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NATURE AND SELF IN THE WORKS OF MUNSHI ABDULLAH

Literature, nature and belief system

The relationship between nature and Malay literature is heavily influenced by the belief system and lifestyle of the Malays. The Malays interpret nature according to their belief system, philosophy and values. The belief system and cultural life of the Malays have changed through the evolution of Animism, Hinduism, and Islam, three major creeds that have imbued the Malay Archipelago at various junctures in history and are extremely deep-rooted, going back not just for centuries, but for thousands of years. The evolution and synthesis of these beliefs have in turn influenced and shaped the Malay concept of nature and the cosmos, and this is clearly revealed in the works of Malay literature, both oral and written.

Malay animism views nature in dualism, i.e., the natural and the supernatural, occupied and controlled by unseen spirits (vital force), which affect every element of the environment (physical and natural) and human life; this incorporeal and invisible spirits are known as *makhluk halus*. This force can communicate and permeate or possess the human body and is believed to be very important in affecting the security and well-being of nature and human life. To ensure a safe and good life, humans need intermediaries such as the *pawang* (diviner) and *bomoh* (healer), who can serve as an intermediary to help them understand and meet the needs and demands of the myriad of unseen spirits through *upaca* (offerings), *serapah* (incantations to drive out evil spirits), *jampi* (magic spells), and *mantera* (an incantation or sounds repeated over and over as an invocation or prayer). *Mantera*, the earliest and oldest form of poetry, serves as a language of communication between beings of this dual world. Respect, interdependence, and harmony between humans and the natural elements are essential to maintaining peace and prosperity. Malay folk literature, like the myths of origin stories, are often deliberate expressions of this nature-centred spirituality or animist worldviews and lifeways which not only venerate and celebrate nature, but are thoroughly enmeshed with indigenous conceptions about what 'nature' might mean.

The Hindu strand of the Malay belief system meanwhile sees the cosmos as being divided into three worlds (i.e., *Triloka*): (1) the upper world, heaven, or *Brahmanda* (the abode of Brahma); (2) the human world or *Bhumi*; and (3) the underworld or the world of the dead (*Tala*). At the centre of, and acting as an axis connecting, all three physical, metaphysical, and spiritual universes, lies the sacred mountain, Mahameru. The universe is viewed as having a concentrically organised structure represented by the sacred geometric figuration of the *mandala*. In this concentric cosmology, each realm is ruled by a deity or king and has its own denizens, each with his/her own individual role and function, as designated by caste. Life is a constant struggle of good and evil that recurs in a continuous loop with each human being trying to raise him or herself from the bondage of *karma* (fate/destiny), attaining *moksha* (freedom from the fetters of time and selfish desires), by following in the path of *Dharma* (eternal law, truth, morality, righteousness, and religious duty), and ultimately achieving *Nirvana* (freedom from existential suffering).

The worlds of god and man are connected, bound together and intersect; the pantheon of deities and *dewaraja* (kings with divine powers) traverse the boundaries of the natural and

supernatural worlds through incarnations, avatars (manifestations of God in human form), and rebirth. Many works of classical Malay literature reflect this Hindu worldview, such as the *Hikayat Pandawa Mahabratha* or *Hikayat Seri Rama*, *Hikayat Panji*, *Hikayat Dewa Marakarma*, and *Hikayat Dewa Mandu*.

Malay-Muslims in turn believe in the concept of the one true God as the creator of *alam agung* (the greater universe), as opposed to the *alam kecil* (lesser universe) of mortal man. God Almighty the ultimate creator “makes djinns and humans to devote themselves to Him.” Every being that exists in the universe is exhorted to know God, because God is “the Hidden Treasure” and He created all manner of beings in the universe in order that He be known to them (as God reveals in the *Hadith Qudsi*). The Divine intention is that all His creations — humans, djinns, all creatures great and small — will know and worship Him (Al-Attas, 1977: 60–66). The existence and multiplicity of His creations and that of the created world inhabited by man — its geography, natural order, cosmology, and human culture — all reflect and prove the richness and greatness of the One (Divine Presence and Unity).

Though made with basal animalistic instincts, carnal appetites, and visceral urges, man is invested with the faculty of mind (intellect), making him God’s special creation, and it behooves him to therefore seek knowledge and apply that which he has acquired in order to better equip himself to fulfil the responsibility and trust bestowed upon him both as God’s caliph (i.e., representative) on earth as well as His servant (*abdullah*), to be the protector, and not the destroyer of nature (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 2002: 13). Mankind was sent the Prophet Muhammad as its paragon (*al-insan al-kamil*), the “Universal or Perfect Man”, whose function is two-fold — as a model of spiritual life and as an “archetype” to the cosmos (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 1986). To attain the status of *al-insan al-kamil*, man must, throughout the course of his life, continue to hone his intellect, nurture his spirituality, and ensure that his knowledge (*al-ilm*) always accompanies his actions (*al-amal*) so that he can rise above his basal and primordial instincts. Examples of classical Malay literature that embody the values and teachings of Islam include the *Tajus Salatin*, *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafi*, and the *syair* of Hamzah Fansuri.

Research on traditional Malay literature has shown that changes to the religious beliefs of the Malays did not change Malay literature drastically. Because of the characteristically amenable and receptive nature of Malay culture and civilization, its literary expression is a synthesis of adaptation and assimilation, a fusion of changing religious beliefs, and a composite of shifting epistemological universes and cosmos. For example, one can still detect distinctive animist and Hindu elements in a number of Malay folktales being told, well after Islam had gained a foothold in the Archipelago. This does not mean, however, that the change in religious belief did not leave its mark on Malay literature at all. As Islamisation became more extensive, the original text of literary works had to be adjusted to align itself with Islamic values. For example, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the two major Sanskrit epics associated with the Hindu religion, lost much of their sacred quality as holy texts in their Malay versions (the *Hikayat Seri Rama* and *Hikayat Pandawa* respectively), and came to be regarded as texts containing moral teachings, but mainly as a source of entertainment upon which *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) performances are based.

