

A WRITER'S VISION AND CREATIVE PROCESS IN RETELLING THE SINGAPORE STORY

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Abstract

This paper is a presentation on the vision and creative process of the writer culminating in the production of three novels, namely *Memeluk Gerhana* (published in English translation as *A Song of the Wind*), *Rawa (Rawa)* and *Duka Tuan Bertakhta* (published in English translation as *1819*). These three novels trace the history of Singapore from the arrival of Raffles on the island up to the 21st century. The aim of the writer was to present an alternative version of history through the retelling of a part of it, and also to present these events something for readers to ponder.

Keywords: sense of history, novels, creative process, *Memeluk Gerhana*, *Rawa*, *Duka Tuan Bertakhta*

INTRODUCTION

This paper intends to present the creative process behind three novels that I have written. The novels are *Memeluk Gerhana* (2007) [published in English translation as *A Song of the Wind*], *Rawa [Rawa]* (2009) and *Duka Tuan Bertakhta* (2011) [published in English translation as *1819*]. All three were first published by Ameen Serve Holdings, which is based in Kuala Lumpur.

There are two major similarities between these three novels. Firstly, they all take Singapore as their setting. Secondly, all three of them clearly display certain aspects of an awareness or sense of history, especially awareness of the history of Singapore. I consider these novels to be part of a series that I call “The Singapore Story”.

We may well be aware that the official history of a country is written by those who are in power at the time. The novels I produced in the Singapore Story series offer an alternative version of history based on the accounts of individuals or groups who are not a part of the group that is in power. In other words, the alternative historical narrative is born from the consciousness of those people who have experienced this history, whether directly or indirectly through bits and pieces that they have heard and recorded from those who lived it.

Certainly, these aspects of historical sense or awareness were not the only focus or subject that I attempted to develop in each of these novels. Therefore, the account of the creative process that I will share with you will not merely be centred around history. Indeed there are other aspects, such as religion, politics, society and culture with which I have infused the narrative. I hold strongly to the opinion that a good novel must be enriched by layers of experience and thinking that are shaped by the atmosphere of everyday life, which is full of the unexpected and is dynamic. Therefore, among other things, I will show how aspects of a sense of history can be interwoven with other aspects of life in a narrative work, which is what a novel is.

Before I go into the details of the different aspects of an awareness or sense of history that underlie the writing of each novel, I wish to explain a little about the relationship between what is “literature” and what is “history”. Such a discussion is necessary because there are similarities and differences between the two. Who should be called a writer, and who should be called a historian? Are the differences between them that great, or are they indeed more similar than we think?

LITERATURE AND HISTORY

Narratives exist in both the field of history and in the field of literature. History is a kind of fiction in which we live and intend to continue to exist, while fiction is similar to a history that offers a possibility, a great story whose details are readily available for the creation of a piece of fiction whose reach is greater and sources more varied than for a historian. There is no such thing as “fiction” and “non-fiction”, as we know it. There is only

narrative. In other words, history is a kind of literature, while literature is a kind of history; both share a common characteristic, which is the narrative (Hashim, 1994).

Looking at their origins, the narrative of history differs somewhat from that of literature. Authors of creative works are free to reject existing plot structures and begin their work with an episode or a character that is then developed through fictitious events. On the other hand, a historian begins with a chronology, which contains events that cannot be changed. Even with this difference, the author of a literary work and the historian both face the same problem: that of showing how a certain situation earlier in the chronology leads to another situation later on (*ibid*, 1994). The assumption that underlies this similarity is as follows:

- (1) All the events that are involved must be suitable with the core of the discussion, such as pertaining to a certain group of people, an area or a country;
- (2) The events must be related in some way through certain issues that are important to people, which in turn will explain why the chronology must begin and end at certain relevant points in time.

Therefore, a narrative is a link or an intermediary between history and literature that is able to show the influence and the reflection of reality in both. The structures and conventions of narrative are not a hindrance for either the historian or the author of a creative work. In fact, it may even open the way for various possibilities of narrating the event. Historians cannot do anything other than control this aspect, especially when they only have access to few facts. Knowing what is important or significant to people, a historian is then able to control certain issues. And through knowing the thoughts, feelings and desires of human beings, and the social structures that shape them, historians are able to formulate hypotheses as to why something happens in a certain way. From a hypothesis, historians then determine which facts are to be studied and how they are to be presented. Historians who depend more on accurate and realistic documentation will follow a similar process. In connection with this, until now there is still no measurement or method to differentiate the relationship of events in a literary narrative and those that have occurred in history (*ibid*, 1994).

