

THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE OF MALAYSIA

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The development of our National Language, that is, Bahasa Malaysia, comes hand in hand with the political consciousness of the people after the Second World War. The short period of Japanese occupation of Asian countries awakened in the minds of Asians new political consciousness to break away the shackles of colonialism. It was during the Japanese time that Bahasa Indonesia replaced Dutch as the official language of administration and education.¹ Though Bahasa Indonesia then was deficient and ill-equipped to be the vehicle for higher knowledge yet the sudden push into prominence by the Japanese made the language to develop faster than anticipated. This is possible because Indonesian nationalists, educationists, scholars and writers had already paved the way for the realisation of the national language since October 28th 1928² (S. Takdir Alisjahbana, 1966, pp.60-74).

The common heritage shared by the Indonesians and Malays in language, culture and religion (Islam) made Indonesian influence greatly felt among the Malays. When Indonesia declared her independence on the 15th

¹See S. Takdir Alisjahbana, *Revolusi Masyarakat dan Kebudayaan di Indonesia*, Kuala Lumpur: O.U.P., 1966, p.69. Also see comment made by the Indonesian literary critic, H.B. Jassin, who said, "We must be sincere in thanking the Japanese for without them there would be no revolution . . . With the Japanese occupation for three and a half years our souls have been ripe for revolution, a thing that would never happen in three and a half centuries of Dutch colonialism . . .". See H.B. Jassin, *Kesusasteraan Indonesia dimasa Djepang*, Jakarta: Ministry of Education and Culture, 2nd print., 1954, p.7.

²The All Indonesia Youth Congress was held on that date in which three historic resolutions were unanimously accepted by the Congress proclaiming threefold ideal of one country, one nation and one language. Alisjahbana, *Revolusi Masyarakat dan Kebudayaan di Indonesia*, p.68. Also see A. Teeuw, *Modern Indonesian Literature*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967, p.22.

August 1945 the Malays also shared the joys of freedom. Inspired by the Indonesian success in politics, and taking pride in the development of Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian language) the Malay nationalists, teachers and journalists agitated for merdeka (independence) as well as fighting to make the Malay language as the national and official language of Malaya. They believed that freedom from the colonial yoke must bring about dignity and respect for the Malay language, which had been neglected during the colonial administration. The British colonial educationists considered the Malay language only suitable for primary education and the highest profession for Malay educated youths was to be primary school teachers.¹ Accordingly it was in the midst of Malay educated that Malay nationalism and linguistic nationalism took their roots. Fanned with the flame of Indonesian independence and the success of Bahasa Indonesia as the official and national language of Indonesia, the Malay cultural bodies held an important language congress in 1956² in Johor Baru which drew attention to the government of the need to make the Malay language as the national language of the country, and to introduce a new educational system which uses Malay as the medium of instruction.

The newly-elected Alliance government took up the cry of the Malay cultural bodies and in 1956 the *Razak Report* was introduced. This Report spelled out the national education policy which makes Malay as the medium of instruction from the primary to the university level. In order to have a good infra-structure for Malay language and education the Report also recommended the establishment of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Language and Literary Agency) whose term of reference is "to develop and enrich the national language; to promote literary talents especially in the national language; to print or publish or assist the printing or publication of books, magazines, pamphlets and other forms of literature in the national language as well as in other language; to standardize the spelling and pronunciation, and to coin appropriate

¹Under the British policy on Malay education the highest education one could achieve was to go to Sultan Idris Training College, a teacher's college, established in 1922. Hundreds of Malay educated teachers were trained here and it was considered as the center of Malay intellectualism before the War. The British policy was to give Malay youths some basic knowledge of reading, writing and simple arithmetic so as to equip them to be better farmers and fishermen than their parents. It was only through English education that Malay youth could aspire to be absorbed into the administrative system of the country as clerks, administrative officers and the like.