Nature and the Author

Having examined the nexus between literature and society’s belief system in general and at the macro level, let us now turn our attention to analyse at the micro level the relationship between an author and nature. An author’s relationship with nature is one that is complex and dynamic. He not only observes, describes, and imitates nature in his works but is, consciously

or otherwise, influenced by his natural environment; he becomes aware that human attributes might be highlighted in the characteristics of plants, animals, and other natural elements. These metaphors then become messages for personal reflection and action. These messages are the mirrors in nature that become a language to express and evaluate oneself while also helping one to make comparisons, criticisms, predictions, suggestions, and so on. Nature functions as a tool for communication, a channel to convey a message, and a mirror to reflect an image of the self that the author wants to project — including that of the author himself. It acts sometimes as a messenger bearing information or insight, and helps sharpen his awareness by indicating another way of seeing and knowing. The meaning that the author wants to convey from this projected and reflected image is in turn determined by the sensitivity and strength of the author's faculty in capturing such an image, his ability to invest it with meaning, and to *re-produce* or *re-present* it in the form of literary work. As such, nature acts as a mirror that reflects an image first captured and interpreted by the author from his natural surroundings, which is then thrown back as a second image that is formed as a result of the interactive process between the individual and his natural surroundings after having been synthesised, merged, and contrived through the author's creative and personal perception (by means of the senses) or cognition (of the mind).

The force or power of this faculty differs, or is relative, from one individual author to the next. An author might view and interpret the natural world with a sharp and observant physical eye; another with the refracting power of a keen intellect; another beholds it with sensitive and sincere intuitiveness; yet another with the purity of the mind's eye; others see it with acute perspicacity and impeccable conscience; while still others with the wild, abandoned eyes of imagination, invention, and creation. The human faculty of perception (Pascal's "intuitive spirit" or "logic of the heart") and intelligence ("geometric spirit" or "logic of reason") are extremely varied and dynamic, and from this multifarious profusion, a cornucopia of literary works is born to satisfy an equally varied and diverse literary taste.

The dynamic relationship between the author and nature is never static, but changes commensurate with his life experience, the development of his faculty of reason, taste, and level of maturity. Generally, the more mature and experienced a man is, the greater the power of his mind, the more mature and balanced are his emotions, and the more concretised and crystalline his ideals and ideas. However, there are exceptions — some authors do not show growth; instead a decline in the quality of their work whether due to a stagnation of imagination, a depletion of intellectual will/desire, or a diminution in creative impulse. This can happen after an author has produced his *magnum opus* and no longer produces any new work that can add value in terms of aesthetics or in its vision of ideas. A thorough and fair assessment is therefore quite important when assessing the development and contribution of an author and his work.

The Concept of Self

The concept of self in traditional Malay literature has been studied by Rolvink (1971), Muhammad Haji Salleh (1991), Braginsky (1993), and Hadijah (2001). Muhammad finds a proclivity among traditional Malay authors to employ a self-effacing narrator-persona as a mask behind which the author hides. This self-effacing, and often self-deprecating, discourse can be seen from the rhetorical or stylistic features used in traditional literary texts that serve to make the narrator — and by association, the author — inconspicuous, rather than drawing attention to himself in an overt or obtrusive way. It is not unusual to find an author-narrator making self-deprecating remarks, interjections, and protestations of unworthiness or ignorance while relating his story, for example. This modest authorial self-representation is an act of describing the self within the confines of a traditional Malay ethos that prizes humility over conceit, polite deference over brazen self-promotion. When looking at

self-representation in traditional Malay texts, according to Muhammad, “We are in the area of tradition not of ‘one-upmanship’ but rather of ‘one-downmanship’” (Muhammad Haji Salleh, 1991: 73).

This authorial self-awareness in Malay literature, according to Braginsky, began to take shape with the rise of religious consciousness in the early part of the 16th century. Exposure to the teachings of Islam and, particularly, to Islamic literary texts, played a significant role in raising the consciousness of Malay authors in regard to redefining authorship and representation of authorial identity, and a reassessment of the complex relationship between authorial self-reflection and literary tradition: “This process of self-reflection and re-imagining affected such notions as the creative process, the function of beauty, the didactic value of literature and the modes for creating literary works. In a word, this period saw the emergence of self-awareness in Malay literature” (Braginsky 1993: 29).

Braginsky believes that religious literature (*sastera kitab*) — in particular, Sufi literature — was instrumental in changing Malay traditional literary practice of maintaining authorial anonymity, with an orientation to Arabic literary culture seeing more and more Malay writers putting their name to claim ownership over their work: “Malay letters was losing its anonymity in the course of Islamization, and authorship was becoming acknowledged and claimed in accordance with the position which the various genres occupy within the hierarchy of the Muslim literary system: the higher their ranking, the greater the percentage with named authors” (1993: 69). This adopted practice of naming and claiming in the fashion of *kitab* literature, according to Rolvink, goes so far as to include, after the author’s name, the name of the place he comes from: “In accordance with Arabic custom these authors used to add to their names a word indicating their place of origin, so that their names are followed by such words as *al-Palimbani*, *al-Bandjari*, *al-Samatra’i*, *al-Fansuri*, *al-Buni*, *al-Makasari*, *al-Kalantani*, *al-Fatani*, and so on” (Rolvink, 1971: 1,233).

