

MUHAMMAD YUSOF AHMAD: A PIONEER OF MODERN MALAY FICTION

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Abstract

This is a study on Muhammad Yusof Ahmad, a pioneer in modern Malay fiction. To explore his contributions, this study focuses on his creative process, specifically in his writing of formal realism fictions such as his short stories and novelette. This study is approached via the writer's biography and linking it to his era, and the systems of traditional and western education which shaped his creative abilities. His main works entitled "Percintaan Lady Brazil", "Zaman Sari" and *Mencari Isteri* were selected as samples for analysis. This study reveals that Muhammad Yusof's creativity is based on his own experiences in life. The structure of his stories can be traced back to the traditional literature of his culture, and elements of realism made their way in to his plot structure due to his exposure to western literature. His works were targeted at new generations, significantly Malay teachers. His works were early attempts of formal realism in the world of modern Malay literature.

Keywords: Muhammad Yusof Ahmad, Malay literature, Malay fiction, *Majalah Guru*

INTRODUCTION

The works of Muhammad Yusof Ahmad not been given due attention in terms of the study of modern Malay literature unlike the broad attention that has been given to his contemporaries such as Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, Za'ba, Ahmad Kotot, Ahmad Rashid Talu, and Muhamad Yasin Ma'mor or Punguk as well as Ishak Haji Muhammad. In fact, his name has not been

given its due place in the history of modern Malay literature. It was his supervision and leadership of *Majalah Guru* that gave rise to the introduction and development of various modern genres in modern Malay literature such as short stories, serial stories, novelette, and poetries. These genres have proven to be dominant until today.

His name gained recognition in a rather unrelated study when Ali bin Ahmad (Ali) conducted a study on *Majalah Guru* for his doctoral research focussing on its publications between the years 1924–1932, and the role played by Muhammad Yusof in the mid-30s. Effectively, Ali made an effort to republish Muhammad Yusof's works. Unfortunately, his works have been forgotten over time in the face of more recent publications by newer writers. Today, scholars of modern Malay literature tend to focus more on the works of newer writers rather than the works of earlier writers such as Muhammad Yusof, albeit being the founder of its modernization. This lack of attention towards the contribution of past writers of such importance has led writers such as Muhammad Yusof and his contemporaries being sidelined in the history of the development of Malay literature. When in actual fact, Muhammad Yusof had a very important role in the development of modern Malay literature, specifically during its earlier developmental period. Not only was he an important figure in the publication of *Majalah Guru*, but he was also a pioneer responsible for the development of modern Malay literature in Malaysia.

This essay is an attempt to focus and highlight Muhammad Yusof Ahmad as a pioneer in the development of Modern Malay fiction through the study of his selected works, namely "Percintaan Lady Brazil (Lady Brazil's Love Story), "Zaman Sari" (This Decade), and *Mencari Isteri (Finding a Wife)*.

HIS BACKGROUND

Muhammad Yusof Ahmad was born in Batu Kikir, Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan on 19th September 1900 and died at Seremban Hospital in the same state on 23rd December 1980. He was the younger brother of Za'ba, a reknown Malay thinker and a very important figure in the study and development of Malay language. In his childhood days, Muhammad Yusof learnt to read the al-Qur'an at home, and received his secular education in the Malay School. He was selected to become a probationary teacher, and later continued his studies at Maktab Perguruan Melaka (Melaka Teaching College), at the age of 14. In 1916, he was selected to continue his education

at the Malay College (Maktab Melayu), Kuala Kangsar, Perak, a college initially meant for children from royal families and Malay dignitaries. Two years later, he passed his Year 7 English Education at the college. In early 1919, he was enrolled in a special training class for Malay Administrative Officers and moved on to become an administrative officer in the newly created Education Service Department. Upon accepting this new job, he began working in Kuala Lumpur with Windstedt, who was then the Deputy Director of Education and also a well-known scholar of literature, culture and history of the Malays. In 1920, he became a Malay Assistant Inspector of Schools in Selangor.