²This Congress known as *Kongres Bahasa dan Pesuratan Melayu yang Ketiga* (The Third Congress on Language and Literature) acted as a pressure group which finally spurred the government to introduce new policy on Malay Language and Malay education for the country. It was also in this Congress that the doyen of Malay letters, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin Ahmad better known as Za'ba, was made a 'Pendeta' (A Sage) by the Congress as a symbolic gesture for his untiring devotion and dedication towards the Malay language.

terminologies in the national language and to compile and publish a national language dictionary". (Report of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1967). To produce more qualified teachers in the national language established in 1956. In 1960 a review of the implementation of the Razak Report was published which is known as the *Rehman Talib Report*.

These two Reports mark a turning point in the development of Malay education and the Malay language. As a result of the national education policies Malay secondary schools with Malay as the medium of instruction were established all over the country. Also, steps have been taken by the Ministry of Education to convert the English medium schools into Malay medium beginning in standard one in 1964. By 1977 the present English medium schools will be fully converted into national schools using Malay or Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction. The first batch of first year university students coming from national schools will be in the campuses in 1978. In order to give more time for the Malaysian universities to plan for the language change (from English into Bahasa Malaysia) the Ministry of Education has set the target that first year courses in humanities and social sciences must be given in Bahasa Malaysia starting in 1983. By 1985 all first year courses in the sciences must be given in Bahasa Malaysia. The gradual language conversion is done because most of the academic staff are still not proficient in Bahasa Malaysia. In addition to it there is still lack of adequate university textbooks in Bahasa Malaysia. However Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia) has already used Bahasa Malaysia in all courses because it has a good number of staff to teach in the national language.

Bahasa Malaysia as the national language has been accepted by all Malaysians irrespective of ethnic origins. It is part and parcel of our national identity. English cannot be made as the national language because it is only spoken by a minority of the people and, furthermore, it is a foreign language in the context of the Malay world. People of diverse cultural backgrounds since centuries have used Malay as the lingua franca in the Malay Archipelago. Based on its long linguistic and cultural traditions it is valid that a language spoken by over 150 million people in this Malay area should be the national language. In a multi-racial country like Malaysia it is imperative and necessary to develop a national character and identity based on a common language. Thus Bahasa Melayu, as the official and national language, is enshrined in our constitution (article 152).

In order to inculcate a new awareness of the significance of the national language the government has spent millions of dollars in her

language campaigns since 1960.¹ Free national language classes have been set up for non-Malays to acquire the language. Ten years have been given for them to master the language. To exert the importance of Bahasa the government imposes a 'pass' in Bahasa Malaysia for the Lower Certificate of Education (Form Three) and the Malaysian Certificate of Education (Form Five) examinations in order to gain full certificates. Since the administration is done in Bahasa it is necessary that all government staff to pass Bahasa examinations in order to maintain their jobs as well as for promotions. To be a Malaysian citizen one has to know Bahasa Malaysia besides satisfying residential qualification. Universiti Sains Malaysia, for example, makes it compulsory for a graduate to pass in Bahasa Malaysia at Malaysian Certificate of Education (Form Five) level before he or she is conferred a degree.

At present the need is to develop and to enrich the national language in various fields of knowledge. There is a great urgency to translate important text books into Bahasa besides coining new terminologies in the sciences and the humanities. The gigantic responsibility is given to DBP. According to DBP Report in 1967 its 24 terminology committees had coined over seventy thousands new terms in Bahasa. Up to the end of 1966 (after a period of seven years from August 1959) the Dewan published a total of 475 titles of various publications and distributed well over 25 million copies of them. Now the Dewan has published a Malay-Malay dictionary, a series of Junior Encyclopaedia and a Science Encyclopaedia.² It has also published a number of science and non-scientific text books for use in secondary schools and universities. In order to standardise the terminologies and spelling systems of Bahasa Malaysia and Bahasa Indonesia both Malaysian and Indonesian governments have set up committees to look into the matter. The result so far is the standardisation of Malaysian-Indonesian spelling which is currently used in both countries. The close cultural and linguistic relationships between both governments will help tremendously in the

¹At the beginning the Federal government launched the *National Language Week* in 1960. Later, seeing good response from the public, the government launched the *National Language Month* from 1961 until 1966. A number of competitions for Malays and non-Malays were held such as debating competition, *pantun* competition, speech contest, starting from the district level until reaching the final at the Federal level in Kuala Lumpur. The author himself was deeply involved in the organising of the national language programme at the Federal level as an assistant secretary of the National Language Executive Committee from 1964-66.

