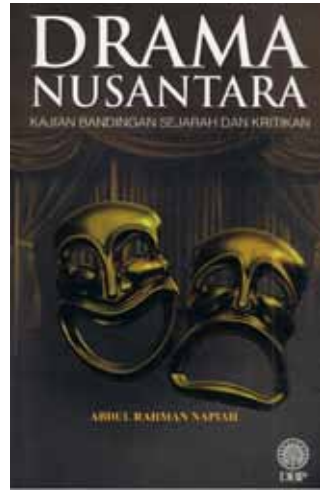


BOOK REVIEW

Abdul Rahman Napiah, 2017.
***Drama Nusantara: Kajian Bandingan Sejarah dan Kritikan.* Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 367 pages, ISBN 9789834901554.**

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INTRODUCTION

Abdul Rahman Napiah is a scholar and prolific literary critic. He is popularly known by his pen name Mana Sikana. As a writer, he has written in almost all literary genres including novels, short stories, dramas and essays on criticism. He has published plays such as *Apa-apa*, *Hikmah*, *Istiqamah*, *Mustaqiima*, *Bunuh* and *Kumpulan Pasir-pasir di Pasir Salak*. As well, he has scripted dramas for television and among his popular television dramas was *Tok Awang* which was aired in 1981. As a scholar, his passion is on theoretical studies and, in this regard, he has discussed literary theories from formalism to post-modernism as reflected in his book *Post-Modern Malay Literary Criticism*.

A highly reputable literary scholar, Abdul Rahman has published books on literary essays and criticism such as *Teras Sastera Melayu Moden* (1982), *Esei-esei Kesusasteraan* (1983), *Kritikan Sastera: Kaedah dan Aplikasi* (1986), *Di Sekitar Pemikiran Drama Moden* (1989), *Teori Sastera Moden* (1990), *Drama Melayu Moden* (1996), *Teori dan Kritikan Sastera Pascamodernisme* (1998), *Sastera Pascamodernisme Melayu* (2002) and *Teori Kritikan Sastera* (2002).

His book, *Drama Nusantara: Kajian Bandingan Sejarah dan Kritikan* (Malay Drama: Comparative Historical Studies and Criticism) is his latest effort to explore contemporary drama criticism and development of theatre in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei. In the introduction of this book, he states that the term Nusantara or archipelago refers to countries such as

Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei. Historically and socio-culturally, these countries are similar in many ways as they use the Malay language, subscribe to a similar culture and tradition, and adhere to the Islamic faith. However, with the passing of time, the lived realities of the people of these countries have undergone some changes. The main contributory factors being political and economic developments. These developments and their impact on the lives of these people are best captured in the literary works of each of these countries in particular the genre of drama.

In this book Abdul Rahman focuses his discussion on three main topics: criticism, development of theatre and textual criticism.

CRITICISM

Theatre is inextricably bound with society as it is a communal activity and reflects aspects of society. Theatre criticism involves the act of viewing and contemplating. While theatre is regarded as the performing arts for entertainment, criticism provides the intellectual engagement and philosophical explorations. Criticism plays a pivotal role in any literary genre. Good theatre critics can add significant new dimensions to our awareness of the art form and to create important records of performances. Theatre criticism brings what we see in the theatre into the wider public domain. It also provides an invaluable indication as to what plays and performance are available for our viewing pleasure. The most informed and influential critic can play a vital part in the maintenance of standards and contributing to the wider debate about the significance of the drama (Pickering, 2005).

However, there are differences between drama as performing arts, and drama as a script or text to be read. Drama as performing arts is theatre and it encompasses all forms of performing arts such as acting, sceneography, music, architecture, special effects and other elements. While drama as a literary text is meant for reading where readers can visualize what they read (Brockett, 2012).

For this book, the writer places his emphasis on two approaches: text criticism and criticism on the performance. Text criticism is carried out based on the script that is produced, while criticism on performance is based on the staged plays. Between the four countries, it is quite interesting to find that only Malaysia and Indonesia have a strong tradition in drama criticism. Hence, in this book the writer focuses the development of criticism on these two countries (Abdul Rahman, 2017).

