

FORMAL REALISM AND THE DISCOURSE ON THE FIRST MALAY NOVEL

(Realisme Formal and Wacana Novel Melayu Pertama)

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Abstract

In Malay literature, scholarly opinions are inclined to state that the novel genre began in the 1920s, when there was interaction between the Malay people and Western colonials, thereafter establishing an education system that made Malay literature as a compulsory subject in its curriculum syllabus. Until the 1950s, at least 300 Malay novels were published.

From these, *Hikayat Panglima Nikosa* (1876), *Hikayat Faridah Hanom* (1926), *Hikayat Percintaan Kasih Kemudaan* (1927–1928), and *Iakah Salmah?* (1928–1929) were among the novels that have been consistently put forward as the first Malay novel. To date and for as long as known, although these early Malay novels have clear publication years that can be used to determine which novel was published first, Malay literature scholars are still unable to name a single title that is collectively agreed upon as the first Malay novel, and this has opened the space to discuss the question of which novel is precisely and worthy of being named the first Malay novel. It is in this context that a corpus on the discourse on the first Malay novel was established, which invites an interesting observation. This study is structured to realise two objectives. The first is to analyse discussions in scholarly studies on the first Malay novel. The second is to formulate the main ideas underlying the discourse on the first Malay novel. This study successfully found that the main ideas underlying the discourse on the first Malay novel are the inclination towards formal realism as well as the proximity of the studied early Malay novels to the genre of the realist novel.

Keywords: Early Malay novels, first Malay novel, *Hikayat Panglima Nikosa*, *Hikayat Faridah Hanom*, *Hikayat Percintaan Kasih Kemudaan*, *Iakah Salmah?*

Abstrak

Dalam kesusasteraan Melayu, rata-rata pendapat ilmiah cenderung untuk menyatakan bahawa genre “novel” bermula pada sekitar dekad 1920-an, iaitu apabila wujudnya interaksi masyarakat Melayu dengan kolonial Barat, sehingga tercetusnya sistem pendidikan yang menjadikan mata pelajaran kesusasteraan Melayu sebagai silibus kurikulum wajib. Sehingga 1950-an, terdapat sekurang-kurangnya 300 judul novel telah dihasilkan. Daripada jumlah ini, Hikayat Panglima Nikosa (1876), Hikayat Faridah Hanom (1926), Hikayat Percintaan Kasih Kemudaan (1927–1928) dan Iakah Salmah? (1928–1929) merupakan antara novel yang konsisten diajukan sebagai “novel Melayu pertama”. Sehingga hari ini dan sepanjang yang diketahui, walaupun novel-novel Melayu terawal ini jelas memiliki tahun penerbitan yang dapat dijadikan ukuran untuk menentukan novel manakah yang terlebih dahulu diterbitkan, kesusasteraan Melayu ilmiah masih belum dapat mengenal pasti “novel Melayu pertama” yang dipersetujui bersama, lalu membuka ruang untuk membincangkan

soal novel manakah yang layak dan tepat untuk diangkat sebagai “novel Melayu pertama”. Dalam konteks inilah, lahirnya korpus wacana novel Melayu pertama yang mengundang satu pengamatan yang menarik. Kajian ini distrukturkan untuk merealisasikan dua objektif kajian. Pertama, menganalisis perbincangan dalam kajian-kajian ilmiah mengenai novel Melayu pertama. Kedua, merumuskan idea-idea pokok yang mendasari wacana novel Melayu pertama. Kajian ini berhasil merumuskan bahawa idea-idea pokok yang mendasari wacana novel Melayu pertama ialah kecenderungan terhadap “realisme formal”; serta kedekatan novel-novel Melayu yang diajukan sebagai novel Melayu pertama ini dengan genre “novel-realis”.

Kata kunci: Novel Melayu awal, novel Melayu pertama, Hikayat Panglima Nikosa, Hikayat Faridah Hanom, Hikayat Percintaan Kasih Kemudaan, Iakah Salmah?

INTRODUCTION

The novel as a new genre in modern Malay literature was first introduced to the Malays through the education system when Malay literature was made as a compulsory part of the curriculum syllabus in Malay colleges around the 1920s (A. Wahab, 1984, pp. 129–130; Awang Had Salleh, 1979; Khasnor, 1996, p. 62; Ramlah, 2019, pp. 36–37). When the number of students gradually increased, Pejabat Karang-Mengarang (The Translation Bureau) was established in Sultan Idris Training College (SITC) to address the need for reading materials. It was through this office that two series of reading materials were introduced around 1924, namely *The Malay School Series* and *The Malay Home Library Series*. To compare, *The Malay School Series* published texts on general knowledge and life skills that were specifically used by the college students, whereas *The Malay Home Library Series* published general reading materials comprising Western classical works, including Greek mythology, collections of English drama, European fairy tales, and children’s literature. More importantly, these series also contained reading materials such as translated English novels, among which are *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) by Daniel Defoe, *Gulliver’s Travel* (1726) by Jonathan Swift, *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1872) by Jules Verne, and others.

Besides Pejabat Karang-Mengarang, independent Malay publishers such as The Jelutong Press, The Asasiyyah Press, and Persama Press also contributed to the publication of foreign novels translated into Malay, therefore introducing the novel to the Malays. Other than the education

system and the publication of reading materials, the genre is also assumed to have been introduced to the Malays via interaction with the Western colonials who were governing Malaya during the early 20th century. It is imperative to highlight that the Western colonials were educated individuals who could be assumed to have brought in a strong reading culture from their homeland. For instance, this is evident in the cultural experience of Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munshi. Hence, it is not an exaggeration to believe that the presence and interaction between these individuals and the Malays had led to the introduction of the novel among the latter.

Until at least the early 1950s, it is estimated that approximately 300 titles of early Malay novels were published. To date, some of the early Malay novels regarded as the pioneers of the novel genre or the first Malay novels are *Hikayat Panglima Nikosa Mendapat Kesusahan Waktu Perang Sampai Mendapat Kemenangan* (1876), *Cherita Kechurian Lima Million Ringgit* (1922), *Kelebihan Bersahabat* (1925), *Hikayat Faridah Hanom* (1926), *Kawan Benar* (1927), *Hikayat Percintaan Kasih Kemudaan* (1927–1928), and *Iakah Salmah?* (1928–1929).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In view of the preliminary observations above, this section explores several scholarly studies that tend to discuss these seven novels as the first Malay novels. Nevertheless, it is necessary to emphasise that *Cherita Kechurian Lima Million Ringgit* (1922) and *Kelebihan Bersahabat* (1925) were respectively put forward only by William Roff (1974) and Pyan Husayn (1974), and thus received less reception. In comparison, although the novel *Kawan Benar* by Ahmad Rashid Talu was published earlier in 1927, it was also not as well received as *Iakah Salmah?*, which was also written by the same author and published between 1928 and 1929, since the latter was more widely regarded in many scholarly studies as an important novel (Li, 1986, p. 135; Safian, 1981, p. 100; Za'ba, 1941). Thus, this study will only review scholarly studies on the four earliest Malay novels proposed as the first Malay novels, namely *Hikayat Panglima Nikosa* (1876), *Hikayat Faridah Hanom* (1926), *Hikayat Percintaan Kasih Kemudaan* (1927–1928), and *Iakah Salmah?* (1928–1929).

Hikayat Panglima Nikosa (henceforth *HPN*) was debated as the first Malay novel when P. L. Thomas and R. W. Reece described it as the “first known piece of Malay literature” in the introduction to the novel’s republication in 1983 (1983, p. 1). Subsequently, it was Syed Othman Syed Omar’s turn to claim it as the first Malay novel, surpassing *Hikayat Faridah*

Hanom (Syed Othman, 1993, p. 20). This was later followed by Hamzah Hamdani, who argued that if its mere 29 pages presented no barrier, he was inclined to accept *HPN* as the earliest Malay novel (Hamzah, 2004, p. 55). Besides that, *HPN* has been consistently discussed as the first Malay novel for 11 consecutive years (2014–2025) in the annual seminar organised by Amanah Khairat Yayasan Budaya Melayu Sarawak (AKYBMS), an NGO that advocates for this manuscript to be recognised as UNESCO documentary heritage.

