# THE DEVELOPMENT OF MUNSHI ABDULLAH'S FRAMEWORK OF MODERNITY IN MALAY LITERATURE: A CRITICAL OBSERVATION

## (*Pembentukan Kerangka Kemodenan Munshi Abdullah dalam Kesusasteraan Melayu: Satu Pengamatan Kritis*)

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## Abstract

The West introduced modernity in literature to relevantize their contribution to scholarship in the Malay Archipelago. This led to the acknowledgement of Munshi Abdullah as a key reformer. Despite various scholarly discussions concerning the modernity of Munshi Abdullah's writing, there has been no systematic idea in relation to the framework of the modernity of his writings. Thus, this study aims to organise scholars' views on Munshi Abdullah's modernity in Malay literature from the colonial era to now and create a framework for it. This study employs a qualitative method in the form of grounded theory. It is a method of deriving theories directly from gathered data that is systematically analysed using comparative analysis. The findings outline the framework of modernity in literature by Munshi Abdullah based on two concepts; realism and individualism. Realism emphasises logical thinking and the rejection of superstitions, while individualism highlights on individual viewpoints and the rejection of institutional authority. Through the construction of this framework,

studies concerning modernity in traditional and modern literary works can be carried out  systematically. Lastly, this study may broaden the audience's understanding of the modernity of Munshi Abdullah's writings, which, up until now, has not been supported by a clear framework.

Keywords: Modernity in literature framework, Munshi Abdullah, colonial, grounded theory, realism, individualism

### *Abstrak*

*Barat memperkenalkan kemodenan dalam kesusasteraan untuk merelevankan sumbangan keilmuan mereka di Alam Melayu.  Perkara ini membawa kepada pengenalan Munshi Abdullah sebagai agen pembaharuan tersebut. Walaupun terdapat pelbagai perdebatan berhubung dengan kemodenan kesusasteraan oleh Munshi Abdullah daripada para sarjana, namun sehingga kini belum ada kesatuan idea yang sistematik berhubung dengan kerangka kemodenan kesusasteraan Munshi Abdullah. Sehubungan dengan itu, objektif kajian ini adalah untuk mengklasifikasikan pendapat sarjana sejak kolonialisasi sehingga kini mengenai kemodenan kesusasteraan Munshi Abdullah dan membina kerangka kemodenan kesusasteraan oleh Munshi Abdullah. Kaedah kajian bersifat kualitatif yang berbentuk teori berasas (*grounded theory*), iaitu teknik penjanaan data untuk mencari atau membina teori daripada data yang diperoleh serta dianalisis secara sistematik menggunakan analisis perbandingan. Dapatan kajian ini membentuk satu kerangka kemodenan kesusasteraan Munshi Abdullah yang bertitik tolak daripada dua konsep yang dapat dihasilkan, iaitu realisme dan individualisme. Realisme merangkumi penekanan kepada logik dan penolakan perkara tahyul dan khurafat manakala individualisme mementingkan penekanan kepada pandangan individu dan penolakan autoriti institusi. Menerusi pembinaan kerangka ini, kajian terhadap kemodenan dalam karya-karya kesusasteraan tradisional dan moden dapat dilakukan dengan lebih teratur. Akhirnya, kajian ini dapat memperluas pemahaman khalayak terhadap kemodenan kesusasteraan Munshi Abdullah yang selama ini tidak disokong oleh satu kerangka yang jelas.*

*Kata kunci: Kerangka kemodenan kesusasteraan, Munshi Abdullah, kolonial, teori berasas, realisme, individualisme*

# INTRODUCTION

During Europe's Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century until the beginning of the 19th century, colonialism became prominent in the Malay World. This colonisation aimed not only to exploit the region resources but also to impose what was termed as a "scholarly contribution" on the local populations (Sweeney, 1987; Cohn, 1996). However, this "scholarly contribution", which has "knowledge to power" as its motive, was in reality meant to rationalize the colonisers' presence in the Malay Archipelago (Cohn, 1996). As a result, the landscape of Malay literature underwent a significant shift, dividing it into two periods—traditional and modern. This transformation brought Munshi Abdullah into prominence, often acknowledged as "The Father of Modern Malay Literature" (Skinner, 1959). The characterisation of Munshi Abdullah as the "pioneer of modern literature" sparked debates among scholars, especially those who oppose it, such as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1972) (hereafter referred to as Al-Attas). Al-Attas was of the opinion that modern elements in literature by the West were aimed primarily at extinguishing animism and Hinduism influences in traditional Malay literature. In contrast, the Malays had embraced a form of modernity (a new era) long before the introduction and consolidation of Islam in the region (Al-Attas, 1972:4). Islam brought rationalism and *aqliah* (acquired) knowledge to the people of the Malay Archipelago and Indonesia, resulting in literature that no longer contained elements of myth, fairy tales or absolute royal authority. The works following this modernity were more democratic, scientific, serious, and rational in nature (Al-Attas, 1972:21). Furthermore, the Western concept of modernity, which is characterized by rationalism, individualism, and internationalism, places much emphasis on tension and opposition towards the teachings of the Church and Western Christianity (Al-Attas, 1972). This clash implies that Western modernity rejects religion and transcendental beliefs which were also deeply ingrained in the Malay society. For this reason, Al-Attas credited Hamzah Fansuri as the "Father of Modern Malay Literature", for he was an "intellectually systematic Malay" who composed with a "highly rationalistic order" (Al-Attas, 1969:28–29). Munshi Abdullah, according to this view, is seen as someone who continued the "rationalistic spirit" introduced by Hamzah Fansuri (Al-Attas, 1969:44).

