

LITERATURE AS A SOURCE AND GENERATOR OF REGIONAL WISDOM

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Abstract

Literature does not appear from vacuum, but took shape from culture that envelops it and at the same instance became a catalyst for the development of culture itself. The symbiotic relationship between literature and culture had become natural, which should be nourished so as to establish a continuum that would be beneficial to the society. As an aspirational platform and society's world view that gave birth to it, literary work accommodate the value of wisdom of such a society. The source of wisdom is disseminated by the author so as to validate and prove their identity amidst the competition with several social groups which are multifarious, unidentifiable and multi-cultural. In the Malaysian atmosphere, literature does not only function as a local civilizational catalyst but could rejuvenate regional civilization. This is so because Malaysia is located in the middle of the Archipelago that synonymously becomes the reception centre for the growth of wisdom that comes from various sources – ethnic, religion and nationalism. Rightfully, this article will discuss the potential of Malaysia playing the role as a hub for regional wisdom due to its closeness and intimate racial relationship with other nations such as Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, Thailand, Kampuchea (Champa Malay) and the Philippines (southern).

Keywords: Literature, regional wisdom, Malaysia.

1. Wisdom in Literature: Means of Developing Culture in Malaysia

Wisdom is related to knowledge, belief, world view, skills, wisdom, knowledge developed from the livelihood of a society and nature and its surrounding. Later, such wisdom is translated into practice, ritual, customs and rules which took place naturally as its thrust lies in the hegemonic energy.

Due to its shared nature among the society, wisdom becomes culture and handed down generation to generation until it forms a special identity for the society in question. All elements of culture are divided into three categories; i.e. tools, thoughts and procedures (Tylor, 1958; Malinowski, 1967, p. 62).

Wisdom is also used as a guide in facing challenges in life (Manugeran, et al., 2017, p. 1) that later made it possible for man to craft civilization. According to Ibnu Khaldun (*Mukadimah Ibnu Khaldun* [trans.]. 2009), man needed social organization (*ijtima insani*), or often mentioned, “man is political in nature” (*al-insanu madaniyyun biaththab’i*). Social organization refers to the word *madaniyyun* or *al-madinah*, or city. Allah SWT created man who in nature requires food and accompanied by the preparedness to look for it. The planting of paddy in turn needed the cooperation of others in order to get the tools for ploughing, seeding and the clearing of the paddy fields and eventually milling. The result of the cooperation of others is the creation of social organization. The larger the organization, the more successful the group would be and a civilized society is thus born.

There is wisdom characterized as intangible (abstract) they are others that have been translated into concrete form (tangible). Born out of lifetime experience, wisdom formed an environment that is organically inter-related between the physical body, spirit and the surroundings. The tools for living the life are invented from the wisdom of its society. For example, the design of a Malay house that has an annex before the house proper was created as a manifestation of the character of the Malays in accepting visitors. There are visitors who only qualify to be entertained at the annex and not invited into the house proper for the visitor is not close to the owner of the house. *Baju kurung* as a clothing for Malay women is laden with the philosophy of maintaining sanctity. The term “*kurung*” meant to control the behavior and the disposition of the women so that they do not look as being wild and unkempt, whilst the design of the dress covers the body.

Literary work which began as an oral form in traditional literature and later on in the form of writing (*belles-letters*) and printed has long played its role as a platform in disseminating wisdom as a route in educating society to share value, more so to “conquer” the mind of the society to obey the set values or ideology that were “forced” hegemonically. The power of hegemony in literature is so strong in structuring its society, whether to tame the mind and uncontrolled behavior or to validate the concepts that prevailed in the mind of every member of society.

The ability of literature as hegemonic power is strongly related to its discursive character. Language as a tool for the generation of idea in literary work is not neutral, but on the other hand possesses the strength and specific ideology. In other words, literary work is a discourse that has implied control and ideology. From Foucauldian nuances (Michel Foucault), discourse derived a philosophical meaning because it is related to ideology. To Foucault, a discourse would not result without ideology, and not neutral, although in historical writings which were thought to be centered on actual facts of events. According to Foucault (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2000, pp. 70-71):

...a discourse is strongly bounded area of social knowledge, a system of statements within which the world can be known. The key feature of this is that the world is not simply ‘there’ to be talk about, rather, it is through discourse itself that the world is brought into being. It is also in such a discourse that speakers and hearers, writers and readers come to an understanding about themselves, their relationship to each other and their place in the world (the construction of subjectivity). (Foucault in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2000, pp. 70-71)

With such a position, a literary work which is also a discourse, whatever the form maybe, whether a fiction or historical literature, constitutionality literature, theology literature, prophetic literature, not only describe man’s history in neutrality. Such work brought ideology, possesses power which determines what could be instilled for the display

to the audience. Therefore, every item in the work is related to power so as to suppress society in order that they obey willingly. It is here that ideology plays its role in the context of ruling by way of hegemony.