The literature also finds that *Hikayat Faridah Hanom* (henceforth *HFH*) was the earliest manuscript discussed as the pioneer of the novel genre, as early as in Za'ba's writing in "Modern Developments" (1939). Subsequently, *HFH* is found to be constantly discussed in numerous reference books as the manuscript that paved the way for the emergence of the novel in Malaysia. For example, Mohd. Taib Othman, in *An Introduction to the Development of Modern Malay Language and Literature* (1961), states that *HFH* is the manuscript that introduced this genre in Malaysia: "The man accredited with introducing Malay novels in Malay is Syed Sheikh al-Hady. His first novel, *Hikayat Faridah Hanum*, was published in 1925" (1961, p. 19). A few books on Malay literary history, such as *Sejarah Kesusasteraan Melayu Jilid 1* (1980), *Ikhtisar Sejarah Kesusasteraan Melayu Baru 1830-1945* (1986), and *Sejarah Kesusasteraan Melayu Moden: Novel* (2003), also state that scholars unanimously agree that the emergence of the Malay novel was pioneered by *HFH*.

Similarly, *Hikayat Percintaan Kasih Kemudaan* (henceforth *HPKK*) was suggested as being among the earliest Malay novels, owing to its year of publication which falls within the same decade as other earliest Malay novels, thereby making it a contender for the title of the "first Malay novel." This is proposed in studies by Mohamed-Adam Saleh (1975) and Zainuddin Jumaat (1972), which express hopes for the novel to receive due attention as other earliest Malay novels of the same era. Meanwhile, *Iakah Salmah?* (henceforth *IKS*) is generally regarded as the second masterpiece by Ahmad Rashid Talu following *Kawan Benar* (henceforth *KB*), which was published in 1927. However, as explained earlier, the novel received greater attention and was more extensively discussed in scholarly works to the extent that it was regarded as more important than *KB*, and therefore invited academic observations on its status as one of the earliest Malay novels proposed to be the first Malay novel.

The discussion above indicates that no Malay novel to date can be unequivocally regarded as the first Malay novel. In other words, it remains a subject of debate without any definitive conclusion. For instance, *HPN*,

although published in 1876 (and thus potentially eligible to be proposed as the first Malay novel if the year of publication serves as the yardstick), remains disputed due to its length of 29 pages in the original Jawi manuscript (A. Wahab, 2009; Wan Nor Azriq, 2021). This total number of pages is argued to fall short of the widely accepted and appreciated criterion for a novel in the West, and thus is more accurately defined as a novelette or a pamphlet. In addition, the debate surrounding *HFH*'s position as the first Malay novel is more focused on its setting of the Arab community in Egypt. Such a setting raises doubts about the novel's originality, prompting multiple scholarly studies to label it as an "adapted novel" derived from Muhammad Husayn Haykal's *Zaynab* (1913), widely considered as the first Egyptian novel (Ismail Ibrahim, 1968; Mana Sikana, 1983; Talib, 1993; Yahaya, 1973; Za'ba, 1939).

It is also worth noting that the four novels were published with clearly stated years of publication. For instance, the publication date of *HPN* is clearly recorded in its colophon dating back to June 30, 1876, at Bukit Persinggahan, Kuching, Sarawak. Meanwhile, *HFH* was published in 1926 in Penang by Maktabah al-Aminiyyah. As for *HPKK*, its first volume was published in 1927, followed by its second volume in 1928 by al-Matbaah al-Rawdzah al-Islam wa Syarikah in Seremban, Negeri Sembilan. Additionally, *IKS* was published in volumes, spanning from December 1928 to September 1929. Based on the publication year, it is clear that *HPN* (1876) can be regarded as the first Malay novel, followed by *HFH* (1926), *HPKK* (1927–1928), *IKS* (1928–1929), and others. Nonetheless, this observation reveals that the debates among scholars and literary researchers mostly overlook publication year as a primary yardstick.

In light of this review, it is evident that the year of publication alone fails to serve as an adequate criterion to determine the first Malay novel. This eventually prompted a substantial body of literature, establishing a corpus of discourse on the first Malay novel. *Discourse on the first Malay novel* refers to a corpus of discourse that systematically debates which text merits recognition as the definitive "first Malay novel." Therefore, this invites an interesting opportunity to analyse the corpus of discourse on the first Malay novel. Hence, this article aims to (a) analyse the discussion in scholarly studies on the first Malay novel, and (b) formulate the main ideas underlying the discourse on the first Malay novel.

METHODOLOGY

To fulfil the needs of a text-oriented research, this study utilises textual analysis, applying Ian Watt's concept of formal realism as proposed in *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1967). This

framework is employed to analyse the discussion in scholarly studies on the first Malay novel. It is chosen for its capacity to structure how a work of fiction accurately depicts reality, aligning with trends in existing literature on early Malay novels. In addition, it also aligns with modern Malay literary criticism's focus on fictional structure and themes (Ungku Maimunah, 2007). Given page constraints and research relevance, this article concentrates exclusively on three intrinsic aspects according to formal realism: character, setting, and "showing, not telling". For this purpose, this section outlines scholarly views on these intrinsic aspects. Prior to that, it is essential to first explain the philosophical foundation of formal realism.

In general, Watt's concept of formal realism stems from his observation that the emergence of the novel, pioneered by Daniel Defoe (1660–1731), Samuel Richardson (1689–1761), and Henry Fielding (1707–1754), was most likely influenced by the social and moral transformations of 18th-century England (Watt, 1967, p. 7). According to Watt, the novels authored by these three pioneering English novelists share a key similarity—all three portray realism, a feature that sharply distinguishes these novels from previous fictional works (1967, p. 10):

Briefly, they have seen 'realism' as the defining characteristic which differentiates the work of the early eighteenth-century novelists from previous fiction.

Watt further adds that the term "realism" is intimately linked to the aesthetic ideology that emerged in France. The term originally referred to Rembrandt's paintings as *vérité humaine* (human truth), denoting an authentic portrayal of human life. It is in this context that Watt emphasises on how this authentic portrayal of human life is illustrated in a novel, as compared to what is illustrated (1967, p. 11):

...in fact it surely attempts to portray all the varieties of human experience, and not merely those suited to one particular literary perspective: the novel's realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it.

With emphasis on methods or procedures in presenting the authentic portrayal of human life, Watt formulates formal realism, a theory that focuses on the narrative procedures of a novel (1967, p. 32):

The narrative method whereby the novel embodies this circumstantial view of life may be called its formal realism; formal, because the term realism does not here refer to any special doctrine or purpose, but only

to a set of narrative procedures which are so commonly found together in the novel.

Through formal realism, Watt explains how a novel serves to record the human perceptual experience in an empirical, realistic, and lifelike manner (verisimilitude). This function allows novels to be used as a tool to manifest “realism,” which René Wellek (1963) later coined as “realist novel.” In his book, Wellek critically selects vocabularies that compensate the compact meaning of realist novel, which is “the objective representation of contemporary social reality” (1963, pp. 240–241). Hence, it can be deduced that formal realism gives rise to works known as *realist novels* by offering a highly detailed and authentic representation of contemporary reality.

Based on the philosophy above, formal realism, among other things, discusses the following three intrinsic aspects, which are setting, character, and “showing, not telling”. In terms of setting, Watt defines it as a tool that accurately mirrors the granular details of the contemporary realm. In other words, the built “setting” is based on the illusion or imagination of the reality world. In his book, Watt also asserts that accurate temporal and geographical settings allow fictional works to develop unique, highly detailed characters (1967, p. 21):

...since, as he wrote, ‘ideas become general by separating from them the circumstances of time and place’, so they become particular only when both these circumstances are specified. In the same way the characters of the novel can only be individualised if they are set in a background of particularised time and place.

In essence, the setting is the description of daily routines that are portrayed with meticulous detail, happening at authentic places as well as precise and specific times to ensure the events strike the reader as entirely veritable.

Regarding characters, Watt states that this aspect no longer relies on historical names or type names. He argues that pioneering English novelists began crafting characters with special traits, shaping them into unique individuals: “...the character is to be regarded as though he were a particular person and not a type” (1967, p. 20).