Mohd. Zariat (2013) is of the opinion that it is necessary to reconsider the view that the Western modernity introduced to Malay literature in the 19th century solely stemmed from Western secular world view. It is

essential for Malay literature to reconnect with its own literary heritage that signifies the accomplishments of past generations (Mohd. Zariat, 2013:655). Meanwhile, Harper (2013) argues that the travelogue *Kisah Pelayaran Muhammad Ibrahim Munsyi*, written in 1872, reflects the writer's distinct personality. It uses the first-person pronoun more frequently and makes reference to other print media such as newspapers, displaying a better understanding of Malay society by the writer than Munshi Abdullah (Harper, 2013:282). On a different note, Alan (2018) expresses a nuanced view that the modernity of Munshi Abdullah had a positive impact in that it strengthened the local culture, but at the same time, was used as propaganda in demeaning the local populacation (Alan, 2018:220). Goriaeva (2019) cynically highlights that the absence of a native figure bestowed with the title "Father of Modern Malay Literature" is a blow to both Malay society and literature. In contrast, instead of focusing on the modernity of Munshi Abdullah's literary works, Baharuddin's (2020) recent study focuses on Munshi Abdullah's first modern scientific text in Malay in 1846, broadening the scholarly perspective.

The main concern here is that although there are differences of opinion and criticism of Munshi Abdullah as the "Father of Modern Malay Literature", he remains the figure responsible for dividing Malay literature into two, namely the traditional and modern. Furthermore, this catgorisation has been validated and accepted by reputable local language and literature research institutions, including Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. Hence, this study aims to explore the specific modern elements in Munshi Abdullah's Malay literary works that justify him as the "Father of Modern Malay Literature". Is there a systematic unity of ideas regarding aspects of modernity in Munshi Abdullah's writings that can be applied in the study of literature today? In order to answer these questions, the study has two primary objectives. Firstly, it seeks to classify the viewpoints of scholars from the colonial to the present concerning the modernity of Munshi Abdullah's writings, and secondly to formulate a comprehensive framework of Munshi Abdullah's literary modernity. This study will only be limited to the perspective of Western and local scholars regarding the modernity of Munshi Abdullah's literature, focusing on the Western modernity concept, namely realism and individualism from the 19th century. Other factors affecting the modernity of his works are not addressed. To summarise, this study is merely intended to organise or justify Munshi Abdullah's literary modernity, highlighting the distinction between traditional and modern periods in Malay literature.

## METHODOLOGY

This study applies the qualitative methodology of grounded theory. Grounded theory is a technique to discover or formulate a theory from data obtained and analysed systematically using comparative analysis (Chun Tie et al., 2019). As stated by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the grounded theory approach emphasise "conceptual thinking and theory building", rather than testing a theory or hypothesis. Punch (1998:163) defines grounded theory as follows:

> "Grounded theory is not a theory at all. It is a method, an approach, a strategy. In my opinion, grounded theory is best defined as a research strategy whose purpose is to generate theory from data. "Grounded" means that the theory will be generated on the basis of data; the theory will therefore be grounded in data. "Theory" means that the objective of collecting and analysing the research data is to generate theory. The essential in grounded theory is that theory will be developed inductively from data."

Hence, there are several steps to be taken to achieve the two objectives of this study using the grounded theory approach. To achieve the first objective, that is, to classify the opinions of scholars from the colonial era until today about the modernity of Munshi Abdullah's literary writings, requires the following:

(1) Identifying the perspectives of scholars from the period prior to Independence (1957) concerning the modernity of Munshi Abdullah's literary writings.
(2) Identifying the perspectives of scholars from the post-Independence period (1958 until the present day) about the modernity of Munshi Abdullah's literary writings.

Meanwhile, to achieve the second objective, that is, to formulate a framework of Munshi Abdullah's literary modernity, requires:

(1) Formulating the modernity of Munshi Abdullah's literary writings in accordance with the opinions of scholars from the period prior to Independence to the present day.
(2) Developing the concepts of Munshi Abdullah's literary modernity.

Upon completing all four of the above, the two objectives of this study will be achieved and the framework of Munshi Abdullah's literary modernity can be established. This will fill the need for a comprehensive framework of Munshi Abdullah's literary modernity and, finally, facilitate its application in literature research in a scientific and academic manner.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### The Development of Western Modernity and Its Relation to the Malay Archipelago

The concept of modernity in literature emerged with the development of modernism in the West from the 15th century (Johnston, 2014). During this period, the West wanted to break free from the constraints of the Dark Ages, which were considered as a hindrance, especially in terms of the intellectual progress (Mullet, 1999). The period known as the Renaissance emerged when the West rose once again, and during which there was an effort to reanimate the intellectual tradition of ancient Greece, capable, in turn, of inspiring the desired development of intellectuality (Ahlstrom, 1972:71). Among the factors contribute to the crisis of intellectual backwardness of the West is the retention of traditional values in life practices. In relation to this, one of the institutions that required serious monitoring was the Church, especially concerning doctrines that elevated the priestly class to the level and status of "holy" human beings closest to God (MacCulloch, 2005). This resulted in a widening gap that separated the priestly class away from ordinary society, resulting in social discrimination, as the rights and opportunities for participating in church services and Christian religious matters were not given to the society at large. Moreover, in the 15th century, the Church successfully cemented its own status in politics and administration at the royal court. Simultaneously, the trade between the West and Asia prosper to the point that the Church's focus changed from its original aim of serving society to competing for the accumulation of wealth (Harbison, 1964). This shift triggered a call for reform in Western society, contributing its perceived backwardness to the overwhelming influence of the Church.