Determining whether a description is “fact” or not actually depends much more on narrative conventions or writing style. In other words, the element

of value of “reality” is created through this convention, whether in history or in literature. In the development of historical writing currently, there is a tendency to apply the sequence or plot structures that are commonly found in literature. It thus becomes clear that reality can be created specifically through construction or structure. Because reality cannot be recorded, realism is thus dead.

All kinds of writing are constructions. We do not imitate the world, we build versions of it. There is no mimesis, only poesis. There is no record, only construction. This is strengthened by the claim that reality is exposed to and influenced by every process of construction it undergoes. In this way, reality is also a creation, a text, a linguistic convention (*ibid*, 1994).

In this context, we see that reality is created in history and in literature not only because there are events and people, but also because of the clear background of time and place, as well as the movements and actions of people within arrangements that are realistic and alive. Therefore, if at any time there is some kind of discrepancy of facts or reality between the narrative presented by a historian and one created by a writer, this is where there exists the possibility of interference by an author motivated by ideology or a utopian vision. This also occurs when writer deliberately eliminates or destroys historical facts in his work.

In the context of novel-writing, especially, narrative is a sequencing of events to form a story. The patterns or structures that form the narrative have political, social and psychological functions. This narrative structure may be similar or different from others. However, what is certain is that narrative is the basic structure of writing. A novel encapsules a cultural form that is wide and far-reaching. The narrative structure in the novel contains plot mechanisms that are very organized and a comprehensive system of social reference, which in turn depends on the institutions within a society, as well as how authoritative or powerful they are. In other words, a narrative may present a depiction of a system and political culture, as well as social situation, that is current at any one time in a society or country.

Apart from his, a novel is also a cultural form that reinforces, refines and sheds more light on the authority of the status quo. An important aspect in the reinforcement of the authority of a novel is not only connected to social power and governance, but is also presented as something that has become normal and absolute, being validated within the presented narrative. It will only become paradoxical when one forgets that the constitution of a narrative subject is a social act of the highest order and therefore has a historical and

social authority (Said, 1993). In other words, through studying the narrative structure of a novel, we are able to measure the extent to which the writer has reinforced or gone against history or the status quo of a social system and a country's government. Similarly, the effect of history on a story can be traced to find out whether history has formed the story or the story has attempted to alter history.

Adapting history, historicizing the past and folk stories—these all energize a novel and provide the opportunity for presenting and shaping a “social space” within a text, that is, a space to be used for social and political activities.

The basis for a social space is territory, land, geographical areas and cultural contest. To think of another land, to colonize it, occupy or isolate it—all this happens because of land. Our geographical sense will make us think of maps, of the armed forces, economics and history, or, generally, culture. But it also makes possible the construction of all kinds of knowledge that depend entirely on perceived characteristics as well as the destiny of a geographical area (*ibid*, 1993).

The implications are that the differences of culture between different groups in a multi-ethnic community within the same geographic location, or the relationships and tensions between the members of different groups in a monoethnic community living in different geographical locations, can also be traced and analysed through the depiction of “social space” in a narrative, whether in the form of historical presentation or fictional portrayal.

Furthermore, the writer's own impressions of a country are not free from the influences of stories and writings about that country, interacting creatively with the needs and norms of the narrative, the writer's discretion and history. It is in this that the influence of one narrative upon another can be traced. The political or social attitudes of a writer, whether or not affected by change, as well as the influence of another writer's novels upon the writer himself, can be seen in the novels produced over time by one writer through the narrative structures of his novels.

Apart from this, a work of creative writing, especially one that discusses a certain country, contains unplanned internal aspects and a rather compact political background. However, beyond this indisputable complication, a work of creative writing is also the result of a process, or of a simplification, or a sequence of choices made by the writer, which are more organized and clearer than any political reality. Therefore, the more connected, mixed-up or complicated the text, the more the efforts to analyse it should be energetic and detailed.

Every text contains its own message and lessons, just as every area in this world has had its share of experiences and historical conflicts that overlap and are related to one another. Certainly, no text should lend itself to so general a reading as to erode the identity of the text, author or movement. At the same time, it should allow for anything to happen that has happened or could happen to a text or a writer, so as to become material for discussion and refutation.

In discussing a text, we must be open to everything it contains, or everything excluded from it by the writer. Every cultural text is the vision of a moment, and we must connect this vision with all the changes of point of view that could crop up in the future. On top of that, the narrative structure must connect with all the ideas, concepts and experiences that it underlies.

