

**INTRODUCING MODERN MALAY  
LITERATURE: THE THEMATIC  
APPROACH**

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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.

The Department would like to thank Hotel Properties Pte Ltd for sponsoring the publication of the series.

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23 November 1992

Professor Tham Seong Chee  
Head  
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# **INTRODUCING MODERN MALAY LITERATURE: THE THEMATIC APPROACH**

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When I joined NUS two years ago I was asked to teach a course on Modern Malay Literature. Before starting such a paper, I asked myself what could be the best way to teach such subject to Singapore students. I have known for some time that in Malaysia, for instance the usual way to address such a topic is to follow the chronological development of such literature. So, in the case of Modern Malay Literature, the starting point is usually Munshi Abdullah who lived in Singapore at the time of Raffles and then continue with, for instance the novels of the twenties, the short stories before the Second World War and then those after that war and so on.

As the course was new at NUS, I wanted to try a new approach. I was of the opinion that there must be another way to introduce literature instead of following blindly the traditional model. I was under the impression that, with a new way to look at literature, it could generate a new interest for it.

So I decided to try the thematic approach.

Of course you are going to object that such treatment of literature is not really new. I would agree with you but at the same time, as far as I know, this approach has not been applied in the case of Modern Malay Literature.

So the first question I would like to raise in this seminar is why did I choose such approach. First of all I did not start using such method for the sake of introducing a new way to look at literature. So what could be the possible reasons for my choice. First I believe that literature is not linear, at least not completely. To me it is not linear in a sense that we cannot see a real development in literature. We often do not benefit from past experiences in literature because we were not aware of them. For instance Europeans have been very proud of Romanticism in the nineteenth century. So we praise the works of Coleridge and Lamartine but do we know that ten centuries before these writers poets in China, in the Tang Dynasty, used the same themes such as regrets, separation between two lovers etc.... So obviously European writers did not know that many of the themes they wrote on had already been tackled by Chinese writers, a thousand years before them. So literature does not build itself on previous productions. In other words there is no obvious development in literature. There is no real improvement in literature. If you allow me a comparison we make in France, literature is like wine some years it is particularly good and some it is not as good as before!

So literature is not linear if we compare it to medicine and athletics. In medicine mankind has improved tremendously, we know how to treat thousand of diseases, even if we are still unable to cure some and if some are the result of modern development. In sports we are amazed to see records being smashed. Man run faster, jump higher and throw objects, like the javelin and the shot putt farther. But can we say the same in the case of literature? Can we say, for instance, that this century is better than the last one? Many if not most of us would disagree.

Therefore literature should not be seen as a chronological development. Of course there is still an element of progress in a sense that in the twentieth century no one could write Elizabethan plays. It would not be accepted because Shakespeare had already written so many of them.

To support this idea of an absence of progress in literature I would like to give two quotations: first from Virginia Woolf: (quote): "It is doubtful whether in the course of the centuries, though we have learnt much about making machines, we have learnt anything about making literature. We do not come to write better ...." This quotation is taken from a book edited by David Lodge and entitled: *Modern Fiction in the Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, first published in 1919 and reprinted by Longman in 1972. My second quotation is from Gaetan Picon, who was Director of Culture when André Malraux was Minister of Culture in the sixties in France: "Tout découpage chronologique précis, au fond, est arbitraire". Which means: "Any chronological splitting is as a matter of fact arbitrary" (unquote) and of course he referred to literature and not to anything else. The quotation is taken from his book *Panorama de la littérature française* published by Gallimard in Paris in 1960.

So, if writers, do not see a real evolution in literature, why should we stick to the traditional model of teaching literature through the chronological approach?

Another way to look at literature would be to make use of one or several theoretical approaches to literature. Many have appeared in this century such as the Marxist interpretation (though I do not think it is very popular nowadays and actually some

rewriting may be done in that respect. I do not know whether writers or literary critics would have used such approach at present. Are they going to try to erase such period of their lives or live with it?) Another theoretical approach could be the Structural method which was popular at one time but which is not very fashionable these days, or should we make use of deconstruction, intertextuality and so on? Apparently theories come and go. At one time they seem to be the "in" thing, very popular and then they disappear in the dustbin of literature if we imitate the late Chairman Mao!

