

Perspective of Abdullah Munshi as the father of modern Malay literature

Rahimah Hamdan *, Arba'ie Sujud, Nik Rafidah Nik Muhamad Affendi

Department of Malay Language, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract: The Western colonization of the Malay world, especially by the British, had a powerful impact on Malay literature. This was consistent with the mission of the colonialists, whereby their presence in the colony would never be forgotten. One effort by the British that will always be remembered to this day is the division of Malay literature into two periods, the traditional and the modern, with the recognition given to Abdullah Munshi as 'The Father of Modern Malay Literature'. Through two works by Abdullah Munshi, namely *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah* and *Hikayat Abdullah*, Malay literature was introduced to a new literary convention that was ego-oriented, critical and with themes other than fantasies or fables. Because of this 'modernity', Abdullah Munshi was 'excluded' by his own audience for challenging the old conventions that had been passed down. It was only almost half a century after his death that budding writers started to copy his writing model. Accordingly, several local and Western scholars emerged to express their views with regard to the recognition given to Abdullah Munshi as the 'The Father of Modern Malay Literature'. Therefore, the objective of this study was to explain the views of those scholars and to analyse the factors that caused this difference in opinion. This study employed a descriptive method to explain how Abdullah Munshi's image was created by the West and how the renewal of this lie disturbed the Malay rulers and the community. As a result, 'The Father of Modern Malay Literature' successfully fulfilled the goal of the West in Malaya despite the fact that it was offensive to Malay literature itself.

Key words: Individualism, Malay Literary Convention, Modern Malay Literature, Traditional Malay Literature, Western Colonialization

1. Introduction

The Malay manuscripts that have been passed down, which are the *magnum opus* of the Malay government, provide evidence of the birth of a literary institution known as the 'court poets'. In fact, this group of 'court people' were commissioned to compose various genres of literary manuscripts as well as letters or messages that were sent by the king to commemorate the establishment of diplomatic relations with other governments (Siti Hawa Salleh, 2009:135). This meant that the court poets were individuals who understood the laws, customs and taboos of the court that served to legitimise the sovereignty of the king. Therefore, as the 'court intellectuals', their main goal was to compose works that revolved around the 'truth'. However, the court poets or authors such as Tun Seri Lanang, Raja Chulan, Raja Ali Haji and several others had to abide by the existing constraints, especially those set by the king, as the patron of this pursuit, who certainly did not condone any criticism against him or his system of government. Therefore, the Malay authors had to use their intellect here to manipulate the subtleties of the Malay language by resorting to testaments, symbolisms, allusions, metaphors and several other forms to describe the 'reality' without inviting the wrath of the king. This

literary convention was in line with the definition of '*sastera*' (literature) which means: "1. A compilation of good essays, with beautiful language and nice contents; 2. Artful language, where it can be seen that the language used in the literature generally has an artistic style, then the 'literature' can also mean the art of language" (Abdul Rahman al-Ahmadi, 1966:3).

Throughout the centuries, the conventions of Malay authorship have been progressing smoothly, starting from the development of Islam in the 15th century AD. Several genres, especially works of historiography, *hikayat* and many others were composed in keeping with their category as the products of 'court literature'. However, the arrival of the British in the Malay World disturbed the allegiance to these authorship conventions by introducing the growing trend of realism from the West. This trend, characterized by reality, gave authors the freedom to voice their opinions without any constraints from other parties. This 'modernity' was introduced by the British into their colonies, including Malaya. Through Abdullah Munshi and his autobiographies, *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah* (1838) and *Hikayat Abdullah* (1843), the corpus of Malay literature started to experience a 'culture shock' (Skinner, 1978:468). Furthermore, the introduction of this new genre into Malay Literature resulted in

* Corresponding Author.

the literature being divided into periods, i.e. the traditional and the modern, whereby Abdullah Munshi was characterized as 'The Father of Modern Malay Literature'. However, starting from 1907, the recognition accorded to Abdullah Munshi as the founder of Modern Malay Literature elicited various reactions that triggered a debate between Western and local scholars. Therefore, the objective of this study is to use the descriptive method to explain the views of some of these scholars. This study will only focus on the opinions of scholars who, throughout their studies, acknowledged or opposed the recognition of Abdullah Munshi as 'The Father of Malay Literature'. Indirectly, this study will highlight the background of the development of Malay literature that led to the division of the traditional-modern periods.