In this matter, Watt also refers to views from John Locke and David Hume on personal identity to explain unique characters in a novel. He points out that Locke describes personal identity as an individual’s consciousness of their past thoughts and actions. He also adds that Hume subsequently

expanded Locke's explanation on this subject by stating that an individual is incapable of rationalising cause and effect if he has no recollection of his past. Based on these views, Watt summarises characters as realistically and extensively illustrated entities, allowing novelists to explore human psychology and awareness (1967, p. 21):

Such a point of view is characteristic of the novel; many novelists, from Sterne to Proust, have made their subject the exploration of the personality as it is defined in the interpenetration of its past and present self-awareness.

Consequently, Watt emphasises realistic naming to establish a character's authenticity and connection to the contemporary realm (1967, p. 19):

...named their characters in such a way as to suggest that they were to be regarded as particular individuals in the contemporary social environment.

In other words, character names no longer function as allegories or symbols. From this perspective, character can be defined as an entity constructed in a realistic, detailed, and lifelike manner.

In reference to "showing, not telling", formal realism emphasises on the authentic depiction of human life, or more precisely, "the production of what purports to be an authentic account of the actual experiences of individuals" (Watt, 1967, p. 27). Within this context, it is interesting to note that in explaining ways to write fiction, Wayne C. Booth (1961, pp. 7–8), in *The Rhetorics of Fiction* (1961), has elaborated upon Watt's view by framing it as the aspect of "showing, not telling". According to Booth, a fictional work should remain free from authorial voice:

The story is presented without comment, leaving the reader without the guidance of explicit evaluation...many authors and critics have been convinced that "objective" and "impersonate" or "dramatic" modes of narration are actually superior to any mode that allows for direct appearances by the author or his reliable spokesman.

Crucially, both Watt and Booth discuss the same principle, that is, the authentic portrayal of human life free from authorial interference. Watt (1967, p. 27) conceptualises this as an "authentic account of the actual experiences," whereas Booth (1961, pp. 7–8) defines it as being "presented without comment." Within modern Malay literature, most scholars and critics interpret formal realism's emphasis on unmediated narrative

presentation (*showing*) as a rejection of sermons (*khutbah*). Therefore, they tend to avoid sermons (*khutbah*), which are described as being overly instructive (*menggurui*) and didactic. Hence, criticisms on early Malay novels, among others, question the presence of sermons (*khutbah*). In the subsequent Analysis and Discussion section, showing, not telling, will be discussed as sermons (*khutbah*), defined as lengthy didactic explanations intended to deliver moral lessons.

To orient the reader, this study will apply textual analysis by employing two types of reading. The first is known as descriptive reading, which is implemented to analyse the literature on the first Malay novels. The second is critical reading, used to formulate the main ideas underlying the discourse on the first Malay novel. The latter serves to justify the research in summarising the intrinsic aspects found in these early Malay novels that meet the yardstick of realist novels.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Following the introduction of the novel genre in Malay literature, Malay novels began to be published in encouraging numbers. By the early 1950s, approximately 300 titles of Malay novels had been recorded. From these titles, *HPN* (1876) by Ahmad Shawal Abdul Hamid, *HFH* (1926) by Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, *HPKK* (1927–1928) by Ahmad Kotot, and *IKS* (1928–1929) by Ahmad Rashid Talu have been discussed as the first Malay novels. To the best of our knowledge, these novels have been lengthily discussed, and hence will be analysed later. The scope of this study is confined to only scholarly studies that discuss these selected four early Malay novels regarded as the first Malay novels.

Setting

The analysis begins by reviewing existing scholarly studies that examine the aspect of setting in the four Malay novels purported as the first Malay novels. *Setting*, in this context, refers to the detailed depiction of daily routines at authentic places as well as precise and specific times to ensure the events strike the reader as entirely verisimilar.

In the context of *HPN*, the analysis discovers that the absence of fairytale has made scholarly studies inclined towards considering it as a manuscript that documents life in a realistic manner and closely similar to the contemporary realm, thereby justifying it to be proposed as the first Malay novel. The earliest scholarly finding regarding *HPN* by P. L. Thomas

and R. W. Reece, for instance, mention that the novel must be observed as a historical document since it recorded the cultivation techniques suited to the historical geography and society of Sarawak (Thomas & Reece, 1983, p. 1). They further add that the novel's setting bears striking similarities to the physical landscape of Sarawak's First Division, which today encompasses Kuching, Samarahan, Serian, and Seri Aman. Some of the similarities include the location of Nikosa's village, which is said to be inspired by settlements that existed along the Sarawak River prior to the Brooke administration (Thomas & Reece, 1983, p. 9). Meanwhile, studies by Jeniri Amir (2022) and John Walker (2005, 2006) expound that in the decade during which *HPN* was published, *Sarawak Gazette* discussed the development around Sarawak River, which is debated to be Ahmad Shawal's inspiration in creating his fictional setting. It is thus clear that the scholarly findings of Thomas and Reece, Jeniri Amir, and Walker collectively position *HPN* as a novel inspired by the author's contemporary realm. This position conforms to formal realism, which requires fictional works to mirror the contemporary realm.

This analysis also finds that scholarly studies are inclined to parallel the social milieu of the novel with the social reality in Sarawak, especially with regard to agricultural policy (Hamzah, 2004; Jeniri 2022; S. Othman & Abdullah, 2003; Thomas & Reece, 1983; Walker, 2005). This tendency in associating the fictional setting with the contemporary realm can be clearly observed in attempts by these scholarly studies to relate *mulong* (sago tree), hill paddy, *angkalak* (a tropical fruit), and pineapples in *HPN* as commonly cultivated by Sarawakians. This can be seen as an effort to acknowledge *HPN* as a novel that empirically records the contemporary realm. In Hamzah's paper (2004, p. 53), the cultivation of *angkalak* is directly linked to the activities of the Melanau people in Sarawak. In *Hikayat Panglima Nikosa: Menelusuri Gagasan dan Pemikiran Ahmad Shawal Abdul Hamid* (2022), which is the most recent compilation of papers on *HPN*, the same rationale is also adopted. Abang Haliman Abang Julai states in his preface that these studies assess the history of Sarawak as depicted in the novel, which he deems as "...an effort to document the values and history of communal life in Sarawak as depicted in the novel *Hikayat Panglima Nikosa*" ["...satu usaha untuk mendokumentasikan nilai dan sejarah kehidupan masyarakat di Sarawak yang terdapat dalam novel *Hikayat Panglima Nikosa*"] (2022, p. xiii). Therefore, these scholarly findings and latest update are consistent in associating *HPN* with the contemporary reality of Sarawak during the year of its publication, which is deemed necessary to claim it as a novel that conforms to formal realism.

Similar discussions can also be observed in scholarly studies that examine *HFH*. Consistently designated as the first Malay novel, its realistic geographical setting represents a major focal point in scholarly validations of its historical significance. This, for instance, is evident in Za'ba's article entitled "Modern Developments" (1939), which evaluates *HFH* to possess similar appeal as *Hikayat Gul Bakawali*, but with a setting that reflects emerging modernity (Za'ba, 1939, p. 153). In later scholarly studies, Za'ba's evaluation is further discussed, particularly regarding its spatial, temporal, and social contexts. This is apparent in a study by Mohd. Taib Osman and A. Bakar Hamid (1978), which highlights the precise and detailed setting in *HFH*, as seen in the following statement (p. 49):

...[*HFH*] clearly show the transitory characteristics from the traditional hikayat and penglipurlara tales to what we call novel, that is to say they do meet the definition of a novel. They are authentic reports of human experience, with some details of the individual personality of the dramatis personae, with reference to the particulars of the time and place of actions, and using a language style similar to that of the current journals.

