

## After the *Tsunami*: Challenges of a Changing Literary Landscape

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### Introduction

On the 9th of May 2018, at the 14th Malaysian General Election (MGE 14), a political *tsunami* (Hemananthani Sivanandam 2018) occurred when the opposition scored a historic win over *Barisan Nasional* after 61 years in power (BBC News 2018). The admirable bloodless change of power which many allude to as "people's power" with grand plans for a "Malaysia Baru" under the aegis of a previous prime minister, also known as the father of modern Malaysia (Reuters 2018) nanogenarian, Tun Mahathir Mohamad overcame many obstacles amongst them allegations of illegal tampering of electoral votes and corruption by those in power (Hemananthani Sivanandam 2018). *Pakatan Harapan* or the Alliance of Hope, the new coalition ruling Malaysia has vowed to overturn and change the core of governance with the introduction of National Centre for Governance, Integrity and Anti-Corruption (GIACC) (The Sun Daily 2018) and much more in all areas of the economic, social and political landscape. Made-up of Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia (Sabah & Sarawak); the 32.7 million people of diverse nationality and ethnic with 67.4% Malays, 24.6% Chinese, 7.3 % Indians and about 0.7 % ethnic other, (Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal 2018) struggle to forge a national identity after independence in 1957. At the formation of Malaysia in 1963, *Barisan Nasional*, a coalition headed by *United Malays National Organization* or UMNO has since ruled until the historical tsunami on the 9th of May 2018. The *Barisan Nasional* implemented a consolidation of the arts under one language Bahasa Malaysia (How 2015) that has become a much-researched topic not to mention forging a "new" identity (Lim 2008). Aside from the diverse ethnicity, cultures and religion, the strive to compete in the technology-driven economy of the future at the dawn of millennial and the impact of globalization which has contributed 11.2% to the 2% registered as international migrants of the overall population are significant catalyst for social change in any nation, Malaysia notwithstanding.

As such, Malaysian Literature, an inclusive term that largely refers to literature written only in *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay Language) was acknowledged prior to Malaysian independence through a *Kongres Bahasa dan Persuratan Melayu Malaya III* on the 16-21 September 1956 both in Singapore and Johor that resulted in the setting up of *Dewan Bahasa Pustaka* (DBP) on the 22 Jun 1956 as the government body that oversees the development of Bahasa Malaysia and Malaysian Literature (<http://lamanweb.dbp.gov.my/>). In the light of the fact that DBP has been the statutory body overseeing the development of mainstream Malaysian literature and language even before and after the establishment of the previous political regime, its role as the patron of "ruling ideas" of the previous regime is undeniable from a Marxist interpretation. With new political developments against a backdrop of social-cultural diversity in terms of race, language, religion, Malaysian literature is poised for changes that need to be documented as part of the literary development of a nation forms the main objective of this paper. This research paper outlines the various challenges faced by Malaysian literature in particular Malay Literature after the nation has undergone political trauma against the global challenges that affect or has influence over the direction and identity of a nation's literature. Aside from the current literary trend, types of writers and their current works, this paper provides a glimpse of the growth direction Malaysian literature after the transition of power.

### Method

In Marx's dialectical materialism, "Literature and art, along with other "ideologies" are determined by "the mode of production in material life" (Marx & Engels 1949 quoted by Albrecht, Milton Mar 1954: 428). Albrecht adds to his view that ideas that feed the literature and art of a nation,

thereby contributing to its “identity” and “direction”, are “the ideas of the ruling class, which are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (Albrecht 1954, p. 428). Yet the “ruling ideas” Guerard (quoted by Albrecht March 1954, 430) observes that the idea of the ruling classes may not be similar to the public interest which often results in a different ethos of arts & literature. As such, a critical rhetorical approach to the subject matter of this paper in view of literary works from particular nations that have experienced the same upheaval will allow for the importance of creating a new direction or identity that is already burgeoning in this new Malaysia Malaysia (Hart & Daughton 2016, 24).

A close reading of Malaysian political history before and after GE14 within and outside of Malaysia will ascertain the emotional mindset of the people that is reflected in the types of Malaysian literature being written and how they are published. Simultaneously, the knowledge is cross-referenced with initiatives taken by the new government to tackle the past and current issues arising from the challenges underlined. A survey of the literary criticisms in regards to current Malay fiction especially novels being published by previous government-endorsed and independent publishers support the conceptual framework of this research. These are the recent developments that become an important source of reference in determining the direction and growth of Malay literature as well. These include perspectives from writers and popular Malay literary critics to ascertain the changes happening and to be expected of Malay literature in the aftermath of 9th May 2018.