Since drama began late in Malaysia compared to other literary genres, drama criticism naturally started late. In its early development, drama criticism was a simple review based on the analysis of the script. The review outlined the plot, identified the actors and directors, and offered opinions about the play. It merely provided the intuitive response of the critic towards the story but rarely discussed in depth the performing elements as the critics found them to be too difficult and complex to understand. The reviews were published after World War II in magazines such as *Majalah Guru*, *Jajahan Melayu*, *Warta Ahad* and *Cenderamata*. In the 1950s and 1960s, reviewers comprise Usman Awang, Kalam Hamidy, Seniputera Budaya, Saleh Daud, Habibi Melaka, Panorama, A. Shukor Harun, Aimi Jarr, Zain Ariff, Iskandar Putera, Amin Awang, Atondra, Manisah Haji Siraj, Zakaria M.Z. and Dharmawijaya. According to Abdul Rahman (2017), as intimated above, most of the reviewers were impressionistic in their approach as the analysis was based on what they had viewed while text criticism was largely absent.

However, the development of theatre criticism in Malaysia changed in the 1970s. Several factors contributed to these changes. In the 1970s, Malaysian theatre dramatically shifted its focus from realist plays to contemporary experimental ones with the emergence of absurdist theatre movement in the west championed by dramatists such as Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee. Absurdist viewed the world as irrational and they were influenced by the horrors of the war and the threat of impending disaster. They raised questions about man's capacity to act responsibly or even to survive. Anxiety and guilt became the major themes during this period. Since drama can be seen as a form of thought, that is a cognitive process, thus theatre provides an objective way of testing experiments in human behaviour (Soemanto, 2001).

The 1970s also witnessed the emergence of new highly educated theatre critics as they had received some form of exposure to literary and drama criticism from their respective universities. They comprised Dinsman, Salleh Ben Joned, Krishen Jit, Johan Jaaffar and Hatta Azad Khan. Interestingly, they were not only actively criticising but they were also writing and directing plays. Their plays were experimental with critical thought on contemporary economics, social and political issues impacting Malaysia. The new form of the plays has provoked robust discussion among the critics. As plays tend to use metaphors and symbols to represent ideas, critics

shoulder the responsibility of guiding readers to understand the philosophy of the plays.

Dinsman and Hatta Azad Khan have used formalistic and theoretical approaches especially in their analysis of surreal and absurd plays. Another critic who also adopts a critical stance in his essays is Johan Jaaffar. Although Johan's approach to criticism is similar to Dinsman and Hatta, however, Johan focuses more on the directorial style. Krishen Jit, on the other hand, always believed that the success of a theatre is very much dependent on how the director interprets the play. As such, Krishen places greater emphasis on the theoretical aspects of the performance rather than the directorial aspects. There were two periodicals which actively publish essays on criticism, namely, *Dewan Sastera* and *Dewan Budaya*.

According to Abdul Rahman (2017) the number of plays produced in the 1980s had declined, but the quality of the plays had improved. Plays such as *Lantai T. Pinkie* by A. Samad Said and *Tiang Seri Tegak Berlima* by Noordin Hassan are examples of quality theatre. The commitment to these plays could be seen from the price of tickets which had spiralled to RM40.00 (considered a high price during the 1980s and 1990s). Needless to say, quality theatre will affect and develop quality criticism. Critics who had emerged in this decade were Solehah Ishak, Zakaria Ariffin, Fatimah Ali, A. Rahim Abdullah, Z. Afif, Koh Yung Hun, Samoza and Rahmah Bujang. Among them, Solehah Ishak is the most critical as she provides an in-depth analysis of a drama. Being an academic, Solehah normally focuses on the principles and concepts of the play. For instance, in using deconstruction in her criticism of *Teks dan Makna dalam Drama Melayu Moden* (Meaning and Text in Modern Malay Drama), Solehah opines that the text and meaning of the subtext function to provide a cultural reflection of society. Deconstruction is a critique of the relationship between text and meaning. It insists on the way in which meanings are structured around a centre and what we concede is that meanings cannot be entirely contained but are always likely to diversify and diverge from their centre (Pickering, 2005). To Solehah, in drama, the meaning of a text (drama) that is being performed could change according to the form and nature of the stage. Perhaps, the perception of the behaviour of characters will almost certainly modify in the light of their own experiences and interpretations.

