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Relationship between Literature & Politics in Selected Malay Novels

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Abstract

It cannot be denied that politics has a connection with the field of literature as politics is often a source of ideas and literature a "tool" to politicians especially in Malaysia. Baha Zain once said, "writers or literates often make politicians a screen to show their dreams. Politicians usually see writers as the dreamers who are like branches of life in a tree of more important matters" (1982: 3). When discussing the two areas, the socio-economic issues that spark the themes of creative work are inevitable. In general, fiction writers cannot escape the political, socio-economic environment of a country, especially in Malaysia. The more political the situation of a country, the more political the literary works becomes as they are used as a voice for the community to support or protest the socio-economic administration of a government. Thus, a society's ideology and thoughts or expectations are often reflected in various genres of creative and flow works such as novels, short stories, poetry and drama. This research explores the relationship between literature and politics of Malaysia in the 1980s in particular, the novel genre written by selected Malay authors in the mainstream Malay literature.

Introduction

These recent decades have shown a tremendous tendency among Malaysian writers to tackle political questions in their works, either expressly or implicitly. Literary authors often make their work as a medium of political pronouncement. Literary works often produce political insights as well as their political ideology in their creative reality. Political novels are written expressly to raise issues, events and characters linked to society and indirectly to politics, government and power. Faulks (1992), states that politics is linked to institutions developed in a country and formed between the will of society divided into rulers and citizens. The *Oxford Dictionary* (1994) describes a more comprehensive and political understanding of the relationship between literature and politics; that is "knowledge and governmental arts, knowledge related to the form, organization and administration of the country or part thereof and its relationship with other countries" (Ariff, 2016).

Bearing in mind these definitions, literary works are not consensual depictions of a multitude nor a power but often expressed controversial views on sensitive topics related to religion or views in opposition of the government depending largely on its creator, in this case the writers. Conflict that is transposed into pages and confined in a fictional world is “allowed” therefore to enjoy a certain amount of freedom between the rulers and the general public in the ambivalent relationship which authors who thrive upon and generally literature survives upon. As Leo Tolstoy, George Bernard Shaw or Salman Rushdie have done, the act of writing can and will interfere with the power play in politics of any nation, government, society, or a particular institution. This is further reinforced by Milton C. Albrecht’s (1954) hypothesis that:

*literature “reflects” society; its supposed converse is that literature influences or “shapes” society. A third hypothesis is that literature functions socially to **maintain and stabilize**, if not to justify and sanctify, the social order, which may be called the “social-control” theory (Milton C. Albrecht, 1954).*

Ideally, it can be interpreted as a belief that literature is the platform in which people, the community or the state responds. As mentioned by (Sapardi, 2000), it means that literature should not be separated from political attitudes, authors' ideologies, publishers and readers. According to Sapardi in his study of Indonesian literature, the prohibition and restriction of literary criticism of the government is a recognition of the power of the written word, as hypothesized by Albrecht. More importantly, it acknowledges that literature has a broad influence on the way people think and act. Literature is definitely more than an aesthetic work but a form of control on ideology, politics, economy, socio-culture, law and religion of a nation, Malaysia literature notwithstanding.

Malaysian Literature

As stated by Sikana (2004) in his scrutiny of Malay Literature, he observes that:

“Literature and politics are like hunters with tigers. What hunters are trying to hunt is not a tiger, maybe a deer or a jungle. But it turns out that the hunters in the game have not always been tortured by tigers. To the tiger, the hunter became his rival. The food is a dream hunter. For the hunter the tiger becomes a barrier.”

His analogy of the hunter and the tiger is an apt and accurate description of the relationship between the Malay authors and politics in Malaysian Malay literature. The ambivalence is balanced by an unacknowledged dependence between the political scenario in Malaysia and Malay literature as allegorized in there being no hunt if there was no tiger and vice versa.