## Discussion

### Marginalization

Among the challenges that Malaysian literature face in searching for a new identity stretches back to its inception and the choice to acknowledge the sovereignty of *Bahasa Malaysia* as the national language. According to *History of Malay Literature* (Vol. II, 1992), the first literary body that gathered Malaysian writers writing in both English and Malay was called *Sahabat Pena* (1934) spearheaded by Jymy Asmara. As the spirit of independence or *Merdeka* from the British colonials drew near, another group of writers exclusively writing in Malay called *Angkatan Sastrawan 50* (ASAS 50) gain strength consolidating the writers from pre-Merdeka namely Ahmad Bakhtiar, Harun Aminurrashid and Abdullah Sidek with Keris Mas Adibah Amin, Ahmad Lufti and Wijaya Mala. The thematic concerns were indisputably independence from the colonials and the formation of Malaysia. The struggle to find an identity amid the many different styles, languages, and thematic concerns led to the formation of Balai Pustaka in 1956 which would eventually become a governing body in June of that year. Balai Pustaka’s task was to promote writing and Malaysian literature in particular literature in the Malay language. The institutionalizing of a governing body that focused much of its attention and effort on growing Malaysian Literature specifically in *Bahasa Melayu* caused factions to form among writers who wrote in English, Chinese, Tamil, and other ethnic languages.

The “othering” of Malaysian literature was mostly independently funded by private publishers who invested in these “other” Malaysian literature. These literature were other[ed] as they did not conform to the criteria the main criteria of main-stream publishers like by Dewan Bahasa Pustaka. Although small in numbers, the poems, short stories, and novels had created a small following in the country and for some great literary careers as Tash Aw who won the coveted Whitbread Book Awards in 2005 (FMT 2017) for his celebrated novel entitled *The Harmony Silk Factory*. While Tash Aw represented sizable post-colonial writers, writing Malaysian literature in English abroad or exile, many who wrote and still write for publishers like Silverfish. Established in 1999, Silverfish’s manager Raman Krishna (The Star 2007, 17) harnessed the talented pool of writers who did not choose to immigrate to Singapore after the 1960s. Among them are celebrated writers like Shirley Lim, Chuah Guat Eng, M. Shanmmulingam and Kee Thuan Chye whom Muhammad Quayum and Peter Wicks (2001) described as having lost their “common pool of consciousness”. The catapulting and rapid growth of “other” Malaysian literatures, has increased the pressure for some kind of acknowledgment, encouragement or endorsement from the government that has thus far been silent remunerating the mainstream writers writing in *Bahasa Melayu* through internal platforms like *Hadiah Sastera Perdana* (HSP) and numerous writing workshops. Other streams of Malaysian literature that lamented the marginalization for their contribution in making the country proud are the Mahua writers (Malaysia Today 2018). The Mahua writers are the Malaysian writers writing in the Chinese language contributing to a large corpus that has risen to world recognition. Show Ying Xin, co-founder of Rumah Atap Library lamented the fact even though many young Chinese were eager to learn *Bahasa Melayu* after the birth

of Malaysia in 1963, the racial unrest on the 13th May 1969 deterred them causing many to migrate to Taiwan. Under accusations of leftist perspectives, the growth of Mahua literature abroad is fanned by the lack of acknowledgment and appreciation from the Malaysian government. According to Khor Boon Eng (Malaysia Today 2 Jan 2018), an Associate Professor at Tunku Abdul Rahman University's Institute of Chinese Studies, "Ma" refers to Malaysia while "Hua" refers to "Chinese" and the writings that are produced mainly explore the "discomfort and discontent with the [Chinese] political status quo in Malaysia". Prominent Mahua writers like the late Li-Yongping, Ng Kim Chew, Chang Kuei Hsien, and Ho Sok Fong have won accolades and praise for their works in Taiwan as the country's robust track record in the area of the arts allow for a thriving literary culture. Back in Malaysia, the Mahua writers are supported by private initiatives such as the Chao Foon Monthly literary magazine and the Sirius Poetical Society (Chiah Seng 2017, 23) with great influence from Taiwan and China especially in their development of modernist perspectives. The ambivalent identity of Mahua writers is indicated in the fact that "Taiwan regards them as Taiwanese writers, but we also claim them as 'mahua' writers" says Professor Khor (Malaysia Today 2018). Another marginalized literature by a large minority race is Tamil Literature that is threatened by extinction to the lack of fostering of Tamil language and literature in favour of Bahasa Melayu, especially in the national education curriculum (Schiffman 1996, 1). Only receiving significant private support from states with higher numbers of ethnic Indians such as Penang, the prolific output of Tamil poetry and short stories by the likes of Murugaiyan, Dato. P Shanmugam, A. Kadir, CT. Ramasamy, Anthony Muthu, S. Anbanantha (Penang Tourism, 2013) are seminal to the survival of Tamil literature. It is imperative that the direction, Malaysian literature moves toward will have to address the marginalization of a large corpus of race and language-based literature that has grown regardless of the lack; to proportions that are congruent to a multiracial Malaysian identity under the attention of a globalized world.