In 1939, he was appointed Assistant Principal of Sultan Idris Training College (Maktab Perguruan Sultan Idris), in Tanjong Malim, Perak. He was always aware of the importance of education among Malay Children and it was he who started schools for young Malay girls. Apart from his official duties he was also active in teacher's society and became one of the founding members of *Majalah Guru* (Ali bin Ahmad, 1975).

He retired in 1950, and a year later appointed as a Member of State Legislative Council (Ahli Majlis Mesyuarat Undangan Kerajaan). Later on, he was appointed to become a civilian ADC to the first Malay King or Agong (1958-1960).

THE WRITER AND HIS WORKS

When he first ventured into writing he wrote under a pen-name Jentayu, but later used his real name, Muhammad Yusof Ahmad. The name Jentayu was taken after a name of a bird. According to him Jentayu is a mystical bird, always thirsty and yearning for the rain to fall. The name Jentayu symbolized a Muhammad Yusof Ahmad who was always yearning for new processes of literature created by his people and always hoping that one day Malay literature in Malaysia will be enhanced by new writers (Sabariah Maarof, 1975:7). He also used pen-names such as Anak Negeri and Melor, specifically in his journalistic writings.

“Percintaan Lady Brazil” (PLB) and “Cubaan kasih”, (CK) were among his first works in modern Malay fiction writing. Through these two titles, it is possible to show that he was a pioneer in realistic fiction writing serials.¹ The two titles were partly an adaptation from original stories, and partly fiction (Interview, 1979). He had hoped that through such attempt his readers (significantly the Malay teachers) will discover new ways of story telling

which he had discovered from his earlier readings. As agents of change and innovations, he believed that his specific readers will be able to popularize his new writing techniques in the literary society (Sabariah Maarof, 1975:7). He had discovered that this technique was more appealing than the *hikayat* and believed that teacher or reader will be able to spread it among his pupils and eventually, the society at large (Interview, 1979).

He chose his stories for adaptations according to his own preference and the suitability of their theme for the education of his people. "Percintaan Lady Brazil" (PLB) is an example. This is a very sad love story. It tells the story of a boy who lost his father and being brought up by his aunt who already had two daughters. He was privileged to be given a high education and upon completing it, the aunt wanted to marry him off to a young wealthy widow. By doing so she thought his future would be secured as he had nothing to depend upon. The boy opposed his aunt's arrangement. Instead, he fell in love and went on to marry the daughter of his father's former servant. They had a child before they set sail to India. During the journey to India their boat broke up in the Bay of Spain (sic) [probably Bay of Biscay]. In due they were separated. Both thinking of each other being perished. The husband went on to India and lived there for forty years and became a millionaire. The wife together with the son went back to England. In England, the son grew up to become a painter and a traveller. During his travels he met his uncle and went on to marry his cousin who was his uncle's daughter. His uncle then brought him to see his millionaire father.

According to Muhammad Yusof, the story of PLB was similar to his own personal life experience as a young man. His family had arranged for him to marry a young girl from a wealthy family. It was hoped that this arranged marriage would secure his happiness because the family of the would be wife would also help support Muhammad Yusof's education. But, the arrangement was never materialized because Muhammad Yusof did not agree to it (Interview, 1979).

PLB portrayed the romantic and idealistic traits of Muhammad Yusof in his twenties. Its narration of a love story of a highly educated young man was akin to the story of Muhammad Yusof himself. The story of PLB highlighted travels and journeys of the protagonist, and the plot expanded to the adventures, exploration and a vocation of a second generation. The story ended up with a happy ending when the grown child was reunited with his father whom for so long he thought had died.

The structure of the story is similar to *hikayat*. This is not a surprise considering that up to the age of fourteen, Muhammad Yusof was brought up in a family who had loved *hikayat*. His father had always been reading various *hikayat* to him and he too loved reading them on his own (Interview, 1979). Thus, it was inevitable that indirectly, the structure of *hikayat* influenced him to choose and select stories suitable to his taste for adaptations, even though the stories might have contained traits of modern fiction writing.

In fact, the traits of transitions from the old ways to the new were already ingrained in Muhammad Yusof's works. He was educated in both cultures, traditional Malay culture (via religious and Malay culture) and modern education (via secular Malay school and English school).

