

**CONTEMPORARY LITERARY  
THEORY AND THE STUDY OF  
MALAY LITERATURE**

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## FOREWORD

I am pleased to write this short foreword to introduce the Department's Seminar and Occasional Papers Series. The series provides the opportunity for staff members of the Department as well as scholars of Malay Studies in general to have their research findings on Malay subjects made known to a wider audience. It is also hoped that this initiative will provide the avenue for a beneficial exchange of ideas and viewpoints on Malay issues between town and gown.

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# CONTEMPORARY LITERARY THEORY AND THE STUDY OF MALAY LITERATURE

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It seems innocent enough, as Terry Engleton remarks at the beginning of *Criticism and Ideology* (1988:11). "There is literature, and so - because we wish to understand and appreciate it - there is also criticism". The relationship is spontaneous, natural, even deferential, criticism is the self-effacing handmaiden who follows literature wherever she goes at a discrete distance, and lives but to serve her mistress" needs.

And yet, as Engleton very soon points out: "Criticism is not an innocent discipline, and never has been" (1988:17). Rather, criticism has its own history, its own autonomous life separate from the works of literature, its own laws and structures. Criticism forms its own relatively complex system, which is articulated with the literary system rather than merely reflexive of it. Methods of criticism come into being and pass away again for reason which are beyond literature. Certainly the "labour intensive industry of literary enquiry" has its amateur workers, but it also reaches out professionally into schools, universities, publishing houses and literary bodies, to which the amateurs are subordinate. These institutions in the words of John Frow (1986:2) serve as "a machine for the production of specific behaviours and discourses". They constitute Literature (note the capital L) as an apparently self-contained order of canonic texts. They administer the methodological paradigms used for dealing with this Literature, accrediting some texts, some practices and some practitioners, while excluding others from serious contention. The professors transmit

"Knowledge" to their pupils within a hierarchy of academic authority, in which each has an appropriate position, a proper way of acting and a correct manner of speaking.

My concern here is with contemporary European literary theory and the study of Malay/Indonesian literature. In general, I seek to explore the institutional contexts of these two forms of discourse, the texts they produce, the way in which these texts relate to other similar texts and each other, the way they do not relate, and in what contemporary theory has to offer Malay Studies. I begin with some brief outline remarks on theory, and its reception in Malaysia and Indonesia. I then proceed, more specifically, to an analysis of indigenous theory, as represented in the Forward to a recently published anthology, *Memori Seorang Tua* (the Memory - or Memories - of an Old Man). After summarising the way in which indigenous and new theories support and challenge each other, I conclude with a schematic reading of one of the stories in the anthology, "Gunung" by Shahnnon Ahmad. My aim is to present a range of issues rather than arrive at one single conclusion.

## II

In 1966, Prof A H Johns of the Australian National University wrote in the Perth-based literary journal *Westerly* (Johns 1966:28):

Modern Indonesian poetry ... remains very much an unknown world, as much - if the truth be told - in Indonesia as elsewhere. Fundamental questions to which a whole range of possible answers need

consideration and comparison are not even asked. Despite the verbiage proffered by patrons, we still lack a definitive study of the work of any Indonesian writer: an account of his background, the sources of his inspiration, his indebtedness to his predecessors, his relations with his contemporaries whether as a poet, personality or thinker; his influence upon them, theirs upon him. We are equally in the dark concerning the aesthetics of modern Indonesian writing; we know next to nothing of the dynamics of Indonesian prosody, or what it is in the genius of the language which determines variety of pace and rhythms, influences mood, or suggests force, vitality, gentleness or despair. We still need to ask by what criteria the language of poetry may be distinguished from that of prose, from whence it derives its dimension, and its potential for over-tones.

On the other side of the world in that same year, 1966, certain possible ways of answering Johns' questions about Indonesian literature, and by implication about Malay literature as well, were becoming to come into clear focus. That year, as Felperin (1990:74) points out, witnessed the publication of Pierre Macherey's *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire* which inaugurated structuralist-Marxist criticism, and of Roland Barthes' *Critique et verite* which marked structuralism's own

coming of age as a literary-critical school and a movement, completing the transition of criticism from its interpretive phase to its theoretical. Although Felperin does not mention this, Foucault's *Words and Things* were also first published in 1966 as well. These three works signalled major new ways of thinking about language and discourse, literature, and the forces acting on and through literature. The shift in paradigm which they confirmed has continued to strengthen over the past almost thirty years.

Contemporary literary criticism draws its strength from writing in a number of disciplines: criticism itself, but also philosophy, sociology, Marxist theory, and psychology. There is not one but a diverse number of theories and partial theories. These derive from a number of master-texts and it may be useful to summarise these in a fairly succinct chronology (Harland 1987: 187-8, supplemented from other sources). The roots of contemporary theory rest in the pioneering linguistics work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), in particular his posthumously published lectures entitled *A Course in General Linguistics* (1916), and in the work of the Russian Formalists and the Prague School, which "unified Formalism and Saussurean linguistics in a single theoretical programme" (Robey 1987:51). Structuralism, as it developed in France during the 1950s, took shape in the semiotic work of Roland Barthes (1915-1980), *Mythologies* (1957), *Elements of Semiology* (1964), and A J Greimas *Sémantique Structurale* (1966), *Du Sens* (1970); as well as in the anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss (b 1908), *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949), *Totemism* (1963), *The Savage Mind* (1963) and *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964).