Still, we cannot and should not attribute a novel with legislative and political power. Novels make only a small, and very slow, contribution to the political process, which elucidates, reinforces and sometimes supports the perceptions and attitudes towards a certain country (*ibid*, 1993). It is thus important for us to study a series of novels written in different periods of time by different authors in order to obtain a more complete and accurate picture of the social and political situation that colours the culture of a community or country.

The ideas, concepts and beliefs of the author about a society and country are often reflected in the characters in his works, especially the protagonists, whether male or female. The protagonists of a novel reflect the worries and of a community, and these are highlighted through experiences that show to them the limits of their aspirations, efforts and abilities. As such, the novels often end with the death of the protagonists because their aspirations do not fit existing conditions, or cannot fit the protagonist's rise to the pinnacle of stability. The implications are that through studying the characters in a novel, we can unearth the aspirations of a community as well as the writer's stand which is presented either directly or indirectly through the narrative.

SENSE OF HISTORY IN MY NOVELS *MEMELUK GERHANA (A SONG OF THE WIND)*

Inspiration

I have found that there are not many books in the Malay language that are suitable for teenage readers, especially books concerning the lives of

Malays in Singapore. Therefore, it occurred to me that it would be a good idea to record parts of my early life in the form of short stories, at least for entertainment, especially for my own children. As it happened, I met some old friends with whom I attended primary school. Suddenly all the old sweet, funny and bitter moments, such as catching spiders, playing in ditches, stealing chickens, peeping on courting couples, puppy love and the like returned to memory.

Challenges

At the same time, I was disturbed when I saw that children of the same age as mine were not as in touch with reality as I had been at their age when I was growing up in the kampong. Children today are much more entranced by the glitter and glamour of the cyber world and the media, which I consider artificial and distracting.

I also realized that where documentation is concerned, there is not much about the social history of Singapore Malays from the era of independence until the 1980s. This situation worried me because in my opinion, a community ignorant of its history is a community without roots, and with a weak character—easily becoming isolated in life, especially in Singapore, which is extremely open to global influence. Therefore I felt it to be my calling to contribute something to the corpus of writings that have some relation to the social history of my own community.

Search

I thus began digging up the experiences of my life from my primary school years to my teen age. The experiences of living in Kampung Tawakal, which was surrounded by a Chinese cemetery, were all poured into fictional works. I retold with all honesty the experience of moving from there to a different life in the HDB flats of Ang Mo Kio. The early short stories were then expanded to become a novel. Apart from that, as a background for my works, I referred to events in world and local history, such as the founding of ASEAN, the assassination of Kennedy, and inflation as a result of the oil crisis and the Islamic revolution in Iran, which to a certain extent was a topic of discussion among the kampong folk and clearly influenced the lives of everyone at that time.

Writing

When it comes to storytelling, I wrote everything honestly, based on my own experience. I only changed some of the facts and characters in order to protect the good names and guard the personal safety of some people. In order to achieve this aim, I had to create composites of characters or change settings when necessary. I used everyday language to drive the story forward easily.

Hopes

Memeluk Gerhana (A Song of the Wind) is the work that is closest to my heart. It can even be considered to be an autobiographical novel. Among the effects that I had hoped to achieve was to depict that humble surroundings are no obstacle for achieving high aims in life. In this respect, true friendship can strengthen one's personality and lead one to achieve success in life. Where nationhood is concerned, I showed that peace is essential to guarantee a prosperous future for the people.

When it comes to the awareness or sense of history, I uncovered a fragment of history that had become lost in the folds of the official version of history. With great honesty I retold the story of the arrest of a group of students who were accused of being involved in a subversive plot threatening national security. I was aware that in doing so I was taking a great risk because I had signed a contract of confidentiality. However, the drive to retell the story of this event overcame all reasoning. Moreover, in my estimation, an event that had taken place 30 years prior was probably no longer a sensitive issue where national security was concerned, in fact it could become a lesson for everyone. Thank God, so far I have not encountered any difficulties from the authorities, although I am still cautious in what I say and do.

RAWA (RAWA)

Inspiration

At one time, a friend of mine from NUS shared with me an academic article about the Orang Seletar. I was stunned to read it and tried to find if any creative work had ever been written about the Orang Seletar—the aborigines of this area. As far as I could remember, nothing like that existed. The closest was the novel *Darah Kedayan (Kedayan Blood)* by Harun Aminurrashid, who was my mentor for writing historical novels. Thus arose the desire in me to write a novel about the mysterious original inhabitants of Temasek.

Challenges

Among the questions that arose in my mind were, who had first settled Singapore? Why had their history been forgotten? What had happened to them? Were they so insignificant that their identity and culture had been completely lost in the course of history? Was there no contribution from them whatsoever through their lives that we could learn from in facing modern life today? The answers to these questions were so important to me because I realized that there were efforts by certain quarters to rewrite the history of Singapore to support their justifications that Singapore had always been an island of immigrants. They were beginning to question and challenge whether there was such a thing as “native inhabitants” of Singapore.

Search

I began to read academic writings about the Orang Laut, Orang Seletar and Orang Biduanda Kallang who at one time had lived in the area of Temasek and the waters surrounding it. The area of the Tebrau Straits clearly was the main artery as they traversed it with their houseboats, travelling back and forth between Temasek, Johor and the Riau islands.

I also dug into the history of Singapore before and after the coming of Raffles. I also visited places where they had had settlements, such as the Seletar river, Sembawang and several other places on the northern shores of Singapore and the south of Johor.

Writing

The novel *Rawa* (Rawa) revolves around three generations. I traced their assimilation into the Malay community in terms of social, political, religious and cultural aspects from the years before Singapore’s independence until the 1980s. Such assimilation causes stress within the protagonist as he witnesses his way of life slowly dying out and being replaced by city life which is far removed from nature. The intuition that has hitherto been his guide while paddling his houseboat is replaced by a rational approach and mental evaluation such as practiced by the younger generation of his family, for which at times the harmony between humans and nature is sacrificed. His only hope is that he will be able to pass on some of the old ways to his grandchildren so that his way of life will not be lost forever.

Hopes

Rawa was my effort to remind the Malays that progress also has its risks and could potentially have negative effects if it happens too quickly, without taking into consideration its effects on the ways of life which one has inherited and which one leans on. Apart from this, we must also always be reminded that something that has all the while been a right will be lost or taken away by other parties if we are not careful and are not determined or consistent in defending that right.

Concerning awareness of history, my effort was to offer a piece of Singapore history from the perspective of the original inhabitants who have now been forgotten. Their simple ways of life may still serve to teach us sophisticated city-dwellers something, if we are willing to learn and take example from them.

DUKA TUAN BERTAKHTA (1819)

Inspiration

I read a novel titled *Grand Saint of Singapore* by Dr Ghouse Khan Suratee about the life of the great Islamic scholar and teacher Habib Nuh Alhabshi. I was stunned to read that he had come to Singapore from Penang a few months after Stamford Raffles had found Singapore in 1819. It was by chance that I was reading Dr Hadijah Rahmat's *Antara Dua Kota (Between Two Cities)* which talks about the influence of Abdullah Munshi on this small island during that time.

Challenges

There arose in me a question based on the assumption that there may have been a certain reason why Habib Nuh followed Raffles to Singapore. This assumption was strengthened by the discovery that Habib Nuh had been purposely invited by a Naqshbandi sufi by the name of Habib Salim Bin Abdullah Ba Sumayr, who was living in Singapore at the time.

At the same time, I was bothered by the situation whereby the number of Malays in Singapore was decreasing. Around 15 years ago, Malays made up around 17 per cent of the total population of Singapore. It has been reported that the Malay population now makes up around 13 per cent of the 5.5 million Singaporeans. There have been more and more immigrants coming in from China, India and the Philippines who have been given citizenship or

permanent resident status. On the whole I feel that my existence as a Malay in Singapore is threatened.

Apart from that, there had been no work of literature dealing with the founding of Singapore by Stamford Raffles from the perspective of the local Malays up till that point. The history of the founding of Singapore that we are familiar with was written by the authorities and depict Raffles as a hero that should be held in high esteem by everyone. However, in some of the extracts that I read, Raffles was presented as quite the opposite. As a writer I felt compelled to study this in more detail and write a novel about it.

Search

I began to scour several versions of history of before the arrival of Raffles in 1819. Apart from that, I carefully studied the *Hikayat Abdullah* as well as *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah* as well as books offering a new perspective of Stamford Raffles written by the late Professor Dr. Syed Hussein Alatas and Dr Syed Muhd. Khairudin Aljunied. I also looked in detail at several books that touched on the idea of progress and Malay thinking by Dr Shaharuddin Maaruf and Dr Hadijah Rahmat. I was pleasantly surprised to find out that Wak Cantuk, a legendary hero of the Malays, lived during the time of Raffles, Farquhar, Habib Nuh, Munsyi Abdullah, Sultan Hussein and Temenggung Abdul Rahman.

These historical characters provided fertile material for a novel because each of them represented certain parties who influenced one another in the course of Singapore Malay history: Raffles and Farquhar representing the colonizers, Habib Nuh the religious scholars, Munsyi Abdullah the intellectuals, Wak Cantuk the defenders of the people, Sultan Hussein and Temenggung Abdul Rahman as the ruling class.

Writing

I retold the story of the founding of Singapore in chronological order. Some of the interactions among the characters have been reported as historical fact. Some have been made up by me using my imagination based on possibilities that cannot be dismissed easily, for example the relationship between Wak Cantuk and other characters such as Sultan Hussein and Habib Nuh, of which nothing is mentioned in historical documents. Where the characters are concerned, I attempted to fashion these based on actual historical information. However, there are still some situations of my own invention,

for example the comic character of Sultan Hussein, which was a vent to my “fury” towards him for being so ignorant, weak and greedy that he easily fell prey to the manipulations and exploitations of the colonizers. I tried also to show the findings of my academic research through the depictions of events as recorded in history. However, there still were situations in which I had to invent contexts for the presentation of important information, such as a large amount of material from Dr Syed Khairuddin Aljunied about the character and attitude of Raffles towards the Malays and Islam, which I included in a fictional letter from him to Resident Crawford. Besides that, I lightened up some of the more serious historical material by borrowing the iconic comic character Bujang Lapuk. Such characters function as narrators and represent the ordinary folk. Indirectly I am trying to remind the reader that this is a work of fiction, even though at its core lies history. I made an effort to remain true to historical fact while at the same time offering a narrative held up by imagination.

Hopes

Through *Duka Tuan Bertakhta*, I attempted to expose several historical inaccuracies, such as the notion that Singapore was merely a pirate nest occupied by Orang Laut until the arrival of Raffles, whereas in reality many Malays had already settled here and had established a trade centre on the island. Similarly, I attempted to expose Raffles as a character who hated Islam and was wily and unscrupulous in his dealings with the people, especially the Malays. I created the character of Farquhar as someone closer to the people to balance out that of Raffles, so that I would not be accused of being anti-British or anti-colonial.

I also exposed the strategy of the Freemasons who were based in Singapore and who were led by Raffles himself after he had been in Batavia, Bencoolen and Penang. I tried to show that the strategy of the Freemasons took root in the lives of the Malays from way back then until now. I realize this step may cause my works to be labelled as speculative or as based on an insignificant conspiracy theory, yet I remain determined and convinced that my conjecture and storytelling is not sheer nonsense and should be contemplated deeply by the reader. It is my hope that *Duka Tuan Bertakhta* is able to offer an alternative version of history to balance out the official version that has been fed to us all this while.

Finally, it is my hope was that the novel will contribute to preserving the existence of the Malays in Singapore.

CONCLUSION

I hope that through the discussion above we will be able to understand that the relationship between history and literature is a very close one because both involve the creation of a narrative in order to present situations, aspirations, struggles, disappointments, as well as successes of a community. In other words, both depict the “human condition” at a certain period, age, era or milieu. The difference is that history is commonly written by those with authority while history presented through literature emerges from the consciousness of the community.

The aspect of awareness of history, or a sense of history, as woven into literary works is also varied. Through *Memeluk Gerhana*, we are encouraged to dare to expose fragments of history that have been forgotten, in order to bring the truth to light. Through *Rawa*, we are reminded not to forget our origins and to reevaluate the contributions from the life of the native inhabitants who have become forgotten over the course of history. Through *Duka Tuan Bertakhta*, we are challenged and reminded to always remain cautious of the strategies of certain quarters who try to eliminate the history and existence of Malays in Singapore. Besides that, this novel offers an alternative version of history to use as a basis for regaining the spirit and dignity that is constantly assailed and challenged by such parties.

On the whole, all three of these novels challenge to a certain extent, or even go against, the official version of history or the status quo. As a writer, it is my hope that there will be a kind of dialogue between the official version of history and the alternative versions that I present in my works. Even so, I admit that these three novels are subjective in nature and thus limited in the way that they deal with the sense of history. A study of these three novels should be combined with studies of works of other novelists so that a more comprehensive picture of Singapore history can be obtained.

I personally hope that I have been a good student to Harun Aminurrashid, or Pak Har, whom I admire very much as a writer who has made history as a starting point and the core of his writings.

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