From the long-standing ideas of the writer as a craftsman of words or a “re-teller” of tales, the idea of the “author” now emerged in the modern sense — as an individual producing his or her writing as an expression of unique, individual personality rather than external source of inspiration, and therefore possessing a unique claim of ownership over that writing. By showing how literary self-representation and authorial identity evolved from 18th century print culture and exposure to foreign literatures, especially from the West and the Middle East, my own study looks at the works of seven Malay authors, namely the Sufi poetry and prose of Hamzah Fansuri, *Hikayat Nakhoda Muda* (1830) by Laudin, *Hikayat Perintah Negeri Bengkulu* (c. 1770) by Ahmad Rijaluddin, *Surat Keterangan Sheikh Jalaluddin* (c. 1829) by Fakhir Saghir, *Hikayat Abdullah* (1849) by Munsyi Abdullah, *Tuhfat al-Nafis* (1872) by Raja Ali Haji, and *Tarikh Datu’ Bentara Luar Johor* (1928) by Muhammad Salleh Perang, to show how they redefine their identities, poetics, social function, and relationship with the audience within the rapidly changing social and economic contexts of authorship (Hadijah, 2001).

My research shows that these developments brought about by extraneous influences do not represent a discrete or sudden break, but a gradual development in response to the complex conjunctions of circumstances, and shifting social, cultural, and economic forces of the time. The idea of authorship, literary self-representation, and individual identity, with its own discursive forms and practices, were already evident in Malay literature before print capitalism from the West arrived on Malay shores. Though contact with Western literature threw into sharp relief the distinctive divide between the two literary traditions in terms of the notion of self, or the “author-function”¹ as Foucault calls it, these discursive constructs were

¹ See Michel Foucault (1969) “What Is an Author?” in Donald Bouchard, ed., *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 138.

not understood in the same way as they were in the West, nor were they taken wholesale from the West, but were more oriented toward Malay culture and Islam which emphasise a sense of religious consciousness, duty, and social responsibility as being endemic in the role of the Malay author (Hadijah, 2001: 347–48).

Munsi Abdullah: Authoring Nature and the Self

In many ways, Munsi Abdullah's career marks the transition from a literary economy of patronage to one of the marketplace. Although one must be wary of turning writers into symbolic figures, Abdullah's works, more than that of any of his contemporaries and others before him, embody the *zeitgeist* of a changing milieu. He was the first to define his own authorial identity in relation to this print market public, making his identity central to much of his later writings. Abdullah's turn to explicit self-representation and the identity he constructed for himself must be understood in terms of his changing relationship to this dynamically emerging commercial print culture. He was raised and worked in the background of a time and place that are unique and interesting. Compared to previous Malay authors, the natural environment or the cosmos that underlie and affect the life, thoughts, and works of Abdullah were relatively more composite and complex.² Abdullah's works were born out of the encounters and clashes of intermingling physical and cultural dynamics.

Abdullah was born and raised in the late 18th to the mid-19th centuries — the time of the fall of the Malay sultanate and the rise of Western colonial powers in Asia — and settled in the cities administered by the English empire in Melaka and Singapore. Melaka and Singapore were, at that time, and arguably still are, cosmopolitan cities, and this backdrop exposed him to a diverse community of denizens from a variegated cultural, religious, education, economic, technological, and social backgrounds. Abdullah's own family, work, and social backgrounds too were open and diverse. The composite nature and uniqueness of the cultural, political, economic and social environments Abdullah found himself in influenced the way he views nature (and consequently his worldview or *weltanschauung*) which in turn are reflected in his works. Abdullah consciously and creatively integrated all these elements from a variety of sources — Hinduism, Islamic, Western, and Eastern — which congregated and found confluence in the city, particularly in Singapore — an emerging hub of commerce, culture, and publication in the 19th century, and the administrative centre of the British — as a means of personal expression and projecting a self-image that is unique and interesting.

In this chapter, we discuss how Abdullah approaches nature (i.e., the environs and surroundings, both natural and manmade, of places and landscapes he encountered during his travels) in three of Abdullah's major works; and how his *Kisah Pelayaran* (accounts of his sea voyage) and his *Hikayat* distance themselves from the lyrical pastoral tradition of the romantic wanderer, with its sentimental and affectionate rhetoric concerned with the powerful feelings that natural scenery might inspire as in the classical Malay tradition of nature writing, but instead, emphasizing the observations of an intelligent human being as a crucial and critical agent as a countermeasure to Romanticism, aligning his works with something more modernist in form in the way he approaches nature in heterodox and more critical ways. All three works were produced in the context of different stages of Abdullah's life and a variety of nature elements are used to record his thoughts and observations, which also reflect the way Abdullah developed in later years to keep his writings deeply rooted in what concerned him in everyday life, but at the same time reaching for innovative new literary forms,

² See Hadijah Rahmat's *Antara Dua Kota* (1999) and *Munsi* (1999) to understand the historical and political contexts that underlie Abdullah's life.

challenging the old tradition, and to adapt with a keen eye on the challenges of a changing modern world.

ACCOUNT OF ABDULLAH'S SEA VOYAGE TO KELANTAN (1838)

The *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah ke Kelantan (Account of Abdullah's Sea Voyage to Kelantan)* narrates Abdullah's journey both as an interpreter and messenger tasked by the British governor of Singapore to deliver his missive to the sultan and provincial chiefs of Kelantan. Four boats carrying merchandise, said to be worth between 40 to 50 thousand Ringgit, belonging to a group of Chinese and Jewish traders from Singapore could not leave the state of Kelantan due to a civil war that had erupted there. The traders had asked for help from the Governor of Singapore, Sir Samuel George Bonham, who wrote a letter each to the three rajas of Kelantan — Raja Bendahara, Raja Temenggong, and the Yang Dipertuan Kelantan. Abdullah and a young man of noble Portuguese origin by the name of Grandpre were assigned to deliver Mr. Bonham's letters to the sultan and chiefs of Kelantan. Accompanying Abdullah and Grandpre was Baba Ko An, a leading Chinese merchant from Singapore, who joined the delegation to bring the Chinese letters to Kelantan's Chinese Captains. They boarded two sloops, the *Maggie Lauder*, belonging to Mr. Scott and the *Waterwitch* owned by Mr. Boustead, two of the fastest vessels in Singapore at that time (Skinner, 1966: 25). They left on 27 March 1838 and safely returned to Singapore on 24 April 1838. On the way to Kelantan, they stopped at several places in Johor, Pahang, and Terengganu, and sailed back to Singapore after a six-day stay in Kelantan.

