THE ORIGIN OF THE MALAY SHA'IR

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by

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Since 1963 I have been engaged in making an intensive study of the teachings and mystical ideas of the sixteenth century Malay Sufi poet and writer on doctrine, Ḥamzah Fānṣūri, and a critical examination of his prose works including his verses that have come down to us. The result of this effort has been set down in writing in the form of a book of two parts completed in late 1965. Due to its bulk and the many technical printing and editing problems that its text entails, the book is still under production, and will not be ready for presentation to the public for yet another year at least. In the concluding chapter of this book, I have in definite terms asserted that Ḥamzah was the originator of the Malay sha'ir. The brief discussion on the Malay sha'ir is almost incidental and does not occupy a prominent position therein since the book itself deals more with a detailed and comprehensive account of Ḥamzah's religious and metaphysical ideas. Nevertheless, enough is stated in the process of commentary on Ḥamzah's prose and verse to urge me to conclude positively that he was indeed the originator of the Malay sha'ir. I had then thought of elaborating on this subject—in which it seemed to me I had made an important discovery—later, in due course as it were; and now this 'due course' has come, for in January 1967 I came across an article by Professor A. Teeuw of Leiden entitled The Malay Sha'ir, problems of origin and tradition. Teeuw's important paper in which, after an extensive examination of the relevant available literary source materials, both internal and external to Malay literature, he put forward his idea that Ḥamzah's sha'ir is possibly the origin of the Malay sha'ir,

1. It was submitted and accepted as a Ph. D. thesis by the University of London in May, 1966, and it is now being published in the form in which it was presented.
has spurred me to re-examine my own conclusion on the same topic. Having re-examined the validity of the critical analytical method of approach by which I have arrived at such a conclusion, I have been able to satisfy myself in re-affirming it now. It is worthwhile and timely to re-write here some of my arguments on Ḥamzah being the originator of the Malay shaʿir based upon my conclusion as set forth in the concluding chapter of my book. I will, however, put forward further arguments not mentioned therein as they and this paper have a direct bearing on the subject of the Malay shaʿir exclusively and on my refutation of some of the theoretical considerations, hypotheses, assertions and doubts Teeuw has set forth in his paper, as well as correction of some errors, both trivial and grave, found therein. The present paper, therefore, must not be regarded as merely a reproduction of relevant ideas and statements in my book, for although it is based on those ideas and statements it is nonetheless a separate and full treatment of the subject considered in its own right.

It is indeed remarkable that while Teeuw was formulating his ideas on the origin of the Malay shaʿir by means of an extensive practical method of approach which has led him irresistibly to Ḥamzah Fanṣūrī’s works, I have independently thought along similar lines and have been led to the same sources to the extent that even the same passages from Ḥamzah’s prose and verse quoted by Teeuw have similarly caught my attention. But my practical method of approach to Ḥamzah has been intensive rather than extensive; that is, it is mainly through the testimony of Ḥamzah’s works alone that I have been led with increasing persistence to arrive at my conclusion.

At the outset I declare my general agreement with the final conclusion in Teeuw’s paper that Ḥamzah Fanṣūrī’s works are to be regarded as the possible origin of the Malay shaʿir. I do not agree, however, with his judgement that definite proof of its correctness will be difficult to furnish because older Malay literature must always remain a mystery to us. On the contrary, I think and venture even to predict that it will be difficult to furnish definite proof of its incorrectness. My general agreement with Teeuw’s ideas is, however, qualified by many disagreements, particularly on points which neutralize the validity of some of his important preliminary conclusions that affect the positive value of his final conclusion. It seems to me necessary to understand where and in what lie our fundamental differences in our solutions to the same problem.