Beyond structuralism lay the post-structuralism of the 1970s. Here we need first to distinguish the group centred around the literary periodical *Tel Quel*: Jacques Derrida (b 1930), *Writing and Difference* (1967), *On Grammatology* (1967), *Speech and Phenomena* (1967), *Dissemination* (1972), *Positions* (1972) and *The Margins of Philosophy* (1972); Julia Kristeva (b 1941), *Semiotike* (1969), *Polylogue* (1977); and the later works of Barthes, especially *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975). Then there is the work of Gillés Deleuze and Feliz Guattari, especially *Anti-Oedipus* (1972); and the later writing of Michel Foucault (1926-1984), *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* (1976). Thirdly, mention must also be made of Jean Baudrillard (b 1929), *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972), *The Mirror of Production* (1973) and *Forget Foucault* (1977).

Separate from the work of these thinkers, although related to it in various ways, was the writing of various "major independent figures" (Harland 1987:3); the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), whose seminars, begun in 1953, were attended during the sixties by Derrida, Barthes and Kristeva, among others - *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1964-1965); the Marxist Louis Althusser (1918-1989), *For Marx* (1965); and *Reading Capital* (1965); and the "earlier Foucault", *Madness and Civilization* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1964), *The Order of Things* (1966) and *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1969).

It is not my intention to summarise these master-texts here. This has been done in a number of other places (including the useful "New Accents" Series published by Methuen: in particular Bennett 1979, Hawkes 1977, Harland 1987 and Norris 1982).

The most widely used introductory textbooks on contemporary theory include Terry Eagleton *Literary Theory, An Introduction* (1983), Ann Jefferson and David Robey (eds) *Modern Literary Theory, A Contemporary Introduction* (1982), and Raman Selden *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (1985). Significantly these are all available in Malay translation (respectively Muhammad Haji Salleh 1988, Mokhtar Ahmad 1988 and Umar Junus 1989).

In brief, however, Freedman and Miller (1992:10-11) suggest that "the salient features of contemporary critical theorising" includes:

the denial of the referential power of literature and its images of the individual; the adoption of 'decentered' models of the self; the denial of the 'originary' authority of the author; the (related) denial of determinate meaning, and so of determinate acts of interpretation of texts; the (again related) image of the text as embodying an infinite plurality of meaning and a correspondingly infinite range of reading (or 'subject') positions; the tying of hermeneutic acts to the analysis of social power relations; the rejection of canonical notions of literary tradition, and indeed of the very category 'literature' itself.



The older theory saw itself as "the logical formulation of the principles underlying a literary-critical practice already in place and operating on an accepted canon of literary texts" (Felperin 1990:26). The newer theory dismisses its predecessor as untheoretical and impressionistic (Freadman and Miller 1992:34), conservatively dedicated to the promotion of certain values which contribute to the establishment of a particular type of "culture" and indeed a more splendid, and more moral, vision of "society", obsessed with individual selves, and naive about language, literature, culture, values and its own ends (Freadman and Miller 1992:13, 35-36). Contemporary criticism consider, no doubt grandiously, that it has brought about a "Copernican Revolution" in literary studies (Catherine Belsey, cited by Freadman and Miller 1992:12), but also one which reflects a profound re-orientation in the intellectual life of the West since (approximately) Freud, Marx and Saussure - and one which is in line with a general conceptual re-orientation within the Humanities themselves (Freadman and Miller 1992:12, 36-36).

Profoundly rooted as it is in classical French and German philosophy on the nature of human consciousness (Habermas 1987), contemporary theory, on the one hand, and its derivative contemporary literary theory, on the other, both present enormous challenges to those scholars outside Europe who would seek to understand and extend this work. Eagleton, in the Introduction to *Criticism and Ideology* (1988:7), provides an English response in his own attempts to reformulate a materialist aesthetics. He writes:

It is not only that so many issues in this field are fraught and inconclusive, but to intervene from England is almost automatically to disenfranchise oneself from the debate. It is to feel acutely bereft of a tradition, as a tolerated house-guest of Europe, a precocious but parasitic alien.

Be that as it may, the theory paradigm was securely established in Britain, America and the Commonwealth since the early seventies with only a few pockets of resistance left, although these too are currently in the process of being "mopped-up" (Felperin 1990:28).