This documentation of the contemporary realm in *HFH* cites several renowned scholars during that period, such as Shaykh Muhammad Abduh, Huda Sha'rawi, and Anatole France, as well as some main streets, such as al-Abbasiyah and al-Zahir. This is discussed as a departure from the old Malay hikayat (stories), hence creating proximity between *HFH* and its reader (Abdul Wahab, 1984, pp. 297–298; S. Othman & Abdullah, 2003, p. 17). In this regard, the tendency of these scholarly studies to emphasise realistic setting is partly driven by the need to distinguish *HFH* from old Malay hikayat. More importantly, the effort by these scholarly studies in linking the setting with the contemporary world of Egypt itself suggests that the main idea lies in the accuracy and meticulousness of *HFH*, a quality that conforms to formal realism. In light of the discussion surrounding *HFH* as the first Malay novel, this study discovers that the setting itself is a major focal point for literary scholars and researchers. This is clear when the realistic and verisimilar setting of this story ignites a debate regarding its detachment from the Malay world. In this matter, the detailed illustration of Cairo and Alexandria as the backdrop of *HFH* tends to be regarded as an adaptation of a Middle Eastern novel entitled *Zaynab* (1913) by Muhammad Husayn Haykal (Hamzah, 1982; Li, 1986; Rosni, 2008, 2017). While some scholarly studies advocate that a foreign setting can still convey universal elements relevant to the Malay community, the originality of *HFH*, however, is slightly challenged (Abdul Rahman, 2004; Talib, 1992, pp. 54–55).

This slightly challenged position of *HFH* further paves the way for a tendency to propose a few other earliest Malay novels as the first Malay novel. Among the consistent title is *HPKK* by Ahmad Kotot (Mohd. Taib & A. Bakar, 1978, p. 51). As a novel that departs from folkloric conventions, *HPKK*'s realistic depiction of Malay villages tends to be regarded as one of the earliest local attempts in exploring the novel genre through a Malay setting (A. Bakar Hamid, 1980; Anwar, 2006, p. 25; Hooker, 2000, p. 42; Zainuddin, 1972, pp. 74–75). This is evident, for instance, when the setting of a Malay village is considered as an engaging narrative effort in Malay literature (A. Bakar Hamid, 1980, p. 228; S. Othman & Abdullah, 2003). Although the novel features an anonymous locale, Mohamed-Adam Saleh (1975, p. 36) and Zainuddin Juma'at (1972, p. 67) regard this Malay village setting as a realistic reflection inspired by the author's native state of Pahang. This analysis of the opinion that such a tendency by Mohamed-Adam and Zainuddin in associating the author's native state of Pahang with the setting of *HPKK* is also another effort to recognise this novel as conforming to the criteria of formal realism and the realist novel. Mohamed-Adam states that the story presented in the novel had truly taken place in Ahmad Kotot's village (1975, p. 36):

Novel Hikayat Percintaan Kasih Kemudaan yang diterbitkan dalam tahun 1927 itu adalah hasil penyusunan dan gubahan semula Ahmad Kotot mengenai sebuah kisah yang benar-benar telah berlaku di kampungnya.
[The novel *Hikayat Percintaan Kasih Kemudaan* published in 1927 is a literary work adapted and illustrated by Ahmad Kotot based on a true event in his village.]

Other than geographical setting, this study discovers that many scholarly studies also focus on the social setting illustrated in this novel, namely the fight for a democratic system and the status of a widow or a female divorcee. These two are perceived as realistic portrayals of society inspired by the contemporary realm (A. Bakar, 1980, pp. 230; A. Bakar, 1989, p. viii; Abdul Wahab, 1984, pp. 305–306; S. Othman & Abdullah, 2003, p. 27; Zainuddin, 1972, p. 9). Many scholarly studies consider the widow or (female) divorcee status as a taboo among the Malays in that period, hence prompting Ahmad Kotot to rectify the misconception. Thus, this analysis notes that scholarly studies tend to regard *HPKK* as a documentation of an authentic social reality. Therefore, this tendency also highlights the close alignment between these scholarly studies and Watt's formal realism.

In addition to *HPKK*, this study finds that *IKS* is also frequently regarded as the first Malay novel illustrating life in the Malay Peninsula

(Yahaya, 1963, 1970, 1973). Unlike *HPKK*, which depicts a Malay village as its setting, *IKS* is claimed as the earliest novel to authentically document the life of the Malays in Malay Peninsula cities, such as Kuala Lumpur and Penang, with striking verisimilitude. When compared with *HFH*, which is set in the cities of Cairo and Alexandria, many scholarly studies advocate that *IKS* is more deeply attuned to Malay readers (A. Bakar, 1990, p. 7; Li, 1986; S. Othman & Abdullah, 2003, p. 18; Sohaimi, 2003, p. 3; Yahaya, 1970, 1973, 2004). The tendency to compare the setting's proximity to Malay readers clearly reflects the inclination of these scholarly studies to assess the setting as a realistic depiction that mirrors the readers' contemporary realm, thereby evoking emotional resonance and establishing narrative trust. Thus, this analysis views that such tendency also aligns with the principles of formal realism in constructing the realist novel.

More importantly, this opinion allows most scholarly studies to hail *IKS* as an important novel by Ahmad Rashid Talu since the realistic and localised setting represents “an important innovation” [“pembaharuan penting”] (as described by Yahaya) and “a major deviation” [penyimpangan besar] (as described by S. Othman and Abdullah) in modern Malay literature (S. Othman & Abdullah, 2003; Yahaya, 1970, p. 5; Yahaya, 1973, p. 102; Yahaya, 1990, p. 35). With regard to this, the important innovation and major deviation refer to the depiction of the states in the Malay Peninsula, a geographical setting that is rendered in detail in this novel. The observations of these scholarly studies also focus on the temporal and social details constructed in this novel. This focus can be examined in a study by Rosnah Baharuddin (2003, p. 75), which evaluates the reference to the date August 30, 1921, in *IKS* as a justification to consider this novel as a social document that records the development of the Malay society in Penang in that decade. This analysis therefore posits that the analytical focus that these scholarly studies dedicate to the elaborate verisimilar descriptions in *IKS* emphasises the realistic representation advocated by formal realism, which facilitates the emergence of the realist novel.

Based on the above discussion, the analysis reveals that the discussions in scholarly studies on the first Malay novel conclude that these four novels proposed as the first Malay novels depict the spatial, temporal, and social settings with meticulous detail—they are perceived as references to specific historical settings, such as Sarawak, during the Brooke administration (*HPN*), Egypt around the end of 19th century (*HFH*), Penang in the 1920s (*IKS*), and Malay villages around the early 20th century (*HPKK*). More importantly, this analysis also detects the tendency of most scholarly studies

in associating the novels' settings with the contemporary realm of the authors. This tendency is justified by the stance of these scholarly studies to consider these novels as narratives that mark an initial shift towards realism. Therefore, it is not an overstatement to conclude that these scholarly studies tend to perceive the settings of these early Malay novels as having been depicted in a manner close to the realist novel.

Character

Moving on to the next discussion, the analysis discovers that literary scholars and researchers also focus on character in *HPN*, *HFH*, *HPKK*, and *IKS*. Here, according to formal realism, *character* is defined as an entity that leads the narrative, which is illustrated in a realistic and lifelike manner.

With reference to *HPN*, the analysis discovers that the protagonist of this novel, Nikosa, is viewed in the discussion of scholarly studies as a realistic and verisimilar character. This is evident through the emphasis given by these studies on the depiction of Nikosa as a “mortal” (*orang bumi*, as described in the novel), free from magical and supernatural elements that are considered unrealistic (S. Othman & Abdullah, 2003; Walker, 2005). In a study by J. H. Walker, the story about Nikosa's success in defeating enemies of the state is considered a sound narrative, whereby logically, an encounter between a strong warrior and a weak enemy would naturally grant victory to the former. As Walker states, “Nikosa's victory owes nothing to the paranormal” (2005, p. 433). The story about Nikosa's triumph against his enemies also receives attention in a study by S. Othman Kelantan and Abdullah Tahir, who believe that *HPN* does not depict characters with supernatural traits. As stated in their study, “...(there is) no evidence that supernaturalism exists in defeating the enemies” (2003, p. 12). In lieu of this, the analysis on both discussions of the scholarly studies finds that Nikosa, as depicted in *HPN*, is a realistic character due to the portrayal of his victory in the war that is based on traits that are similar to real-life human beings, hence conforming to the criteria of character as advocated by Watt's formal realism.

