

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND GLOBAL LITERARY INFLUENCES ON THE WORK OF SHAHNON AHMAD

Harry Aveling

H.Aveling@latrobe.edu.au

La Trobe University
Victoria, Australia

Abstract

Postcolonial literary theory asserts that the colonial literature provides the models and sets the standards which writers and readers in the colonies may either imitate or resist. The major Malay author Shahnnon Ahmad received his secondary and tertiary education in English and taught English at the beginning of his career. Drawing on his collection of essays *Weltanschauung: Suatu Perjalanan Kreatif* (2008), the paper argues that Shahnnon was influenced at significant points in his literary development by his reading of literature in English and English translation—nineteenth century European and American short stories, the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and William Faulkner – but not by English (British) literature itself. Through his creation of original new works, focused on Malay society and directed towards Malay audiences, Shahnnon was not a postcolonial subject but a participant in, and contributor to, the wider flow of world literature.

Keywords: postcolonial, Shanon Ahmad, English literature, literature in English, world literature.

Malaysian Literary Laureate Shahnnon Ahmad has been stimulated at crucial points in his career by his reading of literature in English—not English Literature (literature written by British authors) but literature translated into the English language or, less often, literature written in English from outside of Great Britain.

In this article, I wish to discuss three phases of these powerful influences on Shahnnon's writing: his short story translations from nineteenth century European and twentieth century South and Southeast Asian fiction at the beginning of his professional development; his discovery of the "magical realism" of the Spanish Gabriel Garcia Marquez, as reflected in his works of the late 1980s; and the influence of the American William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* on works such as *Tok Guru*. In so doing, I wish to suggest how Shahnnon has used the English language to escape the colonial influence of English national literature and enrich Malay literature through access to other literatures originally written in other languages. Finally I suggest that by this resistant reworking of foreign literary influences, Shahnnon has made himself and Malay literature not the subject of the British Empire but proud members of world literature.

INTRODUCTION

Shahnnon Ahmad grew up in a Malay world that was shaped by the presence of British colonialism. Born in the inland rural Malay district of Sik, Kedah, in 1933, he was educated at Sultan Abdul Hamid College, an English boarding school in Alor Setar, from 1947 to 1953. After completing the Senior Cambridge Examination, he taught English at the English Grammar School in Kuala Terengganu in 1954; then, after a year in the Malay regiment, he returned to Kedah in 1955, where he continued to teach English, at the Sekolah Melayu Gunung, 1955-1956, and Sekolah Melayu Bukit Besar, 1957-1962. He then returned to Sultan Abdul Hamid College, to teach Malay language and literature, until leaving in 1968 to assist with a English-Malay dictionary project at the Australian National University in Canberra. Having completed certificates as a Teacher of English in Vernacular Schools and as a Normal-Class Trained Teacher in 1957 and 1959 respectively, he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Asian Studies from the Australian National University in 1971 and a Master of Arts, in Malay Literature, from the Universiti Sains Malaysia in 1974.¹

Shahnnon has suggested that the move to teaching Malay was "something very peculiar", adding "but no one can prevent the will of God" "*satu keanehan tapi kehendak Allah siapa pun tidak boleh menghalangnya*" (Shahnnon, 1979:xi). The education he had received was a colonial education "*dasar pelajaran adalah dasar penjajah*", in which Malay was taught once a week for a mere forty minutes and the reading material was "enough to

put anyone to sleep”, “*yang boleh melenakan pembaca*”. The only thing he remembers having learned from these classes was how to translate, “*Yang diajar pun banyak aspek-aspek terjemahan*” (Shahnon, 1979: x).

As we recognize today, Dato’ Profesor Emeritus Haji Shahnon Ahmad Sasterawan Negara has subsequently had an outstanding career as an author in Malay and as a teacher of Malay literature. This career was fed by his love of Indonesian literature from the time that he was a high school student (Shahnon, 1979:x) but it has also been stimulated at crucial points by his reading of literature in the English language—not necessarily English Literature but, most commonly, literature translated into English and, to a lesser degree, literature written in English from outside of England. This article presents a fairly simple beginning to what is overall a very complex task. With the benefit of comments, Shahnon makes on his reading of non Indonesian and Malay literature in his autobiographical collection of essays, *Weltanschauung: Suatu Perjalanan Kreatif* (*Weltanschauung: A Literary Journey, Shahnon Ahmad, 2008*—henceforth *W*), I wish to discuss how Shahnon has responded to three of these powerful influences in his creative journey: the nineteenth century European short story; Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Latin American “magical realism”; and William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*. Having done that, I will question some of the conventional assumptions of postcolonial theory about the dominance of the metropolitan centre (England) over the colonial periphery (Malaysia) in the fields of literature and translation.

“CHEKHOV– POE–MAUPASSANT”

Shahnon’s education and early teaching career would almost inevitably have involved with an English curriculum that would have involved the study of British literature. He has said nothing about this in his various recollections. What we do know is that while he was still in high school, he began purchasing volumes of short stories, some in translation, written by major nineteenth century European and American authors. He continued reading translations during his military training (*W, 2008:448*). In the essay “Terjemahan” (Translation, *W, 2008:442-47*, see also Haslina Haroon, 2010) etc., Shahnon deals with his own experience of translation work. He notes his fondness for translation throughout the 1950s and comments on two of the works he translated at that time: “Kucing Hitam” (The Black Cat) from the collection Tales by Edgar Allan Poe (1845), published in *Majalah Guru* (*W, 2008:442*), year not mentioned and not listed elsewhere, and “Mata”

(The Eye) by the Pakistani author, K.T. Mohammad (published in *Mastika*, September 1963). He has a few things to say in the essay “Terjemahan” about the practice of translation: it is a difficult task, “amat rumit sekali” (*W*, 2008:445), requiring an extraordinary degree of professionalism, “menuntut profesionalisme yang agak luar biasa sekali” (*W*, 2008:445), an art in itself, “suatu seninya yang tersendiri” (*W*, 2008:446), requiring the complete rendering of both the literary and socio-cultural features of the original text for the new audience, “Yang hendak diterjemahkan itu bukan sekadar kata-kata yang mempunyai makna, tetapi juga budaya yang mendasari karya asli itu” (*W*, 2008:446).

The essay following “Terjemahan” in *Weltanschauung* is entitled “Chekhov–Poe–Maupassant”. It too begins with Shahnnon’s confession of his early pleasure in translation and foreign non-British literature. Although he discusses “The Black Monk” by Chekhov, “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-tale Heart” by Poe, and “Boule de Suif” by de Maupassant, there is no suggestion this time that Shahnnon ever published translations of these works. Instead, the major focus of this essay is on how much he learned about writing from studying the works of these three international kings of the short story, “Tiga Raja Cerpenis Dunia” (*W*, 2008:448).

Translations are often considered derivative and unoriginal works, lacking in creativity. Perhaps for this reason, it is seldom noted by critics that Shahnnon’s first book, *Setinggi* (*Incense*, 1960), was a collection of his translations of short stories. In fact, the translated works he produced receive a very unimportant place even in his own biodata (e.g., Shahnnon Ahmad, 2006:189-277, lists translations of Shahnnon’s own works but not *Setinggi* or other translations by him). Far from being unimportant, however, the translations taught him the principles of fiction and thus formed the basis for his first tentative steps into writing (*W*, 2008:449). In time, *Setinggi* was followed by two collections of original short stories, *Anjing-anjing* (*Dogs*, 1964) and *Debu Merah* (*Red Dust*, 1965), then by the three novels which were to establish his reputation: *Rentong* (*Rope of Ash*, 1965), *Terdedah* (*Exposed*, 1965), and *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* (*No Harvest but a Thorn*, 1966). Mohd. Yusof Hasan has calculated that between 1957 and 1963, Shahnnon published 34 original stories and 18 translated stories. The number of translated stories is significantly high. In 1960, in fact, he published more translations, 13 (ten in *Setinggi*), than original stories, 9 (Mohd. Yusof, 1979:15). Besides those collected in *Setinggi*, one translation was published in the anthology *Cepu Kencana*, and seven in the popular magazine *Mastika* (Mohd. Yusof, 1979:

11); as Yusof does not include Poe's "Black Cat" in his reckoning, there may be still more translations to be added to the list.

The ten stories in *Setanggi* include the following works. "Pelajaran yang Penghabisan" (The Final Lesson) is by the Frenchman Alphonse Daudet (1840-1897). A further three are by another French author, Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893): "Cerita Gadis Desa" (The Story of a Farm Girl), "Hilang di Laut" (Lost at Sea) and "Syarat" (Condition). One is by the Russian author, Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910): "Menunggu Kebenaran dari Tuhan" (Waiting for the Truth from God). Three stories are by Asian authors. These include: "Kisah dalam Tahun 1857" (A Story in 1857) by Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), as well as "Harimau" (Tiger) and "Chieng-niang" (A Name) by the American educated Chinese author Lin Yutang (1895-1976). (Significantly, "Harimau" tells the story of Cheng Fang, who has the ability to turn himself into a tiger in order to kill his enemy—which is potentially the theme of *Rentong*.) Two are by North Americans and originally written in English: "Takut" (Fear) by Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849), and "Aku Hilang Seringgiti" (I Lost a Dollar) by the humorous Canadian author, Stephen Leacock (1869-1949).

The single story in *Cepu Kencana* (edited by Derwent May, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur 1960) is "Pertanda" (Executioner) by Honore de Balzac, a third French author.

Six of the seven translations published in the monthly magazine *Mastika* appeared after the publication of *Setanggi*: "Hilang dara" (A Maiden's Loss) by Khushwant Singh (b. 1915), November 1958; "Harimau" (Tiger) by S. Rajaratnam (1915-2006), March 1960; "Namanya Emile" (Called Emile) by Erskine Caldwell (1903-1987), May 1960; "Warganegara yang Baik" (A Good Citizen) by the Thai woman author Dok Mai Sod (1905-1963), September 1960; "Bintang di Langit Pagi" (Star in the Morning Sky), possibly by N.V.M. Gonzales (1915-1999), April 1961; "Interview" by the Malaysian artist Patrick Ng Kah Onn (1932-1989), July 1961; and "Mata" (The Eye) by Pakistan author K. T. Mohamad, September 1963.

Looking at these literary works from around the world, which were all "taken from English versions" (Mohd. Yusof, 1979:12), we may note that five are translations of stories written by Frenchmen (Daudet, Maupassant, Balzac), one by a Russian (Tolstoy), another by a Thai woman author (Dok Mai Sod). The rest were written in English but not in England: three from South Asia (Singh, Tagore and Mohamad), four from Southeast Asia (Rajaratnam, Ng and Gonzales), and three from North America (Poe, Leacock

and Caldwell). None of them is by a British author. Shanon was a subject of the British Empire but not of British Literature.

WRITING REALISM: “DI TENGAH KELUARGA”

To state that Shanon was stimulated to begin a literary career in Malay by extensively reading short stories in translation is not to suggest that he blindly imitated what he had read. Although Mohd. Yusof notes that there was “a general trend in the late fifties and early sixties of translating world literature (*sastera dunia*) into Malay”, he also suggests that: “Like other writers of the time, Shanon selected stories that he believed would be meaningful to Malay readers” (Mohd. Yusof, 1979:11). Shanon’s concern from the beginning of his writing career was with his Malay audience. He was independently taking through English material that would be appropriate for his own community.

Translating these various stories helped Shanon find his own subject matter and style within a specifically Malay rural context (*W*, 2008:442). In *Weltanschauung*, Shanon regularly classifies *Rentong* (1965), *Terdedah* (1965), *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* (1966), and one other, *Seluang Menodak Baung* (1978), as being among the outstanding works of his early writing. Their realist plots, omniscient third person narrations, interest in action as indicative of character, and keen social analysis, were undoubtedly encouraged by, but different from, I would suggest, his interest in Chekhov, Maupassant, and Poe, as he himself writes in the essay on these three writers:

“From my broad reading and translations, I learned that the short story can be characterized as a fairly short and compact form of prose. It offers a single impression, not one that is dispersed, through a single significant episode or scene, involving a few characters, perhaps two or three persons or even only one. The form demands compactness in areas such as theme, characterization, setting, plot, and such like. Although the plot is compact, there are times when a short story tells no story because it is motivated only by a mood or feeling...”

(*W*, 2008,450).²

The first story from *Debu Merah*, “Di Tengah Keluarga”, In the Middle of the Family, already represents a complex response to British colonialism and is already representative of Shanon’s early style. (The story first appeared

in *Dewan Bahasa*, May 1960, and was only his ninth to be published). Set in a rural Malay village, the story describes the tensions that arise in a family because of the decision of the elder brother (*abang*), a Sandhurst graduate, to marry a European woman, who, it later turns out, is unable to conceive a child; “*mem orang putih, mandul pula perempuan jahanam itu*”, as the father comments bitterly (Shannon, 1999:2). The narrator is the younger brother (*dinda*), Non, who finds himself caught between these two extremely stubborn men, neither of whom is willing to make any compromises. The story can be divided into three blocks: an initial section describing the enmity between the father and the older brother, and how this has been exacerbated by the further decision of *abang* and his wife to adopt a Chinese child; a long middle section describing the brother’s leaving to study overseas, his marriage, the father’s encouragement of the brother to take a second wife, the brother’s initial willingness to do so and then his change of mind out of consideration for his wife, the adoption of the child; and finally the younger brother’s own marriage and his wife’s ready conception of a child, thus given the father what he has wanted all along—a grandchild. The first and third sections use a direct first person narration that is almost completely about the actions of other, third, persons. The second section relies on a series of letters between the elder brother and the father, with some additional commentary from the younger brother.

Although the story is adapted from the experiences of his own family, it is given an extra dimension through the brother’s marriage overseas. Shannon has explained elsewhere that the actual cause of the quarrel between his father and elder brother had nothing to do with any English woman—the brother had divorced his first wife, whom he had married while still in high school, in favour of a divorced woman, a *janda*, whom his parents disliked (Sharif Shaary, 1992:13). The story carries a number of moral messages. On the one hand, the elder brother has placed himself outside the Malay community through his education, his adoption of a Chinese child, his marriage to an English woman, who is significantly sterile, and his opposition to his father. The Malay community as represented by the younger brother is easy going, fertile and strongly family oriented. Despite this strong pro-Malay sentiment, and the fact that the English woman herself plays no active role in the story, the overseas dimension is nevertheless rendered in a positive light when the elder brother argues that Europeans are human beings too; that he has married for love (and anyway his wife has become a Muslim); and that the father is stubborn and does not understand that times have

changed, “*Ayah tak mengerti perubahan zaman*” (Shahnon, 1992:3) – the world has become “modern”, “*Ayah memang bodoh dalam hal-hal moden sekarang*” (Shahnon, 1992:5).

In this story, Shahnon is writing in a strong local and contemporary context. The style is confident, the characterization clear but complex, and the moral tension such that readers may sympathize with each of the various points of view. Apart from the first section, which can be considered a foreshadowing of the plot and its unexpected resolution, the story develops organically, from its beginning to a point of crisis, which is then resolved at the end of the work in the third section. The Malay point of view is significant but the wider context of British presence is not completely rejected. In his later works, he was henceforth able to tell tales of Malay society directly, freed from the need to foreignize in any way.

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES: MAGICAL REALISM AND GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ

In an essay entitled “*Ab Ovo dan In Media Res*” (*W*, 2008:607-12), Shahnon recognizes that this linear approach, characteristic of his early prose work, is the technique used by most works of traditional literature as well as in many modern novels and plays. As he poetically suggests:

The stories were simple and developed like water flowing from the head of a river to the bay or like the rain continuously falling to the earth from the sky without stopping on the way or turning back again.

Ceritanya simple dan berkembang seperti air mengalir dari hulu kuala atau seperti hujan yang terus sahaja turun ke bumi dari langit tanpa singgah di mana-mana atau berpatah balik lagi.

(*W*, 2008:608).

Shahnon describes this technique as “*ab ovo*”, beginning from the egg. It is clearly the approach he learned from the masters of nineteenth century realism, whom he so lovingly translated from English.

We may ask: What about “*in media res*”, in which the story does not begin at the beginning but in the middle or the end, and “then looks back, looks forward, and looks back again in a very uncertain manner, but finally still forms a solid composition”, “*menyorot ke belakang dan menyorot ke depan dan ke belakang kembali dalam keadaan yang kurang menentu, tetapi*

akhirnya merupakan satu komposisi yang mantap juga” (*W*, 2008:607). Such an approach, Shahnnon insists, is characteristic of a completely new and different way of thinking about fiction and one that he also learned from reading literature in English but, again, not from reading English literature.

In “Generasi Baru” (A New Generation, *W*, 2008,364-69), Shahnnon again compares these two literary perspectives, emphasizing that they have appeared successively at various times in many literatures. The first perspective is now that of the “old generation”; the second that of a “new generation”. In this second essay Shahnnon focuses almost exclusively on the “new” dimension of the dichotomy.

The writers of the new generation, he suggests, possess “distinct differences in form, expression, and perhaps, to a greater or lesser degree, in the way in which they manipulate the problems they deal with”, “*ternyata memiliki kelainan yang ketara dalam bentuk, ekspresi, dan mungkin sedikit sebanyak dalam perihal memanipulasi persoalan*” (*W*, 2008:365). Earlier in his explanation, Shahnnon describes human problems as being complex and extensive (*kompleks dan tuntas*) and therefore less susceptible to change than the other aspects of fiction writing (*W*, 2008:364). Nevertheless, new generations of writers do tend to bring new ethical and aesthetic standards to their works, “*meningkatkan nilai etika dan estetika karya itu*” (*W*, 2008:365). Among the new generations that Shahnnon lists are the Spanish Generations of 1898 and 1927, the Indonesian Generation of 1945, the French *nouveau roman* generation of the 1950s, the Latin American “boom” writers of the same decade, and the Malay Angkatan Sasterawan Lima Puluh, Generation of the 1950s, to which he had a distant relationship. None of them are British. Shahnnon lists representative writers for each of these groups but he is particularly detailed when he describes the members of the Boom: “Mario Vargas Llosa, Jorge Luis Borges, Miquel Angel Asturias, Alejo Carpentier, Julio Cortozar, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel Marquez, and many more”, “dan banyak lagi” (*W*, 2008:368). Shahnnon also notes explicitly that few works of any Latin American writer have been translated into Malay and that the works he read were translations into English (*W*, 2008:418).

Contemporary Latin American fiction is the only movement to which he devotes a whole essay, “*Fiksyen Amerika Latin Kontemporari*” (*W*, 2008:454-59). While his remarks are not completely complimentary, he acknowledges:

“Perhaps I didn’t completely agree with their form and style of expression, but meeting their works clearly gave a new impulse to the style of my own

writing, especially when I wanted to deal with aspects of politics and human networks in works of literature”

(“Mungkin tidak kesemuanya aku setuju dengan bentuk dan gaya ekspresi mereka, namun membawa karya-karya mereka ternyata memberi nafas baru terhadap gaya penulisku, terutama apabila aku ingin menghadirkan aspek-aspek politik dan jaringan kemanusiaannya dalam karya-karya sastra”

(W, 2008:455).

The name that stands out in *Weltanschauung* is that of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, from whom he admits having learned a great deal, especially from his style of writing, “*Aku banyak belajar daripada karya-karya pengarang Amerika Latin ini, terutama daripada karya-karya Marquez; khususnya gaya kepengarangannya*” (*W, 2008:416*). Shanon refers to many of Marquez’s works, including *A Thousand Years of Solitude*; however, the work to which he returns most often is *Big Mama’s Funeral* (*W, 2008:138*); see also the discussion of “Monteil’s Widow”, a chapter in *Big Mama’s Funeral*, (*W, 2008:417, 421-28*).³

The essay devoted to Marquez (Gabriel Garcia Marquez) (*W, 2008:415-20*) describes Marquez’ style in some detail. The style emphasizes emotion and imagination well above the intellectual aspects of the writer’s craft. It explores myth, legend and folktales, and links them with reality in such a way that meanings are confused and often obscured (*W, 2008: 416-17*). These non-rational dimensions of the consciousness carry important implications for the construction of plot: Marquez’s plots are intricate, slow moving, and often sensational (*W, 2008:417-19*). There are also implications for characterization, as the following passage, in Malay but almost self-translating, shows:

Ternyata, dalam kebanyakan karya Marquez, falsafahnya tersirat makna-makna loss of self atau kehilangan peribadi, anxiety states kegelisahan dan resah, keluarbiasaannya, despair atau kekecewaan, depersonalization atau kehilangan manusiawi, apathy atau tidak ambil kisah, loneliness atau keseorangan penuh kesepian, atomization atau ketuntasan, kesisihan, pesimisme, dan sebagainya.

*(W: 2008:418).*⁴

The second dimension of Marquez’s style, and one that particularly catches up themes that had already been prominent in Shanon’s own

work since the late 1960s (e.g., *Menteri*, 1967, *Protes*, 1967, and *Perdana*, 1969), was the connection of Marquez's diverse and common figures of speech with reality, "most especially political reality, around which his work continually rotates", "*realiti politik yang rata-rata menjadi paksi karya-karya Marquez*" (W, 2008:417). Here too there was room for the factors of hyperbole, extravagance, and a frequently negative approach to human problems (W, 2008:417). Marquez's technique provided the opportunity to "mock certain issues, including the playing with objects and people, for example corpses and religious figures like priests or major political leaders, "*mempermainkan mayat dan tokoh-tokoh agama seperti paderi atau pemimpin utama Negara*" (W, 2008:419).

Among Shahnnon's works that he specifically links to the influence of Marquez are the short stories "Permaisuri" (The Queen, unpublished) and "Gunung" (The Mountain, Shahnnon Ahmad, 1989; 293-303), as well as the novels *Tunggul-tunggul Gerigis* (Stumps, 1989), *Patriarch* (1991) and *Igauan* (Delirium, 1996) (W, 418-19, 716-17).

SYMBOLIC PERSPECTIVES: "GUNUNG"

In these middle works, Shahnnon deals in his own very distinctive way with what he has learned from Marquez and his comrades. *Igauan*, for example, begins with a tragedy, as Shahnnon suggests all Marquez's works do (W, 2008:419):

"Hari itu, Rabu rembang, bak kata, seperti yang ditunggu-tunggu, akhirnya PMN pun matilah"

(On that day, Wednesday high noon, it was said, as everyone had been waiting for, finally PMN died)

(Shahnnon, 1996:3).

It then descends into comedy, as, again, all of Marquez's works do: a coarse description of the unashamed immorality of all levels of a corrupted society waiting for the funeral of the PMN—Paduka Mulia Negara (His Excellency, the Head of State (Shahnnon, 1996:9)—on the next day. But it has no plot and no obvious characters. In its gross physical singlemindedness, *Igauan* is the background to *Patriarch* and perhaps a forerunner of the notorious *Shit* (1999). The work uses some of Marquez's techniques but also goes

beyond the master's "apparent" conventionality of plot and characterization in *Big Mama's Funeral*.

I would like to discuss "Gunung" as a more straightforward example of the radical way in which Shahnon has used the tenets of magical realism to express his political concerns in the language of dreams.⁵ The story is told by a first person narrator, whose consciousness is separated from, but perhaps also constitutive of, what he sees. The time frame is extremely fluid:

"Alahai! Dulu rasa-rasanya aku sedang tenggelam asyik berkhayal memerhatikan Gunung Gayamahatumpul ..."

("Dear Lord! A while ago, I was lost in contemplation of Lord Humpty Dumpty Mountain ...")

(Shahnon, 1989:293)

In paragraph two, "A while ago" immediately shifts to "yesterday" (*Kelmarin*). In paragraph three, the time again shifts back to "now: (*kini*), and insists that what the narrator sees—the mountain collapsing, "*Gunung Gayamahatumpul beruntuhan*"—is really happening, it is no longer a dream, "*Ia bukan lagi suatu khayalan*". The consciousness of the narrator includes elements of sleep, dreaming, fantasy and thought, all of which are apparently present in the sensory experience of an external reality that may or may not be happening. [English translation revised from Aveling, (1991:166)]

The mountain, on the one hand, is a natural phenomenon, covered with boulders, rocks, pebble, trees, roots, grass and dirt. On the other hand, the mountain simultaneously suggests a human figure:

"Puncaknya menirus tajam mempamerkan sebutir noktah di hujung bagaikan secekek kuasa bupala yang benar-benar mengancam segala"

("It rose to a sharp peak at the top, three-sided like a modern prince standing with his hands on his hips, menacing everything")

(Shahnon, 1989:293 & Aveling, 1991:166).

The figure is human:

"pernah muncul dalam bentuk seorang insan yang amat biasa sekali. Ada kakinya. Ada tangannya. Ada matanya. Ada telinganya: malah lengkap"

seperti aku dan juga seperti anda. Bezanya ia adalah seorang bupala, sebutir noktah yang bertapak di puncak gunung yang teguh menggengam segala”

“it had once appeared in the form of a very ordinary human being. It had legs. And hands. And eyes. And ears. It had everything that you and I have. Except that it was a prince a dot standing at the peak of a solid mountain, tightly holding everything in its grip.”

(1989:294 & 1991:167)

Later the figure is presented as a political triangle, with the *jelataan* (the masses) at the base; *oknum-oknum* (cronies) at the next level; then the *pak pacak pak pacak* (thugs); and ultimately, right at the top, the point branded *bupala* (the prince) (1989:301, 1991:174). Even language is unstable. The word *bupala* is extremely rare. It does occur in the standard *Kamus Dewan*, with the annotation “sl” (*sastera lama, classical literature*), meaning *raja*, king. *Pacak* refers to a servant of the king, and to along sharp implement, symbol of aggressive exploitation. The term *jelataan* is recognizable (*rakyat jelata*) but does not occur in this form in the dictionary.

Once the reader recognizes the radical political intention of the story, the criticism becomes real ... and savage. The people withdraw from their ruler (1989:295, 1991:167); they criticize him for his favoritism, “*Mu seorang bupala belah buluh*” (You are a prince of broken bamboo) (1989:296 & 1991:170) – raising half, suppressing the other half (1989:296 & 1991:171). Finally they denounce him for his naked use of power, *berkuasa bogel*, (1989:300 & 1991:172) – nakedness being one of the most serious, and derisory, of sins in Shahnnon’s later writing (including *Igauan*) and a sure sign of sexual immorality of the worst kind. The ruler rejects this accusation, protesting his commitment to the masses in a long self-defence that is in turn confused, arrogant, sexually violent and grotesque:

“Aku hanya seorang pemimpin yang bijaksana, yang bervisi, yang bersopan dan yang bersusila. Aku sendiri tidak pernah berbogel kecuali sekali-sekala bila bersiput babi bersama cewek-cewek. Dan aku amat perlu cewek-cewek itu untuk memudahkan kebuyutannya. Aku bukan bupala. Aku hanya seorang hamba kepada rakyat. Akulah tunjang mereka. Akulah obor mereka. Akulah yang memberi kesejahteraan mereka.”

“I am a wise leader, a man of vision, decency and virtue. I am never naked except from time to time when I am raging with the young chicks. And I

really need the chicks to make my old age bearable. I am not a prince. I am simply the servant of the masses. I support them. I am their light. I look after their welfare”

(1989:299 & 1991:172-3)

The climax of the story is the apocalyptic destruction of the mountain by fire and hurricane (also happens in his following works: *Tivi*, *Television*, and *Iguan*), so that nature is purified and restored to the people (1989:302-03 and 1991:173-74). In the last paragraph the narrator perhaps wakes up, perhaps does not, but is at least reassured that the mountain has been completely obliterated from his mind, “*sudah sirna dalam fikiranku*”, (1989:303 & 1991:178). The refusal to ultimately blend dreams and daily consciousness is, perhaps, a sign of Shahnnon’s unwillingness to completely leave a realist perspective. Once more we see Shahnnon taking a foreign style and subject matter from his reading of English (but not of British) and making it completely his own, in a Malay context, for the entertainment of Malay readers.

MULTIPLE POINTS OF VIEW: WILLIAM FAULKNER AND *TOK GURU*

In “Gunung”, Shahnnon has taken magical realism far beyond its Latin American origins, although with some ultimate reservations. His use of *As I Lay Dying* (1930) in the late eighties, more or less the same time that he was exploring magical realism, deviated far less from the original model. Faulkner’s novel has its own illogicality but basically it is anchored in shifting perceptions of the real world, which may also have appealed to Shahnnon. Its plot has been described in one sentence: “Addie Bundren, a farmer’s wife from the backwoods hills of Mississippi, has just died, and in order to respect her last wish her family takes a long and perilous journey to carry her coffin to a distant graveyard at Jefferson” (Bleikasten, 1973:3; Turner, 1981:7 suggests that Jefferson is “forty miles away”). The narrative itself is spread over fifty-nine chapters, and told from the first person point of view by no less than fifteen different narrators. Seven of these actor-narrators belong to the Bundren family—Addie (1 chapter), her husband, Anse (3), and their children, Jewel (1), Darl (19), the daughter Dewey Dell (4), Cash (5), and Vardaman (10) the youngest. The others are either near neighbours, professional members of the local community, or distant

observers: Vernon Tull (6) and his wife Cora Tull (3); the farmers, Samson (1) and Amstid (1); the clergyman, Whitfield (1) who is Jewel's biological father; the physician, Dr Peabody (2); and the two pharmacists, Mosely from Mottson (1) and McGowan from Jefferson (1) (Bleikasten, 1973:56).

Shannon's essay, "As I Lay Dying—*Tok Guru*" (Shannon, 2008: 460-65), describes how William Faulkner's novel further challenged his conventional writing practices. The essay begins:

"Di sini ingin aku menyebut sebuah karya yang benar-benar mempengaruhi dalam perjalanan kreatifku, terutama dari aspek kaedah atau teknik menghidangkan persoalan"

("Here I wish to mention a work that really influenced me in my creative journey, particularly from the aspect on style or the technique used to present the problem")

(*W*, 1989:460).

Shannon acknowledges that prior to this, his common practice had been to write from the point of view of an omniscient third person narrator. Occasionally he had mixed a first person point of view into a mainly third person narration but only in his later work—such as *Ummi dan Abang Syeikhul* (The Leader of a Muslim Community and his wife, 1992) had he moved to use a first person narration consistently throughout the whole novel. *Tok Guru* (*The Teacher*, 1988), written before *Ummi dan Abang Syeikhul*, takes one step even beyond this technique, through its use of not one but multiple first person perspective narrations.⁶

Tok Guru is the story of an Indian Muslim family caught up in a Muslim group whose most distinctive teaching appears to be the practice of polygamy. Like Faulkner's novel, *Tok Guru* employs a multiple first person narrative—by six different characters, each identified by the title of their respective chapters: the father Mamak (6 chapter); his wife Mami (4); their children, Cumbi (6 chapters, including the first), Mumdas (3), and Mirasa (2); as well as the teacher Tok Guru (1 chapter, the last). Again, the characters of each novel are focused on something beyond themselves: in *As I Lay Dying* on the death of Addie Bundren, in *Tok Guru* on the teacher himself. Despite their non-traditional method of characterization, both stories move from a beginning to an end: from Addie's death to her burial, from Cumbi's innocence to her increasing importance on Tok Guru's list of wives.

From the essay, it is easy to understand why *Ummi dan Abang Syeikhul* (1992) then took a step backwards from *Tok Guru* (1992). Multiple characters, Shannon explains, involve multiple statuses, ages, historical backgrounds, interpersonal communication skills, and so on. To be effective, each character has to be differentiated from all of the others, and this is even more difficult when all are members of the same family (*W*, 2008:461). *As I Lay Dying* clearly pushed Shannon further than he wanted to go. Nevertheless, *Tok Guru* aroused great public interest, partly for what it seemed to reveal about the fundamentalist Muslim group, Darul Arqam, but mainly, one suspects, for the prurient interest aroused by the multiple frank discussions of human sexuality. *Ummi dan Abang Syeikhul* offered the same pleasures but in a simpler form.⁷ After this, his works head out in yet another new direction.

CONCLUSION

Pramod K. Nayar, in his provocatively entitled book *Postcolonialism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2010), writes:

Postcolonial ‘theory’ is a method of interpreting, reading and critiquing the cultural practices of colonialism, where it proposes that the exercise of colonial power is also the exercise of racially determined powers of representation. It argues that race and racial discourses enable colonial powers to represent, reflect, refract and make visible native cultures in particular ways preliminary to ordering and controlling these cultures. Postcolonial theory is an analytical-critical approach that treats colonial writing, arts, legal systems, science and other socio-cultural practices as racialized and unequal where the colonial does the representation and the native is represented.

Nayar’s statement focuses on the colonizer’s perspective of the colonized. It seems not to recognize that the colonized may also represent themselves, both in the colonial language of the metropolis and the local vernacular of the post-colony. The subaltern can, and does, speak and few have spoken more eloquently in Malay than Shannon Ahmad.

How the subaltern speaks through literature, in English, was the subject of the pioneering work *The Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989 – henceforth *EWB*) and has been much discussed since then. In broad terms, the “relationship with the imperial centre” is “paradigmatic” for the growth of post-colonial literatures everywhere (*EWB*, 1989:2). The

centre is “privileged”, the post-colonial is “peripheral”, “marginal” and “uncanonised” (*EWB*, 1989:3). Each post-colonial literature is different –it has “special and distinctive regional characteristics”; however, more importantly, each literature is also identical–“What each of these literatures has in common ... is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre. It is this which makes them distinctively post-colonial” (*EWB*, 1989:2).

There are, *EWB* asserts, “three important features of all post-colonial writing”. These are:

The silencing and marginalizing of the post-colonial voice by the imperial centre; the abrogation of this imperial centre within the text; and the active appropriation of the language and culture of that centre.

(*EWB*, 1989:83).

Shahnon’s turning to writing in the vernacular places each of these assertions in question. Firstly, he is neither “silenced” nor “marginalized” by Britain; he has had a long and productive literary career, for over fifty years, that has regularly and widely honoured throughout the Malay world, mostly recently by his selection from among the seven living Malaysian Sasterawan Negara for the granting of the Anugerah Sastera MASTERA (Literary Award of The Council for Southeast Asian Literature) in Brunei, September 2011. Secondly, he has not “abrogated” the centre so much as he has simply ignored it by translating non-British works and writing in Malay, for Malay audiences, and requiring to be judged by purely Malay aesthetic criteria. And, thirdly, he has certainly not “(appropriated) the language and culture of that centre”, if by “appropriation” one means no more than bringing English “under the influence of a vernacular tongue, the complex of speech habits which characterize the local language, or even the evolving and distinguishing local English of a monolingual trying to establish its link with place” (*EWB*, 1989:39). He has simply not written in English at all. In the words of the Australian poet, Les Murray: “I figure that the centre is everywhere. It goes with the discovery that the world is round, not flat ...” (Sharp, 1988: 160). Shahnon’s centre is Sik, a small town in the southeastern corner of Kedah, Malaysia; his language is the Malay language of Sik; the culture he has appropriated is the Malay culture of Sik.

Yet at the same time as he has written in the vernacular about intensely local matters, Shahnnon has participated, as a teacher and as a writer, in the circulation and study of literatures that exist beyond their national borders. His resistant use of translations and his ongoing pragmatic reading in world literature through the medium of the English language have served, when transformed into the vernacular of the Malay language, as tools for the repositioning of Malay literature and for the transcendence of the colonial culture in which he had been educated. Through the wider circulation of his own work within the broader Malay world, the wider circulation of English and other translations of that work, and discussions in forums such as this one, Shahnnon ceases to be a post-colonial subject and becomes instead a citizen of the world.

NOTES

1. These biographical details are taken from Shahnnon Ahmad, 2006: 190-91.
2. "...daripada pembacaan dan penterjemahan yang agak meluas itu, tahulah aku bahwa cerpen ini termasuk dalam kategori prosa yang agak pendek lagi padat. Kesan yang dituntut ialah tunggal, tidak berberaian dan disampaikan melalui suatu episod atau adegan yang signifikan, melibatkan beberapa watak, mungkin dua tiga orang atau hanya seorang. Bentuknya menuntut kepadatan termasuklah, tema, perwatakan, latar, plot, dan sebagainya. Cerpen ada jalan ceritanya meskipun padat, tetapi adakalanya cerpen tidak ada cerita kerana yang menggerakkan cerpen itu hanya mood atau rasa."
3. See Gabriel Garcia Marquez: *Collected Stories* (Harper Perennial, New York 1984), pp. 105-214.
4. "Clearly, in most of Marquez' works, his philosophy implies the meanings of loss of self or loss of individuality, anxiety states nervousness and restlessness, unusualness, despair or disappointment, depersonalization or loss of humanity, apathy or indifference, loneliness or isolation filled with a sense of the absence of others, atomization or reduction to the smallest elements, marginality, pessimism, and such like." (*W*, 2008: 418)
5. The following discussion draws on Aveling 1992: 19-26; the English translations are revised from Aveling, 1991:166-76.
6. A fourth area of borrowing through English of non-British materials relates to Shahnnon's role in the Islamic Literature (*Sastera Islam*), debates of the late 1970s, if we accept that Shahnnon drew his ideas from English-language translations of works by Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi, Syed Qutb, Syed Hussein Nasr, Ayatollah Khomeini, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, Maryam Jameelah and others. *Ummi dan Abang Syeikhul* and *Tok Guru* are the distant outcome of this interest.
7. Interestingly, Shahnnon compares the eroticism of *Terdedah*, in particular, but also that of *Tok Guru* and *Ummi dan Abang Syeikhul*, to that of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (*W*, 2008:286, 664-65); perhaps he had read more British literature in his early days than he admits!

REFERENCES

- Ashcroft, B. Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, 1989. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge.
- Aveling, H., 1991. *Fables of Eve*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Aveling, H., 1992. "Contemporary Literary Theory and the Study of Malay Literature". Singapore: Seminar Papers Series, No. 10, Dept. of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore.
- Aveling, H., 2000. *Shahnon Ahmad: Islam, Power and Gender*. Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- Aveling, H., "Shahnon Ahmad: Malay Author" in *Malay Literature*, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 39-57, 2010.
- Bassnett, S. & Harish Trivedi, 1999. *Postcolonial Translation*. London: Routledge.
- Bleikasten, A., 1973. *Faulkner's As I Lay Dying*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Cox, D. I., 1985. *William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying: A Critical Casebook*. New York: Garland Publishers.
- Damrosch, D., 2003. *What is World Literature?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Eckermann, J., 1951. *Conversations of Goethe with Johann Peter Eckermann*. Translated by John Oxenford. London: J.M. Dent.
- Faulkner, W., 1930/2004. *As I Lay Dying*. London: Vintage Books.
- Haslina Haroon, 2010. "Shahnon Ahmad sebagai Penterjemah" in Siti Hajar Che Man (ed.) *Resah Menusia Desa dan Kota*. Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, pp. 65-80.
- Johns, A.H., 1979. "Man in a Merciless Universe: The Work of Shahnon Ahmad", in *Cultural Options and the Role of Tradition*. Canberra: Faculty of Asian Studies in association with the Australian National University Press, pp.109-23.
- Marquez, Gabriel Garcia, 1979. *Collected Stories*. Translated by Gregory Rabassa and J.S. Bernstein. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Mohd. Yusof Hasan, 1979. *Novels of the Troubled Years*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Pramod K. Nayar, 2010. *Postcolonialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum.
- Niranjana, T., 1992. *Siting Translation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Robinson, D., 1997. *Translation and Empire: Postcolonial Theories Explained*. Manchester: St Jerome Press.
- Shahnon Ahmad, 1960. *Setinggi*. Province Wellesly: Pustaka Remaja.
- Shahnon Ahmad, 1965/1991. *Debu Merah*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan

Pustaka.

- Shahnon Ahmad, 1978. *Seluang Menodak Baung*. Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia).
- Shahnon Ahmad, 1979. *Gubahan Novel*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Shahnon Ahmad, 1988. *Tok Guru*. Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti.
- Shahnon Ahmad, 1989. *Seketul Hati Seorang Pemimpin*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Shahnon Ahmad, 1992. *Ummi & Abang Syeikhul*. Penang: Yusran.
- Shahnon Ahmad, 1995. *Tivi*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Shahnon Ahmad, 1996. *Igauan dan Cerita-cerita Lain*. Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti.
- Shahnon Ahmad, 1999. *Shit*. Kubang Kerian: Pustaka Reka.
- Shahnon Ahmad, 2006. *Perjalananku Sejauh Ini: Sebuah Autobiografi*. Penang: Pustaka Shahnonahmad.
- Shahnon Ahmad, 2008. *Weltanschauung: Suatu Perjalanan Kreatif*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Sharif Shaary, 1992. *Shahnon dengan Debu Merahnya*. Shah Alam: Marwilis.
- Sharp, I., 1988. "Interview with Les Murray" in *Landfall*, 42:2, pp. 150-68.
- Strich, F., 1949. *Goethe and World Literature*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.