If Eagleton in England felt himself the "house-guests of Europe", it is even more the case that those who would seek to understand and apply the new theory in Malaysia and elsewhere in the postcolonial world feel themselves to be no more than guest of the guests. We certainly do not understand, I would suggest, the background to which the theory forms a very definite response. Because of its range, diversity and arcaneness, it is often equally difficult to see what the theory might be for and how we might use it. The progress of the new theory here, therefore, is slow. There have been articles on aspects of theory in *Dewan Sastera* since the beginning of the 1980s: for example, Umar Junus' short account of Structuralism and Semiotics (October 1980), Supardy Murali on Reception Theory (May 1984); Md Salleh Yaafar and Fatimah Ali on Post-Modern Criticism (July 1986); and Anwar Ridhwan on Discourse Theory (October 1986); these essays appear with a range of much more

conventional criticism in Hamzah Hamdani 1988. The most outspoken advocate of contemporary theory has long been Umar Junus, who had the good fortune to be teaching at Yale when much of critical theory first began to make an impact on America. (for an account of this experience, see Felperin 1990:6-9). His works include *Teori Respesi* (1985), *Sosiologi Sastera* (1986) and *Karya Sebagai Sumber Makna, Pengantar Strukturalisme* (1988). Muhammad Haji Salleh gives some recognition of theory in his various papers, published mainly in English and in non-academic journals, collected as *Yang Empunya Cerita: The Mind of the Malay Author* (1991). In Indonesia, Prof A Teeuw had begun discussing the need for theory in various lectures given there since 1977; a range of these papers is collected in *Membaca dan Menilai Sastera* (Indonesian text 1983; Malaysian text 1992). His thinking is most fully expressed in *Sastera dan Ilmu Sastera, Pengantar Teori Sastera* (1984), which does attempt to set the theories discussed in a wider historical context. It is perhaps no coincidence that the introduction of contemporary literature theory was vastly overshadowed in both countries by epistemological concerns more firmly rooted in indigenous cultures: the debate on *Sastera Islam* in Malaysia (Shahnon Ahmad 1981, Ahmad Kamal Abdullah 1988 and Nurazmi Kuntum 1991); and *Sastera Kontekstual* in Indonesia (Ariel Heryanto 1988). Nevertheless, the subject was increasingly taught, seminared and debated from the late 1980s without, as yet, achieving the dominant status which has already been established in the West. (On theory in Indonesia, see Sapardi 1991).

### III

Writing explicitly from within the new theory in 1982, H J Maier (1982:317) noted in what is essentially an updated version of Johns' earlier lament:

Lack of an explicit, strong framework of theoretical conception is one of the characteristic features of studies concerning Indonesian literature. The work of many scholars in our field appears to be based on intuitive, implicit notions about the literariness of given texts, the problems of interpretation and evaluation, and the relationship between language and reality. Too often this has unavoidably led to unverifiable, more or less arbitrary analyses of texts, genres and periods. My primary aim here is to show that the study of Indonesian literature can only benefit by the consistent application of a comprehensive literary theory.

Maier's articles mainly deals with an analysis of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's story "Sunat" in the light of the work of Jurij Lotman. Here, equally arbitrarily, I intend to follow up remarks on theory by a reading of the story "Gunung" by Shahnnon Ahmad. First published in *Dewan Sastera*, December 1988 and then in *Seketul Hati Seorang Pemimpin* (1989), the story has recently been republished in an anthology entitled *Memori Seorang Tua* (1992). The anthology, directed to upper secondary students in Malaysian schools, contains a Forward by the editor, Abdullah Tahir, on

how the stories can best be read. Before proceeding to "Gunung", however, I wish to deal with the anthology itself.

I do this because the relationship between literature and education is important. As Barthes has written (1986:22): "Can literature be anything else for us than a childhood memory?... what is that speaks of literature after the *lyoée*?" (His answer: crossword puzzles, a few quiz shows, an old poster, an obituary, a few paperbacks, an accidental reference in the paper...) Abdullah Tahir is Associate Professor of Creative Writing in (note) the Department of Malay Studies, University of Malaya. The "Biodata" gives the educational levels of each of the 20 authors and their later involvement: A Samad Ismail received an honorary Doctorate from the National University of Malaysia (UKM) in 1976; Anis (or Amida Abdul Hamid) is also a lecturer in the Department of Creative Writing; Anwar Ridhwan participated in the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa; Sri Diah (or Radhiah bt Shaharuddin) holds a Certificate in Creative Writing from the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), and so on. At least seven of the authors presently teach in Malaysians schools or campuses, and a further three have served as university Writers in Residence. Two are employed by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, the most consistent publisher of the new writing in Malaysia, and the publishing arm of the Ministry of Education. *Memori Seorang Tua* is published by Fajar Bakti Sdn Bhd, a subsidiary of Oxford University Press, established mainly to publish textbooks in Malay. That the aim of *Memori Seorang Tua* is to socialize young people into appreciating literature is not an embarrassing aside; it is simply a further example of the fact that the function of teaching in Malay society has always been closely linked to the

appropriation and exposition of written texts, as the highest form of human cultural achievement. Further, such an activity is (and was) not only recognised by the state as valuable, but is (and was) supported by various systems of honours, rewards and titles. These, too, are listed in the Biodata: in 1992, DYMM Yang diPertuan Agung granted A Samad Ismail the PSM and the title "Tan Sri"; A Samad Said received the title *Pejuang Sastera* from the Prime Minister in 1976; Professor Datuk Shanon Ahmad also received the title "Pejuang Sastera" in 1976 from the Prime Minister and the Anugerah Sastera Negara in 1992; on a slightly less exalted level, S Othman Kelantan has been awarded the *Hadih Karya Sastera* several times, as have Malim Ghozali PK and Zahari Afandi; and so on again.