2. Perspective of scholars who acknowledged the recognition of Abdullah Munshi

Colonization by the British introduced a new genre to the colonised communities, especially in Asia. What was interesting was that the colonization experience in India gave the British such a wealth of experience that they were motivated to choose an author of Tamil origin, such as Abdullah Munshi, in Malaya. According to Skinner (1978:469), the earliest 'diary' in the Asian continent was produced by Ananda Rangga Pillai, the secretary to Mr. Duplex, in Pondicherry in the middle of the 18th century AD. Thirty years later, in 1786 AD, the first travelog in the Indian language (Malayalam) was produced by Paramakkal Thoma after accompanying the Bishop of Kodunggal to Rome (Skinner 1978:469). Meanwhile, the first Malay language travelog in Malaya was introduced through the *Hikayat Perintah Negeri Benggala* by Ahmad Rijaluddin in 1810 AD (Skinner 1978:466). He was the first Tamil native who succeeded in writing a travelog on the encouragement of Captain Robert Scott, a British trader who proposed that their journey from Penang to Calcutta, India be recorded. Then, on 27 March 1838 on a journey to Kelantan, the name of Abdullah Munshi appeared in response to a challenge by an American missionary named Alfred North that a travelog/autobiography be written, thus resulting in the writing of the book, *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah* (1838). Clearly, in this work, Abdullah Munshi applied the idea of realism in his writings at the request of Alfred North (Skinner 1978: 481). Based on this writing scheme, Abdullah Munshi frankly criticised the Malay ruler and his government from his personal observation without taking into account the sensitivities of the Malay community. His enthusiasm to produce works on the scale of realism was intensified through *Hikayat Abdullah* (1843), which was described as a successful contribution by Abdullah to the world of Malay literature, as stated by Skinner (1978:470):

"In Malay literature, the transitional stage between a 'classical' and a 'modern' literature is usually associated with the name of Munshi Abdullah

who, although obviously writing with one eye fixed firmly upon his patrons, seem nonetheless sincere in expressing views that are at variance with (sometimes severely critical of) many aspects of the society he had grown up in; he does so moreover in an individualistic, even 'journalistic' prose style that is clearly different from that of the 'classical' writers. The sheer range of Abdullah's work is impressive and shows clearly how Abdullah bridged the gap between classical and modern".

The praise by Alfred North (Skinner, 1978:480-481) that Abdullah's writing was "[...] a work of singular interest in beautiful Malay, and in all respects a new thing in the language" led to him being bestowed the title of 'Founder of Malay Literature' by R.J. Wilkinson in 1907. Wilkinson (1907:60), who was the secretary to the Resident of Perak, was the first individual to elevate Abdullah Munshi as 'the pioneer of Modern Malay Literature' through his writings in *Papers on Malay Subjects* in 1907. *Hikayat Abdullah* was used as a reference by English cadets in an effort to understand the Malay worldview and values. This contribution by *Hikayat Abdullah* became more meaningful when Wilkinson (1957:i) adopted no less than 15,000 words from this work to be included in the *Kamus Melayu-Inggeris (A Malay-English Dictionary)*, which he published. Abdullah Munshi's work continued to be used as a 'model' by scholars in the colonial period in an effort to understand the worldview and the ethos of the colonised society. For example, Thomson (1984:323), in 1864 argued that Abdullah, "did a rare thing amongst the Malays. He wrote an ample autobiography in the Malayan language". This argument was supported by Winstedt (1940:117), who was of the opinion that Abdullah was an innovator in Malay literature because his works inspired the idea of realism in his community. A local scholar, Za'ba (1940:142), believed that Abdullah managed to change the allegiance from elements of fantasy and legends to contemporary writing. Skinner (1959) continued to bestow on Abdullah Munshi the highest title as 'The Father of Modern Malay Literature'. Indirectly, Malay literature is divided into two periods, the traditional and the modern. The courage of Abdullah Munshi in introducing a new Western style to Malay literature to the extent that he was prepared to be sidelined by his own people (Skinner 1959: vi). Skinner (1959:6) added that Abdullah Munshi was aware that through these new tools his call to the Malay community to shed their inherent ignorance in Malay literature and culture could be realised. Indirectly, he was hoping that Malay authors would move forward and strive to 'come out' of the conventional style of writing. Skinner's (1959:6) reason for raising the stature of Abdullah Munshi was reinforced by his argument that Abdullah wrote with his very own style without any model or copying from Malay individuals before him. However, Malay authors after Abdullah had a role model to emulate if they wished to discuss 'modernity', what more when journalistic developments at the end of the 19th century AD