Actually critical theories come and go in the same way as literary movements. In the twenties in Europe, Surrealism was born and was well received but like the rest, that movement had to give way to other endeavours. Le Nouveau Roman which started in France in the fifties also constitute a milestone in modern French literature. But once again that movement died out later. Even if in 1989 the 1985 Nobel Prize winner for literature, Claude Simon still published, *L'Acacia* a novel following the Nouveau Roman style, with for instance no clear starting and ending points, no grading adjectives and so on. Yet one reason for the demise of the Nouveau Roman is the fact that it was considered too technical and too artificial.

As a matter of fact many literary critics have reminded us to be aware of the pitfalls of theories, especially when dealing with poetry. For instance André Miguel, in his work *The Poetical Man*, published in 1974, said that we have to avoid what he calls and I quote "Theoretical Terrorism". Further on he wrote: (quote): "Poetry is an expression nor a discourse of truth, nor a reflection of what is absolute". In this,

even Jean Paul Sa'tre (another Nobel Prize Winner who declined the Prize though in 1964), agreed that poetry was art, so theories had no place in such a literary genre. For another literary critic, Serge Brindeau we must avoid "Formalistic Terrorism". So apparently theories are not well received when we speak of poetry. Twice this concept of terrorism appears in a book of literary criticism.

So if we discard the traditional chronological approach, if we are aware of the limits of theoretical moulds, how to proceed. That is why I have chosen this thematic approach.

Interestingly when I started to prepare this seminar I tried to look for some books or chapters of books dealing with such a topic. So I went to the Central Library but was surprised to notice that apparently the thematic approach was only considered for medieval times. So I found a study of the themes of Chaucer or the theme of Dracula but nothing beyond that period. I then asked myself why it was so and could the Thematic Approach be irrelevant to our times, or was not fashionable? This did not deter me and I moved forward.

Actually I knew beforehand that I was not a pioneer in that field. For instance in French High Schools since 1984, French literature had been taught that way instead of the more traditional habit, that is the diachronic approach which had been used for ages. I still remember that during my time, in one particular year we were supposed to study a special period and the following year we would continue with more recent writers and so on. So seven years ago the system was revamped and a new approach

adopted to make French literature known to school children. General themes have been selected such as the passing of time, the perception of nature, dreams and so on. So students are exposed to several texts from different authors who wrote on the same topic. Sometimes the writers are contemporary sometimes they lived centuries apart.

In the literature class, students are thus shown a few different works on the same topic or theme. Usually the number of texts selected is not too big. In order not to distract the attention only a few texts are chosen on a particular theme. So the need to be exhaustive on one theme does not occur at all.

We can find other examples of the study or the classification of literature by themes. For instance a collection of poems entitled *La Poésie contemporaine de langue française depuis 1945* (or in English Contemporary Poetry in French since 1945) published by Les Editions Saint-Germain des Prés in Paris in 1973 makes use of such an approach. So in the contents the reader can find, among others, the following themes: War and Peace, Imagination, Surrealism, Dream and in another section: threat to nature, happiness and so on....

The perception of nature has also been a source of numerous descriptions or of inspiration. At times nature was considered as a kind of paradise; this is quite obvious in Shakespeare's play: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, at times nature was the perfect setting for the Romantic writers. Most of the time they preferred sunsets to dawns, as, apparently the beginning of the day appeals to revolutionaries while



romantic writers feel better at the end of the day.

Now worldwide we have witnessed a new trend, ecology. Politicians, students and even writers have joined that trend. We can note this in American literature with for instance Thoreau (who is of French descent), in France an example was *Les Racines du ciel*, *Heaven's Roots* published in 1956 by Romain Gary. In the case of Malay Literature we also find such concern. For instance the side-effects of intense felling of trees has been seen in Shahnnon Ahmad's novel *Tunggul-Tunggul Gerigis*, the title of such novel is quite explicit in that sense for it means: Uneven Stumps.

