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Writing as a Medium in Modern Malay Literature¹

Muhammad Ariff bin Ahmad

IN HIS BOOK 'SARINAH' (1947), THE LATE IR. SOEKARNO, first President of Indonesia, had mentioned, "we learn history to make us intellectual". And everyone knows that history is a record of life experiences, be it an individual's or a nation's.

That statement has an effect: those who deny history will not be intellectuals.

History often shows the evolution and progress of a life, according to the conditions, period and what is desired of the living. The same happens to Malay literature.

History proves that Malay literature started off as oral literature because literature develops by word of mouth.

Folk literature like tales of:

- *Pak Pandir,*
- *Pak Kaduk,*
- *Lebai Malang,*
- *Si Luncai,*
- *Si Tanggang,*

- *Nakhoda Manis*,
- *Bawang Putih Bawang Merah*, and many more were passed on orally by storytellers (who later were called '*sahibul-hikayat*').

With the advancement of human intellect and civilization, along with technological development and progress, Malay oral literature was then published in stages and known as written literature.

The rise of the Malay intellect and civilization began when the Malays embraced religion. History tells us that the first religion which influenced the life of the Malays was Hinduism/Buddhism. Teachings of Hinduism/Buddhism were transmitted to the Malays through the Old Malay language, with influences of Sanskrit.

Terms like *agama* (religion), *Tuhan* (God), *sembahyang* (pray), *puasa* (fast), *pahala* (merit), *dosa* (sin), *syurga* (heaven), *neraka* (hell) and more that are used in Malay till today are derived from Sanskrit. In fact, the term *sastera* (literature) also traces its roots back to Sanskrit.

Sastera originally meant 'writing' in Sanskrit. In Malay, *sastera* refers to language. With a prefix "su" (meaning beautiful in Javanese), literature becomes *susastera*, meaning beautiful language. Literature is created and enjoyed by man through writing (also known as composition).

Writing is a jotting of phonemes of consonants and vocals, which are known as scripts or letters. A

combination of the scripts copy the words read by man as a source of obtaining information on knowledge, teachings and guidance to perfecting life.

As known by many, through Hinduism and Buddhism that were embraced once by the Malays at the beginning of their civilization, written Malay literature used *pallawa*, *kawi* and *nagiri* scripts as its tool.

After embracing Islam, the Malays began reading the Qur'an which is in Arabic and written in the Arabic script. According to Marco Polo when he stopped over at Perlak en route to China in 1295, the Perlak people were already reciting the Qur'an.

The experience of reading the Qur'an and Islamic texts in Malay (Arabic style and full of Arabic terms) eventually saw Arabic letters - later with some additions and system amendment - being used to write Malay.

With the addition of letters for phonemes *ca*, *ga*, *pa*, *nga* and *nya* (that do not exist in Arabic), the omission of the Arabic diacritics *a-i-u*, and the replacement with *alif-ya-wau* as vocals for the Malay phoneme *a-i-u*, the modified Arabic writing was used to write Malay.

The new writing, which had its spelling system amended and revised over time, is known as the *jawi* script. The Johor people referred to *jawi* as the Malay script.

Since then, except for being used in official letters for royalty, *jawi* was also used in written

Malay literature - either for transcribing oral folk literature into written literature or writing Malay translations of foreign literature, particularly Hindu², Arabic/Persian³ or English⁴.

Even newspapers, magazines, fiction, novels and other literary works for public reading were mostly printed in Jawi until the 1960s, although since 1930s, there already rose a trend of publishing Malay books written in the Roman script.

When I entered school in late 1933, there were already old Malay literary works, including:

- *Hikayat Awang Sulung Merah Muda*,
- *Hikayat Malim Deman*,
- *Hikayat Raja Bedurai Putih*,
- *Hikayat Anggun Cik Tunggal*,
- *Hikayat Bayan Budiman*,

and the likes, which had been printed for the *Malay Literature Series*, and MPH had printed the *Malay Schools Series* in romanised script.