Besides, the analysis also identifies a tendency for these studies to evaluate Nikosa as an intellectual character. In this context, studies by Jeniri Amir (2022), Nordi Achie (2022), and Thomas and Reece (1983), for instance, put together the narratives of Nikosa formulating strategies to defeat his opponents, distributing the spoils of war, and managing agricultural activities as reflecting his wisdom as a chief commander.

According to Walker (2005), this representation of Nikosa highlights his determination to take charge of his own life course. As stated by him, “In Shawal’s construction individuals, rather than deities, spirits, ancestor or rajas, are seen as being responsible for their own fate” (Walker, 2005, p. 428). Walker’s insight is noteworthy since such narrative specificity is typically absent from old Malay hikayat, particularly works rooted in animistic and Hindu worldviews that demand a character’s absolute devotion to nature and the deities respectively. Hence, Nikosa’s representation as a character who wishes to be responsible of his own fate mirrors him as a realistic character inspired by Sarawakians living under the Brooke administration at the time of the novel’s publication. It is within this context that this analysis finds that discussions in scholarly studies are inclined to portray Nikosa as a character that precisely represents the realist novel genre as required by formal realism. In other words, the analysis indicates that these findings view Nikosa as conforming to the aspect of character defined by formal realism.

In relation to *HFH*, this analysis also identifies similar findings through discussions in scholarly studies that view the characters in this novel as realistic and verisimilar. This is evident through their interpretation of Faridah Hanom and Shafik Affandi, the two important characters in this novel, as individuals inspired by ordinary human beings rather than gods and goddesses possessing magical and supernatural powers as depicted in old Malay hikayat (Abdul Wahab, 1984, p. 297; Hooker, 2000, p. 23; Talib, 1992, pp. 67–69; Yahaya, 1973, p. 87; Yahaya, 2004, p. 123). Although these scholarly studies believe that the characteristics of Faridah Hanom and Shafik Affandi are still portrayed in a classical and romantic style similar to that of the traditional Malay *hikayat*, these studies also clearly attempt to differentiate these characters from those in the same *hikayat*. Hence, such efforts reflect the tendency of scholarly studies to present *HFH* as a new genre, which can be assumed as the realist novel. In this circumstance, this analysis finds that the discussions in these scholarly studies regard Faridah Hanom and Shafik Affandi as characters that match the principles of formal realism.

In addition, the analysis also discovers that scholarly studies are inclined to identify Faridah Hanom as an intellectual female character (Farish, 2005; Hooker, 2000; Muhammad Haji Salleh, 2008; Nur Saadah, 2020; Yahaya, 1973;). In a study by Farish A. Noor (2005), the characteristics of an intellectual woman is deemed reflected in Faridah Hanom’s personality as she is brave in fighting for her rights as a free woman, voicing out her

opinion, as well as deciding the course of her life. The fact that Farish draws attention to the question of determining one's own destiny (which he describes as "freedom of choice") in Faridah Hanom's character—just as Walker does for Nikosa—clearly exhibits that to him, it is this feature that accentuates the intellectual trait of *HFH*'s protagonist. This is even more apparent when Farish also draws attention to Faridah Hanom's personality as someone seeking to free herself from the confines of customs and traditions (Farish, 2005, p. 237):

What is more, the character of Faridah Hanum herself is one that is endowed with personality, agency and purpose. She is not some passive subject who merely reacts to the environment around her. In the novel al-Hadi was laying great stress on the need for individual rights and freedom of choice.

Likewise, the intellectual female character is also discussed by Muhammad Haji Salleh (2008) and Nur Saadah Hamisan (2020). Muhammad and Nur Saadah both regard Faridah Hanom as an intellectual woman who is compelled to challenge the custom that demands her to marry a man chosen by her family. This intelligence, according to Muhammad and Nur Saadah, is clearly reflected in Faridah Hanom's arguments that demonstrate significant depth of knowledge. In Muhammad's writing, Faridah Hanom is perceived as a "strong backbone to the novel." This perception is also shared by Nur Saadah, who views the portrayal of Faridah Hanom as an intellectual character in contrast to the stereotypical Muslim female characters. As described by Nur Saadah (2020, p. 166) below:

...al-Hadi was the first Malay author who introduced a female character of knowledgeable, brave and argumentative; which was different from stereo-typed Muslim women.

If the scholarly studies evaluating Faridah Hanom's appearance as an intellectual female character are examined via formal realism, it is not an overstatement to assume that this evaluation is likely rooted in the aim of presenting Faridah Hanom as a realistic female character whose portrayal closely reflects the contemporary realm. Hence, this analysis could deduce that these scholarly findings are inclined towards depicting Faridah as conforming to the criteria of the realist novel.

In relation to this deduction, this analysis adds that it is important to highlight a common trend in scholarship on interpreting Faridah Hanom's intellectualism as a contributing factor to her rigid portrayal (Talib, 1992, p. 73;

Yahaya, 1973). This can be observed in a study by Talib Samat (1992), which regards Faridah Hanom as a character who is not naturally developed to move the plot. Instead, Talib views that Faridah Hanom serves solely to convey the author's ideas, rendering her character as "less functional" ["kurang berperanan"] and "a living puppet" ["patung bernyawa"] (1992, p. 73):

Jika diperhatikan watak-watak ciptaan Syed Syeikh dalam novel HFH ini merupakan corong suara pengarang untuk menyampaikan khutbah-khutbah, idea-idea, sikap dan pandangannya tentang pelbagai aspek hidup...Menurut setengah-setengah pengkaji sastera, watak-watak ciptaan Syed Syeikh kurang berperanan kerana watak-watak ini dicipta semata-mata untuk melontarkan mesej, visi dan propaganda pengarangnya. Dalam setengah-setengah keadaan, watak-watak ciptaannya menjadi patung bernyawa dan mengikut saja tari dan irama yang dikehendaki pengarangnya.

[When carefully observed, the characters created by Syed Syeikh in the novel *HFH* become the author's mouthpiece to deliver his didactic messages, ideologies, attitudes and views on various aspects of life... According to some literary scholars, Syed Syeikh's characters are less functional because these characters are created solely to convey the author's messages, vision and propaganda. In some situations, these characters become living puppets that simply follow the steps and rhythms dictated by the author.]

By observing the views on Faridah Hanom as a rigid character via formal realism, it is fair to assume that these opinions stem from the understanding that a novel is intended exclusively to depict the reality of life that is perceivable by the human senses. Therefore, when the articulation of abstract and imperceptible ideas/thoughts in *HFH* is considered a weakness, it is clear that the discussions in these scholarly studies have evaluated *HFH* with the objective to present it as conforming to the realist novel.

In the context of *HPKK*, this analysis identifies similar opinion in scholarly studies that tend to highlight Zamrud and Yazid, two important figures in *HPKK*, as realistic characters who fit the label of the "first Malay novel" (Mohd. Taib & A. Bakar, 1978; Zainuddin, 1972, p. 48). In light of this matter, Mohd. Taib and A. Bakar (1978) argue that these characters are depicted in a "low mimetic mode," a term coined by Northrop Frye to explain the proximity between fictional characters and readers. According to them, this mode is visible in characters with appearance who can be approached easily by the readers (1978, p. 52):

The characters are of “low mimetic mode” as commonly found in comedy and realistic fiction... they could easily be identified as individuals in a village and the author paid particular attention to details to characterise them as individuals.

Hence, the attention given to the realistic and verisimilar portrayals of Zamrud and Yazid in this novel clearly reflects the stance of scholarly studies in associating these traits with the ones required by the realist novel.

Aligning with the scholarship on the characters in *HPN* and *HFH*, the analysis discovers that scholarly studies examining the characters in *HPKK* also perceive Zamrud and Yazid as stiff characters, or mostly described as puppets (*boneka*), a label that is generally used to refer to characters who are considered present only to convey the author’s ideas. Zainuddin (1972), for instance, claims that the storytelling technique that is analytical (telling) causes the characters to be perceived as mere “puppets” [“boneka”] (1972, p. 48):

Tetapi disebabkan oleh kebanyakannya digambarkan dengan cara analitik, dialog yang formal serta dalam banyak hal pengarang muncul di tengah-tengah peristiwa maka watak-watak dikatakan sebagai figura atau boneka masih jelas kelihatan.