The form of socialisation which takes place in the Introduction is partly intuitive and implicit but largely, I would suggest quite explicit. Into the former category fits the assumption that these twenty short stories belong to a particular ontological category which is called Literature. The reason for publishing this particular item of literature, which will be sold on the open market and therefore be the focus of countless financial transactions, is not, however money but: "*fungsi mendidik, menghibur dan juga mempelajari dan menghayati karya cerpen di samping belajar menguasai bahasa dan teknik penulisan cereka*", to teach, to entertain, and also to study and visualise works of short fiction, as well as to teach (students) mastery of language and the techniques of writing short stories. The stories provide *teladan dan iktibar*, examples and strategies for readers to follow. It is Abdullah Tahir's hope that these *tujuan murni*, pure ideals, will soon be realised (kelak akan tercapai). Literature, in summary, is a noble form of discourse, with many benefits for those willing to

engage in it. (This paragraph draws on the final paragraph of Abdullah's Forward, page xiii, future references to the Forward will be presented as page numbers, in brackets).

Literature is part of a field of wider human endeavour, *karya seni*, art (vi). In the "Biodata", authors are constructed in terms of the date and place of birth, education, employment, awards and major publications. The Forward (vi) constructs the concept of *penulis cerita pendek (atau cerpenis)*, short story writer, through a very different discourse. Authors are "artists" (*manusia seniman*). As such, of course (*tentulah*), they are possessed of sharp powers of observation and very high sensitivity (*daya pemerhatian mereka itu amat tajam dan sensitiviti mereka pula amat tinggi*). In translating this last phrase, I was tempted to write "a well-developed sensitivity", this would have to falsify - in this situation "sensitivity" is innate, it is not something that needs cultivation to find its full maturation). These powers are brought to bear on the "transformation" (surely an inadequate rendering of *mengolah*) of particular events they have experienced, noticed, heard about or even read about elsewhere. The work of art is a way of presenting and resolving certain problems (*persoalan yang diungkapkan*), which human beings endure in their everyday life (*pelbagai persoalan yang mencecah kehidupan seharian manusia*). These problems may be social, political, economic, historical, philosophical and so on.

The reason why authors do not have a personal history in the Forward is that they share in a broader history, that of the State, and its progress from the Japanese occupation to the present day (*berlatarbelakangkan zaman perang dan pendudukan*

*Jepun, zaman tanahair mencapai kemerdekaan dan terakhir zaman kita sedang mengisi kemerdekaan, iv).* The state is Malay and male. Perhaps no more than three of the authors are women. Two only are non-Malays: Lim Swee Tin and E Pian Pro Poul, both born in Kelantan. Abdullah tells us both at the beginning of the Forward and at the end that Lim is of Chinese descent and E Pian of Thai (iii and iv, xiii). Both, it should nevertheless be noted, write about Malay values and Malay families. Further, because the state has a history but art does not, there is no acknowledgement of where or when the stories were first published. Each piece of equal value, they belong to a new text, constructed today, *Memori Seorang Tua*. (Two similar cases of textual construction were presented to the Malaysian Literature Week held in London in 1992. *The Puppeteer's Wayang, A Selection of Modern Malaysian Poetry*, assembled by A Rahim Abdullah of DBP, used translations done by Muhammad Haji Salleh and others over the past 20 years, and an article on Malay poetry by him, first published in *Tenggara*, 24, in 1989, as an Introduction, *Cempaka, Four Contemporary Malay Poets*, probably put together by Kemala, was at least two-thirds derived from translations I have done over the past decade, with my Key-Note Address to the KL World Poetry Festival of 1990 as its introduction).

A researcher, or more precisely a literary critic (*seseorang peneliti atau tugasnya pengeritik sastra*, v) may use various approaches to analyse a work (*menganalisis karya*), Abdullah suggests. These include the "formalistic", the "structural", the - most recently - the "semiotic". But no matter what approach is taken, the critic will always need to discuss the two most important aspects of any story, its content and its form or structure (*isi dan bentuk atau struktur*). These are, if we were in any



doubt, the sort of things student will most commonly be asked to comment on in examinations (vi). The "theme" is the fundamental problem presented by the story (*Istilah tema atau pokok persoalan dimaksudkan isi atau pokok cerita sesebuah cereka*). The "structure" is the form (*bentuk*) and includes plot, characterisation, point of view and style.