The parley between literature and politics is also reflected in the use of Malay literature in the political arena. For example, the symbolic betrayal and guilt between the classical friendship of Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat, two classical Malay heroes of the Malacca Sultanate often used as a symbol of ideal Malay Heroism that has been used countless times by Malay writers when alluding to the sacrifice of Hang Tuah in preserving Malay sovereignty. According

to Hassan (2016), the impact of *Korban Hang Tuah* the poem which inspired Raja Raja Muda Perak, Raja Nazrin Shah ibni Sultan Azlan Muhibuddin Shah when he launched the book *The Malays* at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in 2009 and also Hishamuddin Tun Hussein who went on to quote it during his opening speech at the annual Umno Youth convention in 1999, was unforeseen. As stated by Zurinah (2009), in her own blog claims that it was written as a call to re-evaluate the Malay circumstances; if Hang Tuah did not stop Hang Jebat from committing treason by killing the King. The allusion to the conflict arising from loyalty to King and country over loyalty to friend and comrade is lauded by those in government and the Malay rulers. Clearly, Zurinah Hassan has highlighted the pride of the Malays in their loyalty in unity. But Shahrudin (1993) mentioned in his book entitled *Konsep Wira Dalam masyarakat Melayu*, the evocation of Hang Tuah's act as an example of blind unthinking loyalty provides other avenues of interpretation to the poem. The ambivalent nature of the relationship between Malaysian politics and Malaysian Malay literature appears to be harnessed by the fluidity of interpretation enabling a two-way power confluence depending on who is in power.

This research will focus on a cross section of selected Malay novels that received greatest critical response in regards to the political themes that permeated the plot, theme, characterization and critical points that it sent across at the point of political changes in Malaysia. A. Samad Said's critically acclaimed nationalistic novel *Salina* (1961) which became a text-book for the secondary level represents the post-*merdeka* writers, while *SHIT* (1999), a controversial novel by National Laureate Shahrudin Ahmad is representative of the height of Malay power in the form of UMNO's superiority in the governance of Barisan National coalition in Malaysia. Faisal Tehrani's *Perempuan Politikus Melayu* (2002), the work of Faisal Tehrani, a prolific writer's opposition views of the current governance at that time and Azizi Hj Abdullah's *Kawin-Kawin* (2001) winner of the Sako 2 awards representative of the prevalent Islamic writings before millennial.

Ariff (2016) mentioned that political questions in Malay society have been presented in many classical traditional works such as *Malay History* (Sulalatus Salatin) and *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. They like the early Greek mythologies. Since the 1920s Malay novels reflected a local colour genre that proliferated storytelling stories, history books, constitutions, folklore, poems and poems. As mentioned by Ariff (2016), in this article "Malay political novels" or "Malay Protest novels" refer to novels written in Malay that are produced by Malaysian authors with critical views of political matters, presented in cynical, figurative or unambiguous form. Throughout the eight decades of development, modern Malay literature has changed not only in technique and focus but in its role in society pertaining to the political climate of Malaysia. While most works of literature stayed away from politically sensitive issues pertaining to Malaysian politics, there were some who managed to free themselves from being vehicles of government propaganda.

According to Talib (2010), observed that Shahrudin Ahmad's narratology in his novels express current political issues that target readers' experiences specifically their memory, power of recollection and understanding of the present political issues occurring in the country. The

current political issues presented in writing as a narrative strategy can create political awareness on certain aspects of the reader's heart, functioning to mobilize the reader's mind to immediately remember and interpret the actual events or events that have passed whether involving political, economic or religious matters. The author creatively translates his interpretation of events and political issues based on his own experience of the issue or perspective directly and indirectly. The changing political scenario undoubtedly influences the type of writing produced in a nation, Malaysia is no exception. *Juara* (1974) is the epitome of the political angst that is played pushing advantages and persecuting the weaker opponent to gain an ill-gotten advantage. Othman Kelantan likens political to a traditional game played with buffaloes where victory is the ultimate goal translated to a higher status and increasing power and luxury (Ariff, 2016).