[But since many are depicted in an analytical manner, with formal dialogues, and in many situations the author would appear in the middle of events, therefore the characters can be clearly perceived as figures or puppets.]

Anwar Ridhwan (1985) similarly opines that these characters serve to convey the authorial voice (p. 49):

Banyak juga watak dalam novel ini telah dijadikan corong suara pengarang. Mereka berhujah panjang dengan gaya bahasa yang tidak berbeza dari gaya bahasa pengarang.

[Many of the characters in this novel are made to be the mouthpieces of the author. They engage in lengthy debates with a style of language not different from the author’s own style.]

With regard to this, Hashim Awang maintains that the author’s presence hinders the natural development of characters in *HPKK* (1989, p. 52):

Watak itu terlihat hanya melaksanakan tindakan-tindakan itu sahaja secara kaku; dorongan untuk bertindak adalah jelas bukan datangnya dari dalam diri atau keinginan watak sendiri; tetapi semata-mata bertolak daripada kehendak pengarang belaka.

[The characters are seen as merely doing actions in a stiff manner; the motivation to take action clearly does not come from within themselves or their own desires, but from the author's own aspirations.]

Although the characters in *HPKK* are seen as realistic depictions, this analysis discovers that scholarly studies are decisive in regarding their treatment as both “puppet” [“boneka”] and “author’s mouthpiece” [“suara pengarang”] as a weakness. This is evident, for instance, in a study by Zainuddin (1972, p. 113), which generally considers this novel as flawed if measured by contemporary standards. A. Wahab’s study presents a more forthright observation on the characters of this novel (2009, p. 232):

Berdasarkan standard sastera semasa, perwatakan dalam HPKK masih lemah, terutama berhubung kurangnya perihalan terperinci rupa paras dan sifat fizikal serta latar belakang watak utama. Ini menyebabkan pembaca berasa watak tidak begitu realistik.

[Based on contemporary literary standards, the characterisation in *HPKK* is still flawed, especially in the lack of detailed description on the looks, physical attributes and background of the main character. This causes the readers to feel that the characters are not that realistic.]

Indeed, the scholarly studies reveal two different viewpoints with regard to the depiction of Zamrud and Yazid. On the one hand, some scholarly studies view both as realistic and verisimilar characters since they are portrayed as ordinary people who lead normal lives. On the other hand, some scholarly studies view them as stiff, puppet-like characters who merely become the author’s mouthpiece in conveying his ideas. Hence, this clearly reflects the tendency of these scholarly studies to understand Zamrud and Yazid as characters whose sole function is to record empirical reality, as demanded by formal realism.

In line with these scholarly discussions on Yazid and Zamrud, similar findings could also be traced in other scholarly studies that examine the characters in *IKS*. Consistent with earlier findings that highlight the setting of the Malay Peninsula in *IKS* as an important innovation [“pembaharuan penting”] and a major deviation [“penyimpangan besar”] in Malay literature, this analysis discovers that these studies focus on the appearance of its protagonist, Salmah, with local characteristics. Yahaya (1973, pp. 141–142) describes local characteristics as “a progress in the field of fiction writing” [“kemajuan dalam bidang penulisan fiksiyen”], whereas Talib (1992, p. 73) characterises it as an exploration “with more appealing form” [“bentuk yang lebih menarik”]. Che Abdullah Che Ya (2007, p. 34)

describes Salmah's depiction as "a tradition-breaking woman" ["wanita pemecah tradisi"], while Muhammad Haji Salleh (2003, p. 11) claims that Salmah reflects the Malay social milieu, lives in a Malay state, and voices Malays hardships, all of which resonates closely with the Malay readers. In this regard, these scholarly studies put forth that Salmah's character is introduced in individual, distinctive, and detailed manners—attributes that are similar to the ones proposed in Watt's formal realism.

Furthermore, the analysis also finds that these scholarly studies tend to view Salmah as an intellectual character. More importantly, her intellectual appearance is considered by most scholarly studies to be a strength and firmer manifestation compared to lectures delivered by Faridah Hanom in *HFH*. In other words, these studies are inclined to argue that ideas/thoughts are more clearly conveyed via Salmah's modern representation than through Faridah Hanom's lectures in *HFH*. This argument is clearly evident, for instance, across several key textual passages that demonstrate approval in Salmah's modern representation, such as "kuat dan unggul," "wanita yang bebas," "dinamik," "wanita moden," and "maju" (literally translates to "strong and superior," "a free woman," "dynamic," "a modern woman," and "progressive"), compared to lectures by Faridah Hanom (Abu Bakar, 1990, pp. 4–5; Anwar, 1985, p. 58; Li, 1986, p. 135; Mana Sikana, 1982, p. 58). Within this context, the preference demonstrated by scholarly studies for Salmah's modern representation over Faridah Hanom's lectures to communicate these ideas/thoughts further highlights the propensity of these discussions in presenting the character aspect of this novel as befitting the criteria demanded in formal realism.

Next, the analysis also identifies the fact that these scholarly studies interpret Salmah as the author's mouthpiece to convey his ideas. For example, Anwar Ridhwan argues that the author tends to not separate between the ideas he wishes to put forward and the characters in this novel (1985, p. 57). The same tendency is also noted by Siti Hajar Che Man, who argues that Salmah's voice as a female character has been silenced. According to her (2003, p. 89):

Salmah wujud sebagai alat untuk mencapai cita-cita pengarang... Akhirnya kita tercari-cari di mana suara Salmah yang sebenarnya.
[Salmah exists as a tool to achieve the author's vision...In the end we are all left searching for Salmah's real voice]

It is also significant to highlight here that these scholarly studies lean towards criticising Salmah's age of 15 as being too idealistic to be

delivering lectures on ideas/thoughts. Yahaya Ismail (1970, p. 28), for instance, mentions his difficulty in accepting Salmah's portrayal as someone who is remarkably advanced for their age, and is unhesitant to label it as a weakness. Anwar Ridhwan also expresses the same opinion regarding Salmah's age, stating, "...Salmah's intellectualism is doubtful because at that time she was only 15 years old" ["keintelektualan Salmah meragukan kerana pada ketika itu umurnya baru meningkat 15 tahun"] (1985, p. 54). The same goes with a study by Rosnah (2003), who is clearly reluctant to endorse the ability of a 15-year-old in delivering lectures. She opines, "The courage shown by Salmah in presenting her opinions (is simply because) of Ahmad Rashid Talu's confidence in her ability despite being a 15-year-old girl" ["Keberanian Salmah menghujahkan pendapatnya semata-mata kerana Ahmad Rashid Talu yakin terhadap kemampuan Salmah walaupun gadis berumur 15 tahun"] (p. 73). In the same vein that certain scholarly studies dismiss Faridah Hanom as well as Zamrud and Yazid as being rigid and merely the author's puppet, this analysis demonstrates that Salmah is viewed through an identical lens. Ultimately, the ideas/thoughts channelled through her character is condemned as a narrative flaw merely because of her young age. The inclination to disregard these ideas/thoughts indirectly reveals the stance of these scholarly studies to evaluate the characters in these early Malay novels via Watt's formal realism, which mandates the character remain verisimilar and chronicle only empirical truth.

