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Tradition and Change in Contemporary Malay-Indonesian Poetry

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
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by

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PENERBIT UNIVERSITI KEBANGSAAN MALAYSIA
KUALA LUMPUR
1977
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CHAPTER ONE

THE NEW INDIVIDUAL

Aku ini binatang jalang
Dari kumpulannya terbuang.

I am a wild beast
Expelled from its herd.

Chairil Anwar.
THE impact of the idea of individualism on the society of the Malay Archipelago has been revolutionary. It has changed the concept as well as the function of the individual in his community, given him a progressive freedom, conferred upon him an identity and has even on occasion separated him from that community to the extent of alienating him entirely. It has been especially meaningful to the artists and thinkers who through the ages have discovered freedom of creation and thought which in turn appeared in their works. In literature itself it has broken the circle of tradition and ushered in formal experiments, thematic exploration and new artistic concepts.

The Malay peoples have seen at least three different kinds of individualism through the course of their development. The first was the quiet internal one present in the pre-Islamic age; the second was one that developed from cultural contacts with Islam and the culture of the West Asians; and the third an individualism that shows European elements. In the period we are concerned with, i.e., the years after the Second World War, we see the presence of all these three types, both in the artists and in their society. Generally in the works of a poet, one can more or less point to the different strains, however mixed they may be. In this chapter I propose to trace the impact of the first two, as a background for the third, which I shall be examining in some detail.

I

Traditional Malay-Indonesian society is founded on the collective functioning of its members as a machinery for its survival and continuity. It is generally self-sufficient both economically and politically. Economically it owns enough resources to feed, clothe and shelter its population without taking much from the neighboring villages. As a political unit it is based on a tight hierarchy with a rigid customary law, (also known as adat law in certain communities), which encompasses all the activities and practices of the people. Such a societal structure naturally depends on the stability of the system and institutions for its smooth and harmonious functioning. Members of this community are bound to their social responsibilities, which are normally quite exacting of their time and freedom. However, they have some freedom in certain areas of their life. For instance, they are free to cultivate their plots of land or let them lie fallow, plant vegetables instead of rice (if the quality of earth permits it,) keep goats, and fish in the river or sea, if they want to. They are also free to choose the time and method of work. Hard work is encouraged and so is piety or moral excellence.
The villager can excel in his own special area and can expect recognition for it from his neighbors. In this limited sense individualism does exist in the traditional society, whether it belonged to the pre-Islamic era or to modern times.

For better and more specific examples of individualism we have to look at the village talents. Among them we find various characters who become popular for their eloquence, humor or style of singing the pantun or kidung. Although collective functioning of the society is of utmost importance, individual talents are respected and admired. The youth who can sing his poems or perform a wayang kulit show (shadow play) or play the seruling (flute) or gamelan is always recognized by his community if not also by the king. He may even get to marry the penghulu’s (chieftain’s) daughter. Or if he is more independent of mind and desires he will find his own girl and marry her.

It is generally accepted that in such a society only the aristocrats at the summit of the hierarchy have complete freedom to be real individuals - the rajas and the princes in the courts and their blood relations in the desas (villages). However, these persons are only individualistic in their emotions and desires. More often than not they are individuals in the bad sense of being irresponsible and insensitive to other people.

There are, besides the aristocrats and the nobles, the real individuals of that traditional society. They are the pujanggas, thinkers or men of letters. Externally they may appear to be obedient members of their society, accept and obey their adat and play their particular roles, but as thinkers or men of letters they can be said to be individuals. In the act of creation of a literary work a pujangga is his own master in a world beyond the rules of his society or the desires of his superiors. He chooses his own words, recreates his own experiences and formulates his own thoughts. The sensibility to respond to the world with balance and insight, the talent for language and style are qualities that make an individual out of a person, however rigid the society he lives in may be.

Only an individual mind with an exceptional poetic talent can compose a poem that is as intense and compact as this pantun:

Tinggi tinggi simatahari,  
Anak kerbau mati tertambat,  
Dari dahulu saya mencari  
Baru ini saya mendapat.