Prior to 1950, vernacular Malay schools in Singapore were still using the 3M approach (reading, writing and counting) in schools. Malay schools of that period taught both types of writing - Jawi and Rumi.

Subjects taught in Malay schools then were:

- Jawi and Rumi reading,
- Jawi and Rumi spelling (dictation),
- Jawi and Rumi writing,
- Composition and Letters,

- Malay Language,
- Mathematics and Timetable,
- Health and Wellness,
- Geography,
- History, and
- Art and Crafts.



Chirita Dahulu-kala Namanya Sam Kok, atau, Tiga Negri Berprang: Siok, Gwi sama Gor di jaman "Han Teow"

The only subjects taught in the Jawi script were reading, spelling, writing and composition & letters; whereas other subjects (including the Malay language) were taught in the Rumi script.

I entered school when I was almost 9, having completed reading the Qur'an twice and taught to read the newspaper in Jawi weekly by my father at home. Hence, reading Jawi was not a problem for

me as I was used to reading the magazines *Warta Malaya*, *Warta Jenaka* and *Tanah Melayu* which were often brought home by my late father, even though I did not understand everything that I read⁵.

With regards to *rumi* (spelling, reading and writing), I learnt the abc's, when I entered school.

In 1940, as a trainee teacher, other than reading *Utusan Melayu*, *Mastika* and fiction printed in Malaya in the *jawi* script, I also read many Malay books that were brought in from Java and Sumatra.

Books written in romanised Malay from Java were said to have been written by the Semarang Chinese; however, with the rise of a group called *Pujangga Baru*, many writers comprised Malays from the region.

Although the *rumi* spelling system within the Dutch East Indies (known presently as Indonesia) then was different from the system used in Malaya, many Malay readers here were able to read books and magazines brought in from across the straits fluently.

Many of us are familiar with names like Hamka, Marah Rosli, Merari Siregar, Adi Negoro, Surapaty, A. Hashimy and many more through their books written in *rumi* that were brought here by others. But I do not think that people there (Indonesia) knew of names like Harun Aminurrashid, Wiwaha, Abdullah Sidek, Ahmad Bakhtiar and many of our other writers because they were unable to read books written and printed in *jawi*.

On the day the Tenno Heika soldiers took over Singapore (15 February 1942), I had bought a Remington typewriter "axe brand" from a teacher for \$10.00 (British Malaya currency). With that typewriter (romanised script), I wrote a radio drama script for the Middle Syonan Drama group.

During the Japanese Occupation (15 February 1942 – 14 August 1945), there were two Malay magazines – *Semangat Asia* (publication of Marai Shimbun Sya Shimbun Sya) and *Fajar Asia* (publication of Sinsei Marai Kensetsu Sya) that were printed in *rumi*.

After World War II, aside from newspapers and magazines written in *jawi*, the *Cenderamata Maktab Perguruan SITC* and *Kencana* magazines were published in Singapore in *rumi* since 1947. This was followed by associations⁶ that published their bulletins in *rumi* – most were cyclostyled magazines.

That situation spurred the interest of many young writers in the 50's, including myself, who used the typewriter to produce their works in romanised script, although the newspapers and magazines to which the works were sent and published were printed in *jawi*.

It was then up to the compositor of the newspapers and magazines to transcribe the text from *rumi* to *jawi* for printing and publication.

In 1952, ASAS '50 spearheaded a committee that comprised KGMS (Singapore Malay Teachers Union), 4PM (The Malay Youth Literary

Association), the Malay Language Board and the Trengkas Malay Institute in organizing a Pan-Malayan Malay Letters conference. The aim was to foster collaboration among literary and language associations in the whole of Malaya in developing the Malay literature here.

On 12 April 1952, the Pan-Malayan Malay Letters Conference was held at the Seaview Hotel, Singapore. Representatives of 20 language and literary associations throughout Malaya and 86 observers⁷ from various language and literary individuals attended the conference.