Through literature, the audience would be pushed to act according to the paradigm put in place. This was clarified by Greenblatt (in Lentricchia & McLaughin, 1990: 228), "Art is important agent then in the transmission of culture. It is one of the ways in which the roles by which men and women are expected to pattern their lives are communicated and passed from generation to generation". Therefore, literary work is viable to become a tool in providing culture to the society subtly. In a society or a nation, taming the society or citizens is not easily done via the strength of the military or laws because every tyrannical action would result in counter action from the oppressed group.

There have been many conflicts between citizens and the government whenever oppression is used to control its citizens. But by using ideology as a tool to uniform the minds of the people so that they become tame under the rule of the government, such effort is easier to deploy and achieve its objective. That was what happened in the Marxist rule when class rebellion was put down by way of ideology, including through literary work. In this context, James Kavanagh (in Lentricchia & McLaughin, 1990, p. 309) wrote:

When ideology dominates social reproduction, the process becomes indeed much better for the dominant class: subordinate-class subjects will tend to resign themselves to their social weakness, trying to get what they can for themselves in any way possible, and to express dissatisfaction through relatively easy-to-control individual forms of ambition, violence, and self-destruction (including crime); meanwhile, dominant-class subjects themselves are freer to believe that their wealth and power are after all justified, that it really is the best of all possible world they manage, and that they can comfortably dismiss all those inconvenient and fanciful notions of how society and the social production of wealth might be organized differently, schemes that would only take away their power and wealth without actually helping anybody else. In such a situation, the social regime of class relations will remain stable, even if there is a lot of individual dissatisfaction. (James Kavanagh in Lentricchia & McLaughin, 1990, p. 309)

Kavanagh's opinion is relevant in any situation and in any civilized society. According to him, when the ideology instilled has successfully taken over the soul of the society, even the oppressed would view it as being fair, although in actual fact there was tyranny in the rule or social class stratification. They (the citizens or government) understand the situation and accepted it willingly.

In consonant with the perspective, literature could function as a platform to disseminate the meaning of the sublimity of language, procedures in communication, customs, procedures being part of society, the methodology of settling local problems, the way of respecting the government and vice versa. In the Malay literary domain, historiographical work had functioned culturally and ideologically whether horizontally or vertically. Through *Sulalatus Salatin (Sejarah Melayu)* the value of trust for example has been applied in the context of citizens and rulers relationship. The belief that the king was Allah's representative is passed via the grand image of world leader, Iskandar Zulkarnain (Alexander the Great) as being the lineage of Malay rulers, whereas Islamic religion delivered to the king by Muhammad the Messenger himself through a royal dream.

Historiography literature also became a platform to submit various wisdom from numerous civilizations. The element of Chinese, Indian, Pahlavi, Arab, Javanese, Siamese and Malay civilisations combined to form a value rich narrative that is ideology laden. This

diversity is beautifully arranged as though self composed by the author though many other texts were referred as hypotexts before appearing as a new text (hypertext) for example, *Sulalatus Salatin*, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, and *Tuhfat al-Nafis*.

In Malaysia modern literature possesses a broad resource because of its central position in the Archipelago region allowed the entry of various wisdom from an unidentifiable sub-ethnic. Malaysia which became incorporated with Borneo (Sabah and Sarawak), has a common border with Thailand, the Phillipines, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia is able to become a regional hub of wisdom as the writers are not only open to the influence of wisdom of neighbouring countries, but they were also the recipients of a particular sub-ethnic wisdom. National Laureate Arena Wati is of Macassar origin (born in Jenoponto), National Laureate Anwar Ridhwan is a Javanese from Sabak Bernam, National Laureate Shahnnon Ahmad is a Patani Malay origin in Thailand, Jong Chiang Lai an ethnic Melanau has Chinese blood in him, Dayangku Mastura is a Bruneian Malay, Douglas Jaga, Harry Usop Umbar and Jaya Ramba are Ibans, the Dayak of Sarawak, Akiya is an aborigine and there are others too.

From them came value of a particular ethnic wisdom such as *al-Syiqaq* (Shahnnon Ahmad, 1985), *Sukma Angin* (Arena Wati, 1999), *Citra* (Arena Wati, 1991), *Sudara* (Arena Wati, 1994), and *Mevrouw Toga* (Arena Wati, 1995); *Pendekar Rimba* (Jaya Ramba, 2013); *Kelingkang* (Douglas Jaga, 1998); *Pindah* (Jong Chiang Lai, 1987), *Suara Dari Rimba* (Jong Chiang Lai, 2008) and *Gugurnya Langit Hijau Nanga Tiga* (Jong Chiang Lai, 1990); *Singkowoton* (Azmah Nordin, 1994); *Ngayau Air* (Hamlin Bolhi, 2001); *Ngayau* (Amil Jaya, 2001); *Libau Rentap Rimba* (Harry Usop Umbar, 2008), *Perang Sangkil* (Akiya, 2008), and *Hamba* (Akiya, 2013), *Samran* (Prasert Eh Chai, 2018), *Helaian Linangkit* (Dayangku Mastura, 2016), *Panchayat* (Uthaya Sankar, 2012), and many more about exotic ethnic wisdom.