Drama criticism in Malaysia has developed in a much more interesting way compared to Indonesia. For Indonesia, drama criticism is known as *kritik teater* (theater criticism) and it started as early as in 1916 when Kwee

Tek Hoay wrote a book *Allah Yang Palsu* which touches in general about theatre criticism.

Theatre criticism in Indonesia began to develop with the involvement of literary writers such as Motinggo Busye, B. Sularto, Mohamad Diponegoro and Boen S. Oemarjati. They had criticised the weakness of some plays staged at Balai Budaya and at the universities. Discussion of plays have appeared in some general magazines such as *Aneka*, *Varia*, *Star*, *Weekly*, *Selecta*, *Minggu Pagi*, *Berita Minggu*, *Warta Bandung* and *Bintang Minggu*. Cultural magazines such as *Budaya*, *Basis*, *Siasat Baru* and *Indonesia Sastera* have published theatre criticism written by W.S. Rendra, Asrul Sani, Idrus Ismail and Arif Budiman (Soe Hok Djin).

However, in March 1971, quality theatre criticism began to emerge with the publication of a weekly magazine, *Tempo*, founded by Goenawan Mohamed and Yusril Djalinus. *Tempo* is a magazine that covers news on economic, social, political, cultural and arts matters. It has a different style of writing commentaries and regularly features film and theatre criticism. Among the early critics who contributed their essays on criticism to *Tempo* were Putu Wijaya, Ariffin C. Noer and Ikranegara. Their writings have reflected their vast experience in theatre. Putu and Ariffin who have been playwrights and theatre directors have also established themselves as film directors. While Ikranegara has established himself as a theatre and film actor. Apart from *Tempo*, theatre criticisms have also appeared regularly in newspapers such as *Pikiran Rakyat*. In Indonesia, critics focus their analysis on the performance rather than the text or play itself.

In his observation, Abdul Rahman concludes that essays on drama criticisms in Malaysia and Indonesia are produced by literary critics. Newspapers and magazines have played a dominant role in promoting theatre reviews and criticisms. To reiterate, in the early stages of criticism, critics were more concerned with impressionistic values such as acting and the director's style. Insightful criticism with a demonstration of theories came from scholars such as Solehah Ishak who wrote for specific literary periodicals.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DRAMA

In part two of this book, Abdul Rahman concentrates on the historical development of theatre in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei. The origin of the theatre as a form of art and the use of theatrical elements could

be traced from traditional plays. It may have started as religious rituals but, subsequently, it developed into drama and entertainment forms.

From traditional plays, *bangsawan* (the opera) emerged as a form of Malay theatre in the early 19th century. *Bangsawan* was influenced by Persian operas and established in Penang. The earliest *bangsawan* troupe in Penang was Pusi Indera Bangsawan. *Bangsawan* had its heyday for 33 years from 1902 up to 1935. However, the emergence of film as a popular medium of entertainment affected the *bangsawan* and caused its gradual decline. *Bangsawan* was then replaced by *Sandiwara* as the transition to a modern type of drama.