Hence, this initiate a religious reform movement known as the Reformation, which directly questioned some of the Church's stances, particularly regarding its authority and power of the Church in determining matters in the lives of Western society (Johnston, 2014). Al-Attas (1993:2)

quotes the opinion of the French philosopher Auguste Comte, who believed that this took place because developments in Western philosophy and science influenced the society to reform from a "primitive" to "modern" state, and to move from teleology to science. In fact, Western writers and thinkers prepared for an era of an "[…] emancipated world with no "God" and "no religion at all" (Al-Attas, 1993:2). This led to a rejection of the Church's function within society, which reflected the rejection of religion in Western society. The effort to free Western society from the retained traditional values, such as beliefs in metaphysical and transcendental elements, resulted in a process of "modernisation" (Al-Attas, 1993). This intensified when both Catholics and Protestants opined that the role of the Church needed to be suited to the situation of the "contemporary Western man" and a new lifestyle surrounded by a panorama of secularism (Al-Attas, 1993:3–5). This, in turn, led to the birth of "modern" Western society living surrounded by secularisation, which is defined by Al-Attas (1993:17) as: "[…] the deliverance of man from religious and then from metaphysical control over his reason and his language". From here, there occurred a transformation in the thinking and ethos of the West, with the empirical and the scientific at its core that encompassed all aspects of life. According to Western secular thought, it was believed that human beings must rise from their childish attitudes towards maturity, particularly in terms of their responsibility towards their own individual lives, without the support of metaphysical or transcendental sources (Al-Attas, 1993:18). Clearly, the "Westernization of Christianity" involved the emergence of modern thinking that separated life from religion (Al-Attas, 1993:22). The reformation of the Church and the rise of Europe in the 15th century witnessed the West beginning its colonisation of territories beyond Europe. The efforts to source raw materials to fulfil the needs of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries propelled major world powers of the era, such as Britain, Spain and France towards Asia, encompassing the Malay Archipelago. While trade constituted a significant aspect of this outward expansion, the primary objective was to spread Christianity beyond European boundaries. However, this religious endeavour faced formidable resistance due to steadfast adherence to Islam among the inhabitants of the Malay Archipelago. Therefore, a more subtle method was needed in order to get closer to Malay society, one example being through education (Putten, 2006:410). In their attempt to forge closer connections with the Malay community, literature was one of the tools that was employed

due to its ability to reflect the intellectualism of a community (Al-Attas, 1972). Notably, an examination of the remnants of the great Islamic-Malay literature of the 16th and 17th centuries revealed an exploration of profound subjects such as metaphysics, *tasawuf* (Sufism) and philosophy, extending to contemplations on the nature of God and humanity. Intriguingly, literary works preceding the arrival of Islam also included folklores, magic and the realm of the *kayangan* (pre-Islamic deities). Building upon this historical backdrop, secularism emerged as a deliberate strategy aimed at separating religion from the lives of Malay society (Al-Attas, 1993:17). Al-Attas (1972:18) describes this phenomenon as the "de-Islamisation of the Malay Archipelago" orchestrated through administrative policies designed to erode the influence of Islam in the Malay Archipelago. A pivotal turning point in this trajectory was the The Pangkor Treaty of 1874. It introduced the Residential system, directly diminishing the authority of the Malay Sultans, whose role was restricted merely to being directly responsible for matters concerning religion and Malay customs. The core of this secularism was that it emphasized on the separation of Islam and administrative affairs, and the implementation of a secular education system that excluded the Qur'an and Sunnah from the curriculum. This deliberate act propelled the extinction of the Jawi script—an invaluable heritage of Malay intellectual writings—and the like, as a significant sign of their colonial presence in the Malay Archipelago (Ungku Maimunah, 1987).

Malay literature experienced a significant transformation with the introduction of genres such as travelogues, autobiographies and memoirs, placing a pronounced emphasis on empirical data validated by the five senses (Ungku Maimunah, 2009). This shift aligned with the development of science and technology in the Western world, which prioritised causal relationships and positioned literary works as a social constructs. Consequently, literary works could be studied using a scientific method that placed emphasis on facts and detailed descriptions (objectivity), side-lining the bond that ties human beings to their Creator (Al-Attas, 1993). In line with this, Munshi Abdullah was acknowledged as the "Father of Modern Malay Literature" for advocating Western-style modernity, which eventually ushered in a new chapter in the corpus of Malay literature (Ungku Maimunah, 2000:65–66).

## Pre-Independence (1957) Scholars' Perspectives of the Modernity of Munshi Abdullah's Writings

Alfred North, an early colonial scholar, played a pioneering role in characterising Munshi Abdullah's writings as distinctly modern. He was a missionary under the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) who ventured to Singapore on an exploratory expedition of the Pacific and Australasia (Skinner, 1978). North hinged his analysis of Malay literature as "an essay that was not able to improve people's thinking and the portrayal of 'everyday events' was too crude to be used as a serious topic" (Skinner, 1978:480). From here, North introduced Munshi Abdullah through a travelogue from 1838 and the autobiographical *Hikayat Abdullah*, penned in 1843. North emphasizes several guide-points for autobiographical writing, such as the necessity for writing with deep interest, producing something that had never before been produced by a Malay individual, the capability to improve the thinking of the Malays, and writing about everyday occurrences (Traill, 1981:36). In addition, North also advocated for a comprehensive study of Munshi Abdullah's life, encompassing his early education, interactions with European administrators, reflections on beliefs, Malay customs (including the character of Malay rulers), as well as narratives familiar to a European audience (Skinner, 1978:480–481). This suggest that an autobiography should be written to suit the preferences of a European audience as its main target audience, focusing on everyday events in an "individualistic" writing style (Skinner, 1978:480).