Further education in English had enabled Muhammad Yusof to indulge himself more towards reading materials in English, be it original writings in English or other works from other foreign languages translated into English. Knowledge of English that he had acquired had also enabled him to deviate his focus from reading *hikayat* to reading other genres such as writings on current issues, general knowledge, fiction-literature, and western poetry especially English poetry. He loved the works of Mary Stope (Sabariah Maarof, 1975) and Washington Irving (Interview, 1979). However, his favourite writers were Sir Walter Scott and Alexander Dumas (Interview, 1979).

He admitted that Dumas influenced him immensely. He showed it in his work entitled "Cerita Siti Maznah" (*Majalah Guru*, 1 Mac 1936 – Feb 1937). Dumas's influence could be clearly seen in the narrative via its story structure about a "respectable prostitute" and a one-sided love affair which reminded us of a character in *La Dame Aux Camelia*.

In "Zaman Sari" (ZS), we would be able to detect a simple village life still untouched by urbanization. The story had a simple plot akin to folk tales. It began with a character named Dato' Duka Tuan. In his younger days he was known as Hussain and the story started from then. During his childhood, he lived in a small village in Serting, Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan. Being young he fell in love and tried to win the heart of Munah. But, Munah was the fourth wife of Haji Janun, a religious teacher in the village. This illegal relationship became known to Haji Janun and he reported it to the family of Hussain. Hussain was then shoved away from his village due to his untowardly behaviour which had brought shame to his family.

The story continued with his life ventures as an outcast which included his marriage to a widow, his fights, and his newly met friends. He went back to his village to pay his last respect to his dead father. And, eventually met up again with his sweetheart, Munah, and married her. According to Yusof, “Zaman Sari” (ZS) was based on a story he had heard during his childhood days told by the old folks in the village. On another note, the story also had an added lustre in the form of his father’s personal experience and adventures (Interview, 1979). Thus, the two elements of “handedme-down stories” and personal experiences were concocted to become a fiction named ZS.

It is clear then that ZS epitomized the central theme of the day which was the opposing friction between the older generation and the younger generation, forced marriages, abused of trust and religious institution. From another point of view, the theme of the story could be viewed as a new approach laden with rationality and secularity to combat traditional norms which were filled with mythos and beliefs towards religious figure heads and institutions. Hussain’s success and the conferment of a datukship in his later age symbolized the success achieved by younger generation who were more inclined towards modernity and secularity. This achievement could be seen through the character of Munah whose individual freedom was curtailed (by her husband, a religious teacher). She was freed from any traditional linkages and abused of religious institution by the writer. However, like the writer, the characters’ religious beliefs remained intact and they got married legally according to Islamic traditions.

His attempt to put forward two opposing values as a theme for his story had clearly exposed the influence of his strong educational background and his cultural life which he had endured. At the beginning, he went to Malay school and being taught Islamic education and learnt to appreciate traditional Malay literature. Later, he went on to Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK) to learn English, its culture and literature too. Exposures to both educational cultures had resulted in his outlook and philosophy as portrayed in ZS.

In ZS, Muhammad Yusof openly opposed some of his traditional norms and this open opposition had opened up an important area in the development of Malay literature, i.e. being released and freed from its traditional mythos literature. This trait could be seen in the two characters being trapped in two cultures and both were trying to free themselves from the trappings. However, they never lost their grip on their religious and cultural beliefs, i.e. Islam. Both upheld their beliefs until old age.

Distinct differences between characters could be seen in each generation. The most convincing character was Hussain. He was clever, witty, patient, effective and responsible. His character portrayal befitted his tribulations. Munah's portrayal was a bit exaggerated, totally outside the norm of girls during that period. Her character lacked personality support to justify her actions. Most probably she acted in such acceptable manner due to cruel pressures that were coming from her husband whom she married as to please her parents. They had wanted to be blessed by marrying off their daughter to Haji Janun whom they regarded a holy person. Events in the story took place in real locations, Serting, Kelang, etc. Time spectrum was convincingly laid out, starting from Dato' Duka's childhood until his adulthood.