Beginning with Classical Malay Literature in the colonial era, proceeding to the entry of Modern Malay Literature followed by the rise of Indie literature, Malaysian Malay literature has evolved along with the change of political powers in Malaysia. "Indie Literature" or fictional publications by independent publishers also refer to the pool of writers who are independent of the mainstream Malay Literature published by Dewan Bahasa Pustaka, the Malaysian Literary bureau. The tremendous growth of Indie literature supported by independent publishers such as Dubook and Fixi or also known as marginal literature as opposed to "main stream" literature that are edited and published by Dewan Bahasa Pustaka. It is obvious that the rise of these independent publishers with the support of publishers and readers is an obvious move to break the dominance of the premier literature in the name of freedom and an alternative space for broadcasting works that are considered provocative in terms of narrative or language. Hasyuda (2016) stated that the nature of indie work has been described as "rebellious and aggressive, beyond the habits embodied through the premier literary masterpiece"

Analysis

The 3 authors selected for this analysis evoke political ideology through the images, characters, places, objects and expressions used reiterating the classical styles of Malay authors. For instance, *Salina* (1961) by A. Samad Said invests political liturgy through the main character Salina in his classical novel with the same title while Shahnnon Ahmad *SHIT* (1999) represents overt views of political miasma critically couched in an allegorical satire exploiting the disgusting aspects of a dark humour. Similarly, the novel Faisal Tehrani's *Perempuan Politikus Melayu* (2002) is a critique of government and country through a more sophisticated modern structure reiterating the same themes of A. Samad Said's *Salina*. *Kawin-Kawin* (2001) a novel by Azizi Haji Abdullah differs in his critique using Islamic rhetoric as his vehicle for critique. Although there were many other political novels such as *Hujan Pagi* also by Said (1986) while *Sutan Baginda* by Ahmad (1989), Faisal Tehrani's novel differed in that it marked a change in Malay literary publication. All four novels addressed the theme of greed for power, an abuse of power by a corrupted government, cronyism, a persecuted and incriminated society with rampant and often negative critical views of the present government of the time of publication. These selected authors' styles of writings reveal the consciousness and political thought as well as the social

psyche that has continued to grow and change since the inception of the first protest Malay novel by Ishak Haji Muhammad entitled *Putera Gunung Tahan* (1937).

Literature Reflects Society

The Malaysian protest novel is highly aware of its role and function that is to utilize the *geist* of a people in order to impact the society. It is the “*Volkgeist*” or “National Character” evoked by Hegel (1902) that the early political Malay novels used as a platform to communicate their anti-colonial views. The promotion of this *volkgeist* appeared early before *merdeka*, the retreat of the British colonial from Malaysia which marked independence day on the 31st of August, 1957 with numerous short Malay novellas such as *Kawan Benar* (1927) by Ahmad Rashid Talu. But the element of politics and the acknowledgement of the novel as a political vehicle arose with the setting up of PASPAM (*Persaudaraan Sahabat Pena Malaysia*) in 1934. According to Hashim (2007); Yatin, Alias, Awang, & Burhanud-din (2018), the anti-colonial sentiments closely tied to anti-monarchical perspective were united with the intellectuals through PASPAM and subsequently the Malay novel genre took on a political aspect. It was *Salina* (1961) that was hailed as the *mahakarya* or masterpiece by Dewan Bahasa Pustaka after a ground breaking competition held to find a novel representative of the Malay ethos in 1958. But the rejection of “Gerhana” the original manuscript that eventually became “*Salina*” after the revision of certain passages that were deemed vulgar and “pornographic” (Mallari, Luisa J. 2000) and subsequent debates by Shahnnon Ahmad decades after about the suitability of a prostitute representing the Malay dislocation raises a question of denial, one that is interpreted by Mallari (2000); Omar, Rahman, Hamid (2018). as a preoccupation with “*asli*” or origins and “*perintis*” innovator.