²See Report of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1967.

exchange of knowledge and publications now and the future.

We do not deny that there is still much to be done in order to develop the potentials of Bahasa Malaysia. There are still insufficient books in Bahasa for secondary and university education. We lack translators and experts in various fields of sciences and humanities to devote time and energy for writing or translating of books. Considering the development of Bahasa Malaysia and Malay education during these eighteen years (1956-74) one would be astonished to find that our national language has developed by leaps and bounds in that short period. And we look forward with optimism at the healthy trend of its development now.

As stated earlier, the healthy growth of Malay education and the Malay language have great impact in the development of Malay literature. It has to be defined here that Malay literature is considered the national literature because it is written in the national language (Ministry of Culture, 1973)¹. Though Malay literature has a long and rich tradition, yet her modern tradition started only in the middle of the nineteenth century when Abdullah Munshi published his two famous memoirs *Hikayat Abdullah* (Story of Abdullah) and *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah ke Kelantan dan Juddah* (The Tales of Abdullah's Voyage to Kelantan and Jeddah). The novel, as a modern genre, was introduced in 1925-26 when Syed Sheikh Ahmad Al-Hadi published his adapted work *Hikayat Faridah Hanum* (The Story of Faridah Hanum) which has an Egyptian background, and characters. But in 1927 a Malay novelist, Ahmad bin Haji Muhammad Rashid Talu, introduced local problems, characters and setting in his first novel *Kawan Benar* (A Real Friend). Later Ahmad Talu wrote a number of novels which were published in numerous volumes (Yahaya Ismail, 1972). Traditional literary techniques and modern ideas derived from Arabic influence could be discerned in the early novel-writing. Later, Indonesian literary influence replaced the Egyptian in the thirties and before the great war, when literature was dominated by Malay educated teachers. Modern Malay poetry came about in 1924. The short story was also introduced around the same period.

Before the War Malay literature took its own course of development

¹A Congress of Malay Culture was sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports from 16th-20th August 1971 in Kuala Lumpur in which participants contributed a number of interesting papers on various aspects of Malay culture. It was unanimously accepted that Malaysian literature in Bahasa Malaysia must be considered as the national literature. Malaysian literature writing in Chinese, English and Tamil are not considered as part of the national literature because the respective literatures are only known to particular communities only. All papers presented and the resolutions of the Congress were compiled by the Ministry of Culture and published in 1973.

without anchoring itself to any patronage like the court literature before the nineteenth century. In themes the works depicted a search for individualism in expression in which social problems like forced marriage, anti-traditional Malay customs, were exposed. There were much moralising and didacticism in fiction writing making the genre as a literary pulpit. One has to understand that the Malay writers were neither familiar with new literary forms nor had deep knowledge of modern literary concepts except to use the literary mediums for the expressions of their moral and social views irrespective of their literary values.

It was only after the war that Malay literature took a new bearing with the participation of numerous literary bodies that sprang up during the fifties. Literary audiences became greater than before the War and more publications were devoted to imaginative literature and literary criticism. The most important and the most influential of all literary bodies, at least in the fifties, is Angkatan Sastrawan '50 (Generation of Fifty Writers) which was established on August the 6th, 1950 in Singapore by a group of young journalists and Malay teachers (Syed Hussein Ali). Among the great stalwarts of Asas 50, by which the Generation was popularly known, were Keris Mas, Usman Awang, Awamil-Sarkam, Masuri S.N. and Asraf. Asas 50 upheld the concept of 'Literature for the society' which they expounded frequently in the monthly magazine, *Mastika*, and the weekly newspaper, *Utusan Zaman*, of which they were the editorial staff. Asas's writers declared that "language and literature should be used as a tool to bring about national unity, and its fight for independence; language and literature should also be used as a tool to bring about consciousness to the people's mind with the aims of achieving a just society, to bring prosperity and peace in life". It was in the field of poetry and short story writing that Asas 50 was widely known in the short span of its writers' activities of four years (1950-54) (Ismail Hussein 1959).¹ It was also in the fifties that literary criticism was introduced by the Asas's critic Asraf, who expounded in numerous articles, the concept of "literature for the society" as well as reviewing short stories and poems published in *Mastika* and *Utusan Zaman*. Asraf and Hamzah, a dissident of Asas 50,