A pantun is a quatrain with an abab rhyme. Each line contains between 8 and 12 syllables. The first two lines prepare us in image, sound and suggestion for the meaning proper in the last two, while a kidung is a verse form found among the Sundanese (of West Java) and the Javanese, and is quite similar to the kinantii in structure and rhyme-scheme. Cf. Chapter III.
Higher and higher noons the sun
A pet buffalo dies at its peg,
So long have I searched, (my only one)
Only now are you found

This translation cannot capture the intricate verbal and emotional complex of the quatrain. The rare compression of meaning, the delicate suggestion of the first two lines where the image of approaching noon is intensified by that of a dead pet buffalo in order to hint at its total neglect by the young man who has just found his love, are undoubtedly the fruits of an individual sensibility. Literary creation itself is an act of solitude. The composer of this pantun operated from the magic world of poetry where there is no society; only the whole cosmos of his mind, emotion and inspiration are present.

The genuises who created the pantun, kinanti and tembang forms, which are so much a part of the literatures of the Malay peoples, belong to this group of real individuals. They have transcended the common intelligence and talent and found for their society new modes and forms of expression. They have extended its tradition and given new life to their poetry.

The pantun and its related forms, the kinantis and the tembangs, are short poems, capsules of poetic thoughts and images. They were popular among young lovers, and were usually composed in one moment of poetic inspiration and still retain their popularity today among modern Malays. However, in longer forms like the kakawin or epics, the composing was done by court poets who wrote under the patronage of their kings. They were not as free as the pantun poet to choose any theme they wish to write on. Their subjects, understandably enough, were centered around the king and his country. Being court poets and a mouthpiece of the rajas they were obliged to express universal truths that could educate the rakyat (king's subjects) or justify the tenets of the official religion, or the actions of the king-patron. At times they had to manipulate history to please their patrons. They did not strive to be unique or personal as the pantun poet sometimes did. They were bonded not only to their kings but also to Siva and the gods. Thus at the moment of literary creation they had to take into consideration all these powers and their idiosyncrasies. That was part of their official duties. However, like the pantun poet, they had areas where they could be their

2Kinanti is a folk verse-form shared by the Sundanese and Javanese of west and central Java. Cf. Chapter III.
3A Javanese form usually having seven lines and varied rhyme-schemes. Cf. Chapter III.
own masters. For example, the actions of their kings were open to imagina­tive interpretation; so were the events of nature. Again their talents and sensibilities were their own which no king or god could change. Of course, in comparison to the modern poet who has no society, king or God between him and his experience, the traditional poets were fairly limited in their creative freedom. However, in such a society that existed at an early stage of development, their interpretations, minor innovations and new images were acts of the individual.

II

Hinduism and Buddhism came to the Malay Archipelago and were well assimilated into native ways. These new imports made the Malays Hindu-Buddhists in religion, gave them new rituals and a new divinity but left the organization of the society intact. Native kings became Hindu rajas, the pawang (shaman) became the priest and the peasant remained a peasant. The native hierarchy and the adat or customary law too were little touched. The status of the individual did not change much from what it was in pre-Hindu-Buddhist times. The relationship of the desa people to nature and the supernatural remained much the same except for the exchange of their ancestors for the Hindu gods. For the individual these powers were still remote; further, he had no direct access to them. While he used to go to the pawang in more order to ask something of them, he subsequently had to make the priest his inter­mediary. Even after the introduction of Sanskrit writing the literature of the people remained basically oral. In its qualities it illustrates a pre­modern period. The traditional mode of thinking, styles of creation and the interwovenness of poetry in the life and rituals of the people were practised right into the Hindu-Buddhist period.