dispersed the seeds of 'modernity' that were first planted by Abdullah Munshi, such as 'democracy in writing' and 'photography'. Based on these elements, Abdullah Munshi deserves to be recognised as an agent of change in Malay literature. Skinner's opinion was expanded on by Ismail Hussein in 1974. He (1974:1) based the divide between the traditional and the modern in Malay literature on the introduction of the printing machine. For him, the printing machine not only brought about changes to Malay literature but also revolutionised the concept of Malay literature. It was from here that Abdullah Munshi should be recognised as the founder because of his connection to printing.

A. Bakar Hamid (1979), A. H. Johns (1979) and Yahya Ismail (1987) also agreed and acknowledged Abdullah Munshi's style, describing him as an "individual presenting a personal point of view and who is one of the earliest expressions of the encounter between East and West". This was reinforced by the opinion of Kassim Ahmad (1981: xiv-xv) that Abdullah Munshi introduced democratic values and injected fresh vigour into the Malay community. Malay authors were nurtured to be courageous in voicing their views in their works. Mohd. Taib Osman (1988:281) also praised the ability of Abdullah Munshi in discussing his personal criticisms of contemporary issues in a transparent manner in his works. For him (1988:281), Western civilization characterised modernity, and Abdullah Munshi was 'westernized and symbolised the new Malay world or civilization'. In that regard, it is only appropriate that Abdullah Munshi be recognised as 'the originator of Modern Literature'. Meanwhile, Muhammad Hj. Salleh (1988: xiii) agreed with Mohd. Taib Osman that although Abdullah's writings retained the classic style in their contents, his works were more critical and free in using modern elements with a new perspective. Clearly, several of the above scholars acknowledged that the recognition given to Abdullah Munshi marked the beginning of the modern period in Malay literature. Obviously, Abdullah Munshi was prepared to fend off any implications that may have arisen from his courage in changing the conventions of Malay writing because it was mentioned, "[...] its 'newness' derived from its realism and it is this realism that is seized upon Abdullah as being the hallmark of a new, modern literature" (Skinner 1978:471).

3. Perspective of scholars who opposed the recognition given to Abdullah Munshi

Although Abdullah Munshi successfully introduced a new perspective into the world of Malay literature, his contributions remained doubtful, and he was even denied recognition. For example, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1971) challenged the recognition given to Abdullah Munshi by suggesting that Hamzah Fansuri, an intellectual from Aceh, deserved that title (al-Attas 1971:28-29). According to him, Abdullah merely continued with tradition in writing *Sejarah Melayu*, which was

"[...] gradually being displaced by the new stream of literature brought about by Islam". Furthermore, Abdullah only continued with the 'modernity' introduced earlier by Hamzah Fansuri as the style of individualism, inner self-expression, creative use of language and its ambiguity (al-Attas 1969:44). This opinion was supported by A. Teeuw (1989:410-418), who stated that the 'modernness' of a figure depends on how the audience is encouraged to find and discover themselves as the 'modern man'.

