MODERN MALAY LITERARY CULTURE
A Historical Perspective

Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir
MODERN MALAY LITERARY CULTURE
A Historical Perspective

Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
CONTENTS

Introduction 1
The Impact of the West: Education in Colonial Malaya 2
The Beginning of Modern Malay Literature 20
Literary Conventions in Pre-War Writing 25
Post-War Literature: ASAS 50 32
Conventions in Immediate Post-War Literature 43
The Literature of Independence 46
Conventions in Post-Independence Literature 53
Malay Literature in the 1970s 56
The 1970s: Literary Conventions 68
Conclusion 70
MODERN MALAY LITERARY CULTURE: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

An approach often adopted in the study of modern Malay literature is to separate literary texts from the environment which produces them. Literature is seen as discrete, whose understanding calls for scrutiny of its structural elements only such as theme, technique, rhythm and the like. Context, is often peripheral to the study of literature. This paper, however, contends that both aspects are important and attempts to integrate them in its survey of modern Malay literary culture. It traces the socio-political changes which the country underwent from the period of British colonialism to the present nation state, and sees this historical context as an extra-textual factor which influenced the literature produced. No less important as a formative force are the literary conventions which writers inherit, how they adopt and adapt their literary heritage in the process of evolving a literary mode for their own situation and also their own unique role as they, as writers, influence the literary environment in which they operate. The survey also highlights writers' response to their immediate social realities and how this shapes and colours their perceptions of their society. Couched in literary expression, these perceptions draw attention to the prejudices, in short, the value orientations
evident in modern Malay literary works. In discussing these factors, this study seeks to point out developments which take place as well as show continuity which persists in modern Malay literature.

The paper is organized into periods, not as an attempt at periodization of modern Malay literary history, but merely to facilitate understanding. However, the basic assumption remains that appreciation of specific historical and cultural bases is crucial for a clearer understanding of modern Malay literature on its own terms.

The Impact of the West: Education in Colonial Malaya

The various policies introduced into the Malay states by British colonial administration wrought a major transformation especially of the social and economic landscape of the Malay peninsular. In particular its education policy was to have far-reaching implications on the production of Malay literature and culture. This was especially true of the early years when secular education was introduced into the country. In order to appreciate the impact of British presence in general and their education policy in particular, it is necessary to have an understanding of the structure of Malay society prior to British colonialism.

Traditional Malay society exhibited a rigid division between the ruling elite (bangsawan) and its subjects (rakyat). This division was based on birth and was strengthened by belief and custom. It was believed, for example, that rulers were vested with divine majesty (daulat) and that any infringement (derhaka)
on this daulat would incur a tulah (retribution). This served to consolidate the rulers' position as one which admitted no challenge. Custom also helped to perpetuate the stratification by laying down as desirable and proper such conduct as absolute obedience and respect for elders and chiefs. The subject class was therefore obliged to serve their superiors without question. In this highly stratified society, control of virtually all aspects of life lay in the hands of the ruling élite.

This élite class in traditional Malay society was made up of two groups, the ascriptive and functional, which sometimes overlapped. The former were royal kinsmen who automatically belonged to the Malay upper-class by virtue of birth. The latter exercised administrative and political functions, and as such enjoyed the authority and power which attended their social role. Within this functional élite, the sultan constituted the supreme authority as the head of state, the largest territorial unit consisting of districts which, in turn, were composed of villages. As the head, he had rights to land under his jurisdiction and was empowered to collect revenue from his subjects, usually in the form of goods, tolls and taxes on trade and produce. He was assisted by a number of greater and lesser chiefs who were heads of districts. These chiefs in turn were assisted by several officials, the lowest being the penghulu (headman) who was in charge of a kampung (village), the smallest political unit. A penghulu served, by and large, as a mediator between the ruling and subject classes, and was responsible for maintaining order in his village, assisting revenue collection and organizing compulsory labour (kerja) for the ruling class. Within this system, mobility from the lower to the upper strata, while not altogether impossible, was rare. When British presence was first felt in the Malay states, in the mid-nineteenth century, social structure within those states had become
prescribed, and was resistant to change (Roff 1967; Kennedy 1962; Tilman 1964; Syed Husin Ali 1965, 1977).

British penetration of Malaya began with the foundation of Penang in 1786. In 1826, the British grouped Penang with Malacca and Singapore to form the Straits Settlements. In 1874, the British signed the Pangkor Treaty with the Sultan of Perak, and this saw the appointment of a British Resident to advise the Sultan on all matters of government except those which pertained to Malay religion and culture. The British recognized that political stability was necessary for the development and subsequent exploitation of the country's natural resources and wealth. As such, they saw as their principal purpose the creation and maintenance of law and order along the lines of Western-type governments. Alongside this aim, but of less importance, was the principle of responsibility for the "advancement" of the Malays, a policy which was to be achieved without destroying the traditional fabric of Malay life. This dual purpose, introducing innovations where necessary on the one hand, and preserving traditional Malay life on the other, was to characterize British occupation of the Malay states, especially Perak, Negri Sembilan, Pahang and Selangor which came to be known as the Federated Malay States in 1896.