Islam brought comparatively new elements to the Nusantara society. These elements came in the form of rationalism a new rational­istic logic in our time is the basis of modern thought and knowledge. Although it is still controversial as to who originally brought Islam to the region, it is certain that the religion brought with it a fairly dif­ferent set of values and a culture hitherto unknown. The impact of Arab and Persian accomplishment in science and philosophy in the works of Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Roshd (Averroes) al Ghazali and Ibn Chaldun, to name only a few, came in the wake of the religion. Their contact with Greek and Indian writings and thoughts gave them qual­i­ties of both the east and the west, which to the Malay peoples were attractively new and at the same time acceptable.
The basis of Arabian and Persian mathematics, philosophy, medicine, and social sciences is rationalistic. This rationalistic principle in the form practised by the Arabs (who learnt it from the Greeks) was not only new but very different from the mode of thinking of the Malays who approached their world with an intuitive aesthetic reasoning. The former stresses the power of a priori reason to grasp substantial truths about the world. Its main features are a priori reasoning and also the scientific logic that arises from it. These processes contrast greatly with the Malay intuition and aesthetics, as a mode of ‘thinking’. The meeting of these two modes resulted in a change in world outlook among the Malay peoples. Malay-Indonesian writings during the Muslim period, for example, show a marked change in mode of thinking. These documents are the results of this new rationalism. The study of Islamic principles (fiqh), metaphysics (tauhid), the Quran and the traditions (hadiths) has helped to develop a new concept and approach to knowledge.

These different areas of study all stress the modern analytical or linear logic not unlike that of the west. In the Malaysian-Indonesian area the study of Islam created the madrasah or pondok system of education, where young men and later women, too, in some places, lived in small huts around the madrasah or school-cum-mosque at which a famous teacher conducted his classes. These teachers were usually well-versed in the Arabic language and culture, who might have even stayed and studied in Arabia or Egypt. As the study of the religion and culture of the Arabs and the Persians continued, the new perspectives and values slowly seeped into the mode of thinking and culture of the Malay peoples.

This modern idea of individualism came at the same time as a vigorous rationalism. While in pre-Islamic society the freedom to be an individual was restricted to the princes and aristocrats alone, Islam in essence recognized the common man as an equal of his neighbor and prince. It continued through a brotherhood of believers on the one hand, but on the other hand it also encouraged each member of the community to be independent and free in his thoughts and ways. Fazlur Rahman, in considering the status of the individual in Islam, observes:

the primary locus of responsibility in Islam is the individual. The Quran says, ‘Today (on the Day of Judgment) you have come to us as individuals (furada), just as us created you.’ Again the Quran tells us, ‘Every soul earns but for itself, and no soul shall bear the burden for another, and ever thus shall you return to your Lord.’

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Islam looks upon a person first as an individual and then as a member of society. This is of course an important conceptual shift. While in the Hindu–Buddhist Malay–Indonesian society man was seen to be divided into different castes from the brahmin down to the untouchable, in Islam the king and his slave were equals before the eyes of God.

The Muslim individual was answerable for his deeds to his God. In the words of Fazlur Rahman, ‘the ultimate repository of the divine trust is the individual.’ He was trusted to his duty to himself, his family, community and God. He was free to find his own ways so that they would suit his personality rather than the desires of his society alone. The individual way was now more stressed upon.

There were elements of individualism in traditional pre-Islamic Malay society just as there was a special kind of logic or mode of thinking. The values of a new and different kind rationalism and individualism were transmitted to Malay–Indonesian society by Islamic missionaries and Arab–Persian merchants. They introduced a different way of looking at truth and reality. The scope of this study does not permit the analysis of literary works that show the element of Islamic and Arab–Persian values. However, it is sufficient for our purpose, I hope, to mention works that are so influenced, like *Syair Perahu*, *Syair Dagang* and *Syair Bunting Pingai* by Hamzah Fansuri who himself was of Arab extractions. Up to the sixties of the present century one can still discern the Islamic elements that have become part of the Malay way of thinking and life.

III

The European as colonizer first came with the Portuguese in the sixteenth century to Malacca. However, they did little in the way of influencing the Malays of the peninsula or the other islands as they were always in a state of war with them. It was the aggressive and deceitful business organizations of the Dutch and the British and later the colonial officers which were able to seize land from the native princes. As the islands were attacked and forced to submit through unfair treaties to their guns, soldiers and the Bible, the Dutch and the British at the same time worked on plans to change the society and ways of the Malay peoples to suit their style of administration, their culture and economic ambitions. The coming of Islam was comparatively peaceful as compared to that of the European. While the former was voluntarily accepted the latter forced himself on the people. The Europeans colonized their islands, drew upon their riches and looked condescendingly on their ways.