So nature can be seen as an important theme and the bimonthly literary magazine *La Quinzaine Littéraire* published in Paris had a special issue on that theme in its August 1st, 1991 issue.

Writers themselves are quite positive about such a perception. For instance one of the greatest writers of our time, Aleksander Isayevich Solzhenitsyn wrote in his memoirs which were published in Russian in Paris the same year the world discovered the Goulag Archipelago in 1975 (I quote): "It is frightening to imagine the writer I would have been (and I would have become) if I had not been arrested. But once arrested, after two years in jails and camps, I was almost crushed under tons and tons of themes". So the Russian writers needed themes and as we all know found them and know what to do with them. The way he expresses himself in this context reminds me of the Greek Orator, Lysias who said in "For the Invalid", four century BC, the following (in my approximative Greek: ου πο^ου δεου χαριν εχειν τΩ

κατεροπν). Which means: I am nearly on the point to thank my prosecutor... So Solzhenitsyn like Lysias needed violence on them to find their career.

Literary themes can be seen in school curricula, in literary magazines, it can also be the title of international conferences. For instance last month an International Conference was held at the University of Moncton in New Brunswick, Canada with the theme "The Sea in Literature" from 22 to 24 August 1991.

The issue of *La Quinzaine littéraire* I mentioned earlier had also a section on the same theme, that is the perception of the sea by writers. And we all know that the sea has been a theme described by several writers like Conrad and Arena Wati in the case of Malay literature.

After reviewing a few examples of how themes have been used by writers and literary practitioners, now it may be the time to explain the positive points of such a method. First, through the thematic approach we bring together writers who are usually separated because they do not belong to the same generation and secondly we can discover how writers have tackled such and such problems and situations. So instead of isolating writers in their own traditional grouping we constitute new families, new associations.

If we agree to adopt the thematic approach, what do we do next? How do we go about selecting themes. The list of themes is open-ended, it has no limit. So which themes should be chosen? Which themes can be seen as relevant? To try to answer

such questions let us consider two works in that field. First the volume entitled *Ourselves Among Others. Cross-Cultural Readings for Writers* edited by C J Verburg, St Martin's Press, New York, 1988.

Here is a list of a few themes chosen for this anthology: Firstly the Family, Cornerstone of Culture, secondly Coming of Age, thirdly Women and Men, fourthly Working, fifthly Citizens, sixthly Witness to War, seventhly We are all foreigners and so on .... In all sixty five texts from 37 countries have been selected and one objective of the editor seems to be to show that what we have in the economic field is also felt in literature, that is to say we live in a Global Village.

The second example I would like to mention at this juncture is *An Anthology of French Poetry*, edited by Max-Pol Fouchet and published by Seghers in Paris in 1958. Broad categories have been set up to link some literary texts with one another. So we have the heading Feelings (with the subheadings of Friendship, love, happiness and so on; a second category is made up by the Perception of Nature - Apparently this theme is quite frequent in world literature - with the subheading (which of course are relevant to the European context) of Summer, Autumn (I said earlier that Romanticists preferred sunsets to sunrise) and as far as seasons (in a temperate climate) are concerned Autumn is favored at the expense of spring, for instance. A famous French Romantic writer Chateaubriand is quite explicit about it and says he preferred autumn to the other three seasons. We can notice that in his descriptions of Britany at the beginning of *Les Mémoires d'Outre Tombe*, one of his major works. Another category has been reserved for action and creation with the subheading of art

and adventure; a fourth category is filled by Religion with the subheading of God, the Devil and so on.

After considering the list of themes proposed by some literary critics we can notice that there seems to be a few literary universals in most literatures.