Not only was that the first time Abdullah, at the age of 42, had sailed on a ship, but having been born and raised in Melaka and, later having worked and lived all his adult life in Singapore — both settlements ruled by the British and, in the case of Melaka, also by the Dutch — his voyage to Kelantan was also the first time he had visited a land ruled by a Malay ruler!

The *Account of Abdullah's Sea Voyage to Kelantan* takes the reader to the cultural and regional geography of the Malay hinterland, and portrays landscapes and the physical and natural worlds of the places he visited by drawing attention to the political and economic realities embedded within, and turning a comparative and self-reflexive eye on the terrain between the realm ruled by the Malay rulers and the settlements governed by the British. Abdullah told of the places he visited — Johor, Pahang, Terengganu, and Kelantan — states he describes as being rich in natural resources, but whose benefits he believes were not fully maximised or fully capitalised on to help alleviate the reality of struggle for ordinary people. Abdullah was rather detailed in his descriptions and was in equal measure scathing in his opinion about the locals' way of life, in terms of what he perceives as the backwardness of their cultural and economic practices, politics, education, religion, morality, nutrition, hygiene, language, welfare, and so on.

He made a comparison between the life of the people living in Melaka and Singapore under British rule and that of the indigenes living in the states ruled by the Malay sultans, and concluded that life under British rule was better:

Sebermula maka apabila sahaya ketahui akan segala perbezaan dan kelainan adat Melayu dengan adat2 Inggeris itu, maka mengucap syukurlah sahaya dengan beribu2 syukur kepada Allah, sebab sahaya telah diperanakan di bawah bendera Inggeris dan beroleh aman sentiasa, bukannya seperti orang yang merasa seksa dan sengsara, pada seditakalanya dalam bodoh dan kejahatan itu adanya. (Sweeney, 2005: 168).

“Now that I know all the differences and dissimilarities between Malay traditions and attitudes in contrast to English traditions and practices, I profess thousands of thanks to God because I was born under the British flag and for the peace and stability that this affords; unlike those wretched, benighted people born in inherent ignorance and vileness.” (Sweeney, 2005: 168).

Abdullah also discusses the role and position of the Malay sultanate from the perspectives of spirituality and religion. He refers his readers to the *Taj as-Salatin* to emphasise that it is incumbent on a sovereign to reign righteously according to Islam, and that a core responsibility of leadership lies in trust and accountability, which should weigh heavily on the king’s shoulders. Abdullah recommends that the Malay rulers study and refer to the *Taj as-Salatin* as a guide, so that the king, in the act of ruling over his subjects and of basic legitimation, can learn to use his royal status and sovereign will to lead his followers and administer his kingdom justly, according to God’s laws:

Adapun apabila seorang dijadikan Allah ia raja, bukannya sebab hendak memuaskan nafsunya berbini sepuluh dua puluh atau mencari harta dan membunuh orang dengan aniayanya, melainkan sebab disuruh Allah memeliharakan manusia, supaya tiada dianiaya oleh seorang akan seorang; itulah gunanya. Maka sebab itu, patutlah segala raja2 itu menaruh Kitab Taju’s Salatin (ertinya: Mahkota Segala Raja2) dan menilik akan dia pada tiap2 hari dan mencari orang yang tahu dan belajar daripadanya dan menerima segala nasihat orang yang alim supaya boleh Tengku ketahui hal segala raja2 adil dan zalim. (Sweeney, 2005: 153).

“When a person is made king by God, it is not so that he can satisfy his carnal desires by having ten or twenty wives, or fulfil his avarice for personal gain, or so that he can wrongly kill his people or tyrannize them, but it is because God entrusts him to be their guardian not their oppressor, to ensure that a man is not wronged by another so that there can be equal justice for all; that is the intention. It is therefore imperative that all kings should read daily from the *Tajus Salatin (Crown of All Kings)* and apprised themselves of its teachings and solicit advice from those who are learned and pious so that Your Majesties can distinguish a just king from a wicked one.” (Sweeney, 2005: 153).

A BRAVE AND RESPECTED STATE REPRESENTATIVE

In his accounts, Abdullah portrays himself as a messenger who is respected by both royalty and ordinary people he met along the way, who often called him “Tuan Sayid”:

Maka ada kira2 setengah dua jam lamanya sahaya berlayar mudik, sampailah kepada suatu tempat yang bernama Pangkalan Tambang, yaitu berseberangan dengan Kampung Laut....maka kemudian datanglah Sayid Abu turun ke perahu itu. Maka yaitu diam di Kampung Laut di seberang.

