

Contemporary Malay Literature and Attitudes to Islam

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ABSTRACT

In contrast to major Malay novels of the 1960's, Islam plays a formative role in the literature of postmodern Malaysia. The author delineates two positive and two negative ways in which Islam is being used in contemporary Malay literature. As a complex system of beliefs, Islam offers a network of symbolism for expressing emotion and, with its highly developed philosophical tradition, Islam offers a vantage point for evaluating new theories. On the other hand, Islam can serve as a cognitive framework to exclude certain groups or, indeed, to legitimate shifts in gender relations.

ABSTRAK

Jika dibandingkan dengan novel-novel Melayu tahun 60-an, kini Islam memainkan peranan yang menentukan dalam sastera Malaysia pasca-modern. Penulis membahas empat peranan Islam dalam sastera Malaysia kini; dua peranan dianggapnya positif dan dua negatif. Sebagai sistem kepercayaan, Islam mengandungi jaringan simbol yang dapat mengungkapkan emosi, sedangkan dengan tradisi filsafatnya yang canggih, Islam dapat berperan dalam penilaian teori baru. Namun demikian, Islam dapat dimanfaatkan sebagai rangkaian kognitif yang memencilkan golongan-golongan tertentu, bahkan, mengesahkan perubahan dalam perhubungan gender.

Susan E. Ackerman (1991:193) has argued that: "Industrialization in Malaysia has been accompanied by protracted ideological struggles to construct a new version of Malay identity based on Islam and to moralize the state, which mediates the Malay community's relations with the market." There can be no doubt that there have been enormous changes in the social constitution of Malaysia over the past twenty years (see Kahn and Loh 1992; Tan 1990), and that Islam has played a prominent part in this change in symbolising Malay attitudes towards the condition and aspirations of the Malay community itself and towards the wider world, both within Malaysia and beyond.

"Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia", to use Chandra Muzaffar's term (1987), or "The Reflowering of Malaysia Islam", to use Judith Nagata's

(1984), has taken many forms. Some of these relate to widespread, initially rural-based political movements, such as PAS (Kessler 1978). Others, such as Perkim, were government sponsored bodies directed towards the conversion of non-Malays to Islam. The Jemaat Tabligh derived from India and presented an intellectual forum for an urban professional Malay membership with a missionary commitment. Still others were youth movements, such as ABIM and Darul Arqam, and had many features in common with the New Religious Movements to be found in the West during the same period (such as the Hare Krishna Movement and the Unification Church or the so-called "Moonies").

In this brief paper I seek to give some current soundings on Islam as seen through Malay literature written during the 1980s. It is my opinion that scholars must be increasingly sensitive to what Islam is saying and how it is being used if we are to understand the changes currently taking place on such a wide scale in Malay society.

THE ABSENCE OF ISLAM

It has possibly always been the case that Islam is a major feature of Malay culture but it has not always seemed an obvious fact. In the field of Malay literature, to confine myself to my own field of expertise, Islam has not been something with which critics felt they must come to terms.

The major novels of the 1960s, for example, were *Salina* by A. Samad Said (1961) and *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* by Shahnnon Ahmad (1966). *Salina* is the story of a prostitute, Siti Salina, and is set in a Malay shanty-town in Singapore. *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* tells of the vicissitudes of a peasant family in Kedah, and their struggles to survive in the face of overwhelming natural odds. The Dutch scholar, A. Teeuw, praised *Salina* in 1964 for the author's sympathy for the lower classes of Singapore, his evocation of a particular social setting and its technical complexity. He dismissed the religious figure of Haji Karman as a representative of "the old order of society, already gone forever". Haji Karman, Teeuw noted, "can only shake his head over the way the world has changed, but he has no answers for contemporary listeners" (A. Samad Said 1975: vi). A. H. Johns, in his pioneering study of Shahnnon's works, significantly entitled "Man in a Merciless Universe" (1971), saw the religious dimension of *Ranjau* in terms of the preparation for battle (as in the *Bhagavad Gita*) and minimised the deep commitment to the sovereignty of God which marks the book from its opening paragraphs:

Mati hidup dan susah senang dipegang oleh Tuhan. Dipegang oleh Allah Azzawajalla. Ini pegangan Lahuma sekarang; malah telah menjadi pegangan yang kokoh sejak datuknya Haji Debasa dulu

Today critics are likely to be much more aware of the religious gaps in these texts. Othman Kelantan, for example, a former lecturer in the Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, and a major novelist himself, refers to both books in his short story "Keputusan" (1984) and manages to subvert them both. Lahuma and Jeha are described as "rich peasants" (they own 14 *relong* of land, something Shahnnon considers a tragedy), but ignorant. The major character of Othman's story condemns the once considered heroic couple as "stubborn", "victims of their own stupidity", unwilling to ask others for help, and "religious, without properly understanding the teaching of Islam" (Aveling 1991:12). Salina, too, is a "victim of her circumstances" who failed to act intelligently (just as Lahuma and Jeha had), who wasn't "a very religious person" or capable of "thinking about anything in any depth" (Aveling 1991:15). The same criticisms are found in Ahmad J. Hussein's "Sebelum Berangkat" (1989). Salina is an insult to Muslim Malay women, unable to use her intelligence to free herself from her ignominy and her dependence on her immoral lover Abdul Fakar. Her sins are too extreme for Haji Karman, or "Ustaz Karman", to be able to help her. Lahuma is foolish, stupid, ignorant and follows a form of Islam that is based on wicked superstitions and far removed from the genuine and glorious teachings of the faith as it really is (Talib Samat 1991:357, 359).

A different sense of Islam has led to a different and more antagonistic reading of these two works.

THE AFFIRMATION OF MALAYAN ISLAM

During the 1970s, the demands for a more specifically Muslim form of Malay literature (*sastera Islam*) became very explicit. The most extensive argument for a religiously based Malay literature came from Shahnnon Ahmad himself and can be found in the essays grouped in the collection *Kesusasteraan dan Etika Islam* (1981).

The book opens with the paper "Sastera Islam: Sudut Pandangan" (Islamic Literature: A Point of View), first published in *Dewan Bahasa* in July 1977. There Shahnnon notes the apparent paradox that art is a part of human culture and is, therefore, subject to the influences of geography, history and human experience, while Islam is absolute, beyond human thought and activity, the creation of God for the peace and well-being of all humanity. How then can one speak of literature and Islam in the one phrase?

His answer is to suggest that, in Malay thinking, art has always been considered to exist "for the sake of something". That something may be art itself ("*seni sastera karena seni sastera dan untuk seni sastera*"), or it may be something outside of art, the author, society, a particular

ideology, or such like. Art for art's sake is individualist, egocentric and arrogant; "art for the sake of society", as was proposed by the Generation of the Fifties, can present only limited, relative and imperfect understandings of the purpose of human existence. Shahnoun, therefore, recommends art "*kerana Allah*", because of and for the sake of Allah, which will automatically also be of benefit to humanity as everything commanded by God (in the *Koran* and Tradition) is directed towards human happiness and well-being. Islam accepts and delights in beauty, Shahnoun argues, and it encourages the service of society: an Islamic literature will take up both previous aspirations, purify them, and raise them to a religiously transcendent level. In further papers, he argues, that a true Islamic literature will be theologically informed, ethical, and critical of those types of writing which arise from the Freudian fascination with the imagination as a powerful force for the liberation and expression of violent human urges.

ISLAM AND POSTMODERNISM

This shift in the public role of Islam, which has taken place over the past twenty years, can be understood in terms of the (no doubt increasingly overworked) words "modernism" and "postmodernism". Akbar S. Ahmed begins his recent work *Postmodernism and Islam* (1992) with an extensive attempt to define "postmodernism". His first suggestion is that:

To approach an understanding of the postmodernist age is to presuppose a questioning of, a loss of faith in the project of modernity; a spirit of pluralism: a heightened scepticism of traditional orthodoxies; and finally a rejection of a view of the world as a universal totality, of the expectation of final solutions and complete answers (Akbar S. Ahmed 1992:10).