Shaharom Hussain is considered the pioneer of modern Malay drama with his play *Lawyer Dahlan* (1941). However, the first play published was *Megat Terawis* by Fatimah Abdul Wahab in 1951. The development of Malaysian drama in the 1950s and 1960s had witnessed the transformation from *sandiwara* to realist plays which delved into social, moral, religious and political issues. Notable realist plays in that period were *Atap Genting Atap Rembia* by Kala Dewata, *Tamu Di Bukit Kenny* by Usman Awang, *Di Mana Bulan selalu Retak* by A. Samad Said, *Buat Menyapu Si Air Mata* by Awang Had Salleh. Realist drama has achieved its maturity in the hands of Malina Manja with his satirical plays. From realism in the 1960s, Malaysian drama shifted to contemporary theatre in the 1970s which was heavily influenced by the idea of absurdism from the west. Much have been discussed about such plays by Noordin Hassan, Dinsman, Hatta Azad Khan, Johan Jaaffar, Anuar Nor Arai and even Mana Sikana himself. Their plays brought new themes that revolved around contemporary social, economic and political issues that impacted the country after the tragedy of 13th. May 1969.

The important discussion of the development in contemporary Malaysian drama is in the era of 1980s and 1990s. Although Abdul Rahman said that the 1980's were the unfortunate years in terms of the decline in theatre productions, however, that decade had produced more quality dramas as regards ideas and style. New dramatists emerged and new plays were published. Among the important dramas of the decade were *Tuk Selampit* by Anuar Nor Arai, *Pentas Opera* by Zakaria Ariffin, *Cindai* by Noordin Hassan, *Hari-hari Terakhir Seorang Seniman* an adaptation from a novel by Johan Jaaffar and *Yang Menjelma dan Menghilang* by Anwar Ridhwan. *Pentas Opera*, a tragedy of the *bangsawan* troupe which had a spin off play, *Raja Lawak* (King of a Comedy), a tragi-comedy considered to be the best drama in the 1980s. Meanwhile *Yang Menjelma dan Menghilang*, a surreal

play with three layers of story telling was considered the greatest drama in the 1990s. For the decade of 1980s and 1990s, there were no specific genre or identical styles but some modifications were made to the styles which this author (who is the reviewer referring to?) named it as neorealism.

The historical development of Indonesian theatre is much more exciting and akin to the development of Indonesian literature. Even though *Zaman Pujangga Baru* (literally meaning Generation of the New Literates) placed emphasis on novels and poetry but writers of this generation such as Sanusi Pane and Armijn Pane focused more on the written plays. Asrul Sani has translated western plays into Indonesian language. Indonesia has a strong traditional theatre such as *Ludruk*, *Wayang Kulit*, *Wayang Golek* and *Wayang Orang* with stories from the *Mahabhrata* and *Ramayana Epic*.

With these strong drama and literary tradition, a new generation of writers and directors have appeared in the Indonesian drama scene. These included Rendra, Ariffin C. Noer, Iwan Simatupang, Teguh Karya and Putu Wijaya followed by N. Riantiarno, Ikranegara and Wisran Hadi. What is interesting is that they are not only writing and directing their plays but they are also organising their own group of actors and stage workers.

Apart from the staging of plays, theatre had also developed in Indonesia through script competitions and translations from the great works in the western drama traditions. From these translations, Indonesian dramatists are exposed to wider drama experiences and they always keep abreast with new developments in theatre. Abdul Rahman also acknowledged the role played by Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM) and Institute Kesenian Jakarta (IKJ) in supporting the development of theatre in Indonesia.

Historically, Singapore was the hub of Malay literature and journalism. This was because Singapore was the centre for commercial, education, newspaper, printing, performing arts and popular entertainment especially after World War II. A group of literary writers and journalists then formed a literary association named Angkatan Sasterawan Lima Puluh (Writers of the 50s) or popularly known as Asas 50. The motto of this group was “Seni untuk Masyarakat” (Art for Society). The group became the force for producing literary works comprising novels, short stories, poetry and plays.

The separation of Malaysia and Singapore in 1963 affected Malay literary development in Singapore. Geopolitical factors disrupted the cohesion of social culture enjoyed by both countries. However, the younger generation of Malay Singaporeans with a strong background of English education emerged as new literary talents. They include dramatists such as Sabri Buang, Nor

Effendi Badron, Mazlan Ahmad, Khairul Anwar Salleh, Maimunah Jumari, Zulkifli Kassim and Rosli Abu Bakar. In his study, Abdul Rahman found that these young and vibrant new talents have created new forms and styles of experimental plays.