Maka adapun Sayid Abu itu peranakan Pontianak; maka ia duduk di Terengganu. Maka dijemput Raja Kelantan, karena yaitu ditakuti orang akan dia. Maka Raja membuat guru akan dia. Maka sekalian orang dalam negeri itu membilang dia seperti raja juga. Maka apabila datang ia ke perahu, maka memberi salam ia kepada sahaya, lalu sahaya menyahut

salamnya. Maka disangkanya sahaya Tuan Sayid. Maka katanya: “Apa khabar Tuan Sayid dalam Singapura? Dan adakah ketemu perompak dijalan? Maka berani sangat Tuan Sayid datang ke mari dengan perahu kecil ini; maka kalau orang di sini dibunuh pun ia tiada berani berlayar dalam perahu begini kecil,” serta ia bertanya khabar: “Surat apa ini dan darihal apa?” Maka jawab sahaya: “Tiadalah sahaya ketahui akan perkara isi surat ini, melainkan sahaya membawa surat sahaja kepada raja.” Maka kata Sayid Abu: “Marilah kita mengadap ke dalam membawa surat ini. (Sweeney, 2005: 124).

“For about two and a half hours I sailed inland till we finally berthed at a place called Pangkalan Tambang which lies on the opposing shore to Kampung Laut... Later a man by the name of Sayid Abu, having crossed the river from Kampung Laut, came to our boat.

Though he hailed from Pontianak, Sayid Abu has made Terengganu his domicile. As he was much feared by the locals, he was summoned by the King of Kelantan who made him his advisor. So influential was he that many in the country regarded him as if he too was a king. When he came to the boat, he gave me *salam* to which I replied in kind. He somehow assumed that I was a Sayid (editor’s note: A Sayyid or Syed is a person of Arabic descent believed to be the direct descendants of the prophet Muhammad, and is highly respected by the local Muslim community) and started to address me as Tuan Sayid. He said: “How are you Tuan Sayid, and what news of Singapore? Did you perchance come across any pirate during your journey here? Tuan Sayid is truly a brave man to come in such a small boat; the people here would not dare sail in a boat so small, even on pain of death.” He then enquired of the letter I was carrying: “What is the nature of this letter and what does it pertain to?” To which I answered: “I know not what the content of this letter is, save that I have been entrusted to deliver it to the king.” Replied Sayid Abu: “If that be the case then let’s make haste and bring it to the king.”

In his book, Abdullah noted there were many Arabs in the country who used the title “Sayid” (descendants of the Messenger of Allah) and “Sheikh” (descendants of Prophet Muhammad’s companions). According to Abdullah, the Arabs were revered by the Malays, so much that they spoke to them in a formal register of Malay usually reserved for when they address royalty: “[orang-orang Arab ini] ditakuti orang Melayu akan dia. Maka bahasa mereka itu kepada orang Arab itu seperti berbahasa kepada raja” (Sweeney, 2005: 105). Perhaps aware of the privileged position the Arabs were accorded by the Malays and the special treatment given to them, Abdullah did not protest when the locals called him “Tuan Sayid”. Thus when the Raja Bendahara of Kelantan addressed Abdullah as “Tuan Sayid”, he did not correct him: “Jangan Tuan Sayid takut, sampaikan kepada Tuan Bonham seperti titah kita ini; karena kita hendak memeliharakan orangnya” [“Fear not Tuan Sayid, and convey to Mr. Bonham as we have said; because we want him to keep us in his good books.”] (Sweeney, 2005: 130).

Abdullah also wrote that he was admired by the locals for being able to speak in the white man’s tongue, and because he was often observed ceaselessly writing and making notes:

Maka lalu turunlah sahaya berjalan2 melihat2 kampung dan pasar di situ. Maka banyaklah orang berkampung, beratus2 mengikut sahaya.

Maka sahaya menulislah sepanjang jalan itu, karena mengambil ingatan apa2 yang bertemu dan yang dilihat. Maka itulah menjadi suatu hairan kepada mereka itu, karena menulis sambil berjalan. Sahaya dengar kata mereka itu: 'Pandai sungguh orang timur ini tahu bahasa orang putih dan lagi bolih menulis sambil berjalan dan berdiri.'

Kemudian, maka bertemulah pula sahaya dengan seorang muda hitam manis dan rambutnya panjang, tiada berbaju, dan dipakainya suatu kain selendang; dibuatnya kain sampai di atas lututnya. Maka suatu keris di pinggangnya. Maka kata anak Sayid Abu itu kepada sahaya: 'Ini suatu anak raja besar juga, adik raja yang kita pergi ke rumahnya tadi.' Maka datanglah ia pun berjalan bersama2. Maka barang di mana bertemu dengan orang, sekalian duduk di jalan menyembah akan dia. Maka kata sahaya: 'Tengku tahu menulis dan membaca surat?' Katanya: 'Tiada tahu.' Maka katanya: 'Sahaya terlalu suka melihat tuan menulis, lagi terlalu cepat; dan kalau tuan tinggal di sini, sahaya terlalu suka hendak belajar.' Maka kata sahaya: 'Di sini tiadakah orang tahu?' Maka katanya: 'Tiada empat orang dalam negeri ini yang tahu menulis seperti tuan ini; ada juga sedikit2 orang tahu mengaji Qur'an.' (Sweeney, 2005: 136–137).

[...] Maka katanya: 'Tuan ini terlalu pandai membaca khutbah; baiklah tuan diam di di sini supaya boleh sahaya jadikan kadhi dan khatib.....Sekalian perkataan tuan ini benar. Dan lagi tiada boleh dialahkan lidah tuan ini.' (Sweeney, 2005: 153).

"I took a walk to see the village and market there and a crowd had gathered following me in tow wherever I go. And all along the way as I was walking, I kept writing to record all that I have encountered and seen. This was a source of consternation to them: writing while walking. I overheard them say: 'How clever is this eastern man who knows the language of the white man and what's more can write while walking and standing.'