J. R. Logan, the editor of the *Journal of Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia*, expressed the viewpoint in 1847 that Munshi Abdullah, in his works, possessed a tendency to document everyday events that he personally witnessed, incorporating new and compelling subject matter into his writing (Logan, 1848). Meanwhile, Wilkinson (1907: frontispiece) was of the opinion that the inception of modernity in Malay literature can be traced back to the realism and individualistic style of Munshi Abdullah. Wilkinson contended that within Malay society, Malay literature was typically associated with romantic narratives that were characterised by fantastical and fairy tale elements (Wilkinson, 1907:10). He also believed that this was very distinct from the works of Munshi Abdullah, who highlighted the everyday lives of ordinary people (Wilkinson, 1907:60). As a result, Munshi Abdullah was hailed as the founder of a "new literature" due to this distinctive stylistic (Wilkinson, 1907:60). Expanding on Wilkinsons'

perspective, Ungku Maimunah (2000:105) elaborated that Wilkinson's assessment Munshi Abdullah's autobiographical works, with sketches depicting contemporary or recent events, displayed a shift from the realm of mythology to that of the everyday reality, thus serving as a main indicator of the growth of modernity within Malay literature. Wilkinson's eminent position as the high-ranking officer of the British colonial administration further strengthened the elevation of Munshi Abdullah as the "Founder of Modern Malay Literature". This signifies that the formal recognition of Munshi Abdullah as the "Father of Malay Literature" commenced with Wilkinson endorsement (Ungku Maimunah, 2000:106). This recognition was further affirmed in R. O. Winstedt's article titled *A History of Malay Literature*, which states that Munshi Abdullah brought a new phenomenon into Malay literature through the introduction of realistic elements into literary works. This establishes Munshi Abdullah as the "founder of literary modernity" (Winstedt, 1940:117).

The recognition of modernity inherent in Munshi Abdullah's writings was further acknowledged by local scholars, such as Zainal Abidin Ahmad (hereafter known as Za'ba). Through his magazine *Majalah Guru*, in 1926, Za'ba urged the Malays to leave behind their beliefs in legends and myths, and instead produce works that enrich the intellect of the people (Ungku Maimunah, 2000:107). He stressed on the role of literature as a tool for bringing the Malays to the reality of the modern world, and not merely to continue living under the regressive influence of fairy tales and superstitions. Following this, Za'ba wrote an article for the *Journal of Royal Asiatic of the Malayan Society* in 1940. His writings appeared to represent the voice of the Malays who further validated the endorsement of Munshi Abdullah by the West, published in their prestigious journals. According to Za'ba (1940), Munshi Abdullah was successful in minimising supernatural elements and transitioning from legends to current events. However, Munshi Abdullah's new style of writing employed less artistic or "colloquial" language. Clearly, Za'ba's commentary (1940) in the *Journal of Royal Asiatic of the Malayan Society* significantly impacted both Malays and on the West literary discourse. Za'ba was appointed as senior lecturer at the University of Malaya, and was responsible, together with P. E. de Josselin de Jong, for establishing the Department of Malay Studies, and reinforcing the recognition of "modern Malay literature" influenced by Munshi Abdullah. The offering of the traditional and modern Malay literature course at the university confirmed the acknowledgement of Munshi Abdullah's literary modernity. In fact, the division of Malay

literature into traditional and modern within this academic framework served as a testament to the acceptance and acknowledgement of the literary modernity in Munshi Abdullah's writings.

## Perspectives of Scholars Post-Independence (1958 to the Present)

Cyril Skinner conducted a comparative analysis of the modernity apparent in the literary works of Munshi Abdullah and Ahmad Rijaluddin respectively. His opinion is that "Ahmad and Abdullah were both writing for Europeans and making some attempt to cater for their taste (including their insistence upon factual description) […]" (Skinner, 1978:1). While the colonial scholars of the past emphasized on the elements of everyday events and the imperative of embracing the reality of life, Skinner (1978:470) introduced an alternative term—"realism"—to characterised Munshi Abdullah's writing style. According to Skinner (1978:470), Munshi Abdullah epitomed realism through his depictions of everyday affairs, which were stark different from the imaginary world of Malay romances that are abounded with elements of the fantasty, magical and the like. He asserted that Munshi Abdullah employed realism because it aligned with the European thought in the 19th century (Hemmings, 1974:10). Apart from realism, Skinner (1978:470) employed the term "individualism" to decribe the way Munshi Abdullah expressed himself in his literary compositions. Skinner asserted that Munshi Abdullah deviated from the established norm of Malay-language writers prevalent in his era, and even of his own generation, who typically wrote anonymously. Munshi Abdullah boldly identified himself as the author of a work and as a sign of claiming responsibility for his writings (Abdullah Abdul Kadir Munsyi, 2004:1). According to Skinner (1959:v) in *Prosa Melayu Baharu*, this marked the inception of what he termed as the "new Malay literature", and he defined "new" as "*[…] pertemuan kebudayaan Melayu asli dengan kebudayaan Barat, hingga pecahnya Perang Pasifik* [the convergence of traditional Malay and Western cultures, extending up the the outbreak of the Pacific War]". Skinner (1959: v) stated that the meeting of Malay and Western cultures produced a "modernity" in Munshi Abdullah's writings, characterised by elements of egoism or individuality. This was manifested through two main elements: a conscious acknowledgement for the author's identity and the freedom to express one's opinions. In addition, Munshi Abdullah's outspoken criticism against rulers, aristocrats and Malay society as a whole culminated in his works aligned with the requirements

of Western modernity; these represent the specific forms of modernity found in his literary corpus.