The culture laden and ethnic wisdom narrative at least could provide the anthropological understanding to the audience for the purpose of unity and value sharing. The strength present in literature should be harnessed as this cultural strength has not been too exposed to conflicts, such as in politics. Therefore, a vision to establish a meeting point between this wisdom of various nations should be formulated to provide a joint space which not only could prosper regional relations, but could form solidarity of post-colonial nations and there upon face the threat of Western neo-colonialism and hegemony.

2. The Potential of Literature as a Generator of Regional Wisdom

The content of literary work does not necessarily limited to local values. Good external values could be wisely manipulated by way of artistic creative craftsmanship methodology. Therefore, writers should explore the world of knowledge, culture, and external thoughts and conduct filtration so they can be applied in their own work as long as they do not go against the basic principles and local sensitivity. In Eastern and Islamic world view, openness becomes the basis for the growth of civilization. What comes from abroad may not be bad or good after all. Goodness or badness is determined by the absolute basis of reigion as mentioned by Abdolkarim Soroush (2000, p. 168), "We must rely on it [reigion] as it relies on us". Like water, he said, what cleanses must be clean in the first instance. The natural process of cleaning of water consist of the process of rejection and streaming. In such a way, the culture needed to be retained must be clean; and is borrowed may not be neccessarily dirty. Therefore, the acceptance of external values must not be done haphazardly though we need to be open.

The feeling of *esprit de corp* between societies in diverse countries in the Archipelago will result in the emergence of intense nationalism. Even though unknown to each other, our group is large via the concept of imagined communities (Andersen, 1983, p. 15), "It is

imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." Although not knowing each other, when conscience on the existence of shared values is aroused in each individual, the feeling of nationalism would be regenerated in their souls. The ownership of shared value would cause the appearance of strong unity, not dominative conflict. Nationalism that needed to be strengthened is not nationalism by nation but by regional nationalism.

One item that needed to be removed is turning ethnic wisdom into right of the nation so much so it ended in political disagreement between nations. The value of wisdom belongs to the race without individual copyright. But nowadays, the sovereign right of every nation became the excuse to stop the citizens of another country to admit their ownership, as it is rightfully their heritage. The same applies to the cultural aspect regarding the arts and the way of life. Is it not that culture is owned by the ethnic and not by nations?

In this relation, there are too many local wisdom that could be transposed for the display and pride of regional societies. In Borneo and other places throughout Malaysia and Indonesia local wisdom contains local wisdoms which became the subject of jealousy to the outsiders. Hundreds of ethnic cultures belonging to the people have not been exposed to the present generation. If there were written, the dissemination of the corpus to the entire Archipelago would face stoppages due to various problems, whereas there are many local wisdoms that have shared ownership due to the fact that they are of the same ethnic.

In this context, it is reasonable to think about the setting up of a culture secretariat that could become a centre for study on regional wisdom and centre for documentation of specific literary items or any genre that contains valueable regional wisdom (cultural). If such a one stop centre could be established it would be good for the Archipelago, and this region would be mighty in the eye of the neo-imperialist who tirelessly try to implant their hegemonic conquest.

In such difficulty, fortunately literature and its role in fostering regional relations has never ceased. Like it was destined in each time there arose literary developers although their work methods may vary. This literary activists had developed a network of brotherhood through various platforms and terms: Borneo-Kalimantan Dialogue, Bay Dialogue, Archipelago Poets Meet, Archipelago Literary Figures Meet, North Dialogue, South Dialogue, Culture of Countries in Togetherness Literary Meet (PSBNS), South East Asia Literary Council (MASTERA), Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia Language Council (MABBIM), Nusantara Melayu Raya (NUMERA), Ziarah Karyawan (Artist Visitation) and others.

These efforts experienced the ups and downs but as long there is earnest in its discharge through the tradition of getting together, literary solidarity will continue to strengthen. Only thing, the strategy of pursuing it must be found so that this effort does not perish after the first generation are not able to continue it. Therefore, back-up groups must be orderly and systematically groomed and enabled. Presumably at every gathering a new generation must take part, not only as passive participants but as active catalytic energy. Otherwise, all efforts that has shown success will be doomed.

3. Conclusion

The Malay Archipelago is grouped in a region that possesses a shared value although politically seperated. There are far too many shared values, wisdom and culture which in actual fact overlap each other. Therefore, the sharing of local wisdom and values must be enhanced with full intention that only unity would develop shared civilization, and not

dissension. Literature ought to be given strength to become the tool for accomodating the value of domestic or even regional widom.

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