### **Impact of Globalization and Technology**

With the entire world being able to appreciate one another's culture, language and people through the internet; economic, social and political globalization became expected and not calculated as it was before the dawn of millennial. The Arab Spring in West Asia demonstrates the power of the internet to consolidate a group of like-minded individuals while the world economy is mercilessly dictated by international trade of oil and gas that can turn nations into paupers or superpowers in a split second via information posted on social media (Rohami Shafie 20, 2016). The arrival of the internet is heralded by globalization or vice versa with the emphasis on speed and transparency of communication between people across distances previously unimaginable. The impact of the internet has not spared Malaysians who are as internet savvy as the Western countries emerging 5th in the world for social media penetration according to *Hootsuite* and *We Are Social* reports (Bernama, 2019). Information is traded faster and consumed more liberally without borders as the millennial Y and Z(s) generation demand more transparency, flexibility, speed and platforms to voice their opinions (*Talent Management*). The challenge lies in producing literature that is sustainable in this fast-changing landscape that has not only impacted us economically or politically but socially as well. The ability to sustain the interest of the millennial generations toward the culture of reading and the type of literature that would interest a generation more keen on watching *YouTube* channels for fast, uninhibited information (Urban 2015) rather than read words in a book or online should be taken into serious consideration in the direction taken by Malaysian literature. The type of literature produced will also take on the characteristics of millennials who after 10 years of observation define them as those born between 1981-1996. (Dimock, 2019). S. M. Zakir, an active critic of Malay Literature lends his voice to call for new Malay literature that reflects the present taking into account the materialism and fast-paced development experienced by the people because of technology (Utusan Online 2017)..

### **Urban & Rural Dichotomy**

However, the disparity between the development in the metropolises in West Malaysia and East Malaysia is another challenge arising from the globalization and subsequent domination of the internet in knowledge transfer within the cities but not in the rural areas where the existence of the internet does not predicate the knowledge of the application. In assessing the direction of literary growth, the dichotomy between the East and West in terms of political, social-economic development and also between cities or "periphery/rural" (Ameel Lieven 2015) should be considered especially from the

implicit contrast between the mindsets of the urban and those at the periphery. For example, the mainstream literature in Sabah on the periphery of Malaysia is an example of the dilemma faced by writers who are trapped in their binaries of nostalgia of a rural past against the destructive energy of city-life since the 1980s (Suhaila Sulaiman 2018, p. 20). In startling contrast, prominent Malaysian writer Hamzah Hamdani speaking from an interview with the daily *Utusan online* in Kuala Lumpur, observes that the latest development in Malay Literature involves “[a free form or most commonly referred to as “Indie” [*bentuk penulisan bebas atau sering disebut sebagai Indie*]]” (Utusan Melayu 2015). “Indie” literature in Malaysia refers to literature published by independent publishers defying the conventional rules of publication and writing (Sim 2019, p. 337) that have mushroomed within a genre of protest literature in response to the accusations of corruption, cronyism, and abuse of power before the GE14 political *tsunami*. The Indie novels are mostly written by young and inexperienced writers emotionally charged by the political upheaval especially during the campaign for GE14 which attributes Alliance of Hope’s win to the social media blitz. (The Star 2018). Their literature with notorious, sensitive themes and offensive language plus unconventional themes may be rejected by the mainstream publishers like Dewan Bahasa Pustaka and IBTM but find an easy publication with Indie publishers in the urban centers unlike those who write from the periphery. The knowledge and accessibility to the internet have confined the development of Malay Literature and their publishers to be centered in urban centers leaving out those at the periphery. Jasni Matlani’s *Pulau Tanpa Cinta* (2015) political criticism of the old regime’s corruption and abuse of power is duly noted as an addition to the many mainstream Malay novels that Dewan Bahasa Pustaka published alongside those published by IBTM and the independent publishers. He and Ruhaini Matdarin are two prolific Sabahan writers who unlike their fellow Sabahans do not dwell on the themes of the nostalgic past of the rural *kampung* versus the corruptible modern city that still appears in the special publication of Sabahan short stories initiated by Dewan Bahasa Pustaka Sabah entitled *Wadah*. The disparity between the writers who live or are Ng educated in West Malaysia compared to those in East Malaysia is as wide as their creative technique and thematic concerns demonstrate (Suhaila Sulaiman 2018).