In the period after the Independence, a local scholar who actively contributed to the discourse on the literary modernity of Munshi Abdullah was Ismail Hussein (1966). He substantiated Munshi Abdullah as the "Father of Modern Malay Literature" by associating his role with domain of publishing (1966; 1974). Munshi Abdullah's distinction as the first Malay adept in publishing, to the extent that his works were widely distributed, substantiated his claim to this title due to the transformative modernity he introduced to literary practices. Furthermore, Munshi Abdullah also indirectly accelerated the decline of age-old oral traditions the proliferation of printed material publishing. Traill (1979), in contrast, did not let his Eurocentric spirit control his rationality when discussing this important figure in modern Malay literature. Traill acknowledged that the perception of Munshi Abdullah's writings as modernity awas a construct derived from Western notions, based on the following reasons:

(1) Munshi Abdullah wrote based on facts about society, places and events, while the authorial convention of the olden-day Malays was to include a great many elements of myth and legend.
(2) Munshi Abdullah wrote precisely, clearly and without prejudice according to his inclination and curiosity, making his writings clear and detailed. He has been called a journalist for being able to voice out his ideas without the influence of others. This is different from authors of traditional texts who composed under the auspices and according to the wishes of the rulers.
(3) The vehement criticism of Munshi Abdullah concerning the Malay feudal system are voiced objectively because he was not of Malay descent.
(4) The colloquial language employed in his works shows that he was not fully fluent in classical Malay. Furthermore, the use of colloquial language facilitated a more accurate and direct criticism.

One interesting observation made by Traill (1981:37–38) revolves around Munshi Abdullah's approach in meeting the expectations of his European audience. He outlined three key aspects of literary modernity exemplified by Munshi Abdullah, which included the depiction of everyday events and the portrayal of the lives and affairs of ordinary individuals. According to Ungku Maimunah (2000), the autobiographical *Hikayat Abdullah* garnered recognition as a modern literary work due to its

distinctness from earlier written works. Munshi Abdullah's critical writing in his two major works—*Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah ke Kelantan* and *Hikayat Abdullah*—demonstrated the utilisation of realism to capture his experiences (Ungku Maimunah, 2000). Ungku Maimunah (2000) explains that realism generally refers to "living in the real world",  a characteristic distinctly evident in Munshi Abdullah's extensive recordings. These encompassed accounts of the places he visited, the individuals he met, elaborate descriptions of attitudes and customs, and narratives of everyday experiences. Notably, Munshi Abdullah's encounters with Western individuals were also documented, adding a crucial dimension to his realist portrayal. This penchant for realism clearly distinguished his literary works from those of earlier Malay writers, who frequently incorporated the elements of myth and legend within their narratives. Furthermore, Munshi Abdullah exhibited a bold critique of the Malay feudal system, particularly targeting the royalty and nobility. His critiques did not adhere to the traditional constraints of the Malay society, such as unwavering respect for the ruler's *daulat* (sovereignty) or the avoidance of actions that could constitute *derhaka* (rebellion) against the ruler. The use of "*aku*" ("I" or "me") in his writings signified  Munshi Abdullah's individualistic disposition and displays the modernity within his literary works (Ungku Maimunah, 2000; 2001). The use of "*aku*" as a personal pronoun also suggests that in contrast to the authors of traditional literature preceding him, Munshi Abdullah assumed complete responsibility for the contents within his writings without being influenced by anyone. Indirectly, Ungku Maimunah's assertions (2001:72) acknowledged that Munshi Abdullah exhibited objectivity through the realistic depiction of human experiences, which are directly related to the everyday world. Noriah (2016:33) contends that British colonisation marked a turning point in Malay literature, liberating it from the confines of royal palace and traditions, allowing more creativity and openness. This newfound liberty exposed Malay writers to diverse literary forms introduced by the West, thereby paving the way for the emergence of writers among ordinary people, such as Munshi Abdullah (Noriah, 2016). She shares the view of Parnickel (1995:111) that the interactions between writers from the royal court and the West was extremely limited due to the fact that the majority of these writers were religious scholars and aristocrats, unlike marginal writers who gradually adapted to Western culture and ultimately became trailblazer in Malay literature. Within this emerging cohort of writers, the notion of "colonised mind" crisis and the audacity to experiment with Western ideas

propelled Munshi Abdullah into prominence. As a result, a transitional genre emerged, exemplified by the pioneering Malay autobiography that prioritised a "realism" deeply rooted in first-hand accounts (Noriah, 2007; 2016). Moreover, Noriah (2016:75) asserted that this transitional genre that influenced the literary modernity of Munshi Abdullah can be divided into four characteristics. These included the introduction of entirely new works previously absent from literary landscapes, narratives centred around the author himself, narratives detailing interactions with accomplished Europeans, and narratives specifically written for European audience. Based on this analysis, Noriah (2016:77) concluded that the works garnering the most attention from audiences and aligning with the literary modernity embraced by Munshi Abdullah were those that explored new and interesting topics, maintained a focus on accuracy and everyday events, were written in colloquial language, and revolved around the lives of ordinary people.

Based on the perspectives shared by the aforementioned scholars concerning the literary modernity of Munshi Abdullah's writings, it becomes evident that a definitive and concrete consensus is lacking. Table 1 shows a summary of the opinions of the scholars:

**Table 1** Summary of Scholars' Opinions on Munshi Abdullah's Literary Modernity.

| Scholar | Perspectives of Munshi Abdullah's Literary Modernity |
|---|---|
| Alfred North (in Skinner, 1978) | Everyday events and individualistic style of writing (vague elaboration) |
| Logan (1848) | New and interesting ideas (vague elaboration) |
| Wilkinson (1907) | Reality of local life (vague elaboration) |
| Winstedt (1940) | Realism (vague elaboration) |
| Zainal Abidin (1940) | Rejection of the supernatural, focus on current events and new writing style (overlapping characteristics) |
| Skinner (1978) | Realism and individualistic style of writing (vague elaboration) |

| Scholar | Perspectives of Munshi Abdullah's Literary Modernity |
|---|---|
| Ismail (1966) | Publishing and criticism of rulers (vague elaboration) |
| Traill (1979) | Recording of facts, criticism of rulers, focus on everyday events, use of colloquial language and details about ordinary people (no clear concept stated) |
| Ungku Maimunah (2001) | Realism, Individualism (*aku*) and vehement criticism of the Malay feudal system (overlapping characteristics) |
| Noriah (2016) | Realism, journalistic style of writing and use of colloquial language (overlapping characteristics) |

Clearly, there is an overlap between journalistic explanation and concepts. Hence, the motivation to develop a comprehensive framework elucidating Munshi Abdullah's literary modernity stems from this research gap. In summary, Munshi Abdullah's literary modernity, based on the perspectives of esteemed scholars in the field, as discussed earlier, can be categorised into two distinct conceptual domains:

(1) Realism: This refers to the events that take place in the real world, including current events, everyday occurrences and the authentic experiences of local people. They are based on fact and do not include fanciful tales filled with supernatural elements like myths and legends.

