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Writing as a Medium in Modern Malay Literature

Muhammad Ariff bin Ahmad

In his book 'Sarinhah' (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 Mans,  
• 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.

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Malay literature – either for transcribing oral folk
literature into written literature or writing Malay
translations of foreign literature, particularly
Hindu', Arabic/Persian' or English'.

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 Bedural 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 (read-
ing, writing and counting) in schools. Malay
schools of that period taught both types of writing –
awi 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.

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 Jenama and Tanah Melayu which were often brought home by my late father, even though I did not understand everything that I read.

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 Malay 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, Wivaha, 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 associations 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 KMTS (Singapore Malay Teachers Union), 4PM (The Malay Youth Literary
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vised KGMS (Singapore Malay Teachers
The Passage of Malay Scripts * Singapore and Modern Writing

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 associ­
ations throughout Malaya and 86 observers from vari­
ous 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, KPMMI (Kongres Persuratan
Malayu Malaya Pertama or First Pan-Malayan
Malay Letters Congress) was realized. The agenda
discussed at the KPMMI 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 litera­
ture 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 there­
fore 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
lesser priority, Islamic practices amongst the Malays
would then deteriorate or be affected.

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

However, KPMMI 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)

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 KPMM 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 KPMM 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 LPS, 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 lest 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 KPMM2'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 KPMM2's decision on rumi led to KPMM3 (16-21 September 1956) held at the University of Malaya, Singapore, complete with the official closing of the KPMM at the big palace in Johor Bahru, to discuss three papers on the rumi spelling system presented at the Congress.

The KPMM3 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 KPMM2.

In the pursuit of perfecting the rumi spelling system, the KPMM 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 KPMM'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 Mahakarya and others.
3 E.g.: Hikayat Lalla Majnun; Hikayat Abu Nams; Hikayat Nebi 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.
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Biodata


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