It is my, no doubt limited, experience that Malaysian tertiary students at least do tend to deal with works of literature by firstly "telling the story" and then by describing the theme. If the theme touches mainly on social customs, the analysis is "sociological", if the theme relate to inequalities in everyday life, it may be "economic", if the main interest is in the mental states of the characters, "psychological", if the story is set in the obvious past, "historical", and so on. It isn't actually necessary to know about these various disciplines, to use their data or have an informed stand on their debates, the study of literature was considered "self-sufficient", separate "extrinsic" issues. Be *that* as it may too, Abdullah Tahir places his major focus on themes, or the issues, dealt with in the various stories, one after the other and what we may learn from them. A Samad Ismail's "Pak Cik Bedong", for example, teaches us that we must not be taken in too readily by what other people say (vii). "Ekor Kepala" by Keris Mas teaches us to be courageous (*berani*) and not to depend on others if our life is to be a success (vii). Ashaari's work "Merdeka di sebuah desa" shows how the members of a particular village, although divided into three strongly antagonistic factions (not named: probably UMNO, Angkatan Pemuda Insaf, and the Chinese members of the *kampung*, certainly not PAS), come together in a flag-raising ceremony to mark the announcement of Independence (ix). In

discussing S M Zakir's "Mimpi Senapati", on the other hand, Abdullah goes to extraordinary lengths (almost a page) to avoid finding any theme in this story of the destruction of Kuala Lumpur by fire during the Civil War waged in the nineteenth century between Raja Mahadi and Tengku Kudin, and their Chinese supporters (xi-xii). Instead, he is forced to praise the story for its careful composition and its successful maintenance of high aesthetic values (*pengolahan komposisi yang terkawal dan berjaya mempertahankan nilai estetikanya*, xii).

"Gunung", finally requires little comment. The plot is straightforward (*tidak mempunyai plot cerita yang berbelit-belit seperti cerpen 'Ekor Kepala'*, to be precise). It focuses on philosophy, namely: *kejatuhan seseorang pemimpin atau ketua itu seringkali terjadi bukan kerana orang lain, tetapi kerana kesalahan dan kesilapan yang dilakukannya sendiri* (vii). Which we may paraphrase as: "the fall of a great man or a leader often occurs not because of the acts of others, but through some serious fault or foolish mistake which he himself is responsible for".

#### IV

Our analysis of Abdullah Tahir's Forward to *Memori Seorang Tua* has shown that, contrary to the assertions of Johns and Maier, a clear Malay aesthetic about the nature of art, its creation and its purpose, does indeed exist and can be previously defined. What contemporary literary theory now offers us, I suggest, is a way of coming to terms with that aesthetic, and of challenging and extending it, in an academically rigorous manner. It is not enough to talk of "the verbiage proffered by patrons" (however satisfying that may sound), or of the inadequacies of the "many scholars in

our field" who do not see things that the way we do. Such remarks are patronising, potentially ethnocentric, and fail to carry the debate forward in a way responsive to indigenous Malay and Indonesian conceptions of art and culture.

Two of the major areas of convergence, and contention, are as follows.

Firstly, there is the possibility of reworking our conceptions about "literature" and the nature of the text, particularly if we are prepared to pay attention not only to what is said about literature and text but also to what is done to and with them. Practices related to "Malay literature" have tended to be concerned not with some fixed, eternal essence, which is "Literature" first and then "Malay" in some merely secondary way, but with specific discourse formations in *Bahasa Melayu*. The range of those formations has quite obviously varied. Traditional dealings with Malay texts, and even Sir Richard Winstedt in his *History of Malay Literature*, have all used the term generously, to include not only imaginative discourse about human (and semi-human) action, but also historical, legal, mythic and religious texts. The term has been used to include not only prose and poetry, but also oral texts, many of which are public theatrical events. We are slowly coming to realise too that it is in fact impossible to separate "oral" from "written" literature, when written texts were commonly consumed by an audience of listeners, for whom, and in conjunction with whom, the text was reconstituted and recreated by a "performer" who was not the original "author" of the text. It is quite clearly only since the Second World War that the term "literature", or more specifically "modern Malay literature" has been used to construct a category including works of poetry, short story, fiction and dramatic

script, written at the present time and bearing the name of the person who created it. (There is a greater challenge here, which I shall not pursue here, when we realise that the path is suddenly open for us to move in our explorations of imaginative Malay discourse production from "literary studies" to a "cultural studies" which will include traditional and modern, oral and written, high and low, dramatic scripts, theatre, television, film and advertising).

With regard to texts, we are also in a position to accept more readily than before that there are many versions of the "same" text over time, all with their own validity and interest, and not be led astray by the dream of one original text and one authoritative creator, the "author". We can see, even in contemporary writing, how texts are adapted, reformed, and become new, self-contained texts. We can see (from our experience with the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*) that readers shape texts too, and can influence the value placed in the internal components of the work.

Secondly, contemporary literary theory encourages us to be much more aware of the relations of the literary text to the wider society. Relations of production and consumption are not incidental. Each work of art, consciously or otherwise, bears a social ideology, which it either supports or puts into question. *Memori Seorang Tua*, I have tried to show, is as much about the history of the State of Malaysia, the role of Malays and other communities in that state, the distribution of power between leaders and followers, the old and the young, men and women, as it is about certain small events recorded by highly sensitive artists. We need to be able to read now not only across the text but also beyond it - to discern whose material interests are served

by the work; how those interests are given aesthetic form so that they seem natural, legitimate and compelling; and how those works are upheld, or subverted by the work.