The one-day conference discussed whether the proposed collaboration would be carried out through:

- a writers' association/body for the whole of Malaya, or
- an integration of writers' bodies, or
- a constitutionalised literary congress.

The conference's decision was to collaborate through a constitutionalised literary congress, then form and confirm the constitutionalised congress at the end of the conference that afternoon.

The conference also decided that the first Pan-Malayan Malay Letters Congress would be held the next day.

On 13 April 1952, KPMM1 (*Kongres Persuratan Melayu Malaya Pertama* or First Pan-Malayan Malay Letters Congress) was realized. The agenda

discussed at the KPMM1 that day was the issue of writing as a medium for development as well as the progress of modern Malay literature in Malaya.

There were participants who proposed to use *rumi* as the official script for literature, based on practical reasons such as technical convenience as well as the importance of spreading Malay literature to Malay-speaking areas.

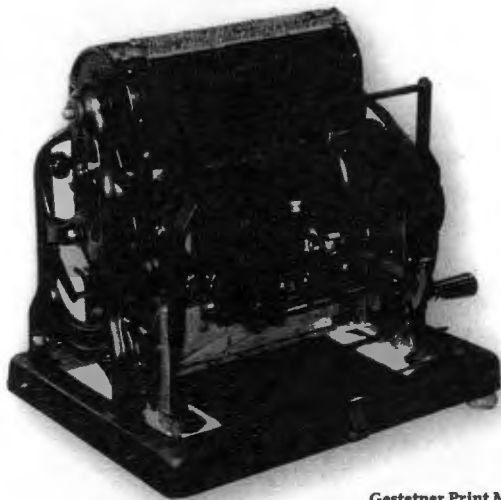
Many participants still held to the use of the *jawi* script as the official Malay script. They remarked that the *jawi* script had already become part of life of the Malays, and considering its contributions toward Malay letters, it should therefore be maintained as the official script for Malay literary writing. In fact, quite a number of the participants were worried that should *jawi* be given less priority, Islamic practices amongst the Malays would then deteriorate or be affected⁸.

There were also participants who wanted both scripts used. The agenda was discussed over half a day.

However, KPMM1 did not promptly decide which of the two scripts should be chosen as the official script for Malay letters in Malaya. It in fact concluded with the appointment of a Script Investigation Committee consisting of:

1. Chairman: Tuan Harun Aminurrashid
2. Lead Representative: Tuan Mahmud bin Ahmad
3. Secretary: Keris Mas (Kamaludin Muhammad)
4. Assistant Secretary: Tuan Ramli Abdul Hadi

5. North Malaya Rep: Tuan Mohd Assry Hj Muda (LEPAS)
6. West Malaya Rep: Tuan A. Samad Idris (ASAS Negeri Sembilan)
7. East Malaya Rep: Tuan Ahmad Wajdi (PAP Kelantan)
8. South Malaya Rep: Tuan Yusof Harun (IPM)
9. Singapore & North Borneo Rep: Tuan Buyong Adil (LBM)



Gestetner Print Machine

The Congress tasked the Committee to:

- research the extent to which *jawi* and *rumi* had been used in all aspects of Malay life;
- study the benefits and gains from the usage of both scripts; and

- thereafter, report the research findings and the committee's recommendations as to which script (either *jawi* or *rumi*) should be formalised as the medium of modern Malay letters to the KPMM to be held about a year later.

Headed by ASAS Negeri Sembilan, Negeri Sembilan Association of Village Heads and Negeri Sembilan Association of Teachers, the KPMM2 was held from 1-2 January 1954 at King George V Secondary School, Seremban, Negeri Sembilan.

2.00 p.m., 1 January 1954

The report of the KPMM1 Spelling Committee was presented at 11.30 a.m. that same morning and discussed in detail. All representatives – 20 congress members and 5 special observers, contributed their opinions and recommendations.