Nevertheless, the story was still transitional in nature. The presence of old and new elements were still hand in hand in the story. Its plot which centred around travels and adventures still belonged to the dominant traits of Malay folk tales. The character of its antagonist was still illustrated in black, akin to the antagonist character in *Hikayat Seri Rama*. However, ZS showed progress in its composition by adapting new techniques already mentioned. The story was far more advanced than "*Perusahaan yang berpadan buatlah tauladan ...*" and "Sutan Baringin" (SB).

As a normal feature of his other works before, Muhammad Yusof's stories were published serially in *Majalah Guru*. According to the writer, this was done with a purpose to test readers preference and to spread the story's circulation. Publishing it in book form during those days was discouraged for fear the story would not be picked up because the number of readers were still small and limited. The readers then were mainly the Malay school teachers (Interview, 1979).

Muhamad Yusof's work which was considered to be the most progressive would be a novel-like effort entitled "Mencari isteri" (MI).² This story had more or less 17 500 words and contained in a 75-page book. As the title suggested, *MI* was a story evolving around the problems of finding life partners among the new breed of western educated middle class gentlemen. It also contained stories of unfulfilled love, forced marriages, unrestricted mixing of girls and boys, race relations, education for girls, economy and the backwardness of the Malays.

The story of *MI* begun with Mahmud awaiting the arrival of his friend Adnan at the Kuala Lumpur railway station. They have not met since they parted ways from MCKK. Mahmud worked in Kuala Lumpur and Adnan in the Land Office in Batu Gajah, Perak. As soon as Adnan arrived, Mahmud

quickly whisked him home. Since they have not met in a long time they talked and talked until the wee hours. Accidently, on that particular night too a friend of Mahmud, Mr. Tan Wong Bee, Director and owner of Bee & Co. came knocking. He came with his wife and two sisters-in-law, Miss Yap Ah Moi and Miss Yap Poon Chong. Miss Ah Moi was a clerk and Miss Poon Chong a typist. They were introduced to Adnan. In the evening of the following day, they played tennis at Mr Tan's house. Later that night, Adnan proceeded his journey to Singapore. He wanted to complete his vacation by touring Java, in Indonesia.

Adnan wrote letters to Mahmud narrating his journeys since his arrival in Singapore. Since Adnan left, Mahmud had become closer to Ah Moi. One day Mahmud brought Ah Moi to a reservoir in Ulu Kelang. This place was placid and beautiful. Here, Mahmud poured his heart out to the Chinese girl. Sadly, Ah Moi rejected him, not because she did not love Mahmud but she was thinking more of his happiness. Being Chinese, she would imagined his parents would not accept her as a daughter-in-law. So, Ah Moi decided for them to just remained friends. Mahmud felt a great disappointment over Ah Moi's decision. For a while he stopped visiting her at her home.

Meanwhile, Adnan continued to send letters to Mahmud telling him about his journeys, interesting new places that he had visited from Singapore to Riau then on to Java. He had also told Mahmud an interesting news about his friendship with a lady by the name of Siti Rohani. He met her on a cruise ship. Adnan met her while she was travelling with her father to Betawi to see her uncle. That brief encounter left an indelible mark on Adnan. He was attracted to her because she was educated, knew Dutch, well read and sociable. These were the qualities that Adnan longed for in his choice of a bride.

Ah Moi contacted Mahmud. To upkeep his dignity as someone educated and ethical, he continued to befriend Ah Moi. Meanwhile, in Perak, Adnan's father had arranged a bride for him. He would be married to his cousin, Siti Kamariah. She was just a thirteen year old girl, a typical village girl who never went to school, and did not even know how to socialize. Adnan was ignorant about this arrangement.

As soon as he got back from his travels, Adnan made a stop at Mahmud's house. Mahmud had managed to tell Adnan about his relationship with Ah Moi. Adnan laughed it out upon hearing the story.

Meanwhile, from Kuala Kubu came Mahmud's mother to discuss about his engagement to his cousin. Mahmud pledged his mother to bring the girl

for him to see. But, his mother was reluctant to do so as such act was not the norm in Malay culture.