Themes

The focus of this study is to analyze how the authors reflect the society through the themes, characters and narrative style of their works. The novel *Salina* (1961) is a story about a woman named Salina who was driven by poverty to find work as a prostitute in Singapore and Malaya (Malaysia) in the 50's. The main theme of oppression, poverty, and life impulse is cliché but reflected enough truth that pushed *Salina* (1961) to be accepted and raised as the *mahakarya* of that era; of course. with revisions that were befitting an Islamic society. But the very questions raised about the suitability of a prostitute in representing the degenerate Malay is replaced by an allegorical satire of the bowel sort that brought even more disgust to Malay Literature by Shahnnon Ahmad himself through his novel *SHIT* (1999) that was subsequently banned. The political repertoire illustrated by the implied meaning of atrocities committed by local politicians invited controversy as it did not fit in with mainstream Malay Literature that critiqued the government especially the head of government by alluding to them as “shit heads”. His scathing allegory highlighted the unethical, corrupt, scandalous, power hungry despots that he implied was led by the then Prime Minister of Malaysia under the Barisan National Coalition from the United Malays National Organization (UMNO).

SHIT was published in 1999 after the 10th General Election and the surprise ousting of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the then deputy who became the head of the opposition coalition. Shahnnon Ahmad was himself also involved in the general election representing the opposition

for the Sik parliamentary constituency which he won. *SHIT* (1999) appears to underline Malay literature's connection with politics begins with its conventional role as a vehicle of communication between the people and the state while the authors try to capture metaphorically their experience through their work regardless of the controversial nature of the work and powers that be.

Undeterred, Faisal Tehrani (FT) agrees with the observation that his novel *Perempuan Politikus Melayu* is saturated with political metaphors and symbolism. He claims that he was inspired by what he read in the newspaper about a farmer who was forced to send her son to the orphanage because his project was hijacked by unscrupulous people (2002). Similarly, Azizi Haji Abdullah's *Kawin-Kawin* (2001) won the coveted Sako prize as it raised various political questions in particular the controversial ideological power struggle in the country between the Islamic and the secular ruling party in Malaysia. Like all the political novels that were anti-government or protest in nature, Azizi's novel highlighted the abuse of power, corruption, cronyism, bribery, despotism and nepotism practiced by the ruling government. Che Abdullah (2015) mentioned that, the cronyism that is so familiar to the people is reflected in the marriage of convenience and subsequently a divorce of convenience to facilitate an economic gain for the estranged husband who is more than happy to release his wife in exchange for profit in the plot of his novel.

Characters

In criticizing the corrupt political leaders not sparing the women politicians through his characters like Datuk Zuri the Jentayu representative who used her position as a policy maker to capitalize on wealth; FT underlines the betrayal of trust given by the people as the "canker" in the country. Aside from indirect moral and ethical criticisms, FT also celebrates the past by revoking the glory-days of post-independence where freedom was the sole objective of the Malay heroes. He presents a historical backdrop that includes freedom fighters like Dato 'Onn Jaafar and organizations such as PUTERA, PKMM, API, CAUTION, SEASK and TANI BARISAN who were all bound together by patriotism and national independence. The spirit of patriotism is personified through the character of Haji Chenon whose sincerity is only surpassed by his love for his country and pride in Islam. Similarly, the characters Mas Umm and Siti Manurra in Azizi's *Kawin-Kawin* (2001) are symbols of victims and their lives a testimony of the gradual descend to degeneration which reflects Azizi's own view of the condition of his country in the face of the Malay political ideology as a result of the abuse of power by certain quarters in UMNO in the 1990s. The main antagonist Mualim is a despot personified that appears to be corrupting the whole political system.

A. Samad Said highlighted messages such as the severity of the lives destroyed by world war II in Malaya after the retreat of the English colonial and subsequently independence in 1957. This can be seen in the life of Katijah, a widow and her son, Hilmy, Salina and Abdul Fakar plus Nahidah and Zarina. The families, their homes and their possessions have been destroyed or seized and they live in poverty in a rented room belonging to an Indian merchant before moving to *Kampung Kambing*, originally a goat enclosure. Siti Salina the main character is also seen to be bereft despite being a diamond merchant's daughter before the war. Written after the retreat of

the English colonials, Japanese occupation and the pending separation of Singapore from Malaya, *Salina* by Said (1961) is a novel that reflected the soul of a nation that has been robbed by the angst of war and looking to cope with the loss through great sacrifice and a love for those around irrespective of their race, religion or weaknesses. As stated by Said (1961), this is personified through Salina the character who prostitutes herself to support her rambunctious family with no blood ties to her as a symbol of unity through solidarity. The novel's nationalistic campaign is undeniable through the thematic concerns and characters personified against a realistic narrative framework.