As a very schematic example of the new critical practice for which I am arguing, allow me to conclude with a few remarks on Shanon's "Gunung".

V

The Russian Formalists have provided criticism with an interesting distinction between the "story" (fabula) ie the chronological sequence of events narrated, and "plot" (syuzhet) ie the order and manner in which the events are actually presented in the narration. The function of "plot" is to "defamiliarise", to make strange or interesting, that which might otherwise be familiar and unexceptional (see Jefferson and Robey 1987:24-45). The story of "Gunung" can, indeed, be constructed as "the fall of a great man", from the beginning to the end of the process. The plot is a good deal more complex.

Firstly, we must recognise that the story exists in a frame: it is something that is seen or experienced by "aku", the first-person narrator. There is a dislocation between the one who sees and what is seen. Secondly, this dislocation is expressed in terms of the narrator's own consciousness, with regard to both the manner and the time of seeing.

Para 1: *Dulu rasa-rasanya aku sedang temggelam asyik berkhayal memerhatikan Gunung Gayamahatumpul .....*

Para 2: *Kelmarin, rasa-rasanya aku sedang tenggelam asyik berkhayal memerhati keruntuhan Gunung Gayamahatumpul itu .....*

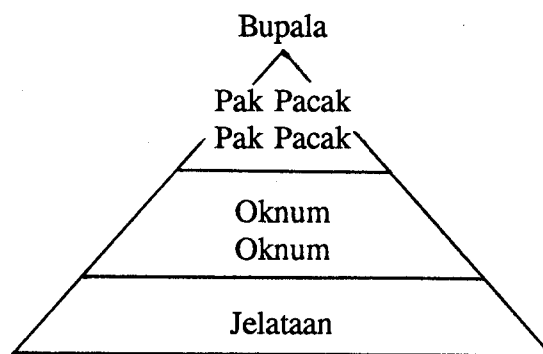
Para 3: *Sesungguhnya kini - sekarang ini - aku benar-benar melihat Gunung Gayamahatumpul beruntuhan. Ia bukan lagi suatu khayalan ....*

para 4: *Sebelum ini dalam mimpiku....*

These shifts are endemic throughout the story: para 7, *kini*; para 8, *di kala itulah*; para 13, *Dan aku pun terjaga*; para 15, *Aku sekarang benar-benar sedang memerhati keruntuhan*; para 19, *Mimpi itu*; para 21, *Ini bukan satu impian atau jelmaan lagi*, para 23, *Entah kali keberapa bupala menziarahiku dalam mimpi. Tiap kali ini*; para 42, *Dan dalam mimpi itu*; para 45, *Dan aku pun terjaga*; para 47, *Aku benar-benar terjaga sekarang. Ia bukan satu keasyikan dalam khayalan lagi. Bukan satu mimpi*; and the last paragraph 50, which states *Aku masih kurang pasti sama ada aku terjaga atau tertidur, bermimpi atau tidak, Yang pasti Gunung jantungku masih berdegup. Dan Gunung Gayamahatumpul sudah sirna dalam fikiranku.* Consciousness, then, thought, may consist of sleep, dreaming, fantasy, all of which present apparent sensory experience; as well as wakefulness, which presents real, true, experience in which what is seen corresponds to empirical events and objects outside of oneself.

Thirdly, however, in considering the story, we must ask what is actually being narrated. Abdullah Tahir suggests "the fall of a leader", The quotations so far suggests the destruction (*keruntuhan*) or a mountain, Gunung Gayamahatumpul (which

I have translated in a rather idiosyncratic way in *The Fables of Eve* (1991) as "Humpty Dumpty Mountain", having in mind that his nursery rhyme originally began as a political allegory). Again, the image of the mountain is also unclear. On the one hand, the mountain is simply a mountain, rather like Srengenge in a previous novel (1974). It is covered with boulders, rocks, pebbles, trees, roots, grass and dirt. On the other hand, the mountain suggests a human figure: *Puncaknya menirus tajam mempamerkan sebutir noktah di hujung bagaikan secekak kuasa bupala yang benar-benar mengancam segala* (para 1). The figure, as a point of power, represents the peak of a three-sided figure which is later (para 43) presented in this way:



And, in a variation on the conflation of the Mountain and the Bupala, Gayamahatumpul takes on anthropomorphic characteristics: *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* (para 4). The figure can express pride (para 4), despair (para 7), surprise (para 12), and so on.

The fourth area of dislocation relates to language itself. The word *bupala* is extremely rare. It does occur in the *Kamus Dewan*, with the annotation "sl" (*sastera*

*lama*) and the meaning *raja*, king. In the *Kamus* it is immediately followed by the Indonesian word *bupati*, the head of a region (part of a province; a high palace official (in Yogyakarta and Surakarta). The *Indonesian-English Dictionary* of J M Echols and Hassan Shadily knows *bupati* but not *bupala*. Abdullah Tahir glosses the word as *ketua: penguasa* (p 187). Within the story, it is obvious that the word also derives meaning from its parallel with *kepala*, head.