For the Anglican theologian, Don Cupitt, the shift from tradition to modernity itself involves "a radical and permanent change in the human condition", or a *Taking Leave of God* (1980) as the title of his book has it. This process, Cupitt suggests, involves (1) a "changeover from the old sacred, highly wrought, finite cosmos to the new 'meaningless', boundless mechanical universe", (2) "a corresponding change in the nature of knowledge", away from a fixed body of sacred traditional material providing communion with the divine, to a body of work which is "man-made, critically-established, ever-expanding and subject to continual revision", with unprecedented technical power; (3) "the disconnection of society from the cosmic order and the constraint of traditionality", such that social institutions come to be thought of, all of them, as "products of history, man-made and subject to continuous development and modification in order to keep pace with social change"; and, (4) a change in

the self itself, so that one is now forced to, and indeed insists on, defining one's own self positing and pursuing one's own goals, and choosing what to make of oneself, rather than having one's "nature, situation in life and destiny" all ready-made. "As man gains in autonomy", Cupitt senses, "God must presumably retire from objectivity" (Cupitt 1980: 17-20). The motto to Cupitt's book come from Master Eckhart: "Man's last and highest parting occurs when, for God's sake, he takes leave of God".

Contemporary Islam in Malaysia, as Shahnon's *Kesusasteraan dan Etika Islam* shows us, refuses to participate in this "taking leave". We are left, rather, with Akbar's insistence that:

In Muslim society postmodernism means ... a shift to ethnic or Islamic identity (not necessarily the same thing and at times opposed to each other) as against an imported foreign or Western one; a rejection of modernity; the emergence of a young, faceless, discontented leadership; cultural schizophrenia; a sense of entering an apocalyptic moment in history; above all, a numbing awareness of the power and pervasive nature of the Western media which are perceived as hostile (Akbar 1992:32).

Religion in the Malaysia moving towards 2000 (or 2020) will, thus, not wither away or represent the relic of some irrelevant, insufficiently modernised past, but on the contrary can be expected to assume an ever-growing importance as a symbolic system for the validation of social behaviour and change.

ISLAM AND CONTEMPORARY MALAY LITERATURE

Let me suggest four ways in which Islam is already being used in Malay literature, ways which were not present a generation ago, or at least less obviously so. Two of these are positive, two negative.

Firstly, Islam allows a greater range of personal emotional expression in literature. The display of emotion is, of course, a complex matter in Malay culture (see Wazir Jahan Karim 1990 and Heider 1991). Western culture is open in its expression of emotion and takes a keen interest in the display, exploration and analysis of passion, guilt and anger. Contemporary Malay artistic culture, if anything, presents these emotions on an even grander scale—even to the point of melodrama—but distraught weeping and cruel violence are the province of the mad, the criminally inclined and (it must be admitted) the artistic, but not of the normal person. The emotions expressed in contemporary literature are highly patterned, conventional, and subject to public approval. To the code of secular emotion employed in the works of the Generation of the Fifties, and the mainly unexplored map of traditional emotions, Islam

adds another network of symbolism, learnt from earliest childhood and carried into all significant adult relationships.

There are at least four dimensions to this symbolic network. They include:

1. religious practice: private and communal prayer, the reading of the Koran, pilgrimage to the holy land, alms-giving and fasting;
2. theological ideas such as the greatness of God, the creation of humanity, the world as a system of signs pointing to a divine reality, the value of community and ethical behaviour;
3. history as recorded in the Koran and the Muslim past, the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, the prophets, great Muslim writers and thinkers; and,
4. personal and communal mystical experience.

These dimensions are present in the opening of the poem "Ayn" by Kemala, for instance:

My mind in awe
 before the cave of Hira'
 covered in cobwebs,
 eyes destroyed by the needles of inner light,
 but who could argue with My wisdom?,

The Prophet, Faithful One, dwelt here,
 as did as-Sidik, who loved him greatly,
 The echoes of the Prophet's departure still ring in the street

(Kemala 1991:63)

The poem most effectively meets the wide aim of Malay literature, which is not to dissect emotion but to move the reader into a state of profound self-absorption (see Aveling and Chin Woon Ping in Bennett 1988). But it demands that the reader know what happened at Hira', who the Prophet was, why he was called "the Faithful One", who as-Siddik was, and why the Prophet left wherever it was. More is revealed now but more is also demanded from those who would read it.