Fundamental differences in our methods of approach lie not only in our practical, but also in our theoretical methodology. Teeuw's practical method of approach to the statement and solution of the problem is what I have called—to borrow his own expression—'extensive'; that is, he has been irresistibly drawn to Hamzah Fanṣūri's works as the possible origin of the Malay sha'ir through evidence of various types in Malay literature as well as reports in foreign literature that seemed to him to testify to the validity of his conclusion. The strange thing is that, while all the evidence he has marshalled in support of his ideas leads to Hamzah's works, those very works themselves have never been seriously considered or even understood by him. Instead, following others before him, he casts a veil of doubt on their authenticity and reliability on no reasonable grounds as if it were an excuse for an honourable withdrawal from the challenge posed by them. The analogy is as if he were a general who has to all outward appearances successfully marshalled his troops and led them on to the all-important strategic position, but who, having got there did nothing to conquer it and consolidate his victory—instead he withdraws and thereby concludes a kind of Pyrrhic victory. There are too many doubts and uncertainties and mysteries for him to be able to arrive at any definite and positive (not neutral) conclusion. I do not think that he has offered any rational theoretical propositions to validate his adherence to those doubts, uncertainties and mysteries; what he has offered are unjustifiable assumptions. I may add that, with reference to the preceding sentence, the criticism should not be regarded as restricted to Teeuw alone, but should also be regarded as extended towards the schools of scholars, orientalists in Malay literature in general, who although it may be said of some of them that they have made great contributions to the study of Malay culture as a whole, have all too frequently succumbed to the stagnancy of unreasonable doubt, the delusion of academic 'red herrings,' the false pursuit of pseudo-problems in their scholarly researches to the extent that during the last few decades research in Malay history and literature has become stifled, knowledge thereof stagnant. My method of approach is what I would call—in opposition to Teeuw's extensive method—'intensive' in that I have restricted myself primarily to the intensive study of Hamzah's works, his sources, polemical works directed against his ideas, the little that we know about his life and times and other directly relevant historical facts and theories; secondarily only the study of other factors which seemed to me not directly connected with Hamzah's works, his ideas and life and times. The authenticity and reliability of the available texts
of his works are for me no longer problematic questions. It will not be necessary for me to give here an account of my proofs demonstrating their authenticity and reliability as this has been done in my book. Suffice me to state briefly here only descriptions of three main methods demonstrating proofs of their authenticity and reliability. The first and most important and even indisputable proof is that resulting from a general linguistic approach applied to all texts of his works available, both prose and verse, in which methodological concepts in a modern semantic analysis are employed demonstrating that the texts were all the creative product of one and the same man who called himself and is called Ḥamzah Fanṣūrī. It also demonstrates that the key and focus words and key concepts were consistently applied throughout the various texts and reveal definite conceptual systems embracing particular ontological, cosmological and psychological systems in Muslim metaphysics. To the best of my knowledge, the method I mentioned above and the manner in which I have applied it has not been applied before in any study of Malay and even Indonesian literatures. The second proof results from verification of representations and quotations of the various texts as found in the works of others after Ḥamzah such as the works of Shamsu'l-Dīn of Pasai and Nūrūl-Dīn al-Rānīrī and others. This proof has to a certain extent also been used by Dr. P. Voorhoeve. The third proof is derived from the study of the nature of the texts themselves, which reveal the author to have mastery over the subject; and this mastery is revealed not in the subject matter of the texts, but in the manner the texts present the subject matter. This is also a very important demonstration of proof closely connected with the first mentioned. This proof and the method arrived at in demonstrating it has also, to my mind, not been employed in the study of Malay and Indonesian literatures in the past. There are, of course, other proofs derived from inferences and implications drawn from known historical facts. During the course of this intensive study of Ḥamzah’s works, I was able to familiarize myself with his thoughts, his vocabulary and the manner in which they are organized, the sense of his symbolism, and I became gradually aware that, on the testimony of what lay revealed before me, that remarkable man was the originator of many possible facts in Malay history and literature hitherto unknown—among them the Malay sha‘īrī. Our fundamental differences in methodology have each exerted their own influence directly on the questions we raised and the answers we offered pertaining to the problem of the Malay sha‘īrī. Teeuw’s question is: ‘Are Ḥamzah’s works the origin of the
Malay sha'ir?'—and his answer: 'It is possibly so, but . . . .'; my question is: 'Was Ḥamzah Fansūrī the originator of the Malay sha'ir?'—and my answer: 'Yes, according to every relevant available indication and inferences drawn from every relevant available material, particularly his own works.' It will be noticed that where the fundamental methodological problem is concerned, Teeuw's answer does not necessarily answer my question, while mine answers both questions.