Adnan journeyed back to his village in Bagan Datok. As soon as he reached his home his mother broke the news about his family's decision to marry him off to his cousin. He would be disowned by his father should he refused to obey. The next day Adnan went off to work. His father went to his office too. He wanted to see Adnan's boss, the District Head, to seek his permission to allow Adnan to go on leave again. The boss was a white man and he told Adnan's father that he had no more leave. The old man was adamant, he forced Adnan to go back to the village for the marriage. A week after being married Adnan returned to his office to start his normal work again. The white man, his boss scolded him for being absent from work for a week and brought the matter to a higher authority. Adnan felt pressured by this incident and thought of his wife as a burden to him, and not his life companion. On the other hand, Mahmud had married his cousin who was said to be an urban girl who knew how to cook and socialize like them. But, Mahmud was disappointed because in actual fact his wife was illiterate and could not even think wisely.

The two good friends continued to write to each other, each time pouring their woes over their sorrow for having unsuitable wives. They had often said, "Let us hoped that it would be only us who will suffer this way and that our children will be spared".

According to the writer, this story was based on a true story. Characters narrated in the story were his real friends who studied together with him in MCKK. Places visited by Adnan were real places. Hotel names mentioned in Adnan's letters were real hotels too. The travel tales were true too because Muhammad Yusof's friends who had travelled before would write him letters telling him of their adventures. In his real life he too had a friend who married a cousin but did not favour it because he thought the wife was unrepresentable in his wide international social gathering. This friend was once a High Commissioner. However, he was proven wrong when the wife was an excellent socialite in his circle of friends and acquaintances. (Interview, 1979).

Apart from being historically apt in terms of current events, time and places in the 1920s, the story carried issues which were central and personal to the writer too. The writer, a Malay brought up in a rural environment was similar to Adnan and Mahmud, the two main characters of the story. They shared the same age too when the story was written. MCKK was another

institution that tied the writer together with his characters. Having had his education from this premier institution the writer went on to become a high ranking government servant and was thrown into the echelon of the new middle class society created by the English colonials. Together with his peers, he underwent several transitions, i.e. from a simple “kampung” boy to a more complex urban and modern individual. A “new” society which involved new manner of relationship between boys and girls, and finding a mate of equal status became central issue.

Muhammad Yusof was deeply concerned about those issues because he was directly involved in educating and enlightening the Malays. He started a campaign to encourage parents to send their daughters to school. Muhammad Yusof was aware of the oldfashionness attitude of the Malays towards “boys and girls mixing freely”. In their point of view this manner of socializing will encourage evil doings. Apart from that, the Malays too were lacking behind in terms of receiving western education compared to the other races living in “Tanah Melayu” at that time.³ This backwardness had led to their backwardness in the economy too. This issue was reflected in *Mencari isteri (MI)*, while Adnan was in Singapore. In Singapore, Adnan could see business centres sprung up without the participation of the Malays. He pondered upon it. His people’s backwardness in education and economy became an issue to him then. Thus, *MI* was a manifestation of the writer’s experience and awareness as a young Malay individual who was well educated about his country’s social issues in 1920s (Interview, 1979). Alas, *MI* was only a fiction. It surely could not depict the socio-economic situation of that decade as precisely as possible. However, realities of those years and enhanced by the writer’s imagination, creativity and immaculate handling of those factors had resulted in a fine fiction.

The story had a new structure since it did not focus solely on the life and death of the protagonist. Instead, it evolved along events which took place while the lead character was maturing up. Characters were presented according to their manner and actions instead of being dictated by the writer. Development of the plot was based on the development of the characters in the story and not according to the changing of events usually found in traditional Malay *hikayat*.

Its characters were “real” living individuals. Important characters such as Mahmud and Adnan belonged to the new emerging middle class breed in Malay society, a society different from the previous lower agricultural class and the higher feudalistic class. The new class was brought about by the

colonial masters via education and economy. Supporting characters consisting of Samat, Adnan's parents, Mahmud's mother and the wives of the main characters were all village people. In short, character compositions were changing from the usual feudalistic characters usually found in traditional literature to mere mortals from other ranks in the society especially the new middle class group. This phenomena was similar to English literature.