Later, I met a handsome, dark-complexioned young man with long hair, shirtless, and with a length of fabric draped around his midriff to just above his kness; donning a *keris* at his waist. Sayid Abu's son told me: 'This gentleman here is another of the king's son and is also a big *raja*; he is the younger brother of the *raja* whose house we went to earlier.' The young prince proceeded to accompany us on our walk. Wherever we went, people would lower themselves in obeisance to the prince. I then asked him: 'Tengku, do you know how to read and write?' He replied: 'No I don't.' And said further did he: 'I am very happy to see you writing, and very fast at that; and if you stay here, I would really like to learn from you.' To which I asked: 'Is there no one here who knows how to read and write?' He replied: 'There are no more than four people in this country who know how to write like you; there are however a handful who know how to recite the Quran.'

"...He said: 'Sir, you are indeed very well versed at reading the *khutbah* (sermon); it will do us well if you stay here so that I can make you our *kadhi* (a judge whose decisions are based in Islamic religious law) and *khatib* (preacher)...All your words are true. And furthermore,

nothing can defeat the words that issue from your tongue.”

Abdullah in his book also makes mention of his efforts to acquire a manuscript of the *Hikayat Kemala Bahrain* by hiring someone to obtain it on his behalf from an Encik Ha, a retainer of the Raja Bendahara. From a collection owned by Encik Ha’s brother, Abdullah borrowed two *hikayat* to make copies — the *Hikayat Isma Dewa Pekermah Raja* and the *Kitab Khoja Maimun* (2005: 137–138). These examples of, and testimonials, to his talents and enterprise further reinforce his image as a learned and erudite man of letters, a thinker, an adept amanuensis, and a keen scribe, who is respected and admired for his knowledge in language and his skills as a rhetorician, as well as an avid collector of classical literary texts.

NATURE AS METAPHOR

Abdullah uses nature and utilizes it in conceptualizing metaphorical expressions to give comment on, and explain human action, behaviour, and attitude in his three books, as a pictorial or illustrative way of representing, analogising, and symbolising human nature by juxtaposing it to the natural surroundings. The culture-specific attitude of the Malays to nature gives a primary reason for why the metaphors that are based on perceptions about it are also distinctive. Nature metaphors are employed in literature in various ways, but the point of interest here is how they reflect on a cultural community’s relation to their natural environment. If we investigate the nature metaphors — the *bidalan* (maxims), *kiasan* (idioms), or *perumpamaan* (allusions), and *peribahasa* or *pepatah* (proverbs) that are abound in Abdullah’s works, we will find that they are communal or conventional ones that have their origins in Malay society, which have been integral of Malay oral tradition since the beginning of their civilization. The nature metaphors employed by Abdullah display an assumption of intimate relationship between the natural and the human, and that nature and the human realm are joined in an inextricable way. This deep interconnectedness between humans and nature can also be understood in terms of traditional Malay folk communities who were predominantly agrarian and made up of peasantry who lived in symbiosis with nature. The Malay peasants’ complete dependence on the land for their sustenance meant that they did not bear any romantic notion nor attitude towards nature (in contrast to the prevalent proclivity observed in European culture). Rather, they viewed natural phenomena as ambiguous — either benevolent or malicious from the perspective of their own survival in life. Also, most Malay common folk lived all their lives in their villages, some never leaving it even for short trips elsewhere; therefore, nature was not only the immediate but also the exclusive context of their lives.

The analogy drawn between the concrete images and their associative meanings is pithy, and the construal schema succinct, direct, and at times, trenchant, as can be seen in the following examples from the *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah ke Kelantan*³:

Adapun Raja yang adil dan hukum yang baik itu adalah seperti seponon kayu berbuah sentiasa. (2005:152)

“A fair king with good rules is like a tree which always bears fruits.”

...orang yang hampir kepada raja seperti bersahabat dengan ular yang bisa, maka salah sedikit dipagut biji mata (2005:153).

³ The quotations are from “kisah Pelayaran Abdullah ke Kelantan” in *Karya Lengkap Abdullah in Abdul Kadir Munsyi*, Vol.1, edited by Sweeney (2005)

“A person who is close to the king is like someone who befriends a venomous snake; one wrong move and he will strike and take out your eyeball.”

Raja yang zalim yang membiarkan anak-anak berperang untuk mengambilalih kerajaan..Maka jadilah ia suatu pangkat kejahatan yang terlebih bengis daripada harimau dan ular yang bias.. (2005:156).

“A cruel king who allows his sons to wage war against one another to take over his kingdom is more savage than the most ferocious tiger or venomous snake.”

Anak-anak raja yang berperang sesama saudara untuk dapat kuasa kesudahannya kelak menjadi seperti rabuk dengan api adanya. (2005:155)

“To let princes wage wars among them to attain power, the result is like putting tinder next to fire.”

Rakyat yang tidak terbela dan menjadi korban kezaliman dalam perang saudara seperti semut seekor adanya (2005:139).

“A subject (unprotected by his king) who falls victim to the ravages of a civil war is like a hapless ant.”

Kisah burung tempua membuat sarang dengan monyet yang kehujanan (2005:149).

“Here Abdullah refers to the folktale of the Weaverbird and the Monkey to draw an analogy between the monkey who refuses to learn from the weaverbird how to build a shelter from the rain as told in the tale, and someone with a similar attitude as the monkey, whose wilful ignorance leads to the ruination of all.”

An essential characteristic identified in the Malay nature analogies employed by Abdullah here is that although metaphors and figurative language are considered non-direct ways of conveying emotions, messages, criticisms, and comments — most obviously evidenced by the metaphorical images that ‘conceal’ the intimated meaning they intend to convey — we are left in no doubt about the directness in the way he brings forward his manifest and unequivocal feelings about the characters he writes about. Metaphorical representation is one crucial form of indirectness; yet, the proposition made here is that Abdullah turned metaphor on its head by being candid and forthright, sometimes even brutally honest, *despite* using nature images as analogies. Unlike earlier traditional Malay authors, and even his contemporaries who wrote at about the same time as him, who hide behind figurative language and adopt a more self-concealing and oblique manner in bringing forward their private thoughts and feelings in their writing, Abdullah was revolutionary in inserting and asserting the individuality of the protagonists and, in particular, the individuality of the author-as-protagonist in his. This is not only in terms of portraying

himself as a central character and narrator in the text, but also in terms of laying bare and defining his personal motives and self-image which are patently self-serving and egocentric, while being unique and autonomous at the same time.