At this juncture, the analysis of the discourse on the first Malay novel positively identifies several important tendencies regarding the character. Firstly, this analysis discovers that the discourse mainly views the characters in these four early Malay novels as realistic and verisimilar in accordance with Watt's formal realism. This tendency in focusing on the portrayal of realistic and verisimilar characters can be considered as driven by the need to present these novels as the first Malay novels. Across the existing literature, this portrayal of realistic characters is understood as a departure from the confinements of traditional literature that normally portrays characters with whimsical and mythological attributes. This can be clearly observed when the discourse on these first Malay novels focuses on the depiction of these characters' psychological interiority and unique individuality, which differentiates one character from another. Secondly, the analysis also identifies a tendency in the discourse to examine the proximity of the characters in these four novels within a contemporary context—a tendency that clearly aligns with formal realism that advocates true-to-life characters. This is evident in the effort to associate characters such as

Nikosa with Sarawak, Yazid and Zamrud with the Malay village in Pahang, and Salmah with Penang. Moreover, the discourse also tends to view the characters in these four early Malay novels as being eloquent speakers and determined to take charge of their own fate, attributes that are considered realistic and closely resemble real-life people in the contemporary realm. Third and lastly, this analysis also identifies the tendency of the discourse in labelling characters that deliver sermons/lectures (*khutbah*) in the early Malay novels as rigid and “puppets of the author” (*boneka pengarang*), thereby diminishing the strength of such characters in a novel. This label is partly due to the stance of this discourse that views novels as a tool to document empirical reality. Hence, ideas and thoughts that are theoretical (not empirical) tend to be marginalised by this discourse on the first Malay novel.

Sermons (Khutbah)

The analysis continues with the aspect of sermons (*khutbah*). Here, it is discovered that the discourse on the first Malay novel also tends to evaluate the author’s writing technique, namely “showing, not telling”. As explained in the Methodology section, “showing, not telling”, rejects the intrusion of the authorial voice, which is either conveyed directly or through the characters’ dialogues. In modern Malay literary criticism, this writing technique, as highlighted by formal realism, results in the marginalisation of an aspect known as *sermons (khutbah)*, which are defined as lengthy explanations in a didactic manner that intends to deliver specific moral lessons. To facilitate the reader’s understanding of this discussion, this section will use the term “sermons” (*khutbah*) as mostly used in the discourse on the first Malay novel itself.

With reference to *HPN*, S. Othman and Abdullah (2003, p. 13) state that the sermons (*khutbah*) used when Nikosa advises Pilina seem deliberately “exaggerated” [“dilebih-lebihkan”] (as described by S. Othman and Abdullah) with the purpose of portraying Nikosa’s grandeur in defeating the state enemies. More importantly, the use of exaggerated sermons (*khutbah*) is contrasted with the detailed depiction of setting and characters in this novel. In light of this detailed representation, the use of sermons (*khutbah*) in this novel is considered as excessive for the requirements of a novel, and thus its presence is considered exaggerated. Next, the issue on the use of sermons (*khutbah*) is also brought up by Awang Azman Awang Pawi (2010), who conveys that the social transformation in this novel is more impactful through the actions of its characters compared to “merely sermonising” [“sekadar berkhutbah”] (2010, p. 97):

Pemodenan dan transformasi ini sentiasa diserukan pengarang dalam setiap bab teks ini dan bukan sekadar berkhotbah, sebaliknya dipaparkan pelaksanaan yang berkesan, sistematik dan terperinci.

[Modernisation and transformation are consistently emphasised by the author in each chapter of this text and [this is] done not merely through sermonising, but also through effective, systematic and detailed implementation.]

The fact that on the one hand, the actions by characters are preferred and perceived as convincing, while on the other hand, the use of sermons (khutbah) is perceived as negligible (“merely sermonising”) [“sekadar berkhotbah”], clearly shows the tendency to downplay the presence of sermons (khutbah). Indeed, these writings by S. Othman and Abdullah (2003) as well as Awang Azman (2010) are similar in viewing sermons (khutbah) in *HPN* as an aspect that weakens the novel. In this subject, the tendency of discussions in the scholarly studies to deduce sermons (khutbah) as an aspect that weakens a novel could be considered as conforming to the principles of formal realism, which aspires to record empirical realms perceptible to the human senses.

Meanwhile, in the context of *HFH*, the analysis finds that the presence of sermons (khutbah) has already been treated in scholarly discussions as a “deviation” [“penyimpangan”] that interrupts the novel’s central romance between Faridah Hanom and Shafik Affandi. For instance, Yahaya (1973) argues that the sermons (khutbah) found in this novel are a narrative technique inherited from *Hikayat Abdullah* (1849). His observation discovers that the sermons (khutbah) in *Hikayat Abdullah* are delivered in essays, whereas in *HFH*, they are integrated into the characters’ dialogues. However, instead of assessing this integration as an innovation, Yahaya is more inclined to examine the sermons (khutbah) in *HFH* as a “deviation” [“penyimpangan”] that interrupts the novel’s central romance between Faridah Hanom and Shafik Affandi (1973, p. 79):

Secara struktural penyelitan kutbah-kutbah yang panjang ini menimbulkan penyimpangan (digression) dari tema percintaan yang menjadi persoalan hakiki di sini.

[Structurally, the insertion of these long sermons results in a digression from the theme of love which is the central concern here.]

In addition, this analysis also discovers that Anwar Ridhwan (1985) similarly regards the sermons (khutbah) in *HFH* as a form of digression,

describing its presence as being “not in harmony with the flow of the story” [“tidak sehati dengan jalan cerita”] (1985, p. 47):

Unsur didaktik yang dikemukakan dalam novel ini menjadi tidak sehati dengan jalan cerita kerana dikuliahkan dengan panjang lebar...kuliah yang bertele-tele yang terdapat di beberapa bahagian novel, andainya dicabut tidak akan mencacatkan keseluruhan jalan cerita Faridah Hanum.
[The didactic elements presented in this novel becomes incompatible with the storyline as the sermon is conveyed in a lengthy manner...prolonged sermons that are available in a few parts of the novel, if taken out, would not disrupt the whole storyline of Faridah Hanum.]

Similarly, Christine Campbell’s study also treats the presence of sermons (khutbah) in *HFH* as being superficial and hasty (2020, p. 266):

This section of *nasihat* is perfunctory, and delivered in a manner too brief to be either informative or very convincing.

The above discussion shows that Yahaya, Anwar and Campbell’s stance regarding the presence of sermons (khutbah) in *HFH* as clearly inclined towards siding with what formal realism advocates, which is to focus only on the recording of the empirical realm, not on the theoretical ideas/ thoughts. Therefore, the sermons (khutbah) in this discourse are regarded as a form of disruption, as deemed in the use of key textual passages such as “deviation” [“penyimpangan”], “not driving the narrative” [“tidak menggerakkan cerita”], “perfunctory,” and others.

In the context of *HPKK*, Abu Bakar (1980) focuses extensively on the central romance between Zamrud and Yazid, effectively marginalising the sermons (khutbah) as a feature that fails to advance the plot. This marginalising can be seen in Abu Bakar’s preference in referring to the sermons (khutbah) as a “dialogue interlude” [“selingan perbualan”], a signal that indicates an intrusion of external element coming into the narrative. More importantly, this “dialogue interlude” [“selingan perbualan”] is considered as “not driving the narrative” [“tidak menggerakkan cerita”] (Abu Bakar Hamid, 1980, pp. 222–223). Similarly, this tendency in marginalising sermons (khutbah) can be observed in a study by Hendrik Maier (1996). According to him, the combination of “manuscript writing” and “telling tales” has produced a story that is complemented with interruption of advice (1996, p. 98):

Hikayat Percintaan Kasih Kemudaan is a tale that derives its spunkiness primarily from the shrewd interplay between manuscript writing and

telling tales, two forms of Malay which had not been combined before in such a consistent manner; this interplay is occasionally interrupted by stately advice and casual daily conversations.

Without denying the positive connotation of the phrase “stately advice,” Maier’s choice to precede it with the phrase “interrupted by” implies that these series of advice are not welcomed in the novel. In the same tone, the study by A. Wahab (2009) clearly prefers the love story between Zamrud and Yazid, as evidenced by textual markers such as “captivating young readers” [“memikat pembaca muda”] and “absorbed in reading the story” [“khusyuk membaca cerita”], compared to sermons (khutbah) that are depicted with textual markers such as “exploitation” [“eksploitasi”] and “interlude” [“sisipan”] in this novel. Therefore, when A. Wahab describes the combination of both elements as triggering a fluctuating plot, the descending arc clearly refers to the sermons (khutbah) in this novel, as seen in the following excerpt (2009, p. 237):

Adegan cinta antara Yazid dan Zamrud bertujuan memikat pembaca muda dan membuat mereka khusyuk membaca cerita ini, lalu penulis mengeksploitasi adegan ini dengan menyisipkan nasihat bermoral. Oleh itu, kita berasa plot menaik dan menurun seperti gelombang.