In *MI* readers were able to see its characters were not solely from the feudalistic and rich merchant class. Its characters were individuals who ate and breathe just like readers do too. Each character were given appropriate role to give meaning to the story. As readers, we could detect each characters' uniqueness which differentiated them from one to another. We could differentiate between Mahmud, Adnan, Samat and Adnan's father. Mahmud was a high ranking official who loved nature, well read and sociable. In choosing his bride he would never compromised his ideas and principles of an ideal wife. Mahmud was anglophiled in terms of running his household. This was reflected through the arrangement of his furniture in the house, took a dog for a pet, particularity towards cleanliness, and etc. Adnan's character was also a typical official character similar to Mahmud, a pro to modern living, appreciated western values, but was different in terms of vocation and political inclination. He was an Assistant District Officer, frank, honest and "nationalistic" in a narrow sense.

Samat was a typical "kampung" lad whose income was low, poorly educated, and simplistic in his thought and views. He was viewed as a man who would always had prejudice over the "new manner of free mixing of boys and girls". Adnan's father, on the other hand was potrayed as a typical autocratic traditional father, very strict, uneducated, ignorant and refused to get to know and adhere to the regulations and conditions of his son's office.

MI characters were given "life". They had feelings, mindful, changeable, proactive and capable of being caught up in ordinary social trappings. Mahmud was a good example from this group. He represented an individual who had the right to feel happy, intelligent, loved his nature and idealistic. His attitude towards Ah Moi developed from simple innocent friendship blossoming into love and yearning. Although disappointed when his proposal was refused, but being educated he held his head high. Nevertheless, the two characters weakened when faced with their respective traditional values. They were forced to fulfill with regrets the demands of their parents. Many other fictions written in the 1920s depicted such tribulations too.

The story took place in Kuala Lumpur, at its railway station, at Mahmud's house and Ah Moi's house at specific time and dates. For example, Mahmud waited for his friend Adnan to arrive at the Kuala Lumpur railway station by a train from Penang which was due to arrive precisely at 6.25pm.

Situational contexts were precisely illustrated. Adnan's journey from Singapore's railway station to the ship meant for his onward voyage to Java Island were nicely drawn out in his letters to his friend. The ship's interior layout and various ports of call which Adnan had visited were also pictured out in details in his letters. After his journey, we were told he arrived in Kuala Lumpur on the 25th August 1928 at 7.15 in the evening. We were also told that he had stayed for three days in Kuala Lumpur. Other informations such as his village and his place of work in Perak were also given.

In *MI*, Muhammad Yusof had applied a new writing technique. He made use of an easy, everyday spoken language which would appeal to normal readers. He used descriptive and narrative techniques where necessary. Letter writing played an important element in *MI*. This technique fitted new readers who were just beginning to learn how to read and write, and letter writing would be an effective and popular tool of connecting with each other. Consequently, some of *MI*'s dialogues were natural, effective, appropriate and frank, and at times were colloquial. At times the writer experimented with formal language. However, such experiments were tried in appropriate contexts and situations. Some sample dialogues in *MI* to illustrate this fact include;

- (1) "Yalah!Pandai lu!" (hlm.24) ["Rightly so! Clever you!" p. 24]
- (2) "Saya malu hendak mengeluarkannya takut barangkali menjadi marah pula di hati tuan." (hlm.43) ["I am shy to say it out for fear it might anger you," p. 43]
- (3) "Mana lu miskin?" Jawab Mahmud sambil tersenyum. "Rumah lu macam palace."(hlm.58) ["You poor?" Answered Mahmud with a smile. "Your house is like a palace." p. 58].

The first utterance was between Mahmud and Ah Moi. They were then in a happy and jovial mood. The second utterance reflected a tense Mahmud. He was serious and doubtful about confessing his feelings and intentions towards Ah Moi. The third utterance reflected a jovial and an embarrassed Mahmud after hearing Ah Moi's comment about his long disappearance since she turned down his proposal in marriage.