Authoring the Self: Motive, the Individual and Self-representation

What do we require of a protagonist appearing in a text in order to label him or her ‘an individual’? It is wrong to assume that there is a necessary connection between being a textual individual and being a central protagonist. Many 20th-century autobiographers explicitly depict themselves as exemplary rather than central protagonists; yet, they are considered individuals. In contrast, there are numerous central protagonists in classical Malay hagiographies of royal families, genealogies (*salasilah*), romances, histories, and other writings; yet, the individualistic theory asks us to believe that individuality is a novel Renaissance phenomenon that represents the rise of the individual in Europe in the 12th century.⁴

According to Yuval Harari (2004), individuality must imply “something else, something more”, and that “something else, something more”, he contends, are uniqueness and autonomy:

(1) **Uniqueness:** For [an author] to portray himself as an individual, the text should at least express awareness of his uniqueness. Ideally, this uniqueness should also be highlighted and celebrated. ... Secondly, there should be something that tries to exaggerate or at least highlight this uniqueness... Finally, there should be something in the text that celebrates this uniqueness and takes pride in it. In extreme cases, the author or protagonist may explicitly declare his or her desire to be different from everyone else.

(2) **Autonomy:** The best way to make one’s [experience] unique... is to depict the [experience] as springing from some authentic inner reality, rather than from a common outside reality, and to depict this inner reality in its turn as ultimately autonomous from the outside reality. Though the inner reality is normally influenced by outside factors such as social status or historical processes, for a person to be recognized as an individual, at least part of what makes him tick must be independent of these outside factors, and this part alone would be considered ‘authentic’. This means that in order to be a textual individual, [an author] appearing as a protagonist should depict himself as being as autonomous from history as possible, drawing his identity, significance and motivation from an inner reality rather than from the historical reality outside.⁵

When we examine Abdullah’s three texts, it becomes clear that he displays such individualistic ideals, and attempts to portray himself as an individual in the aforementioned sense. Indeed, in some respects, they are unabashedly self-serving and egocentric — he paints a picture of himself as the exemplary protagonist, distinguishing himself as the “clever

⁴ See for example: Caroline Bynum (1980). “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?”, pp. 1-17; Jacob Burckhardt (1944). *The Civilization of the Renaissance*, pp. 324-325; and Robert Hanning (1977). *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance*, p. 12.

⁵ Yuval Harari (2004). *Renaissance Military Memoirs: War, History, and Identity, 1450-1600*, pp. 43-44.

eastern man who knows the language of the white man”, who could write and walk at the same time, for example; and is unstinting in his sterling account of his own knowledge, courage, and prowess. Abdullah certainly had unique interests, emotions, and motives, and these are starkly laid bare for all to see. His *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah ke Kelantan* for instance, was written a month after he returned from his voyage, and can be considered as a form of written testimony to corroborate and support the lawsuit he initiated in court against Baba Po Eng, who reneged on his promise to pay him \$80 to serve as an interpreter during the mission of this voyage. So, when he gives an account of the good job that he had done despite the often treacherous conditions he had to endure during the voyage, such as braving war and bad weather, crossing crocodile-infested rivers, facing the threat of pirate attacks, surviving cannon fire and waves as high as palm trees in Kuala Pahang, and other serious threats to his life and safety, these were described in personal, rather than collective, terms, as if they were a unique personal suffering that only he — and not his travel companions, Grandpre or Baba Ko An, or even the other crew members — had to bear. The condition of his travel companions and the other crew members, and whether they too were brave or survived these ordeals, is given the short shrift or not mentioned at all.

In contrast, cognizant of Malay etiquette that frowns on anyone blowing his own trumpet, Abdullah often employs the third-person to sing his own praises. For example, he describes how an acquaintance of his family, who he met during his voyage, praised him for his courage, for how gallantly he has lived up to his father’s reputation as an intrepid man, and how he has continued his family’s bloodline and legacy of producing men of valour:

Kemudian datanglah abang Abdul Rahman anak Melaka, anak Wa’ Fatimah dan saudara abang Kassim Durian Tunggal. Serta bertemu, maka terlalu sukanya, seraya dipeluknya sahaya sambil diciumnya, katanya: ‘Berani sangat engkau ini datang dalam perahu sebesar kelopak jantung ini: bukankah musim ini musim perompak lanun, lagipun musim ribut?’ Kemudian katanya: ‘Tiada engkau membuang baka; maka bapamu pun demikianlah hatinya berani.’ (Sweeney, 2005: 123).

Older brother Abdul Rahman, a son of Malacca, son of Wak Fatimah and sibling of older brother Kassim from Durian Tunggal, later arrived to greet me. Upon meeting me, he was overjoyed; and as he hugged and kissed me, he said: ‘It is so brave of you to come in this boat that is no bigger than the petal of a banana blossom; isn’t this the season piracy is at its most rampant, and what’s more the peak season for storms?’ He then said: ‘Forsooth, you remain true to your bloodline; for your father too was as brave a man as there ever was.’