[The love scenes between Yazid and Zamrud intends to captivate young readers, making them absorbed in reading this story, hence the author exploits these scenes by interluding them with moral advice. Therefore, we feel the plot ascends and descends like a wave.]

Other than that, this analysis also finds that a study by Anwar Ridhwan (2006) also shares the same inclination when he describes this presence of sermons (khutbah) as “quite dry and prolonged” [“agak kering dan panjang”]: “the narrative language of Ahmad Kotot [in *HPKK*], according to today’s standard, is quite ‘dry’ and prolonged” [“Bahasa naratif Ahmad Kotot [dalam *HPKK*], menurut ukuran hari ini, agak ‘kering’ dan panjang”] (2006, p. 30). The fact that the sermons (khutbah) in *HPKK* are regarded by Abu Bakar as “not driving the narrative,” is examined by A. Wahab as an “exploitation and interlude” that causes the “descending plot,” and is evaluated by Anwar Ridhwan as being “dry and prolonged” clearly indicates the stance of *HPKK* as a novel that exclusively records empirical realm. It is in this context, therefore, that the discourse on the first Malay novel reveals its tendency in conforming to the requirements of Watt’s formal realism.

Meanwhile, in the context of *IKS*, this analysis discovers that most scholarly studies that examine this novel also tend to treat the presence of

sermons (khutbah) as lengthy and disrupting the story. For instance, Yahaya Ismail considers the sermons (khutbah) in *IKS* as being “too lengthy” [“terlalu panjang”], which causes “digression” [“digresi”] (1973, p. 125):

...Salmah juga berkutbah terlalu panjang...Sudah pasti khutbah yang panjang itu menampakkan suatu digresi dari kesatuan cerita.

[...Salmah also delivers a sermon that is too lengthy... Certainly the long sermon creates a digression from the unity of the narrative.]

The use of the term “digression” in referring to the sermons (khutbah) in *IKS* explains two things. Firstly, the existence of sermons (khutbah) is not considered as an important aspect that forms early Malay novels, and thus its presence is deemed as a form of “digression” that diverts the attention of readers. Secondly, sermons (khutbah) are obviously treated in an apologetic tone when its presence contradicts the description of Salmah’s character. Both reflect Yahaya’s inclination to conform to the demands of formal realism in recording only empirical realm. Other than Yahaya, Mana Sikana also states that the sermons (khutbah) in this novel are too “long-winded and prolonged” [“bertele-tele dan panjang”], which adversely affect the progress of events (1982, p. 61):

Plot cerita [merujuk IKS] bergerak lambat, satu-satu persoalan dikemukakan terlalu bertele-tele dan panjang; ada hal-hal yang kurang meyakinkan kita.

[The plot [of IKS] moves too slow, each issue presented is too long-winded and prolonged; some matters are just less convincing.]

Mana Sikana’s proposition on the effects of sermons (khutbah) (described as “issues presented that are too long-winded and prolonged”) that compromise reader trust clearly shows his stance that sermons (khutbah) undermine the novel’s storytelling efficiency. This impairs the novel’s ability to render the empirical realm that fosters conviction in readers. Next, the analysis discovers that Muhammad Haji Salleh (2003) also tends to marginalise the presence of sermons (khutbah) in *IKS*. He argues that a novel has no role in delivering sermons (khutbah), described as an “incessant sermon” [“khutbah melulu”] in the following statement, since they may disrupt the story (2003, p. 19):

Sebuah novel bukan khutbah melulu, kerana khutbah akan mencacatkan pengkisahan dan mencarikkan ilusi kenyataan yang diinginkan pengarang serta pembaca. Inilah medan yang amat sulit untuk seseorang pengarang.

[A novel is not an incessant sermon, as it will impair the narrative and shatter the illusion of reality desired by both the author and the readers. This is a particularly challenging field for an author.]

The above statement that describes the presence of sermons (khutbah) in *IKS* as “shattering the illusion of reality” reveals Muhammad’s stance that a novel like *IKS* should be occupied with vivid recording of the realistic realm.

At this stage, the analysis finds that the aspect of sermons (khutbah) tends to be identified and deduced by the discourse on the first Malay novel as a weakness that would affect the novel. Such a finding is derived from the stance of this discourse that tends to examine these four earliest Malay novels as fictional works that are required to only portray what can be perceived by the human senses, which is understood in the context of formal realism as the “showing, not telling”, technique. Hence, sermons (khutbah), which contain abstract ideas/thoughts that are only apprehensible through human reason rather than the senses, are marginalised as a flaw that is considered unnecessary in a story. The fact that this marginalisation of sermons (khutbah) in the early Malay novels—at least in the four novels that are examined in this analysis—is revealed in a similar tone indicates that the discourse on the first Malay novel has attempted to evaluate them with the standards of formal realism, leading to the emergence of the realist novel.

CONCLUSION

This study has successfully achieved its stated two objectives. Firstly, it has analysed critical literature on the four selected Malay novels considered as the first Malay novels. Among the important issues highlighted in these scholarly studies are intrinsic aspects such as setting, character, and sermons (khutbah). In referring to setting, scholarly studies tend to interpret its presence in the earliest Malay novels as a realistic and detailed representation that closely resembles the contemporary realm. Therefore, the discourse on the first Malay novel generally concludes that the earliest Malay novels are the ones that started depicting the settings of the Malay village and Penang city in the Malay Peninsula (*HPKK* and *IKS*), the cities of Cairo and Alexandria in Egypt (*HFH*), and the state of Sarawak (*HPN*) with verisimilitude. The discourse on the first Malay novel has also linked the portrayal of these settings to the authors’ contemporary realms, which are regarded as the primary sources of inspiration. The conclusion

and association drawn by the discourse on the first Malay novel therefore highlight the fact that these intrinsic elements are evaluated within the framework of Ian Watt's formal realism, which eventually leads to the emergence of the realist novel.

With regard to character, the analysis has found that the discourse on the first Malay novel is inclined to view the characters in these early Malay novels as being realistic and grounded in reality. With this finding, the earliest Malay novels proposed as the first Malay novels are identified as the ones that began portraying characters that are not associated with whimsical and mythological attributes. Instead, these characters are endowed with the physical and intellectual capacities of ordinary humans, and thus are able to lead their fictional lives—a finding consistent with Watt's formal realism. This study has also successfully identified that most existing scholarly studies regard the characters in these earliest Malay novels as rigid and insufficiently developed within the narrative. This finding likewise conforms to the principles of Watt's formal realism, which requires the character to be utilised as a tool to record the empirical realm.

In relation to sermons (khutbah), the analysis has also found that scholarly studies tend to regard the presence of lengthy sermons in the earliest Malay novels as a form of deviation and interruption to the story conveyed. This tendency therefore demonstrates the predisposition of the discourse on the first Malay novel to marginalise the aspect of sermons (khutbah), which is considered as a flaw that hinders the portrayal of empirical realm as suggested by formal realism.

Secondly, this study has succeeded in formulating the main ideas underlying the discourse on the first Malay novel. The main idea highlighted in this discourse, as described in the earlier analysis and conclusion, is the inclination towards formal realism. This is evident when the intrinsic aspects in *HPN*, *HFH*, *HPKK*, and *IKS* are found to be conforming the principles of formal realism. In this matter, it is not an overstatement to conclude that the debates and focus of the existing scholarly studies on the aspects of setting, character, and sermons (khutbah) mostly demonstrate their tendency to evaluate which early Malay novel most closely reflects the concept of realist novel as conceived and developed by Western literary conventions. In this context, this study is expected to contribute to a clearer understanding of the ongoing debate on the first Malay novel.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Nudra Shafini Halis Azhan served as the corresponding author, was responsible for collecting data, preparing the initial manuscripts, revising, and submitting the final manuscript; Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani was responsible for conceptualising and designing the study, interpreting the results, and revising; Salmah Jan Noor Muhammad contributed by interpreting the results and revising; Muhd. Zulkifli Ismail contributed by interpreting the results and revising. All authors read and approve the final manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

DECLARATIONS

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