In a Guide to Comparative Literature, edited by Pierre Brunel and Yves Chevrel and published by PUF in Paris in 1989 - of course I am aware that comparative literature is not as well received nowadays than it was some time ago - a chapter deals with the selection of themes. The author of this chapter, Phillippe Chardin believes that there may be five ways to search for themes:

- First, the degree of generality. In this approach we could find the elements (such as the forest or what remains of it!), the ideas (such as freedom) and the feelings (such as love, jealousy).

- Second, the degree of abstraction. In this approach a distinction is made between a concept and a theme. For instance Rousseau developed the concept of The Social Contract and also the theme of Dreaming. In the first case Rousseau tries to explain the essence of the notion while in the second he intends to extend the idea of Dreaming in a broader context.

- Third, the degree of literary creativity in order to reach a more precise classification than in the first approach.

- Fourth, the situation of beliefs at a particular period of time. Here theme is opposed to myth which is considered in this instance as the conclusion of a decadent process while theme is more positively received.

- Fifth, a more formal approach can also be considered. For instance in the way the theme should be selected according to the function it performs.

However after reviewing these starting points in our search for themes are we closer to a clear-cut classification? It does not seem so. Thus apparently the classification is rather subjective and left to the critic, teacher or researcher.

Maybe this leeway given to us is a plus in a sense that we are able to choose any theme we think interesting or relevant and we can easily change such a classification. As a matter of fact we do see a few universals in these classification. There seems to be a consensus for a few broad categories such as events (such as wars), elements (nature), actions and feelings.

To illustrate this point let us consider two themes which I am using in my Modern Malay Literature course.

The first theme is Love. Of course when I started to bring this theme in the classroom, the first reaction of my students was to smile or even to giggle. But we are all aware that this theme is one of the most frequent in world literature.

For me this theme rings a kind of sentimental bell because the first oral presentation I had to do as an undergraduate at the University of Lyon in France was entitled "The Theme of Love and Death" in the poems of Eluand and Aragon.

For this theme I selected two works, first the novel *Salina* - which is quite befitting because it is set in Singapore - and the poem *Kekasih* (Beloved) by Usman Awang. *Salina*, the author of which is A Samad Said was published in 1961 and *Kekasih* in 1971.

One positive feature of the thematic approach is to bring together works which usually are not brought together, because they may belong to different literary genres or because they have been published at different times.

I will not delve in a methodic and detailed study of the two literary works but rather point a few striking features. For instance the reader of the poem is immediately aware of the sets of verbs and nouns found in it. Then he notices how powerful or how full of energy the narrator is as he seems to be able to conquer the world and even the universe for his beloved. On the other hand the conversation between the two youngsters is rather short. Though Hilmy and Nahidah meet five times in the novel *Salina*, they do not indulge in long conversations. The writer seems to portray how slowly they fall in love inspite being in a very unpleasant place, the washroom of a row of slums in Singapore after the Second World War, that is before the PAP Government!

In the poem we can notice that the lexical field of the night is very clear: ranjang tidurmu (your bedchamber), pakaian malammu (nightgown), bulan gerhana (darkened moon), laut malammu (your seas of night) and so on.

In the novel we imagine the young guy willing to express himself but unable to overcome his shyness. So at the beginning when he meets the girl, he cannot stay with her and goes out, and when finally he is used to her, he has a hard time to speak up and needs prompting from Nahidah. At their fourth encounter he tries to reveal his feeling but can only start: "Begini Idah" and he repeats those words a few times until the girl says the words herself: "Hilmy sayang pada Idah kan?" (You love me right?")

As a matter of fact, Hilmy does not reply but just nods. But it is enough for the girl and at the subsequent meeting (the fifth and the last one) they start making plans for the future. Incidentally those plans are never realized for the girl is raped and she leaves the slums.

This analysis of the theme of love is by far not exhaustive, because other texts could be brought in as well and the study could be in detail I just wanted to show you how I proceed and the benefits one can draw from such approach.

Another theme I usually select is the perception of nature. Actually my number of themes is rather similar to the number of lectures we give per course per academic year.