### **Millennial Writers & Publishers**

The increasing pressure for change is felt through the rapidly changing literary landscape in this fast-changing millennial landscape. Mohd Nazri Noh, the Political Secretary to Minister of Foreign Affairs, attributed the political tsunami of GE14 to the significant role played by writers who wrote about the aspirations for a new Malaysia (Siti Haliza Yusop 2018) But Muhammad Febriansyah (2016) claims that Indie publications have existed before 2008 in the form of “*Gerakbudaya*” which published literature that did not conform to the criteria of mainstream publisher Dewan Bahasa Pustaka. In fact, many critics like Ramlee Wahab (2017), Nor Hasimah Ismail & Melor Fauzita Md Yusoff (2016) and Azman Hussin (2016) 4:00pm agreed that these Indie writers and their works used foul language, morbid and ghoulish plots, sinister characters to project what they perceive society really is. Indie publishers like Dubook, Fixi, and Lejenpress published works that challenged ethical, moral and religious norms such as Ridhwan Saidi’s *Cekik* (2011) and Saifulizan Tahir’s *Kasino* (2011). They are joined by main-stream writers whom S. M. Zakir identified as writing “transitional literature” who wrote about urban living, new technology, traffic jams, dark lives and the disparate self that is incongruent with the norms and ethics which they identify as the “uncanny truth” (<https://www.utusan.com.my/pendidikan/sastera/melihat-sastera-era-transisi-1.570358> 10/Dis/2017 4:00pm). He adds that this era of transitional literature is marked by the presence of Gustav Hartlaub’s New Objectivity encourages the perspective of urban imprisonment leading to intellectual staticism often causing a warped perception toward objects and subjects from a realistic point of view allowing for the growth of magic realism technique amongst the new writers like Ruhaini Matdarin, Wan Nor Aziq, and Fahd Razy.

### **Directional Spurts**

Syed Mohd Zakir Syed Othman or S. M. Zakir observes that critics have been unusually quiet in the last two decades (S.M. Zakir 2017) in spite of the growth in both the writing and reading of literature. Adi Namri Sidek (2016) reported in his article entitled “*5 Penerbitan Buku Indie Paling Cemerlang di Malaysia*” 30 September 2016) that Malaysian’s reading habit increased from 1 page in 1997 to 8 books in 2010 which explains the sudden rise in the numbers of Indie publishers like Fixi, Lejen Press, Gerak

Budaya and Dubook Press. Although many like Hamzah Hamdani, a previous director of Dewan Bahasa Pustaka feels that the coarse language and unconventional content of Indie fiction that tends toward being sexually explicit is fleeting and should not be encouraged because it is damning to Malay arts, the short stories and novels are still being produced for a young millennial crowd that thrives at the connection with the “uncanny truth” that abound in these works. The themes range from homosexuality, astro travel, unicorns and deviant behavior in novels such as *Kasut Biru Rubina* (2008) by Suffian Abbas, *Kasino* (Saifulizan Tahir 2011) and Nadia Khan’s *Kelabu* (2011). But rather than being labeled anti-establishment before GE14, there have been several mainstream authors like Faisal Tehrani, S. M. Zakir who published their anti-government political metaphors like *Perempuan Politikus Melayu* (2016) also under these independent publishers like Dubook. It appears that these authors and publishers who adopt the themes without the Indie narrative styles are marginal voices as Fixi (Lifestyle & Youth 2018) another Indie publisher claims.