New traits and techniques found in *MI* qualified it as a novel except for a few parts which were written akin to essay and news writing, and sometimes took the form of synopses. For example, in Chapter 2, (1975:12–21), the writer went to great length to describe books read by his characters. At times the writer became too cautious about the exactness of his dates, times and places (refer to incident when Mahmud was waiting for Adnan at the railway station), and how he ended his story by summarizing and forecasting his character's future (1975:70–75). Such ending was abrupt and marred the flow of the story.

When he wrote *MI*, Muhammad Yusof admitted he was attempting to write a new style of fiction writing—and he was not trying to write a conventional short story or a novel. He was writing a new story in a new style. He wanted to educate his readers, to make them aware about the importance of education, social conditions and life style under colonial rule. In short, his story had a role too to impart to the readers central issues of the day, i.e. issues on education and new approaches in modern living which were unfamiliar to the Malays.

His writings were targeted for new readers, specifically Malay teachers who received their education in Malay schools. They needed new and broader knowledge, new stories and fictions especially those containing guidance, new ideologies and moral values. Muhammad Yusof explored his creativity to fill these needs. However, although he was exploring new techniques in his writings, his stories were not totally free from the traits of *hikayat*. Tales about Adnan's travels depicted this trait. The difference was that the tales were told using new technique, i.e. through letters. The beauty of nature and its surrounding usually expressed in poetries in folk romance could be seen in *MI* through Adnan's depiction of dawn as seen from his window while on a train journey from Johor to Singapore. In folk romance, nature's changes such as the progression of dawn to daylight (when morning comes "hari nak siang") were usually well described in "gurindam", whereas in *MI*, the writer used prose in the form of letter writing.

Stress on moral values in the story were a continuation from traditional Malay literature. In *MI*, these values were debated and discussed, and new values were put forth. Hence, new values became central issues of the day.

CONCLUSION

Discussions on his works such as the above revealed to us the aptness of his pseudonym “Jentayu” in his earlier works. Muhammad Yusof could be considered as a bird named “jentayu” wandering lonely in its surrounding because during his time he explored his creativity by himself. He had no “teacher” nor model to emulate. He created new prose in Malay literary world single-handedly. He made use of materials from Malay traditional literature which he inherited through folk tales which were told to him and *hikayat* which were often read in his family as his reference. Folk tales and *hikayat* were popular reading materials in Malay schools and Melaka Teachers College which he once attended. However, his creativity would not be considered new explorations were he to use mainly folk tales and *hikayat* as models.

In search of new techniques, he used his broad general knowledge gained through wide reading and his mastery of English acquired while studying in MCKK had helped him to read literary works by his favourite authors in English. Nevertheless, if he were to stylize his works solely after western materials, his work would be out of place during the era because his people were just beginning to read and write. The Malay schools then were only providing five years of elementary education. Reading skills were taught using texts from folk tales and *hikayat*. A newer text if it was ever used would be *Hikayat Abdullah*. But, Abdullah Munshi’s creativity was not a fiction, instead it was a true tale. Thus, fictions from the west became an alternative choice. However, a problem existed here. New literary readers were mainly educated in Malay schools or at the most they graduated from teachers colleges. An example of this would be Muhammad Yusof himself and his contemporaries, such as Ahmad Kotot. Aware of such shortcomings, Muhammad Yusof explored and ventured into the world of adaptations. He started with “Percintaan Lady Brazil” (PLB). He chose this title because it suited his experience, his writing capability and his would be readers. PLB’s plot which centred around travels, journeys, and love stories were similar to plots found in traditional Malay folk tales. And in some parts of PLB which depicted the story of a poor boy marrying a rich girl was similar to his life experience too. PLB mentioned new and “real” places in far away lands. Thus, those new names were new elements to the readers. In conclusion, suffice to sum up that the adaptation of PLB carried both new and old elements.