(2) Individualism: This relates to an emphasis on the writer's distinctive voice and perspective, employing colloquial language to enhance coherence and clarity of meaning. It involves the use of "beautiful Malay" that can be comprehended by Europeans, writing with detailed observation and curiosity, composing for for common people rather than targeting a specific audience.In addition, it entails producing literary works devoid of the influence of any particular societal or class authority.

In summary, the framework elucidating Munshi Abdullah's literary modernity can be categorised into two conceptual domains, namely, "realism" and "individualism".

## Characteristics of the Framework of Munshi Abdullah's Literary Modernity

(1) Realism

Realism is immensely significant within the context Malay literature, especially in defining "modernity" (Ungku Maimunah, 2010:177). *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Baldick, 2001:212) defines realism as "[…] a mode of writing that gives the impression of recording or 'reflecting' faithfully an actual way of life". Historically, realism stands as both intellectual and artistic movement or ideology that emerged in the mid-19th century as a rejection of romanticism, that had wielded substantial influence over Western literature in the preceding eras. Parallel to this, the progress in science and technology in the West catalysed a surge in intellectualism, philosophy and ethical discourse, precipitating a decline in transcendental and supernatural beliefs where religion gradually lost its perceived relevance in daily life. Even more disappointing, realism adopted a materialistic ideological stance, dismissing spiritual dimensions and claiming the worldly existence was purely material. Consequently, it contended that the physical world is real, a viewpoint corroborated by scientific validation, which placed importance on detailed and objective observation, and free from prejudice and personal emotions (Morris, 2003:9). In addition, realism was emphasised to only be perceived by the five senses (Ungku Maimunah, 2010:179). The emergence, in France, of internationally influential figures in realism, such as Count Frederic de Stendhal, Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert and Emile Zola, was the evidence of profound impact of the rapid Industrial Revolution that swept across the western world during the 19th century. The economic, political, and social upheavals resulting from this revolution gave rise to a stratified society: a middle class comprised of traders and industrialists who were deeply emgaged in industrialisation, alongside a lower class comprising labourers and ordinary people. The struggles endured by the lower class, such as poverty, acute suffering and oppression by the capitalist segment transcended gender and age barriers. This resulted in unprecedented devastation of lives. This sombre reality encapsulate the French society of that era (Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, 2010:180). This resulted in a creation of artworks that included filthy, disgusting, painful and thoroughly "sordid and harsh" elements, as what the people experienced during the period, putting aside noble values and status, as urgently required by modernity (Morris, 2003). A similar problem was confronted within

Britain and, as a result of developments in education gave rise to a class of people desiring literary forms that were serious and "new". This class grew weary of conventional works that predominantly featured princes, princesses and the nobility as the main characters. Furthermore, realism allowed greater freedom in character development and widened their target audience compared to preceding genres that could only be enjoyed by the upper classes and the nobility (Morris, 2003:3). The emergence of the novel as an original product of realism as demonstrated by the works of writers like Charles Dickens and George Eliot, aimed to meticulously record the societal decay devoid of religious values or ethics. This suggests that realism appeared to send the message that societal decay was a definite reality (Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, 2010:180). Based on the Western realisms as outlined above, the fundamental characteristics of this literary movement it can be surmised as follows:

(a) Involvement of society (ordinary people), especially the lower classes.
(b) Everyday life of people.
(c) Pervasive woes, strife and tragedy (societal decay and ruin).
(d) Avoidance of religious, moral and ethical values; being objective.
(e) Scientific methods, i.e. using the five senses for observation, description and detailed explanation.

It is clear that the realism emphasised by the West laid a substantial emphasis on accuracy of reality (implying a "one-to-one correspondence with reality") or the concreteness of it (Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, 1999). However, the trend of realism that assumed a pivotal role in shaping modernity in Malay literature, and thus within the broader Malay Archipelago through the influential role of Munshi Abdullah, was grounded in what was observed, experienced and could be rationally accepted because realism at this stage was merely centred on "observation" and "experience" (Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, 1999:53). Munshi Abdullah utilised this notion of realism to document his experiences in travelogues and autobiographical narratives while steadily anchored in the realm of the real world, being detailed and thorough in writing about daily matters (Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, 1999). The foundational underpinnings of Munshi Abdullah's modernity framework lay in his focus on logic (fact) in his recording of everyday, contemporary life, in addition to his rejection of superstitions and irrational beliefs. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that Munshi Abdullah, deeply grounded in his Islamic beliefs, grappled with

certain conflict. On one hand, he tends to avoid religious, moral and ethical values, aiming for objectivity similar to the concept of Western realism. On the other hand, his profound commitment to Islam and a strong sense of "self-awareness" warranted the inclusion of religious elements in his writings. Munshi Abdullah's "errors" (perhaps deliberate) in his translation of the Bible caused an uproar among Christian missionaries, especially from Rev. Thomas Beighton in Penang (Milner, 1980:115–117). Evidently, Munshi Abdullah was a faithful Muslim engaged in a daring venture by undertaking this translation work. Therefore, although Western realism tends to distance itself religion (transcendence), this element is emphasised by Munshi Abdullah in his writings, particularly in his two major works. One of the characteristics of Western realism is that it requires a writer's objectivity when producing a work. However, Munshi Abdullah deviated from this requirement, as evidenced by his encounter with Rev. Beighton in *Hikayat Abdullah*. This highlights that Munshi Abdullah did not rigidly adhere and broke two concrete characteristics of Western realism— he inserted religious, moral, and ethical values and exercising objectivity selectively as he deemed necessary for his narrative.