Secondly, we may expect that Islam will become an increasingly more explicit reference point for the introduction of outside ideas and their evaluation. (It is perhaps no coincidence that Akbar Ahmed's other works include *Toward Islamic Anthropology: Definition, Dogma and Directions* 1986).

This is already a considerable factor in the reception, or otherwise, of the "new theories" with regard to literary criticism. A creative use of

Plato's *Republic* is to be found in Fatimah Busu's short story "Al-Amin" (1985). This is a story of a humanity who live in chains deep inside a cave, spending their days watching images screened on a wall in front of them. One person escapes from the Cave and returned to tell the others of the true light which exists outside of the Cave. He is Al-Amin, the Faithful One. Within the *Republic*, the Cave is the phenomenal world and the images those of the senses. The escape from the Cave is "the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world", where the idea of the good appears last of all and is only seen with great difficulty. When it is seen, Plato suggests, the good is inferred to be the "universal author of all things beautiful and right, the source of light and the lord of light in this visible world; and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual". Within Islam, Al-Amin is a term of reference for the Prophet Muhammad. Fatimah Busu thus welds Islamic teachings onto Plato's myth, such that the Messenger of God becomes the one who ascends towards the truth and then brings back the teachings which can free his fellow human beings from a world of injustice, suffering, pride, ambition and illusion.

Thirdly, and now less positively, Islam may also be used as a systematic cognitive framework to privilege the Malay community, or parts of it, and to exclude non-Malays or even certain groups of Malays to whom one objects.

Dinsman's poem "UN RESOLUTION 678" (1991), for example, allows the dismissal of the West, in general, and America, in particular, as war-mongering, manipulative, obsessed with material wealth, and "the home of Rambo, JR and Postmodern civilisation, which does not believe in the Prophet of God or eternity, but in reason and its own 'lifestyle'". (The complete poem, shaped like a nuclear mushroom cloud, is found on p. 26).

The short story "Murtad" (Aveling 1987) by Ibrahim Nusi shows Islam being used not to extend human community but to exclude those who are ethnically non-Malay. The major character in the story is Habibah Musa, an unmarried woman who owns her own business, a sewing shop in a small country town. Habibah is waiting to marry a devout man, who would fulfill his duties to his religion and his family. (Unfortunately, there do not seem to be too many around, as she notes sadly.) Her sister, Munirah was less choosy. She married Salim, or Lim Ah Kua as he was once known, for love, mockingly justifying her actions in terms of government policy ("The government wants the different races to live together in harmony") and religion ("The Prophet wanted more people to become Muslims"). Salim knows nothing of the Faith, does not study, does not pray, does not fast and does not give alms. He makes no provision to ensure that his children, Mat Awal and Siti Akhir, learn to chant the Koran or pray. When Munirah dies, Habibah's worst

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fears are realised as Salim takes the children and departs, determined to change their names and deprive them of their status as Malays. Conversion to Islam, as Habibah feared, has not helped racial harmony but damaged it; Munirah would have been better to stay, like herself, within her own community.

Shahnon Ahmad's "Mayat dan Keluarga" (1989) deals, with considerable sensitivity, with the death of Haji Ahmad and the gathering of his family to witness the funeral. Here, it is clear, the family are already taking different directions. One son, Tok Guru Haji Solih, his wife and his children, understand the funeral in deeply religious terms, as the fulfillment of the Koranic verse: "Peace! shall be the word spoken to the inhabitants of Paradise by a Merciful God" (Yasin 32:58). The other son, Husin, lives in the city, wealthy as a result of many years of senior government service, but ignorant of his Faith, the claims it makes upon him, and the inner richness and consolation it can provide him with. For Haji Solih, the brothers are placed in inevitable antagonism towards each other, which can only result in the eventual destruction of the family and the betrayal of all that their father held dear. Husin's path is ludicrous (his children are little more than grotesque clowns); Haji Solih's position is as firm as a rock. The conflicting tensions between them "are the same tensions which now ran through all layers of society and the Malay race as a whole". In "Mayat dan Keluarga", Islam serves to validate a rural-based authentically Malay solidarity and to discredit an urban materialist human degradation.