In his paper, before arriving at certain important conclusions or in the course of arriving at those conclusions, Teeuw does justice to the discussion by giving the pros and cons as to whether on the one hand, the sha'ir, in spite of its alien name, is of indigenous Malay origin harking back to earlier times and, on the other hand, that like its name, it is of alien and comparatively recent origin. Unfortunately, although the facts he marshals in favour of the second proposition appear to me more convincing than those he aligns in defence of the first, he lays so much stress on the mysterious nature of early or older Malay literature that the mere assumptions he thinks are arguments in favour of the possibility of an indigenous origin of the sha'ir seem to have minimized the importance of his own conclusions. It were as though the one cancels out the other and we are left in doubt and stand about in defeat and awe of the Mysterious Past. The assumptions put forward in favour of an indigenous origin are not of the justifiable type, and those resorted to in favour of the possibility of an indigenous origin are based on credulity in certain nebulous and unverifiable 'theories'. It seems to me that before one can formulate any theory—historical or otherwise—one must, on the basis of facts gathered from what one knows and on the basis of inferences and implications about the relevant past or even present, that can be deduced from those facts, make positive statements of the nature of justifiable assumptions or even postulates in order that the theory may take definite shape. But if unnecessary doubts are created to assail the mind, no theory can take shape for some of the most fundamental elements of hypothesis such as a posteriori reasoning, relevance, fruitfulness in its applications and controllability are lacking.

My main criticism of Teeuw's theoretical methodology touching upon his method of hypothesis which has influenced his approach to the problem posed to the extent that he is rendered unable to be positive in his conclusions is that he has failed to clarify the concept of origin. Sup-

4. Teeuw cites Hooykaas' assertion for the validity of this argument (Teeuw p.433 and note 18). But Hooykaas' assertion is not authoritative, as it is nothing but mere assertion not justified by any logic or proof beyond guesswork!
pose we are writing about the origin of America. Should we go back to
the Declaration of Independence that gave it its national character?—or
to the Pilgrim Fathers who were the first Europeans to settle there and
make it their home?—or to Amerigo Vespucci who gave it its name?—
or to Christopher Columbus who discovered it for the Europeans?— or
to a scientific theory of evolution of the world that caused it to form
into a separate continent?—or even, finally, to God Who created it? In
a sense they all and many more have to do with the origin of America.
An answer to the question cannot at once be attempted because the ques-
tion is vague. It is vague partly because the sense in which America is
meant is not limited to any particular context. If it were so limited, then
logically the concept or origin in connection with the subject would
accordingly revolve around the relevant context. If the context were
politico-historical, then perhaps the first four political and historical
events would be relevant to a theory of the origin of America; and if
theological or metaphysical, then the relevance would revolve around
the last cosmological or ontological event. It is to be observed that the
more we limit the context in the ascending scale from the first to the
last, the less we deal with political and historical facts than we do with
theories and postulates and beliefs respectively. The historian who
believes in God, writing on the origin of America, need not begin with
God if what he writes is historical.

It is important to notice the simple
fact that no matter how vague the question posed, the concept of origin
conveyed by it has a rational limit—even if that limit be ultimately God,
or for those who reject that postulate, there will be other postulates
within the limits of reason itself which will limit the concept of origin.
In science the concept infinity is not meant to convey a limitlessness
that staggers human knowledge to sterility, but a rational limit in order
that human knowledge might set forth scientific theories as fertile
breeding grounds for it to give birth to many discoveries. In metaphy-
sics, eternity is the limit of time. It is true that Teeuw appears
to have
set a limit to the sense in which the term sha‘ir is meant as the Malay and
not the Arabic one, but in reality the limit is illusory for, the moment
we try to grasp it, it recedes into the shadowy recesses of the mysterious
past because the fundamental limit which makes the concept of origin
meaningful is left vague. Thus both subject and object are vague.
Everywhere in his conclusions he is inexorably led to the compelling
idea of a comparatively recent genesis of the sha‘ir—and yet in a mo-
ment of what can only be called unbelieving doubt, he paradoxically
breaks the rational limits within which the origin of the Malay sha‘ir
can be grasped, and joins that company of scholars who have sought to find ultimate answers in some kind of perpetual odyssey into the murky oceans of the past.

