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Social Criticism via Myths and Metaphors: an Ad-hoc Analysis

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Abstract

The traditional Malay works, as a national legacy to symbolize the epitome of quality penmanship by earlier Malay writers, are perceived to be superficial for embracing myths in them. This study, thus, examined the significance of the myths in these selected works. Data related to myths were cited from The Malay Annals and analysis was performed using an ad-hoc concept in the Relevance theory which is a pragmatic theory. The findings of the study suggested that myths are metaphors serving as a social criticism. Guided by an adequate linguistics theory, this study has suggested that myths in the traditional Malay works carry significant meanings.

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Keywords: myths; metaphors; traditional Malay works; Relevance theory; ad-hoc concept

1. Introduction

The Malay community have been blessed with a legacy of sublime masterpiece by the earlier literati. Despite the age, the Malay classical works have been a collective point of departure for the Malay community to characterize their intellect and judgment. In present reality, however, these works have not been genuinely appreciated by the members of the community. This is evident by the declining self-value as a consequence of their nonchalance to derive benefit from these cultural works of dexterity.

How could we be this unfortunate? One of the reasons according to Hassan Ahmad (2003) is the general perception among the Malays towards the literary works which are perceived as mythic and not as philosophical artifacts. This assumption originates from the traces of myths and legends in those works. The community have

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been submissively in agreement with the viewpoints of previous scholars, particularly the European orientalists, especially R. O. Winstedt (1969) in his well-known book *The History of Classical Malay Literature*.

The truth is, the myths within the traditional Malay literary works carry their own significance. The previous Malay writers were not being random or reckless in their effort when including mythic elements into their writing. Myth and reality have been woven and knitted ever so intricately that readers are nearly incapable of separating the two elements. Only through a critical interpretation guided by the Malay hermeneutics would the meaning and underlying purpose behind every myth be attained (Umar 1989).

Myths in the traditional Malay literary works serve a pivotal role as a method to channel criticism in the feudal Malay community (Mohd Taib 1988; S.Othman Kelantan 1997; Muhammad 1997, 2006; Harun 2004), to serve as a symbol in the civilization of the Malay community (Kamaruddin 2007), to offer an honest remark in a clever and implicit manner (Muhammad 2006; Ding 2009), to present substantiation to the kings and Malay kingdom (Siti Hawa 2009), and to present a reciprocal explanation of history and myth (Hussain 2008).

2. Literature Review of Social Criticism in the Traditional Malay Works

Criticism in the traditional Malay works has been manifested in various forms and most of the time, it is not expressed explicitly. Thus, the language forms utilized were in figurative languages full of similes and metaphors. As claimed by Tenas Effendy (2008), the Malays are proficient users of language to the extent that they are perceived as:

a group of people with courtesy, eloquence, wisdom and knowledge in language usage, those who have a way with words, those with words so gracious they lead to peace and harmony, with warmth and genuine joviality, and those who are open-minded and always see the best in people.

This form of criticism is observable in idiomatic expressions, quatrains, ballads, epigrams, jokes, animal tales, folktales, chronicles and history-based literature. Malay scholars and researchers have long investigated the issue of social criticism within these genres including Mohd. Taib (1988), S. Othman Kelantan (1997), Hassan (2003), Harun (2004), Muhammad (2006), Ahmad Fuad & Zaitul Azma (2007), Zurinah et. al (2008), Zaitul Azma & Ahmad Fuad (2011). Some of these studies were directed on a specific category such as Muhammad, Ahmad Fuad & Zaitul Azma, Zurinah et. al who discussed social criticism in quatrains, Zaitul Azma & Ahmad Fuad who delved into the ethical issue of the Malay society in proverbs, while Harun on prose. Thus, it can be stated that the traditional Malay works may be different in genre, but the mind and brain producing them are one.

The Malay community prefer to be cautious when voicing their minds in all aspects of life especially when offering criticism. Since criticism by its nature is impertinent, it needs to be expressed shrewdly and obliquely so as to avoid offending the listeners and to preserve their dignity. The Malays highly prize peace within the community and this is reflected in their language usage. The cultures shared by them have directed to a better understanding in interpreting the meaning of quatrains and idioms since both interlocutors are in a similar context. What is of utmost concern of the speaker is that the message to be expressed (through figures of speech) has to be palatable to the listener.

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