In this book, the Singapore chapter ends on a depressing note. It concludes that Malay theatre development in Singapore is facing difficulty due to strong competition from electronic media, waning interest towards theatre, language problems and the failure of theatre activists to comprehend the subject and interest of the larger society.

Historically, theatre movement in Brunei Darussalam has no clear documentation. Hence, researchers are unable to decide when play writing actually developed in Brunei Darussalam. The problem is made worse when drama studies paid very little attention to the development of drama in Brunei although plays have hitherto been staged. To date, Abd. Rashid Yusof in his study found evidence that H.M. Salleh had written and staged an adaptation of a play "Kamigayo" during the Japanese era.

As a small country, Brunei has limited theatre activities and play writing. The development of theater in Brunei was made possible with the involvement of teachers who have been actively staging dramas. They were A. Wahab Muhammad, Zulkifli Haji Abdullah, Hj. Ahmad Arshad, Dk. Intan and Dayang Sharifah. Studies have shown that most drama writing concentrate on radio dramas. Teachers who are active in theatre have mostly graduated from Maktab Perguruan Sultan Idris Tanjung Malim, Perak. However, some of the dramatists have a background in English education and they include Mahmud Hj. Bakry, Hj. Mohamad Hj Serudin, A. Wahab Muhd and Salleh Abdul Latiff. While writers with an Islamic background who have graduated from al-Azhar have shown more interest in writing plays with good morals and Islamic values. They are Shukri Zain, Yahya M.S. and Adi Rumi.

Drama could be simple and complex and, at the same time, it belongs to the great body of narrative literature (Esslin, 1976). The story developed in a play could be based on the experiences and sensitive observation of social issues impacting society. However, most of the plays in Brunei are still lacking in terms of debates on social issues. This shows that Brunei writers have not developed a critical mind when writing their scripts. Several factors have contributed to these problems such as the attitude of the writers, insufficient monetary encouragement, and deficient knowledge in writing quality scripts.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Drama is a scripted text and playwrights should prepare their dramatic scripts for certain purposes and for certain players or characters. Written dramatic texts are regarded as literary texts that are composed for performance. As a literary text drama embodies ideology. The text is a tissue of meanings implicit or explicit, perceptions and responses (Milner, 1996). Textual criticism is defined as a qualitative method in subjective interpretation to understand the content in the form of text. Text analysis could be used to compare the different approaches or point of view (Berger, 1998).

In chapter six of the book, Abdul Rahman employs several theories to analyse plays from the four countries. He uses deconstruction theory in his analysis of *Wah* a parody by Putu Wijaya. For *Penembahan Reso*, a play by W.S. Rendra, Rahman attempts a new historical reading. While in *Bumiku oh Bumiku* by Zaini Ozea, he employs a political approach to understand political problems. In analysing *Pelayaran Inderaputera II*, he uses phenomenology to interpret the text. In theatre *Gajah Depan Mata*, a play full of symbolism by Nur-Akmar, Abdul Rahman adopts a semiotic approach to understand the generation conflicts in Singapore. While in another Singaporean play *Munysi* by Hadijah Rahmat, Rahman uses new historicism to study the cultural conflicts of a historical text with a Singapore background. Rahman uses a formalistic approach in studying the drama text of *Sasterawan Bangsa* by Abdul Latiff Chuchu, a Brunei playwright. While for *Dendam di Kalbu Membara* by Haji Morsidi Haji Mohamad, Rahman employs structuralism to analyse the romantic style of the play.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, Rahman has attempted a rather comprehensive comparative study of the development of drama criticism and in the four ASEAN countries, namely, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam. However, unfortunately, his analysis did not take into account works that have been produced after the year 2000. In this regard, the reader is left with disappointment as there were developments in theatre in the new millennium which ought to have been critiqued. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that this book *Drama Nusantara: Kajian Bandingan Sejarah dan Kritikan* is another important book on drama analysis, especially if readers want to know the history and critical studies on theatre in the Malay archipelago.

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