Heated discussions resulted in three proposals to be voted on:

1. to formalize *rumi* without affecting *jawi* – proposed by KGMS, supported by ASAS '50.
2. to formalize both scripts – proposed by LFS, supported by the Malay Language Board, and
3. to not make any decisions yet and consider the matter further – proposed by IPM, supported by the Great Malay Culture.

Eventually though, at 4.00 p.m., the KPMM reached an agreement:

Based on the highest vote, "... the Malayan

Malay Letters Congress today has decided that the rumi script should be formalized for Malay Letters without removing *jawi* until time determines so.”

The decision meant that *rumi* was to be the official script for the development of modern Malay language and literature, whilst *jawi* would not be disturbed i.e. it would be left as was needed for other purposes.

Initially, there were those who were reluctant to accept or wholeheartedly agree with the Congress' decision. In fact, some even accused ASAS '50 of killing *jawi*. Without realizing that the script in al-Qur'an was actually the Arabic script and not *jawi*, they blamed ASAS '50 for the cease of *jawi* reading and writing in schools, thus resulting in Malay children not being able to read the Qur'an.

Following KPM2's decision, many publishers continued to print magazines in *jawi*, but they also began printing their books (including Malay language and literature textbooks) in *rumi*. A number of publishers reprinted their *jawi*-written books in *rumi*.

In 1957, *Berita Harian* and *Berita Minggu* began publishing in *rumi*. That same year, I was paid by a publisher, Hashim Abdullah, to romanize two books - *Hikayat Si Miskin* and *Hikayat Mara Kerma* (copyright, Haji Mujtahid), that were published a few times in *jawi*.

The KPM2's decision on *rumi* led to KPM3 (16-21 September 1956) held at the University of

Malaya, Singapore, complete with the official closing of the KPM at the big palace in Johor Bahru, to discuss three papers on the *rumi* spelling system presented at the Congress.

The KPM3 appointed a Malay *Rumi* Spelling Committee to check, correct and complete the *rumi* spelling which was presented as proposal papers and thereafter, establish a new *rumi* spelling system suited for modern Malay letters as decided in the KPM2.

In the pursuit of perfecting the *rumi* spelling system, the KPM Spelling Committee collaborated with the Indonesian Spelling Team in Jakarta to standardize the different spelling systems of the two languages (Malay/Indonesian).

The collaboration produced a spelling system called Malindo spelling (that is, spelling for Malay and Indonesian languages). Both parties also agreed to implement the Malindo spelling system concurrently in January 1954; however, as the saying goes: 'We can only plan; but God determines destiny.'

Politics changed Malaya (including Singapore) to Malaysia in September 1963; Indonesia confronted Malaysia. And the Malindo spelling for the Malay language was stunted.

Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965 to become a republic. However, the LTK (*Lembaga Tetap Kongres*) or Permanent Congress Board, Singapore, still respected KPM's decision on

the usage of *rumi* as the medium of developing modern Malay literature.

In 1966, the Indonesian confrontation against Malaysia ended. The linguistic collaboration between KPBMM and the Indonesian Spelling Team resumed. The Indonesia-Malaysia Language Council (MBIM) was formed, now known as MABBIM.

Independent Singapore formed its own JKE (*Jawatankuasa Ejaan Melayu* or Malay Spelling Committee). In 1966, JKE supported KBKS (*Kongres Bahasa Kebangsaan Singapura* or National Language Congress of Singapore) organized by the LTK. KBKS put the implementation of the JKE spelling on hold to observe the development of spelling managed by MBIM.

Indonesia and Malaysia began using the MBIM (Majlis Bahasa Indonesia-Malaysia) spelling system from January 1967, and Singapore officially implemented the same spelling on 1 January 1972 (five years after it was used in Indonesia and Malaysia). Today, the development of modern Malay literature in Singapore still uses the *rumi* script.