The challenge to break out from the old regime represented by Dewan Bahasa Pustaka has also given birth to another government linked-company in Institut Terjemahan & Buku Malaysia (ITBM) or Malaysian Book & Translation Institution which publishes all manner of works in a variety of genre (s) and languages rather than translates. As S. M Zakir observes we can no longer ignore the Malaysian literature in English and vernacular languages (10 December 2017 4:00 pm) that include the ethnic literature(s) in *Kadazandusun* in Sabah and *Iban* in Sarawak. Calling them the “transitional literatures”, S. M. Zakir draws attention to the vibrant Malay literary scene which he divides into 2 phases with a moderately conservative writers from pre-millennials like Rebecca Ilham a freelance writer who blogs as well as writes travel literature, Nimoiz TY, who famously wrote political satires and published in Indonesia, Sayidah Mu’izzah who illustrates and critiques films; Abang Median writing mainstream children's literature in Sarawak in the first phase. This is followed by a second phase that sees more eclectic and less structured narratives such as *D.U.B.L.I.N.* by Wan Nor Aziz. The changing environment has changed the Malaysian writer who can write about everything and anything inspired by his or her surroundings that may or may not be on a physical Malaysian landscape. The +presence of the internet and various social media platforms has lifted restrictions on publications as well. S. M. Zakir (Siti Haliza Yusop Berita Harian, 2018) calls for the “penjambatan” or the bridging between the different literature(s) as discussed (Siti Haliza Yusop 2018) as “Malaysian literature” is not an exclusive term in reference only to Malay literature but more.

The increasing globalization of thematic concerns such as the blurring of lines between gender, race, and reality plus the hybridity of the Malaysian writers in terms of race, language and religion calls for a change in the conventional approach to the arts. Writers like Nadia Khan and her novel *Kelabu* (2011) who write about the angst of living in a “gray” world where everything is not black and white in reference to marriage, sexuality, and love. The main characters are not from the conventional comic or serious heroes rather shadows of humanity like *Budiman* (2017) in Regina Ibrahim’s novel of the same name. The degree of openness and depth in which divorce, sexual promiscuity, and homosexuality are discussed in these novels signifies a change in conventional themes that revolved around the effects of modernization from a moral-ethical point of view. The main characters are no longer heroes but rather victims of their circumstances as Marcos Ferrarese’s characters Asrul and Malik perish as a result of their greed and recalcitrance in *Nazi Goreng* (2015). Globalization has resulted in the birth of the migrant writer like Marco Ferrarese who’s novel *Nazi Goreng* won the Popular Reader’s Choice Award (Foreword, Nazi Goreng 2015) in Malaysia although he is an Italian musician who has lived in Malaysia since 2004 and his novel is a translation from English. While the mainstream Malay literature no longer published by Dewan Bahasa Pustaka but by ITBM published political protest novels like *Ikarus* (S. M. Zakir 2018), the independent publishers gave voice to the marginals. With the objectives of the protest literature achieved by the results in GE14, the thematic concerns of the mainstream and indie Malay literature remain to be seen. Clearly, there is a changed mindscape that interprets subjects from a different perspective freed from the distinctions of language, race and hopefully religion burgeoning among the Malay writers.

There have been tentative steps by the new government after the tsunami that suggest a change toward a more robust literary scene in the recognition of the contribution of Mahua writers at the *Kata Pengarang kata Pembaca* [trans. Words of the Writer, Words from the Reader] at Malaysian’s oldest writers association Persatuan Penulis Nasional Malaysia or PENA where the relationship between Malay Literature and other Malaysian literature(s) in different languages was held on the 22 August

2018. Aside from acknowledging the contribution of Malaysian Chinese writers, there was a consensus that the meeting between the literature(s) would lead to an unprecedented unity among races fostered by the respect that was not in evidence for the last decade. Other attempts to encourage the growth of marginal literature(s) such as Tamil Literature is seen through the effort at promoting and preserving the ethnic languages through the setting up of language councils such as the Tamil Language Standardization Council, the first of its kind under the Education Ministry (The Star 2019).

### **Conclusion**

Sustainable and long term efforts that will also address the disparity between the metropolitan areas and the rural areas have to be implemented to create a fecund creative ground that allows the arts to flourish without restrictions of genre, religion, language, race or place. A direction for Malaysian literature in the new Malaysia has begun with new healthy perspectives balanced by government and private independent publishers helping to nurture a younger generation of writers with new perspectives about identity. There is still the economic social and political awareness in the themes but the “old” perspectives of plot, characterization, and technique are infused with a new awareness of different realities and truths that are not as clear cut as before. But what is obvious is the freedom in which Malaysian literature is written and published without fear or favour. This heralds new functions for literature in Malaysia as an icon that truly reflects the multi-cultural society that she is. After the tsunami, the fractured community with disparities between the races and the people living on the margins of the urban spaces with great social economic disparities during the years of the previous regime has resulted in the rise of a literature of protest leading to the fateful day 9th of May. Malaysian literature is set to form a new direction that will hopefully reflect the cultural richness of a multiracial society by bridging the disparities that have formed between the races and layers of society.

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