mix of Bahasa Melayu and English in the selected Indie novels.

Novel Perempuan Politikus Melayu	Novel Nazi Goreng	Novel Budiman
How are you? Apa khabar? Sihatkan? All right you all come here to have fun don't you?  (2016)	“You know, I like you. You have this puppy-dog face, and you're so clumsy... You are irresistible...”  (2015)	“Cakaplah betul-betul, free tak? I need a helper.”  (2017)

**Table 1: Use of Foreign Language (English)**

Touching on editing, Azalan (2015); Zakaria, & Abdullah (2018); Iyem, Ozturk, Yıldız, (2018) as a Soljah's Syndicated Producer, a panel judge for the 2015 Young Writers Forum at ASWARA, Kuala Lumpur, acknowledged the weakness of Indie publication especially in the



language aspect which he claims is due to the lack of editorial staff unlike the main stream publishers. He also said, the young writers published with Indie publishers because of the tiresome editing process of mainstream publishers and also the censorship that is pro-government. As such, the language is twisted and manipulated for the sake of generating meaning rather than observing linguistic ambitions in the Indie novels. For instance the use of “pun” in the titles of the Indie novels. The words “Politikus” is not a word in Bahasa Melayu especially with the additions “kus” behind the word “politik” but serves to convey the similarities between politicians and rats which is the point of view of the author. “Nazi Goreng” is also deliberately misspelt with a “z” rather than “s” to refer to the racism that is rife among Malaysians. “Budi” meaning ethical and “Man” is clearly another pun by Regina Ibrahim to satirize how a man only appears moral and upright but is not as the main character appears to be.

### Hanging Sentence Structure

All three Indie novels also display a tendency toward hanging sentence structures for impact. The sentences have no subject or predicate as found in most mainstream novels and is most of the time merely a phrase beginning with a conjunction such as “Kerana”(because) (2016), “Dan” (and) (2017) or a determiner “Yang” (which) as shown in Table 2.

Novel Perempuan Politikus Melayu	Novel Nazi Goreng	Novel Budiman
a) Kerana hal itu akan dibincangkan.	a) Yang datang kelmarin.	a) Dan dia berbohong.

**Table 2: Examples of hanging sentence structures**

### Graffiti Language

Both these hanging sentences and graffiti language that are often foul, abusive and provocative (see Table 3) are deliberate contrivances that are part of the identity of Indie literature reflective of the thematic concerns to protest and at the same time reveal a “truth” in the Malaysian society. Aisamuddin Asri, founder of Indie publisher Lejenpress in an interview with *Dimensi on 22 November 2017*, encourages readers to look beyond the graffiti and examine the contents of Indie literature even though they are different.

**Table 3: Graffiti Language in Indie Novels**

Novel Perempuan Politikus Melayu	Novel Nazi Goreng	Novel Budiman
<p>“Kau setuju aku katakan <i>politician</i> dan prostitute itu sama.” Irfan.  <b>(Perempuan Politikus Melayu, Hal : 97)</b></p> <p>Hey... good money dan <b>good fuck</b> too... you no what I mean?  <b>(Perempuan Politikus Melayu, Hal : 75)</b></p>	<p>“Jalan la celaka woi!” Dia menjerit. Lelaki-lelaki itu makin dekat. Asrul dapat lihat wajah mereka merah marah.  <b>(Nazi Goreng, Hal : 232)</b></p> <p>“This is our country,” Asrul melawan kembali. “ Its belongs to us. Those Chinese and Indians, they came here!  <b>(Nazi Goreng, Hal: 192)</b></p>	<p>“...saling berbalas tindakan bagaikan dua ekor singa yang ganas dan lapar. Seorang menggigit seorang lagi menjilat. Kucupan dalam yang berahi dan perilaku binatang yang saling membalas.”  <b>(Budiman, Hal : 75)</b></p>

### Conclusion

In the course of literary development, the emergence of Indie Malaysian novels, have brought dissent among the literary and academic groups of main stream publishers. As the analysis of these three selected Indie novels, their themes, characters, subject matters and narrative style does not conform to the main stream and in fact appears to be in direct opposite of main stream publications and publishers. While Indie novels appear to be after a form of social and political justice similar to the 80s-90s mainstream Malay novels, the generation of writers, their methods and their obsessive pursuit of “truth” in response to the oppressive political, social and economic background differed. Not many will view this as a renaissance of Malay literature, however the increasing readership aforementioned and the involvement of a younger generation of millennial writers albeit in different styles with different pursuits imply a resurgence in the field of Malay literature. Isaac Asimov a famous Scientist once said, "It is change, continuing change, inevitable change, that is the dominant factor in society today. No sensible decision can be made any longer without taking into account not only the world as it is, but the world as it will be."

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\*For Correspondence : E-mail:khooyeyen@yahoo.com