¹According to the study made by Ismail Hussein for his 'Honours' thesis he considered that Asas's writers and poets were active in their writings only during those four 'glorious' years where we observed a great amount of short stories, poems and essays produced. But it does not mean that individual writers were no longer productive after 1954. The poets, Masuri S.N. and Usman Awang still write occasionally, and Wijaya Mala has produced a few novels after 1954. As an organisation *Angkatan Sastrawan 50* is still in existence in Singapore but has lost its influence over contemporary writers.

conducted a heated literary polemic on the function and evaluation of literature in various publications namely the *Utusan Zaman*, *Mastika* and *Hiburan*. The polemic centres on 'art for the society' of Asas 50 and 'art for art's sake' by Hamzah; both factions lacked a deep understanding of literature; yet it helped to create much interest in literary criticism.

Lack of knowledge of Bahasa Malaysia on the part of non-Malays resulted in Malaysian literature being dominated by Malay writers, thus inevitably making the themes, spirit and aspirations interwoven with Malay cultural values. Themes on poverty, clash of traditional and modern values, political and moral corruption were dominant in Malaysian works. For the Generation writers, the urban poverty and the moral decadence in the cosmopolitan city of Singapore were depicted in their works in which we found them championing the underdogs. Present day writers focus more attention on the plight of the peasantry where tales of suffering still obsess them. It is in the depth of their rural, peasant background that most Malay writers find their source of inspiration in which their personality and attitude towards life are blended with the traditional and Islamic background. Shannon Ahmad, S. Othman Kelantan, to name a few of our best writers, find themselves at home in that rural milieu that nurtured them to produce their best novels. Shannon is considered as the best novelist because of his *Rentong* (Burn to Ashes), *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* (No Harvest but a Thorn)¹ and *Srengenge* (The Sun).² S. Othman Kelantan is known for his novels *Angin Timur Laut* (The Moonsoon Wind) and *Perjudian* (Gambling). All these works have rural backgrounds typifying rural problems.

Most of these Malay writers and poets are Malay educated and the majority are with rural backgrounds. They obtain their knowledge of literature and literary techniques from reading Indonesian periodicals and Indonesian literary works.³ In fact Indonesian influence could be

¹*Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* by Shannon Ahmad was translated into English by Adibah Amin and published by Oxford University Press as *No Harvest but a Thorn*, (1972). This work has been widely acclaimed by foreign and local critics as the best work in Malaysian fiction writing to-day. Prof. A.H. Johns of Australian National University, Canberra, commenting on Shannon's work, said: "There is now in Shannon's work a growing competence in technique, social concern, an interest in characters who take on an autonomous life of their own apart from social message, and a capacity to show through the gesture of a story, a universal comment of human nature, a response to the human situation". (See 'Man in a Merciless World: The Work of Shannon Ahmad', *Sunday Mail* (April 30th, 1972).

²His latest novel published in 1973 which was judged as the best novel in 1973 by the Literary Panel last year.

³This is true of most writers during the fifties. See Usman Awang and A. Samad Said, *Tema dan Tugas Sastra Melayu Modern*, Federal Publication, 1963, pp.1-20.

traced back to the thirties but this influence is more felt in the fifties especially among Generation's writers. Though many of them are living in cities like Kuala Lumpur,¹ which has become the cultural and literary centre at present, yet we find them alienated from the current modern values. They find themselves lost among the skyscrapers and rat race of a cosmopolitan city thus withdrawing into their own traditional selves. To most of them the city is a symbol of sin where one is bound to be corrupted; a place where man has to fight for his survival or be crushed into oblivion. The Malay writers, looking from the negative point of view, reflect a sombre aspect of the urban life in their works since after the fifties.