Fourthly, Islam will undoubtedly be called into play to legitimate shifts in gender relations in such a way as to enforce male superiority. We are presented with a complex example of this in Shahnon Ahmad's *Tok Guru* (1988). The book is centered on an Indian Muslim family - Mamak, Mami, Miras, Cumbi and Mumdas. The family's religious teacher, Tok Guru, convinces Mamak that it would be an act of piety for him to take additional wives. Tok Guru himself takes Cumbi as a further wife. The story is naively, exuberantly racist. It supports polygamy, however, at enormous length: polygamy is justified by scripture (An-Nisaa 3, Al-Baqarah 187 and 223), the practice of the Prophet and his companions; it is an act of devotion (*ibadah*); it protects women and children; it is a way of spreading faith; it teaches a woman patience, modesty, self-sacrifice and generosity, and ensures her easier attainment of heaven; a man with many children can organise his home so that it is like a mosque and ease his own path to the hereafter. The erotic discourse "programmed onto the female body by centuries of Muslim culture" (Fatna Ait Sabbah 1988:17) is taken up into, and subordinated to a masculine orthodox discourse, based on power and punishment, under the authority of God Himself. Ahmad J. Husein (1989:356) points out that the story arises from Shahnon's discomfort with the sexual voraciousness of the leaders

of the Darul Arqam movement, but he cannot fault the theological basis of Tok Guru's arguments.

Arena Wati's *Sakura Mengorak Kelopak* (1987) comes at the same problem from a different angle. At its centre is Dr. Nagei Michiko, Associate Professor in Marine Science at the University of Tokyo. Michiko shocks her nation when she refuses to mourn the death of her husband, who has committed suicide at sea, with his pregnant mistress beside him. Within a few weeks, Michiko acts even more outrageously: she marries a foreigner, Atan, an Associate Professor of Agriculture from a university in Malaysia, who is in Japan on a year's fellowship. Michiko, of course, converts to Islam, in order to marry Atan. She takes great delight in her new faith and it colours her whole life, including her attitudes to food and sex. When it is discovered that Atan's first wife, presumed dead in a hotel fire, is in fact alive, Michiko becomes a submissive second wife. She is determined that the three of them will live in the same house in Kuala Lumpur and that Atan, "our husband", will share his time between them equally. Her only aims for the future are "to bear children and be accepted as a good wife". As she tells Atan: "I am but a human being and a woman. You know well the natural instincts of motherhood".

The West has a long history of involvement with Islam. Some of it is positive, particularly the contribution made by Islam to the preservation of classical Greek learning and science, and the transmission of that knowledge culminating in the Renaissance which was arguably the foundation of modern European civilisation. More of it is negative, from the Crusades through the colonial struggles down to the Ayatollah, the banning of *The Satanic Verses* and the invasion of Kuwait. The perception of Islam in Australia, for example, is influenced by factors of race, class and gender. In our dealings with Malaysia in the next decade and the next century there is no alternative to our having to know much more about Islam, as an explicit component of the Malay character, than ever before. Literature can help us gain this sensitivity and insight. As Akhbar Ahmad (1992:265) concludes:

The Islamic vision ... is rooted firmly in history and belief. It has much to offer a world saturated with disintegration, cynicism and loss of faith. However, this will only be possible if there is a universal tolerance of others among Muslims and non-Muslims alike, an appreciation of their uniqueness and a willingness to understand them. It will only be possible if this sentiment becomes both personal philosophy and national foreign policy, if it is placed on top of the agenda in preparation for the next millenium. This, too, is in the largesse of postmodernism.

NOTE

This essay was presented to a conference on "Malaysia-Australia: Toward 2000" held at La Trobe University in October, 1992. The context allowed me to bring together a range of observations of various texts in a more integrated manner than I had previously attempted.

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