His attempt to put forth elements of traditional literature specifically in terms of plot and new elements in terms of natural places, time and dates, true everyday experiences which partly involved himself could be seen clearly in his two original works, namely “Zaman Sari” (ZS) and “Mencari Isteri” (MI). Both stories were examples of early works reflecting formal realism. When he created the two titles the concept and term of short story [*cerita pendek* (*cerpen*)], novelette and novel were still unheard of in Malay literary world. During those days there were only two names to refer to it, *cerita* and *hikayat*. The terms *cerita pendek*, *novelet* and *novel* were new terms in Malay literature. The terms came about when Malay Literature was taught as a subject in Malay Studies at the University of Malaya in Singapore. When University of Malaya was established in Kuala Lumpur, Malay Studies became a core study of the university. Terms such as *cerpen* and *novel* became popular in the 60s and cemented in 1968 when Modern Malay Literature was put in place in Malay Studies, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. Thus, Muhammad Yusof Ahmad’s creativity through his two earlier works were early attempts in this genre.

In these two works, ZS and MI, Muhammad expressed his experiences and discoveries while shifting from his traditional background to a new world which had challenged his thought, shifting from the familiar and much loved folk tales and *hikayat* to a world of secularism and anglophobic literature. By looking at his story structure and content readers could see that he became taut between two values, old and new. However, in other aspects, as a Jentayu he professed that he would forever yearned for new ideas and new ventures. Thus, through his works and his leadership in *Majalah Guru*, Muhammad continued to explore new styles and structures and tried to compromise and alliance both old and new elements. This could be seen in MI. MI’s plot was still a story of travels and journeys, a dominant plot of traditional Malay literature, but new elements of formal realism were highlighted too. Elements such as real places, characterization, letter writing technique, daily journal and the use of simple everyday language style in the dialogues. The themes put forth centred around current issues, the debate on forced marriages, problems faced by western educated individuals, free mixing of boys and girls, open-mindedness and the desire to find one’s own mate. Lead characters were put to stress when parents wanted their sons to marry girls of their choice, whereas the sons representing new generation wanted educated brides equal to them. However, this friction ended with a compromise, the new generation gave in to fulfill their parents wishes in terms of matrimonial issue, eventhough they were uncomfortable with their parents choices.

Although they gave in and compromised, the new generation never gave up hope in finding new directions in their lives. The following phrases found in letters between the two lead characters in MI, “*Biarlah kita dan pangkat umur kita sahaja yang menanggung kesusahan seperti ini dan janganlah hendaknya berkepanjangan hingga ke anak cucu kita*” reflected key hopes in themselves. It was clear then that Jentayu, a mystical bird, always yearning for new ideas were found in generations after Muhammad Yusof Ahmad. We saw in generations after that a steady and vigorous growth of fictions in the form of short stories and novels in Malay literature sustainable until today. Thus was the contribution of Muhammad Yusof Ahmad or Jentayu as a pioneer of modern Malay literature.

NOTES

- 1 Muhammad Yusof Ahmad other works include, “Zaman Sari” (*Majalah Guru*, 1 Ogos 1928), “Mencari Isteri” (*Majalah Guru*, 1 Ogos 1928–1 Mei 1929) “Hidup Kalkatu” (*Majalah Guru*, Jun 1929), “Menghalau Hantu” (*Majalah Guru*, Ogos 1929).
- 2 *Majalah Guru* I:vol.8, 1 Aug 1928, pp. 149–152, II:vol. 9, 1 September 1928, pp. 172–174; III:vol.10, 1 Okt.1928, pp.188–190; IV:vol. 11, Nov.1928, pp. 207–10; V:vol. 6.1,1 Jan.1929, pp. 9–12; VI: vol. 9.2, 1 Feb. 1929, pp. 25–26; VII: vol. 6.3, 1 March.1929, pp. 45–47, VIII:vol. 6.4 April. 1929, pp .68–70; IX: vol. 6.5, Mei 1929, pp. 93–95. For the purpose of discussion in this article, a published book entitled *Mencari Isteri* with a forward by Ali Haji Ahmad, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur 1975, is being used due to easy reading and the story remained the same.
- 3 Further research on Muhammad Yusof’s ideas on education and his take on nationalism, see Ali Ahmad, “*Majalah Guru – The Magazine of the Malay Teachers* (with particular reference to the 1924–1932 period and the role played by Muhammad Yusof Ahmad), Ph.D thesis, Monash University, Australia, 1975, pp. 130–80.

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(Translated by Aminah Harun)