Of course such a negative outlook cannot be maintained at all time. Socio-cultural and political situations in Malaysia to-day have helped to transform the attitudes of all ethnic groups making them face the new reality. The cultural gap among the races have to be bridged; inter-racial understanding has to be nurtured. Any right thinking Malaysian knows that it is madness to dwell in racial chauvinism and religious fanaticism which can split the delicate inter-racial fabrics asunder. In the course of a writer's adventure with ideas he is bound to encounter various disappointments and frustrations in adapting his attitudes to a fast changing socio-political reality. He has no choice except to be pragmatic. He has to fulfill the needs and demands of the nation, to cherish her philosophy but of course not to degrade the artistic values of his creation.

The government, on its part, has taken great interest to foster literary development among the writers. Tun Abdul Razak, the Prime Minister, had expressed the belief that "a writer should be the propagandist of his era, to depict the aspirations of the world and man of his period". (Tun Abdul Razak, 1966, p.7). As a follow up to his interest in literature Tun Razak set up two committees; one to advise him on the literary development and to give suggestions for improvement and aid; and the other consisting of a number of juries whose responsibility is to select the best literary works of a year. This panel of judges has been responsible for the selection of the best

¹Since the sixties Kuala Lumpur has replaced Singapore as the literary and cultural centre after leading Malay newspapers, *Utusan Melayu* and *Berita Harian* (a subsidiary of the Straits Times Press) moved to Kuala Lumpur. A number of leading writers from Asas 50 have migrated to Kuala Lumpur to seek employment in the newspapers and *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*. Also young aspiring writers from various parts of West Malaysia come to Kuala Lumpur to work as well as to be part of the 'literary colony' after Kuala Lumpur has become the capital city of Malaysia. A good sociological study of the Malay writers in the sixties was produced by Ismail Muhammad for his 'Honours' thesis, Malay Department, University of Malay, 1971, entitled, 'Sastrawan-Sastrawan Melayu Di Kuala Lumpur 1958-1969: Pembagian Sastrawan Kuala Lum'ur', and a fragment is published in *Dewan Bahasa*, June 1974.

works since 1971.¹ Before these two committees were established, the Federal government sponsored a novel writing competition in honour of the celebration of our tenth year of independence in 1967.² A big sum of money was given away as prizes to the successful works. In order to encourage Malaysian writers to publish good quality works the Malaysian government gives attractive monetary rewards for the best works chosen for a particular year. The Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, on its part, also devotes a lot of money for literary activities through the writers' associations such as organising writers' workshop, seminars and the like.

Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka also contributes meaningfully to the development and fostering of literary talents among Malaysian writers. On a number of occasions, DBP has sponsored various competitions in novel writing, short story writing, and play writing. It publishes three quality magazines - *Dewan Bahasa*, *Dewan Masyarakat* and *Dewan Sastra* - which are considered as the best monthly magazines in Malaysia to-day. Being aware of the great response towards creative works, DBP also organised a creative writing course recently where fifteen budding writers were selected to participate in the programme. The positive steps taken by the Federal government prompted some state governments to patronise literature and literary activities too. Some state governments have donated a few thousand dollars to the writers' associations in their respective states to help them carry on with their activities.

Private publishing houses have contributed a lot towards literary development too. Since before the War, private publishers have been indirectly promoting literature by publishing hundreds of novels as well as poetry, anthologies of short stories and drama. In the fifties, publishing houses in Singapore, like Geliga, MIBS, Qalam, etc., published a major amount of Malay works. Later in the sixties, publishers in Kuala Lumpur, Malacca and Kluang became more active in novel publishing. From 1965-67 an average of fifty novels were published per year, making that short period the 'golden' period of Malay novel publication.