## (2) Individualism

The second element that contributes to Munshi Abdullah's framework of modernity is individualism, which is synonymous with personality (Morgan, 1942:435). Realo et al. (2002:164) defined individualism as a political and social philosophy that highly values individual freedoms, depicting it as the "[…] self-directed, self-contained, and comparatively unrestrained individual or ego". Ho and Chiu (1994) stated that individualism embodies a spectrum of such as values, autonomy, responsibilities, achievements, and self-reliance of an individual. Therefore, individualism encompasses a philosophical outlook that integrates moral, political, and social perspectives, with emphasis on a person's ability to freely pursue his personal interests in life. Individualism also gives rise to being individualistic, as pointed out by Triandis (1993):

(a)  Individuals see themselves as free from collective society.
(b)  Individuals are determined by their choices, wishes and rights.
(c)  Individuals emphasise rationale behind the benefits and weaknesses in relation to others.
(d)  Individuals consider their aspirations to be more important than being a part of a team.

Individualism gives rise to the inclination to adopt an individualistic stance, often resulted in a form of self-isolation from society. This disposition toward individualism is, in essence, an expression of rejection against culture, traditions, and customs that hinders one's thoughts and attitudes (Hogan, 1975:536). Building upon this premise, the norms of individualism, according to the psychological perspective expressed by Waterman and Waterman (1971:764–765), are:

(a) The efforts of an individual to discover his true "self".
(b) The freedom to make decisions without interference by other individuals.
(c) Personal responsibility.
(d) Universality,which involves respect for the integrity of other individuals that produces individualism. This means that every individual is born not to fulfil the life interests of another individual. Every individual has the right to fulfil his own aspirations.

It is therefore evident that individualism is a philosophical construct characterised by three fundamental aspects: autonomy, maturity in responsibility, and uniqueness (Realo et al., 2002:167–168). Autonomy refers to an individual's ability to engage in independent thought processes and form assessment in various aspects of life. Maturity in responsibility emphasises the ability to undertake and fulfil personal duties rationally and successfully. Meanwhile, uniqueness focuses on an individual's awareness concerning their unique qualities. Hereby, the individuals believe that they are special and different from other individuals. In retrospect of the historical background of Western individualism, it appears in the 19th century to fulfil certain doctrines, such as the idealistic doctrine of individual rights (political liberalism), the *laissez fare* doctrine (economic liberalism) and the individualism of the aristocratic class (Romantic individualism) that was the result of the French Revolution (Koenraad, 1962:77). The profound impact of the French Revolution extended far beyond the borders of France. Apart from obliterating the powers of the king and Church, this revolution also reinvigorated society by heralding on the emancipation of the individual and advocating for equal rights tto be extended across all societal strata. The term "individualism" was first used to describe a society fragmented by the French Revolution, giving rise to a doctrine that propelled the struggle for human rights. In the mid-19th century, there emerged a French political and social movement known as the Saint-Simonians who believed that the French society could be restructured after the French Revolution

by eliminating traditional ideas (of transcendental powers and spirituality) (Realo et al., 2002:164). They envisioned an evolution would take place to create a united society and productively beneficial society. Moreover, they were convinced that the devoid of individualism, an individual would not be able to amass the wealth that he wished for in order to live a good life. Looking further into the early use of the term "individualism", the Saint-Simonians described it as "anarchy", "egoism", and "a restless mental condition", an effect of the French Revolution (Mohd. Akhtar Khan, 1987:126). In 1825, the supporters of Saint-Simon began calling it "individualism". The extraordinary influence of the Saint-Simonians caused the idea of individualism to spread rapidly in 19th-century France (Lukes, 1971:48). In the aftermath of the Revolution, in 1830, notable French writers, such as Honoré de Balzac, Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve and others, expanded their interpretations of what they perceived as individualism (Koenraad, 1962:80), sparking opposition from French intellectuals who saw the individualists as fostering significant societal ill within social and political aspects of the time (Koenraad, 1962:80). In addition, this group upheld the slogan, "Man exists only for society and society only educate him for itself" (Koenraad, 1962:80). Despite the continuous criticism, individualism remained staunchly advocated by its loyal supporters. Radical French writers blamed the revolution for having fanned individualism in society, claiming it stemmed from "negative values" that led to "egoism and absence of morals" (Mohd. Akhtar Khan, 1987).

When the term "individualism" first emerged in Britain in 1840, the British society initially struggled to perceive it positively until elucidated by the Unitarian minister William McCall, who explained the new way of life aligned the principles of individualism (Mohd. Akhtar Khan, 1987:129). In 1859, writer and reformer Samuel Smiles emphasised on freedom and presented the idea that individualism was an extraordinary power that contributed to human life (Koenraad, 1962:87). Through his prose writings, he stressed on the vital role of individualism in fostering progress and the success of English society (Mundhenk et al., 1999:202). This idea gained attraction among English liberals who were dealing with *laissez faire*. Among the central figures advocating individualism were Herbert Spencer, Auberon Herbert, T. H. Green, and L. T. Hobhouse, who chose to promote their ideas within the political sphere. They continued to defend individualism, as they believed by introducing basic principles that were related to the natural characteristics of human beings could guarantee the prosperity of British society at the time. This implied that

every individual had the freedom to pursue their own happiness according to their own way or together with their community (Mohd. Akhtar Khan, 1987:129). In the view of most writers, whether from Britain, Germany, France and various other European countries, individualism was perceived as a political construct that had significant economic and political influence on society (Koenraad, 1962:90). This concept then influenced society through the many revolutions in Europe, leading individuals to become more self-centric, self-promoting, and willing to suppress others, giving rise to several negative attributes in adapting to their experience realities. Therefore, Western individualism, as elaborated above, is characterized by:

(a) Individuals possessing autonomy over themselves and depending on themselves in their choices, wishes and rights.
(b) Maturity in responsibility.
(c) Freedom from society (certain groups).
(d) Selfishness or egoism.
(e) Individuals who considered the rationale behind any beneficial action, even if not accepted by society.
(f) A high level of confidence in oneself to be free to express the truth.
(g) Uniqueness, that is, the awareness about oneself being special in contrast to other individuals.

In summary, all the attributes of Western individualism, as mentioned above, aligned with the actions and demeanour of Munshi Abdullah in his writings. This is supported by the opinion of Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir (1999:53), who affirmed that Munshi Abdullah's individualism revolved around the ability of human beings' capacity to navigate their everyday lives, with a focus on non-supernatural or non-magical individuals, and the foregrounding of those capable of shaping their own lives. However, Munshi Abdullah's individualism arose from a sense of obligation to his British colonial masters, who wished to introduce a new kind of writing to the Malays. This new idea does not imply that Munshi Abdullah went to the extent of oppressing Malay writers, as one of the traits of individualism would suggest. Munshi Abdullah merely challenged himself to be daring in bringing a change to Malay society, despite knowing that this writing style, especially individualism, would result in cultural shock, particularly among Malay people and writers (Skinner, 1978:468). Armed with individualism, Munshi Abdullah, without any sense of regret, used colloquial Malay (bazaar Malay), which immediately set him apart from the Malay literary

tradition. He was cognisant that the British colonial authorities had given him the responsibility to be the point of reference for English cadets who wished to understand the thought, customs, and culture of the Malays. Therefore, he he refrained himself from using flowery language, aesthetic devices, and symbolism so that the meaning of what he wanted to convey would be clearer and would not cause ambiguity among his readership. Individualism also called for Munshi Abdullah to consider the rationale behind anything beneficial act he performed, even if his act was not well received by society. For example, his curious thinking made him criticise even the highest in social hierarchy (the king), which was not acceptable to the Malays. However, holding on to the philosophy of individualism, Munshi Abdullah felt free to express anything in his writings without any authority keeping tabs on or preventing him. Munshi Abdullah's individualism gave rise to uniqueness and innovation in Malay literature. Figure 1 shows that the framework of Munshi Abdullah's literary modernity is a combination of elements of realism and individualism, as discussed above.
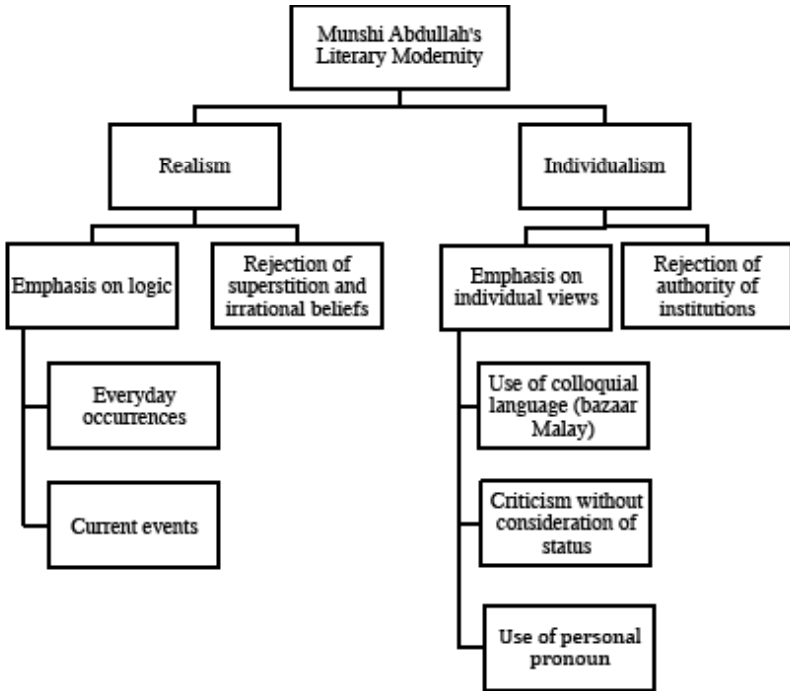


**Figure 1** Munshi Abdullah's Literary Modernity Framework.

## CONCLUSION

The firm believe that the West as forerunner of modernity has profoundly shaped Malay literature, delineating it into two distinct periods: the traditional and the modern. Munshi Abdullah Abdullah emerged as a celebrated figure. He was hailed as the catalyst of the modernisation of Malay literature, introducing innovative elements in his writings distinct from his predecessors. Although this has caused some controversy among scholars, the terms "traditional" and "modern" are firmly established and remained relevant in the domains of literature and education. This study has effectively fulfilled two research objectives through critical examination of scholars' viewpoints spanning from the colonial period to the present day. Finally, this study offers a structured framework for comprehending Munshi Abdullah's Literary Modernity, which realizes the distinction between the traditional and modern periods in Malay literature. It is hoped that the formulation of this framework will be applied to explore other genres, such as traditional Malay literature, which, despite its potential link to modernity, has receive relatively limited scholarly attention. It is hoped that this study will enrich the definition and grasp of modernity within literary and cultural circles, thus nurturing and strengthening a cohesive national identity.

## ACKNOWLDGEMENTS

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