"*Pacak*" occurs as an adjective not a noun in the *Kamus Dewan*, with the meaning of *sesuatu yang panjang dan runcing*, something long and sharp. Subsequent meanings have various phallic overtones, leading to the fourth, from the Javanese, *menjantani*. Echols and Shadily suggest, "1. roasting spit. 2 skilled, experience. *mem-* 1 to fix on a spit. 2 to impale". Abdullah Tahir glosses *pesuruh; juak-juak*, envoys, servants to the ruler, entrusted with bearing the royal regalia. The word, of course, sounds like *pakcik* and is used this way in Kedah, Shanon's home state. In *Kamus Dewan*, it is followed by *pacal, hamba pada raja*. Next, the meaning "an individual" (*orang seorang, peribadi, perseorangan*), which are basically the meanings Abdullah gives, and in Echols and Shadily as "1 person. 2 personality".

*Jelataan* is related to the term *jelata* as used in *rakyat jelata*, as Abdullah also states; this term meaning "common, of the masses" (Echols and Shadily), but not found in this precise form in either dictionary. As a rhyming form, it has some parallels to its opposites *bangsawan* and *hartawan*.



Shahnon's story is primarily political and only secondarily philosophical. Once we have sorted this out from among the various dislocations of point of view, consciousness, time and language, we are able to appreciate just how radically political it is, in fact. The ruler's power is *mengancam segala* (para 1, threatening to all), *maha berkuasa* and *maha perkasa* (para 3, all powerful and most lordly). It holds everything in its might (para 4, *teguh menggenggam segala*). The people are sworn (*bersumpah*) *untuk hidup bersama bupala, bersusah payah bersama bupala, bersenang-lenang dan bersama bupala dalam segala*, to live with the king, to struggle with the king, to enjoy themselves with the king and to be with him in all things (para 4). The envoys serve as a bodyguard, forming a fence around the king to protect him from his enemies (para 5, *memagari G dari sebarang ancaman seteru*) and are marked by their physical strength, their violence, and supine subordination to his rule (para 42). The "individuals", finally, are ritualised into groups, "*dua kali lima dan lima kali dua*", two by five and five by two. They include groups, which are also oddly named, such as the "okaba-okaba" (AT: *orang kaya baru*; the nouveau riche, Indonesian); *juak-juak kelapa muda* (no gloss: the rising middle class?); *cewek-cewek* (AT: *perempuan muda; gadis*; Indonesian slang, "chicks"); and *sipondek-sipondek* (not in either dictionary, although "*pondik* arrogant, conceited", possibly related to *pondan*, transvestite.)

The ruler's power is challenged in three different ways in the story. At first, the people simply withdraw from him (para 7). Alone, the King weeps like a small child, covered with his own tears and snot. (This is yet another pattern of dislocation, as inner bodily fluids become external, and the skin falls away from the

face in wrinkles).

Secondly, his power is challenged through a number of allegations. The first is: "*Mu seorang bupala belah buluh*", You are a King who splits bamboo! (paras 9, 10, 16 and 20). In splitting bamboo, one raises half the bamboo - half the society - high, while trampling on the rest (para 19). The King denies this accusation with his own definition of *bupala*: "*Seorang bupala adalah seorang yang menghentam buta tuli dan menggunakan kuku besi, Aku bukan bupala!*", A King is a man who strikes about himself at will and uses claws of iron. I am not a King! (para 25). This negation calls forward a second accusation: "*Mu seorang bupala yang berkuasa bogel!*", You are a King who uses naked power! (para 26). The answer to this is a long monologue:

*Aku bukan bupala berkuasa bogel, tanpa malu, tanpa silu, tanpa segan, tanpa sopan santun, tanpa susila...  
Mungkin juga aku seorang bupala, tapi bukan bupala yang berkuasa bogel. Aku hanya seorang pemimpin yang bijaksana, yang bervisi, yang bersopan dan yang bersusila. Aku sendiri tidak pernah berbogel kecuali sekali-sekali bila bersama cewek-cewek. Aku bukan bupala. Aku hanya seorang hamba kepada rakyat jelata. Akulah tunjang mereka. Akulah obor mereka, Akulah yang memberi kesejahteraan mereka". (para 28)*

I am not a King ruling by naked force, without shame,  
without modesty, without decency, without ethics ...  
Perhaps I am a King, but I'm not a King who rules  
through naked power. I'm simply a wise ruler, a man  
of vision, of decency, of high ethical standards. I've  
never been naked except for those times when I was  
with the chicks. I'm not a King. I'm simply a servant  
of the people, I support them. I provide them their  
welfare.