Now, we are still in the era of literature books. For Malay books, *rumi* remains the medium of literary works. There is now the possibility of e-literature (electronic literature) being made available online. In my opinion, however, as long as Malay e-literature through the computer exists, *rumi* will remain relevant as its medium.

NOTA/NOTES

- 1 This article was presented at the Aksara Seminar organized by NLB and PGBM (Persatuan Guru Bahasa Melayu or Malay Language Teachers Union) at the National Library on 10 March 2007.
- 2 E.g.: *Hikayat Sri Rama*; *Hikayat Mahabrata* and others.
- 3 E.g.: *Hikayat Laila Majnun*; *Hikayat Abu Nawas*; *Hikayat Nabi bercukur* and others.
- 4 E.g.: Shakespeare's Tales; Golden Island; Robin Hood and the like.
- 5 In fact, I won a crossword puzzle contest held by *Warta Malaya* in 1937.
- 6 Including Singapore Malay Teachers' Association and *Angkatan Sasterawan* 50.
- 7 Not including a few representatives from the publishing industry from Singapore and Johor Bahru who walked out of the conference because their application to participate was rejected with the permission of the Conference Chairman.
- 8 However, *rumi* really became the medium of modern Malay literature in Singapore. Islamic practices and the spread of Islamic *dakwah* was not only unaffected but progressed even further with the construction of more than 80 new mosques here.

Muhammad Ariff bin Ahmad atau Mas merupakan salah seorang pengasas ASAS '50 (Angkatan Sasterawan '50) yang ditubuhkan pada 6 Ogos 1950. Dalam tempoh memegang jawatan di ASAS '50, beliau telah menerajui banyak projek yang menyumbang kepada perkembangan persuratan Melayu Singapura. Seorang penulis yang aktif dan prolifik, kewibawaannya terserlah melalui hasil karya beliau yang berbagai-bagai genre seperti puisi, cerpen, drama, novel dan esei. Muhammad Ariff sering digelar sebagai 'ensiklopedia bergerak' mengenai perkara-perkara yang bersangkutan-paut dengan bahasa, sastera dan budaya Melayu. Karangan beliau melebihi 50 buah buku, termasuk buku cereka, buku pengetahuan, buku kanak-kanak dan buku teks sekolah. Muhammad Ariff juga banyak menulis dan menyumbang rencana dan esei untuk penerbitan di media massa di Singapura dan Malaysia. Antara anugerah yang diterimanya termasuk Jasawan Budaya Majlis Pusat (1984), Cultural Medallion (1987), Anugerah Buku NBDCS¹ : Puisi (1990), Anugerah Tun Seri Lanang (1993), S.E.A. Write Award (1993), Anugerah Pendeta Majlis Pusat (1999) dan Anugerah Suluh Budiman UPSI².

NOTA/NOTES

- 1 NBDCS : National Book Development Council of Singapore
- 2 UPSI : Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris

Muhammad Ariff bin Ahmad or Mas is one of the founders of ASAS '50 (Angkatan Sasterawan '50) which was established on 6 August 1950. During his term in office in ASAS '50, he led many projects that contributed towards the development of Malay writing in Singapore. An active and prolific writer, his authority was brought to the fore through his multi-genre works, including poetry, short stories, drama, novel and essay. Muhammad Ariff is often nicknamed a 'walking encyclopaedia' on Malay language, literature and culture. He has written more than 50 books; these include short stories, informational books, children's books and school textbooks. Muhammad Ariff often writes and contributes articles and essays for publication in the mass media in Singapore as well as Malaysia. Among the awards which he'd received include the Jasawan Budaya Majlis Pusat (1984), Cultural Medallion (1987), NBDCS' Book Award : Poetry (1990), Tun Seri Lanang Award (1993), S.E.A. Write Award (1993), Majlis Pusat Pendeta Award (1999) and Suluh Budiman UPSI² Award.