Sweeney and Phillip (1975: xxiii-xxiv) believed that Abdullah Munshi was a figure whose writings were 'ego-oriented'. This was evidenced by Abdullah's ability to forget about the Malay literary conventions that were being embraced at that time, let alone to accept the switch in the patronage of the arts, which was no longer dominated by the Malay rulers. Furthermore, according to Sweeney and Phillips (1975: xxiv), Malay authors who were working with Europe, with 'its individual' advantage in writing, had a tremendous potential of which the Malay court composers were unaware of. For example, Abdullah Munshi was the first author who was clever enough to take advantage of this opportunity. This was proven in the 19th century AD, when the impact of Abdullah Munshi's work was felt by the European community in the Straits Settlements. They printed his book, sold it, translated it into English and even referred to it for academic research purposes. However, Abdullah's writings did not have the expected impact on the Malay community and that is why he did not have any followers after his death. After the end of the 19th century and in the early 20th century AD, the seed of Abdullah Munshi's writing style, for example, his autobiography and biography, started to bear fruit, and began to be emulated by his own son, Munshi Ibrahim, and authors from Johor such as Mohamed Salleh Perang and Mohamad Said Sulaiman.

The rejection of Abdullah Munshi as 'The Father of Modern Malay Literature' intensified when Hassan Ahmad (1976:289) agreed with the idea by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. According to him, before Abdullah Munshi, figures like Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin ar-Raniri had much earlier on introduced the elements of rationalism and discarded elements of superstitions and fantasies in their compositions. What's more, the writing style that was championed by Abdullah did not symbolize the conventions of real Malay penmanship. Sweeney (1980:16-17) added to this when he said, '*Abdullah's postulated audience was European, not Malay, and that Malay humility is not one of the implied author's qualities*'. Thus, the individual who most deserved that honour was Muhamad Salleh Perang because he composed his autobiographical works for the Malay rules and audience (Sweeney 1980:18). According to Sweeney (1980:15), Abdullah Munshi was unpopular among his contemporaries and is only now being accepted by the Malay community. This view was reinforced by Sweeney (1980:17), who stated that Abdullah's criticisms were aimed at

promoting his name among the European patrons. In addition, how could such an honour be awarded to an individual who was not a pure-blooded Malay (Ras 1985:341)? Ras (1985:341) pointed out that although Abdullah Munshi was born in Malaya, had mastered and was fluent in the Malay language, and was able to read Malay literary texts without difficulty, he remained proud of his Tamil roots. Therefore, it was not surprising that Abdullah Munshi was so brave in his criticisms of the Malay rulers and ignored the Malay literary conventions that had been passed down for ages. He suggested that Abdullah Munshi should be rightly dubbed 'The Peripheral of Malay Literature' only (Ras 1985:341). Watson (1989:3) shared the opinion of Sweeney (1980) and Ras (1985) that the recognition accorded to Abdullah Munshi was questionable because his writings were not for the Malay audience.

The last scholar whose interesting opinion should be highlighted is Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir (1997). She expressed the view that the recognition given to Abdullah Munshi only acknowledged the definition of 'literature' in the understanding of the West and not that of the Malay community. If Abdullah Munshi's works were being praised for 'their contents' and not for their 'aesthetic' value, this meant that the Malay community recognised figures who lack 'literary value'. Obviously, Ungku Maimunah's opinion (1997:186) called for a more in-depth study into the recognition accorded to Abdullah Munshi. She added that the Malay community had to accept a 'Father of Modern Malay Literature' who produced 'non-literary' works. This peculiarity added to the confusion when the recognition accorded to Abdullah Munshi as an important figure in Malay literature was 'offensive' to Malay literature itself (Ungku Maimunah 1997:186).