Similarly, *SHIT* by Shahnnon (1999) protest stance against the Malaysian political exegesis at the time of publication is unmistakable through the political satire and allegory of foul bowel parts as the backdrop of his novella as its title suggests. It is suggested that the characters themselves such as the followers or "shit heads" do not cause problems except for their paralysis. The culprit is "Pukimak" (PM) the head of the bowel system who is concerned with power that it abuses in order to keep it in power. The brutal and foul manner in which the characters are portrayed through their denigrating names and backdrop not to mention the evil plans and implementation of it exposes the political rot rife with corruption, oppression and foul play (Ahmad, 1999). The aggression and anger in which Shahnnon Ahmad pursues albeit metaphorically to expose the truth of the political climate differs from A. Samad Said's celebrated nationalistic novel *Salina* (1961), attesting to the obvious changed objectives and narrative strategies employed imply Malay literature's pulse on the changing political, economic and social climate of the nation.

As a nation with a muslim majority, a religious critique is also presented albeit not in the aggressive manner of national laureates but a simple allegory by Azizi (2001) entitled *Kawin-Kawin*. Written like a book moral book for edification of believers, this nondescript novel uses a parable that includes Muallim is a major figure in power in the Mas Umm district who abuses power for personal gain. He is an autocrat and wields an iron fist over his followers threatening them with economic devastation with any sign of betrayal (2001:164). Azizi's parable criticizes by implication the cronyism in the nation's political arena through the bequeathing of positions, tenders and contracts to families and friends by those in power (Che Abdullah, 2015). Azizi's novel may not have met the criteria of being a national *magnum opus* like *Salina* by A. Samad Said (1961) or a novel written by a national laureate or even an award winning novel like Faisal Tehrani's *PPM* (2002) but it is an example of Malay Literature's role as a platform for people's voices irregardless of their status.

Narrative Styles

From the inception of Malay novels such as *Salina* by A. Samad Said (1961), *SHIT* by Shahnnon Ahmad (1999), *Perempuan Politikus Melayu* by Tehrani (2002) and *Kawin-Kawin* (Azizi, 2001), the narrative styles have become more aggressive from a realistic backdrop in *Salina* (A.Samad Said, 1961) to the surreal one in *SHIT* by Shahnnon Ahmad (1992) thirty years later and the didactic parable in *Kawin-Kawin* (Azizi, 2001) also Faizal Tehrani's provocative Indie novel *PPM* (2002). The shift from nationalism to protest and a particular autonomy is outlined through

the Malay novels selected for this article. While the themes reflect the current social political needs of the environment around the writers, the increasing focus on the author's perspective is detected through the anger felt through their works. While Shahnnon Ahmad implies through his foul and disgusting political satire, Faizal Tehrani deliberately creates a classical realistic backdrop, creating another prostitute Jenny, in PPM (2002) deliberately in direct contrast to Salina as a metaphorical suggestion that Malaysia as personified by the original character who is responsible, pure in spirit and sacrificial has been betrayed and corrupted by the men in power around her as Jenny, his main character experiences. Doing away with a traditional sentimental approach, allegories, parables and metaphors, the independent writer who has Indie publishers like Fixi and Dubook at his disposal; writes without prejudice or editorial sensors by national publishers.

Conclusion

The role of Malay literature, in particular the novel genre, remains since its inception as an "index" of social political and cultural change as each of the selected novels thematic concerns assert. The Malay novels are not viscerally a critique of a particular few nor are they triggers for social unrest but appear to be a platform for the people to voice their discontent creatively as is in most nations. They are rather a "symptom" (Milton C. Albrecht, 1954) of a nation's social political health reflecting the social political, economic and cultural issues that plague the nation, an indicator that is increasingly becoming bolder and more transparent with the emergence of Indie novels in this millennial generation that are free from national sentiments. Politics and its impact on society will continue to be a fodder for Malay novels but the creative energy appears to be the constant change that will hopefully generate more interest in literary growth from the author and reader perspective.

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