I have chosen such a theme because it is a theme apparent in most literatures worldwide. Malay literature has not avoided it. For instance three novels can be considered. Once again it is just a choice and of course other literary works could be selected as well. The three novels are: *Srengenge* by Shahnnon Ahmad which was published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) in Kuala Lumpur in 1973, *Rimba Harapan* by Keris Mas published by DBP in 1986 and finally the novel I mentioned earlier *Tunggul-Tunggul Gerigis* which was also published by DBP in 1988.

Actually within the theme of nature we could restrict our scope and choose a subtheme which could be the Forest.

Of course such a subtheme is quite fashionable at present with ecology, the Green movement and so on. So how such a theme appears in modern Malay literature? First in *Srengenge*, a nice title by the way which means the Sun in Javanese, we are told of the useful role played by the forest according to some characters who go hunting. But according to the main character, the forest is ugly, the Malay term is *Hodoh*, so it has to be tamed and several times Awang Cik Teh says: "Srengenge wajib jadi huma" (Srengenge has to be planted with rice). This reminds me of the words uttered by Cato in Roman times who said "Delenda est Cartago" (Carthage has to be destroyed). Unfortunately nobody listen to him until Carthage started to attack Rome. In our Malay novel, the same occurs, nobody listens to the old man and on top of that the village headman dies, so no plan can be formulated. In the second novel, *Rimba Harapan* (The Forest of Hope), a few people start a new village and for that they have to fell trees and build houses and start paddy fields. The name of



their village is Janda Baik (the Merry Widow). In the third novel, *Tunggul-Tunggul Gerigis*, the villagers live by the side of lumbering operations so they have to bear with the trucks, the noise, the dust and more than that with accidents which occur, for instance a young boy of the village is knocked down by one of these trucks, while crossing the road.

In the three examples above-mentioned the forest is not seen as something nice. It has to be somewhat tamed to become useful, or better looking. So rarely the forest is seen as something precious, something to be respected and maintained. As a matter of fact it is rare to find long and wide descriptions of the forest in Malay literature, both classical and modern. Apparently the Malays who have proved to be very bold when crossing seas and oceans have often been reluctant to penetrate the jungle. For a long time the jungle was only the place of the *Orang Asli* (the aborigines) or the communists, who might not be very many at present.

So the jungle is never seen positively by Malay writers. At our last Departmental Seminar we were told by speaker Encik Sarkasi Said how he tried to experience many things in order to be able to convey them on canvass but as far as I know no Malay writer has tried to spend some time inside the jungle in order to appreciate it and then to write poems and novels on it. The American naturalist Henry David Thoreau, whom I mentioned earlier, made a point to discover nature. He exiled himself for two years inside a forest and then wrote *Walden or the Life in the Woods* which was published in 1854. And the famous English painter William Turner asked once to be tied to a mast on a deck of a ship during a storm in order to absorb as much as

possible before being able to produce the beautiful paintings which we can see at the Tate Gallery in London.

Do not misunderstand me, I am not judging at all, I am just surprised that something which is always mentioned in brochures for tourists is not deemed useful as a source of inspiration to writers.

As a conclusion, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that usually classical Malay literature is considered along thematic lines. For instance in a book written by my learned colleague, Dr Liaw Yock Fang, *Sejarah Kesusasteraan Melayu Kalsik* (The History of Classical Malay Literature) which was published by Pustaka Nasional in Singapore in 1975, themes have been used for the classification of works, so we have Indian epics, Islamic literature, historical literature, legal digests and so on. So my question is why do we have a thematic approach in the case of classical literature and then we do not have such model for modern literature. I do not see any particular reason.

On the contrary I think the thematic approach gives us three benefits. First it helps us to draw a brand new classification of literary works. Instead of being enslaved by chronological considerations, we can look at literature through a new angle.

Second, with this thematic approach literature becomes alive. For instance we can bring together works the writer of which has died long ago and other literary works of a contemporary writer. With this approach literature is not seen as something stale

and old-fashioned but rather something worth discovering.

Finally with this approach we strike a balance with the trend of giving probably too much weight to the reception of the literary work, because the thematic approach favours the production of literature.

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