¹The best short stories and poems which won the literary award for 1971 and 1972 were published in anthologies called *Dalam Perjalanan* (Journey) and *Suara Semusim* (Voices of a Period) by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka respectively.

²The successful novels that won the awards were *Sandera* (Hostage) by Arenawati, which won the third prize; *Meniti Buih* (Walking on the Foam) by Alias Harun; *Interlok* (Interlock) by Abdullah Hussein; *Pulanglah Perantau* (The Return of the Wanderer) by Aziz Jahpin and *Merpati Putih Terbang Jua* (The White Dove is Flying) by a woman writer Khadijah Hashim. The above mentioned novels won the consolation prizes only. There were no prizes given for the first and the second.

Malay weekly newspapers, like *Utusan Zaman*, *Berita Minggu* and monthly magazines, like *Mastika*, have been giving generous columns for short stories, poetry and reviews as well as literary essays since their inception. Because so much creative work and discussion on literature take place in magazine and newspaper columns, one tends to say that Modern Malaysian literature, like that of the Indonesian literature, is 'the literature of the newspapers and magazines'. I think this is true of most literatures of the developing countries where financial restraint make it impossible for small publishers to make profit out of imaginative works.

Literary infra-structure at present is conducive to serious pursuit in literature. There are more opportunities for young talented writers to get their works published than before. Literary audiences too are wider and more varied than before. Writers, university lecturers, poets, are often invited to give talks on literature to secondary school students who take literature papers for their examinations. Poetry readings are not only confined to a select few, but are often held in public places in order to attract bigger audiences as well as to involve a mass participation.

The fact that the government is patronising literature and other cultural activities denotes the important role of literature in society. This has never happened before. Literature can become an effective medium for social change, to bring new consciousness to the people as well as propagating intellectual taste. The tendency to use literature for social protest is very strong in our literature as expressed in numerous anthologies of protest poetry since 1967.¹ Being aware of the delicate fabric of cultural gap among the various ethnic groups, the writers have to steer away from sensitive issues that could spark off racial tensions. Themes for writing are limitless and it is up to the Malaysian writers to select them without incurring any strong racial undertones. As long as a writer realises the political and cultural realities and upholds the principles of Rukunegara² the State philosophy, then he has the liberty to express what he desires. I have to

¹The first anthology of protest poetry was called *Keranda 152* (Coffin 152) - the title symbolised death of the constitution - which reflected the opposition by the poets against the government's decision regarding the national language issue. When the leader of the peasantry, Hamid Tuah, was arrested by the government over his illegal cultivation of the State land another protest anthology was published called *Teluk Gong* (name of a village where illegal cultivation took place). I am strongly inclined to say that protest poetry in Malaysian literature is the result of the Indonesian protest poetry of *Generation '66* which the Malay writers and poets happened to read during that time.

²Rukunegara is the State philosophy which has five cardinal principles; i.e., Belief in God (Kepercayaan kepada Tuhan); Loyalty to King and Country (Kesetiaan kepada Raja dan Negara); Upholding the Constitution (Keluhoran Perlembagaan); Rule of Law (Kedaulatan Undang-Undang) and Good Behaviour and Morality (Kesopanan dan Kesusilaan).

stress here that these are not hard and fast rules as is the situation in the communist countries where writers have no right to criticise the government at all.

Looking at the trend of Malaysian literature to-day I am optimistic that more non-Malay writers and poets will emerge as writers in due course. At present there are a few non-Malay short story writers, poets, translators and novelists writing in the national language. A new generation of Malaysian youth who gain their education mainly through the medium of Bahasa Malaysia will finally generate much more varied literary works than what is seen to-day. With the participation of non-Malay writers writing in Bahasa Malaysia, there will be some rapport and mutual understanding among the people on matters relating to religions, cultures and traditions. Thus their participation will enrich our literature in various aspects besides demolishing some of the unfounded prejudices among the populace. Thus I believe Malaysian literature in the coming decade will be interesting to study.