The language turns back on itself in its confusion, arrogance, sexual violence, and grotesque claims. The two, metaphorical attacks are followed by open declarations: "*Mu seorang bupati yang kejam!* (para 23), You are a cruel King, and: "*Mu seorang bupati bentuk baru!*" (para 37), You are a new type of King. This last cry is significant, for it confirms that we are here dealing with a non-traditional ruler: a constitutional ruler, perhaps, the prime minister, or a member of parliament (the frequent subject of attack in many of Shanon's short stories). The novelty of the *Bupati* is confirmed by the novelty, Indonesianness, of the language: *tanpa, susila, cewek*; as well as its contemporary claims: *bervisi, hamba kepada rakyat jelata, memberi kesejahteraan mereka* etc. The accusations lock the various subjects of the story together as one with the fifth claim: "*Mu sebuah gunung yang menapak di bumi setia ....*" (para 39), You are a mountain that stands on the broad earth, which we already know is a symbol for the people themselves.

The third challenge to the King's power, and the climax of the story, is the destruction of Gunung Gayamahatumpul by hurricane (para 36) and fire (para 44), so that, restored and renewed, nature in all its splendour, it belongs only to the people, who have up to this time known only grinding poverty (paras 36-49).

"We always eventually find, at the edge of text," so Macherey (1978:60) reminds, "the language of ideology, momentarily hidden, but eloquent by its very absence". The ideology of "Gunung" is dependant on a social hierarchy, from ruler to people, which is a mutual contract, of protection and welfare given in return for respect and service. The contract is a very old one in Malay literature, and it has often been broken, particularly by the rulers. Shahnon's story challenges this state infidelity, threatening to establish a completely new order, based on only one social class, the people. Historically, the shape of the Malaysian state, and of Malay society, has undergone enormous changes within the last two decades. The state has grown stronger and more powerful while, at the same time, economic growth and restructuring has taken place at vastly accelerated rates. Francis Loh and Joel Kahn have analysed these trends in detail in their recent book *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia* (1992), drawing attention to the "nationalist ideology" of the elite, which is at once Malaysian and Malay, modern and traditionalising, as well as the fragmentary and completing claims of the rising, and internally divided middle-class, asserting its own claims for economic and political power. Ideologically, Shahnon sits in the middle of this struggle, living as a university teacher and scholar, in a Muslim setting, claiming a petit bourgeois rural background and a dislike for "modernist" thought in literature and religion (so

*Kesusasteraan dan Etika*, 1981). His writing challenges those above him, and claims to reach down to the poor and the needy. It stands in clear opposition to the urban, the new, the display of wealth by newly-rich Malays, and the self-serving hypocrisy of parliamentary democracy. As an ideology, it is both intensely conservative and yet somehow - as in this short story - extremely radical, to the point of potential political violence in terms of both class and community.

"Gunung" acknowledges and yet also rejects this violence, as, in the last paragraph, Shahnon turns away from what has happened, and falls back into the confusion of dream, phantasy, awake or asleep. We may complete our analysis with a brief nod to Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, one of the finest studies of the work of the imagination (and thus of art) in transforming our perceptions and understandings of "reality" (summarised in Jones 1973). Dreams are, in Freud's opinion, far from being a confused and haphazard mixture of mental elements; they are; rather, "a distorted and disguised expression of highly significant physical processes that have a very definite meaning" (Jones 1973:42). Within this process, elements of the unconscious (the story) are shaped so as to be acceptable to the conscious: they are variously condensed, displaced, dramatized and subject to regression. Language plays an important part in this process, especially in the forms of riddles, jokes, puns and other "games". The last paragraph (50) relieves Shahnon of the horror of his views, which can be summarised simply as *durhaka*, the greatest of all Malay crimes. Abdullah Tahir similarly avoids outright confrontation with social disorder when he adopts a "philosophical" position which lays the blame at the feet of a mistaken and misguided leader, rather than the impetus for social change in the hands of the

people. The confusion of the form is, I would suggest, a necessary (if not entirely conscious) strategy to render the content bearable. Or perhaps I am mistaken about the content...

## VI

The new theories are not prepared to consider works of literature as "factually given" and "isolated for our inspection" (Machery 1978: 13). Our task as critics is to do more than describe what is already present in the text, so that others can consume it more easily. Rather, we are challenged to "elaborate the product, exploring rather than describing it" (Machery 1978:12) going beyond the work to say "What it does not say and could not say" (Machery 1978: 77), because of its incompleteness.

Machery (1978:149) asks:

Can there be a criticism which would not be commentary, which would be a scientific analysis adding an authentic knowledge to the speech of the work without, meanwhile, denying its presence. Instead of an *art of reading* could there be a positive criticism which would speak of the conditions for making a book?

For, he insists, a science is not a reinterpretation of its objects but a transformation of them, by attributing significations which they themselves did not initially possess:

falling bodies do not know the law of gravity, they do not possess it as an internal quality. Thus (Macherey 1978:150):

The transformation affected by theoretical knowledge leaves the object-reality intact; it does not de-realise it, probe its origins or its depths, it endows them with a new dimension. Thus the knowledge of a literary work is not a demystification or an undoing; it is the production of a new knowledge; the enunciation of its silent significance.

The new literary theories challenge us to new ways of creating knowledge about Malay literature. Despite their difficulty, their culture boundedness, and their incompleteness, we can learn much from them. And, hopefully, because we are passing guests, friendly strangers, we too can return something by the new questions we ask, the new knowledge we produce.

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