4. Conclusion

Based on the scholarly debate with regard to the recognition of Abdullah Munshi as 'The Father of Malay Literature', it was found that those who approved of it outnumbered those who were against it. Most reacted differently and expressed conflicting sentiments. For example, if the opinion came from a colonial scholar, it was inclined to praise the contributions of the imperialists to the colony. According to Cohn (1996:46), this was a trick of the colonialists, in line with the motto 'Knowledge is Power', to ensure their presence was welcomed in the colony. This was proved by the experience of the British in India, that "To appear legitimate in the eyes of the Indians, the British thought they had to demonstrate respect and interest in those Indians and institutions that were the carriers of the traditions". Thus, it comes as no surprise that they continued with this formula when they colonized Malaya. Meanwhile, some of the scholars who opposed the recognition given to Abdullah believed that a great 'modern' writer is one who fulfils his responsibilities

to his audience. For example, Wang Gungwu, as quoted by Hadijah Rahmat (2001:57), opined that "[...] the sense of community or social responsibility is stronger than a writer's sense of individualism, and in fact the writer's studies invariably present the perceived need to hold on to one's culture in the face of change".

References

- A.Bakar Hamid. (1979). *Diskusi Sastera, Jil.II: Kesusasteraan Moden*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Abdul Rahman al-Ahmadi. (1966). *Pengantar Sastera*. Kelantan: Penerbit Kelantan.
- Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib (1971). *Concluding Postscript to the Origin of Malay Shair*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. (1969). *Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Cohn. B.S. (1996). *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Hadijah Rahmat. (2001). *In Search of Modernity (A Study of the Concepts of Literature and Notions of Self in Traditional Malay Literature*. Kuala Lumpur: Akademi Pengajian Melayu.
- Ismail Hussein. (1974). *Sastera dan Masyarakat*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Pustaka Zakry Abadi
- John.A.H. (1979). 'The Turning Image and Reality in Malay Perceptions of the Past'. In A.Reid & D.Marr, *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd.
- Kassim Ahmad. (1981). *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah*. Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti.
- Liaw Yock Fang. (1985). Reputations Live On: An Early Malay Autobiography by Amin Sweeney. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, xvi (1): 167.
- Mohd.Taib Osman. (1988), 'Moden Malay Literature', In Muhammad Hj.Salleh, *An Anthology of Contemporary Malaysian Literature*, Pp.281-293, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Muhammad Hj.Salleh. (1988). *An Anthology of Contemporary Malaysian Literature*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Ras, J.J. (1985). 'Book-reviews. Ahmad Rijaluddin's *Hikayat Perintah Negeri Bengkulu*. Edited and Translated by C.Skinner', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, xvi (2): 341.
- Siti Hawa Haji Salleh. (2009). *Kelopak Pemikiran Sastera Melayu*. Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

- Skinner, C. (1978), 'Transitional Malay Literature. Part 1. Ahmad Rijaluddin and Munshi Abdullah', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 134 (3): 466-487.
- Skinner, C. (1959). *Prosa Melayu Baharu*. London: Longmans.
- Sweeney, A. (1980). *Reputations Live On. An Early Malay Autobiography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sweeney, A. and Phillips, N. (1975). *The Voyages of Mohamed Ibrahim Munshi*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- Thomson, J.T. (1984). *Glimpses into Life in Malayan Lands*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- Ungku Maimunah Mohd.Tahir. (1997). 'R.J.Wilkinson dan Pensejarahan Kesusasteraan Melayu Moden. In.Shafie Abu Bakar & Mohamed Anwar Omar Din (Eds).*Peradaban Melayu*', *Jabatan Persuratan Melayu*. Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- Watson, C.W. (1989). 'The Study of Indonesian and Malay Autobiography', *Indonesia Circle*, 49 (6): 3-18.
- Wilkinson, R.J. (1907). '*Malay Literature, Part 1. Romance, History, Poetry*'. *Papers on Malay Subjects*. The Federated Malay States Government Press.
- Wilkinson, R.J. (1957), *A Malay-English Dictionary (Romanised)*. London: Macmillan.
- Winstedt, R.O. (1940). 'A History of Malay Literature', *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, p.xvii.
- Yahya Ismail. (1987), *Sejarah Sastra Melayu Moden*. Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti.
- Zainal Abidin Ahmad. (1940), 'Modern Developments', *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 17: 142-162.