In implementing their colonial policy, the British retained, and indeed, reinforced the demographic pattern prevalent in the country. Prior to the coming of the British, the bulk of the indigenous population, ethnically Malay, were engaged in semi-subsistence agricultural production of wet rice in the rural areas. Some were fishermen and petty traders, while a few lived in the towns, especially around the royal courts, and worked as petty bureaucrats and artisans. Initially, some Malays were engaged in tin-mining. However, when the Chinese entered this
field, the Malay's traditional method of panning for surface tin was soon rendered economically unviable beside the Chinese water-pump which was able to mine tin underground. Further improvements in methods of mining and cheap labour imported from China, accompanied by greater world demand for tin, led to greater expansion of the industry, a process accelerated by British economic infiltration which relied heavily on Chinese middlemen. By the middle of the nineteenth century tin-mining was a large scale enterprise virtually controlled by the Chinese and employing Chinese labourers. These mining areas soon developed into urban centres such as Taiping and Ipoh with an overwhelmingly Chinese population.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century rubber was introduced into Malaya. The Malays, however, were discouraged from entering this new field both by their rulers and the British, and laws to this effect were passed. Tamil labourers were thus imported from India to work the rubber estates, and rubber industry soon expanded, accelerated especially by the pre-war rubber boom. With the intensification of British capitalist infiltration, tin-mining and rubber industry became full-scale capitalist enterprises with their commercial centres in the urban areas. Meanwhile, the Malays remained in their semi-subsistence economy which was confined mainly to the rural areas.

The growth of urban centres and a settled population resulted in the development of educational institutions for the children of the urban dwellers. At first, and as had already occurred in the Straits Settlements during the 1830s, schools were established by Christian missionaries for the primary purpose of disseminating their religion. In setting up schools in the Malay states the London Missionary Society sought to
promote Christianity through education. Bryson, for example, observed that "the missionaries were there to preach the Gospel and seek converts to Christianity as a first duty; education was merely a means to that end" (Bryson 1970, p. 14). The association with Christianity of schools in general, and English-medium schools in particular, was not without its effect on the Muslim Malays. It engendered hostility and opposition to education and effectively alienated the Malays from the only "modern" education available to the general population. So strong was the opposition that even when mission schools offered secular education, Malay suspicion could not be allayed.

Alongside the mission schools, the British colonial government also started government-aided English schools. This came about in the need for English-educated low-level clerical and subordinate staff, both in the government service and the private sector. Such posts thus far had been filled by clerks and other functionaries expatriated from the Indian Civil Service and from Sri Lanka (Ceylon). With increased British involvement in the Malay states, the need for such staff became more acute, and it was considered economical to train local people to fill these subordinate posts. So between 1883 and 1885 a few government English schools were opened in Perak and Selangor. In opening these schools, however, the British were careful to do so sparingly and, more importantly, to confine them to the urban areas. It was clear that the British tended to tread carefully in the sphere of education, a caution reflected in the stern warning of the Resident-General, Frank Swettenham: "The one danger to be guarded against is an attempt to teach English indiscriminately" (cited in Loh 1975, p. 15). In view of the demographic pattern already referred to, the concentration of schools in urban areas meant that they were not available to the bulk of the indigenous population. In effect, it was mainly
members of the immigrant communities who were able to avail themselves of the modern education offered by these schools.

The passing of the Elementary Education Bill of 1870 in Britain, however, signified British adoption of the principle that the state was morally and legally entitled to provide education for its people, a principle which was also gaining ground in Europe. In line with these developments in Britain, the colonial administrators in late nineteenth century Malaya began to turn their attention to the question of an expanded state education system for the indigenous population. Significantly then, for the colonial administrators state education meant education for the Malays. Furthermore, in conformity with their policy of preservation and innovation, the British devised an education policy which would retain intact the class division and the demographic pattern existing in the country. This meant the provision of two quite separate and distinct education systems, one for the élite and another for the masses.

Where education for the masses was concerned, the British held fast to their policy of preserving the fabric of Malay traditional society and its peasant base. Introduction of education, especially English education for the masses, would be seen as a breach of this policy. Moreover, the British were anxious to avoid what had come to be seen as "Macaulay's 'singularly tactless and blundering championship' of the English education" which had resulted in the anglicization of India and, as the British saw it, the problem of over-education which it entailed (cited in Loh 1975, p. 15). Given their Indian experience, the British shrewdly adopted a policy of vernacular education for the Malay peasantry. As R.H. Kenion, an unofficial member of the Federal Council remarked: