

An Exploration of Resistance in Non-Malaysian Literature

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia is a diverse country and Malay literature is a unique literature with its own irreducible national tones that can be composed of works from multiple perspectives. However, there is some justification for the existence of non-Malay literature, which can also exist as a unique literature that enriches Malaysian literature. This study selected several distinguishing works to discuss this phenomenon in detail: *Swordfish+Concubine* (2018), *The Girl and The Ghost* (2020), *We, the Survivors* (2010) and *Without Anchovies* (2019). It aims to explore the cultural milieu that is biased against Malay literature as well as its reflection to Malay culture and society. Thus, it could form a complement to Malay literature and an exploration of social phenomena.

Keywords: *Non-Malaysian literature, Malaysian literature, Multi-racial diversity*

1. INTRODUCTION

The most striking feature of Malaysia is its multiracial diversity, which includes Malay, Chinese and Indian cultures as well as the traditional cultures of other indigenous minorities. Malaysian literature also has a unique ethnic identity. However, there is a type of literature in Malaysian literature called 'resistance literature', which is believed to have an overwhelming influence on Malay literature [1]. This type of resistance literature advocates an attack on elements of Malay culture that are ethnically biased, such as the caste system and the status of women, in order to gain insight into the study of Malay society.

2. METHODOLOGY

The paper intends to complement the exploration of Malay literature, as well as the social phenomena of the cultural milieu specific to Malay literature. After studying Malay literature, this study selects three non-Malay literature works in order to make a clear comparison. The collection was based on an internet search and adopted textual analysis to discuss it.

3. MULTIPLE MALAYSIAN LITERATURE

One of the most impressive aspects of Malaysian culture is the patriarchal social system. Based on

ethnicity, Malaysian policies have influenced the circumstances of each individual citizen, and ethnic politics has been the most prominent feature of Malaysian politics. In this system, literature has given rise to many feminist novels. In *Memory and Nation-Building: World War II in Malaysian Literature* (2021), it explores the contemporary image of World War II in Malaysian literature and the continuing significance of conflict in collective memory and country building in Malaysia [2]. Given the multicultural nature of the country, Malaysian memories of war are multiple and often contradictory. In contemporary Malaysian literature, these memories embody the exploration of the historical narrative to accommodate the country's cultural and ethnic diversity.

3.1. Feminist tinge

The sexist nature rarely seems to be a topic of discussion, nor is it as widely debated as ethnic politics. In this context, literature has focused on many feminist novels. This is a social phenomenon, as society develops and women's consciousness awakens, the call for true equality of women's status grows louder, and so that a number of scholars begin to study feminism. A simple example is the 'headscarf removal' campaign in Malaysia. This is a feature of the awakening of women's consciousness, a rebellion against the patriarchal social system. It is definitely not an overnight change for a woman to stop wearing the hijab, from wearing the hijab

as a child at the behest of her parents, to questioning and searching for answers to this rule, and finally making up her mind not to wear the hijab. In *Unveiling Choices* (2019), Maryam Lee trapped into a long struggling process of dehijabbing. She has already prepared to violate traditional culture. She did not believe that female should wait for Malay society [3]. The process is long and not easy. It can easily be interpreted as a violation of social norms, a violation of religion or even disobedience to parents. But perhaps the greatest fear for them is the hindrance to their parents. Since then, some people have to give up their autonomy in the process and suffer loneliness in silence because they don't want to lose their family.

In addition to forcing women to wear the hijab, the Muslim community in Malaysia often dictates that women cannot be leaders in the name of religion, and if they are, they can only be leaders among women [4]. As a result, Muslim women are often confined to the role of full-time wives at home. They are taught from an early age that a girl's body does not belong to her, and that women belong first to their parents, whose father has more decision-making power than the mother, then the brother in the family, and after marriage the body belongs to the husband. Such narrow-mindedness was passed on from generation to generation and became a unique social phenomenon in Malaysia in the 1980s. There are two parallel court systems in Malaysia: one is the Islamic court, which is exclusively for Muslims dealing with Muslim religious matters such as marriage, inheritance, divorce, apostasy and proselytism; the other is the ordinary criminal and civil court.

In the book *Without Anchovies* by Kok Yee Chua, three stories are told. Sin Zhi, the main character in *The Gift*, prepares a gift for his mother on her birthday. Yet his father takes the gift away from her and gives it to her when she finds out. Sin Zhi is angry and upset at her father's behaviour, but eventually accepts it and does not explain the reason to her mother. Although this story comes from a family, it shows that women do not have any power in the family. In *Saviors in the Nigh*, this is a more dramatic story. Her husband has disappointed her for a long time and an incident makes the woman decide to divorce.

"The sensible thing to do right now is to squeeze David's arm and wake him, but I do not (p. 71)."

She heard two footsteps in the night and thought they were two killers. *"I hear footsteps coming up the stairs"* (p. 69). Instead of choosing to wake her husband in the night, she relies on her discovery that the men at the door are in fact saviors and they decided to save her. And at the end of the story, the woman discovers that it turns out to be a leaky tap outside her window. In doing so, it is really ironic. She realizes that the only person who can save her is herself, and so ends up choosing to divorce her husband. The protagonist is sober enough to realize

that no one but herself can help her out of the mire, so the only person who can change a woman's unfortunate situation is herself. In the last vignette, the narrator say "I suspect my boyfriend, Joe, is a murderer" (p. 112). The wife is tired of her husband, even if she becomes a ghost.

In addition, women's conventions have been haunted in literature. A chapter in *No Anchovies-'Smoking Kills'*, describes a wife who posts notices in her house to prevent her husband from smoking. She says that *"smoking was harmful to health (p.76)"*. Her efforts to control this makes her husband uncomfortable and so causes a series of troubles over and over again.

Malaysian unique traditions and complex religious nature have always existed and are unlikely to be eliminated. Due to its diversity, it has created a variety of cultures. The diversity of Malaysian culture has been the most important part of Malaysia's history and has created a distinctive Malay literature. Thus, Therefore, whether from the social status of women or from the awakening of their consciousness, its characteristics can be highlighted.

3.2. Immigrant Culture

Malaysia is mainly composed of Malays, Malay-Chinese and Indians. The Malay, Chinese and Indian cultures form the distinctive national culture of Malaysia. This general social situation is also reflected in the literary sphere. The Malay population in Malaysia is divided into the aboriginal Malaysians and the indigenous Malaysians. The aboriginal Malaysians live mostly in the harsher north of the country, where they maintain their own cultural traditions, while the Aborigines are the people who settle here later than the Aborigines. The Chinese are the second largest ethnic group in Malaysia.

3.2.1. Cultural Identity

In contrast to the assimilation of the Chinese in other Southeast Asian countries, the Malay Chinese are committed to their cultural identity. They identify with a common cultural heritage and maintain uninterrupted contact with the Chinese cultural community through immigration and the media [5]. The third largest ethnic group in Malaysia are Indians, who are mostly of Indian descent who migrated to Malaysia in the 19th and 20th centuries. Many tin mines were discovered in Peninsular Malaysia, and the cultivation of rubber led to a demand for large numbers of miners and rubber harvesters, so the British colonial authorities imported many Chinese and Indians.

At that time, there was an influx of Chinese into Malaysia, Singapore and other south-eastern regions. In *The Girl and the Ghost*, Suraya meets Pink, a ghost who was abandoned by her grandmother when she was five

years old. “*Suraya. Come inside now. The sun is setting; it will be Maghrib soon* (p. 12).” At the age of five, Suraya’s body was broken at least twelve times, gassed twice, and probably died on seven different occasions. When she went to school, several of her classmates openly mocked and denounced Suraya. Pink’s anger had turned from sparks to flames. He had to hold his tentacles to keep himself from casting a spell he might regret. He had seen people like this before in his travels: people who needed to step on others to elevate themselves. Even he just didn’t realize they could start so young. Later, Susan met a Chinese friend named Jing Wei and became inseparable.

This girl grew up a bit autistic and didn’t get on well with others. But Pink has magic and can use it to help him get back at others. Thanks to the presence of the witch, Suraya becomes confident. After she starts school, she meets her friend Jing Wei, with whom she is very close, but this makes Pink angry and determines to do some mischief. To get rid of the witch, the main character and her mother find a ghost collector called Pawang to deal with this issue. He stood in the middle of the cemetery, wearing his pale gray jubilee, the moonlight glinting on his small round glasses shimmering on the glasses. Around him, dark wriggles and squirms..

Upon arriving home, they are surprised to discover that Pink is the ghost of a young boy whose only request is to help find his own grave to rest in peace. Despite some twists and turns in the search, Suraya eventually discovers that Pink is in fact the grave of her own brother. The entire novel is centred around two characters, a young girl and a ghost, combined with a secondary character, Jing Wei, who drives the storyline. The novel’s conflicts are so deep that the reader is drawn in to read it intently.

3.2.2. *Immigrant Plots*

At the beginning of the first century AD, both Chinese and Indian traders settled on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula, so Hinduism and Buddhism were brought to Malaysia at this time. Subsequently, Islam was imported into the area. From World War II, the British began to colonize Malaya. When the Indian Legion that had been stationed in Singapore suddenly revolted in the early 20th century, it virtually dominated Singapore. This was followed by the occupation of Malaya by the Japanese, but it was not a smooth process. They met with fanatical opposition, mainly from the Chinese in Malaysia. After the war, the British restored Malaya but also faced resistance. This is mainly from the Malayan Communist Party. With the growth of the Malayan Communist Party, Malayan nationalists became engaged in the fight for independence. These forces grew in maturity.

Ah Hock, as the main character in *We, the Survivors*, is a descendant of Malaysian immigrants. His father immigrated to Malaysia after the Second World War in search of labour opportunities and settled there. The whole novel revolves around Ah Hock and Keong, who are the descendants of immigrants in this country. Through his hard work, Ah Hock has a good job in a small fishing village and earns a decent income.

My shirt was wet -- not just damp, but properly wet - - and it clung to my back like a second skin; only that skin did not belong to me, but to a separate living organism, cold and heavy, weighing me down. [We, the Survivors, p. 22]

Keong, a childhood friend of Hock, returns and asks the protagonist for help with his job of helping some people to immigrate illegally. Coincidentally, a worker at the Hock fishery suddenly ill and is unable to continue his work, so he asks his friend Keong for help. And in the process of finding the worker, the main character accidentally kills an innocent man and ends up in jail under the condemnation of his conscience.

In fact, the main character is a person who acts with honesty and integrity. In contrast to his best friend, Keong acts badly, people comment badly on him, and his work is an illegal hook. After releasing from prison, Hock was approached by a sociologist and followed up with an interview, which culminated in the publication of Ah Hock’s story. The story is based on a true story and is narrated using a disadvantaged immigrant in Malaysia. This unique perspective has made the work a popular favourite.

4. SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES

The political transition of Malaysia is unique among developing countries in that it has been a process of political development through infra-institutional transformation. Even it without changing the basic form of the country’s political system. Since its establishment in 1957, Malaysia has maintained a relatively stable political transition through ‘one-party rule’ under the Malay National Unity Body. Since the birth of the nation state in the 17th century, communal politics has been a part of human history [6]. Especially in the 21st century, it has not only not disappeared, but has tended to intensify. Today, communal conflicts and even communal wars still exist in many countries in Africa and Asia. In the history of Malaysia’s political transformation, communal politics has been reflected mainly in institutionalized participation in the political process.

To a certain extent, Malaysian party politics is essentially communal politics. In Malaysia, communal politics is manifested in the government’s intention to divide all Malaysians into indigenous and non-indigenous, Malay and non-Malay, Muslim and non-Muslim, thereby granting special political, economic and

cultural rights and treatment to indigenous, Malay and Muslim people. Corruption is therefore an outgrowth of the political squeeze of the community, and to some extent is related to the Malay government's high-handed development agenda. The consolidation of communal politics has led to the privileging of the Malays and the administration's heavy favouritism towards the Malays in the form of communal quotas, banks and etc., which has created a huge scope for rent-seeking and the normalization of corruption [7].

In *Swordfish+Concubine*, the author provides a fun-filled account of the period in which Hang Nadim and Nurhalisa saved the corrupt country. This epic play was scripted by Malaysian dramatist and producer Kee Thuan Chye. It describes some of the current prevalent socio-political issues in Malaysia using history and mythology. The author explore the problem of political corruption reflected in the script. The play is a light-hearted approach to two satirical stories: one about Hang Nadim's series of efforts to save his kingdom from a swordfish attack. After the crisis subsides, some of the leaders become jealous of the boy's talents and begin to fear that he will grow up to overthrow them, so the boy is executed.

This we must do, for on no account must a Malay ever turn his face from his Ruler. [Swordfish+Concubine, p. 18]

The ministers and the monarch came up with a way to resist the swordfish attack and let the stationers build a defensive wall with their bodies, because they believed that the warriors' bodies were indestructible, while the swordfish were just a bunch of mindless, inferior creatures. By using the rhetorical technique of metaphor, the soldiers' bodies are compared to cloth and the swordfish to needles. This dialogue portrays the incompetence and stupidity of the monarch and his subjects. A little boy can save the whole country by trying to fend off a swordfish with a banana branch. But the ministers and the monarch worried that the clever little boy will grow up to their reign. They see him as a threat and execute him for treason.

The other is the story of Nurhalisa, a woman's perspective. She is a virtuous, public-minded young girl who agrees to become the Sultan's consort in order to rescue two villagers' lives. Nurhalisa is portrayed as a fragile woman who sacrifices for justice, while Iskandar makes political changes to get the woman he loves. These two figures are contrasted. Through the use of irony, contrast and exaggeration, the passage depicts an absurd and comical scene.

Whenever Iskandar speaks to establish intimacy with the villagers, he always looks down and asks his concubine what she needs to say next. You re not totally useless. *"You're vile. You're poisonous. You can at least rub your poison on me.* (pp. 125-126)" The blunt

depiction exposes the monarch's stupidity and incompetence, as well as his lack of his own mind in government affairs. The story of the girl who is eventually falsely accused of being sentenced to death for her misdeeds. By depicting the language of Iskandar's actions, the play shows us the incompetence and cowardice of the monarch, and more ironically the corruption of politics and the abuse of power under the feudal dictatorship.

5. CONCLUSION

This article is a comparative analysis of selected literary works with their own characteristics. It argues that the existence of non-Malay literature is somewhat justified, especially as an insightful analysis of social phenomena. The study is addressed from three perspectives, which includes feminist tinge, immigrant culture and socio-political issues by historical evidences and novel elements. Literature is a mirror image of contemporary society, with all its strengths and weaknesses expressed in fiction or drama. Malay literature is a product of the fusion of diverse ethnicity and languages, and non-Malay literature can also provide a unique perspective and reference material for Malay literature.

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