During the course of a somewhat extensive survey on the topic of the terms *sha'ir* and *shi'r* as found in Malay and Javanese literatures and in foreign reports, Teeuw makes the following preliminary conclusions:

1. that in Aceh in about 1600, the word *shi'r* or *sha'ir* still meant 'poem' in general;⁵
2. that the *Tāju'l-Salāṭīn*, whose text was written in 1602, contains no poems which exhibit the structure of present-day Malay *sha'ir*, and that the word *shi'r* (or possibly *sha'ir*) found therein conveyed the same meaning of 'poem' in general;⁶
3. that the roughly contemporary *sha'irs* of Ḥamzah Fanṣūrī must be compared (i.e. had the same connotation as far as the word *sha'ir* is concerned) with the *Tāju'l-Salāṭīn* text;⁷
4. that the *Sha'ir Perang Mengkasar*, written about 1670, although the subject matter is historical and not religious, derived direct influence from Ḥamzah's *sha'irs*.⁸

At this stage, Teeuw raises the decisive question as to whether Ḥamzah's works (*sha'irs*) are in fact the origin of the Malay *sha'ir*. Before he attempts to suggest an answer, he makes further preliminary conclusions:

5. that there is no external evidence for the existence of *sha'ir* as a literary genre before 1600;⁹
6. that internal evidence does not seem to suggest the plausibility for the existence of the *sha'ir* as a literary genre earlier than 1600¹⁰ (the *Sha'ir Ken Tambuhan*, which Winstedt believed to be of fifteenth century origin is more probably the product of the seventeenth or eighteenth century).¹¹

Before exposing grave logical and analytical errors couched in the above conclusions, I would like first to draw your attention to his reasons for not being able to give a decisive positive answer to the question raised concerning Ḥamzah's works being the origin of the Malay *sha'ir*:

I fully realize that it will be difficult to state anything with certainty in this matter. It would, for example, be difficult to prove

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⁵. Teeuw, p. 435.
⁶. Ibid., pp. 434-435.
⁷. Ibid., p. 435.
⁸. Ibid., p. 440.
⁹. Ibid., p. 442.
¹⁰. Ibid., pp. 442-445
¹¹. Ibid., p. 445
that there were no earlier poems of the sha'ir type in Malay: it could be argued that parallel to an Indo-Javanese, early Javanese literature, there must have been an Indo-Sumatran, early Malay one, of which in fact there are obvious relics preserved in Malay writings. Nuruddin ar-Raniri's denunciation of this sort of literary product in about 1640 is a clear indication of its existence. But because of the absence of manuscripts earlier than the sixteenth century and the fact that in Malay literature copyists were always potential rewriters, we shall never obtain any more precise knowledge of this earlier Malay literature.¹²

The arguments in the above passage are misleading because the mere assumptions are based upon dangerous generalizations and, what is more, the salient points are irrelevant to the hypothesis on the origin of the Malay sha'ir. Criticism of the above passage, and another which continues it which I will treat in an appropriate section,¹³ is not to be overlooked as it reveals the vague manner in which the historical premises are formulated and the non sequitur conclusions drawn. The argument that it will be difficult to prove that there were no earlier poems of the sha'ir type in Malay would in fact not be difficult to counter effectively. In the first instance, the argument is misleading. The demand to prove that there were no earlier poems of the sha'ir type in Malay is illogical since by it is revealed that the term 'proof' is to be taken to mean nothing short of actual production of all earlier poems in Malay in order to enable one to demonstrate that there were no poems of the sha'ir type—and this meaning is obvious from the mere fact that the two words were and no qualify it. The demand is not only illogical, it is unfair since conversely it is possible to actually produce some earlier poems in Malay which in point of external formal structure at least can be categorized as a sha'ir type, although it does not follow that any one of such poems can be said to be the origin of the sha'ir. The mere actual production of some earlier poems of the sha'ir type in Malay is not proof that any one of them could have been the origin of the sha'ir; and since the proof meant in the above argument is the demand for actual production, which at the same time is meant to demonstrate actual non-production of its object, it is just as difficult to prove that there was an earlier poem of the sha'ir type in Malay that can be demonstrated to be the origin of the sha'ir. One of some of the earlier poems

¹². Ibid., p. 440
¹³. See below, pp. 15 foll.