Perhaps the most common method used by Abdullah to draw attention to his ‘individuality’ is to focus on incidents in which he was in conflict with the collective, whether in the shape of a cruel king who cared very little for the welfare of his subjects, an ambitious raja bent on thwarting his mission, or his travel companions who he deemed lacked the strength of character he possessed. Such incidents highlight the difference between Abdullah, the author-protagonist, and the collective, and emphasise that his personal interests were distinct from those of his crew members, travel companions, his British superiors who employed him, the Malay hoi polloi or the rajas. Having made this distinction, he almost always interprets and evaluates events according to his own personal interests rather than

according to the interests of the collective. Abdullah expressed his frustration when his attempt to deliver Mr. Bonham's letter to the Yang Dipertuan of Kelantan was foiled by a wrathful Raja Bendahara who forbade him from carrying out his task. He describes the episode as follows — portraying himself as the intrepid messenger who was single-minded in carrying out the task he was entrusted with, even in the face of threats to his life and safety, while at the same time alluding to Grandpre's and Baba Ko An's lack of resolve:

Maka terlalu susah hati sahaya sebab surat itu tiada sampai ke dalam. Maka menyembah sahaya lagi juga, sahaya pohonkan: 'Tuanku, kalau ada ampun, patik pohonkan juga ke bawah duli hendak menyampaikan surat itu ke dalam kubu. Maka jikalau patik mati pun, apalah boleh buat, sebab menyampaikan kehendak tuan patik.' Maka pada ketika itu berubahlah sahaya lihat mukanya, serta titahnya: 'Tiada kita benarkan. Dan lagi pada masa ini negeri Kelantan ini dalam perintah kita.' Maka apabila sahaya melihat lakunya murka itu, maka berkatalah sahaya kepada Grandpre dan Baba Ko An dalam bahasa Inggris: 'Apa bicara kita sekarang?' Maka jawab mereka yang berdua: 'Sudahlah cukup akan pekerjaan kita ini.' (Sweeney, 2005: 130).

That the letter did not reach its recipient vexed me to no bounds. So I bowed again in obeisance and implored: 'If My Lord deign to show me mercy, then I beseech your good graces to grant me ingress into the citadel to deliver this letter. And if I were to die, well, so be it, for I am merely fulfilling my master's wishes.' In that moment, I saw the expression changed on his face, as he commanded: 'We will not allow it. And so it shall be, for at this juncture, Kelantan is in our command.'" When I saw that I have incurred his wrath, I turned to Grandpre and Baba Ko An and asked them in English: 'What do we say now?' To which they both answered: 'Our job here is done.'

Highlighting the author self-image grew in prominence and peaked through the works produced and published about a decade later (1849), the *Hikayat Abdullah*. If in the *Voyage To Kelantan*, the experience in sailing a few weeks became the main narrative, in his autobiography, the whole history and the nature of his life from birth up to the peak of his career as a teacher, or *Munsi*, a Malay linguist, and also as an assistant editor for the publisher, Singapore Mission Press (under the London Missionary Society and then ABCFMS), became the spotlight or main narrative. His life history was made into a narrative theme and himself as the protagonist of the narrative. This is a step further when compared to authors such as Lauddin, Ahmad Rijaludin, Fakhir Sagir, and Raja Ali Haji. The nature of his life was portrayed to be relative and consistent with authority figures and the development of power or greatness of the British colonial empire in Asia.

If in *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah ke Kelantan*, his experience during a maritime voyage that spanned several weeks was made the main thread of his narrative, in his autobiography, *Hikayat Abdullah (The Life Story of Abdullah)* (1849) published about a decade later, his whole life story and the circumstances and events that surrounded his life from birth up to the peak of his professional career as a teacher or *munsi*, a Malay interpreter and also as an assistant editor at the Singapore Mission Press (which was run by the London Missionary

Society and later by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Service), became the focus of his accounts and narrative. Here, we see Abdullah not only distinguishing and reifying himself clearly as a unique, special, or extraordinary person, but also that his *Hikayat* is about the self or individual, not history *per se*; and that his life story is grounded in an inner reality autonomous of history. True to what the individualistic theory expects, Abdullah grounds his life story in an inner personal reality, independent of the historical reality outside. He projects himself (the author-protagonist) as an ahistorical entity, caught in history and influenced by it, but ultimately, independent of it. For sure, the events and circumstances that happened in his life were intertwined and inextricably linked with the lives, mission, and enterprise of well-known historical figures from the West, and that his life story is set against the backdrop of the expansion of British colonial empire in Asia. However, the main strand of his narrative stands alone from its greater historical context and the events he describes are transformed and related not from a historical, but instead, a personal and psychical perspective. He writes the story of his life, about his childhood, and his family background, and lays bare his own inner reality; he did not to set out to write a historical record about the decline of Malay feudal rule and the advent of European (Portuguese, Dutch, or English) colonial power in Peninsular Malaya in the first half of the 19th century. He focuses on his personal complexes and struggles rather than on history and politics. He opens his *Hikayat* by stating in his preface that:

Bahawa maka adalah kepada tatkala Hijrah sanat 1256 tahun kepada lima likur hari bulan Sya'ban al-Mukarram, iaitu kepada dua likur hari bulan Oktober bertarikh Masihi sanat 1840 tahun, iaitu dewasa itu adalah seorang sahabatku, iaitu orang putih yang kukasihi akan dia; maka ialah meminta sangat-sangat kepada aku, iaitu hendak mengetahui akan asal usulku dan peri hikayat segala kehidupan diriku. Maka ia meminta karangkan suatu kitab dengan Bahasa Melayu. (Sweeney, 2005: 236).

On the 25th day of Sya'ban al-Mukarram, 1256 Hijri, or the 20th day of October 1840 Masihi, a friend of mine, a white man, who is most beloved by me, beseeched me to tell him of my origins and all there is to know about my life, wherefore he asked that I write a book in Malay.

Bahawa sekarang dengarkan olehmu, hai kekasihku, maka adalah aku karangkan akan kitab ini darihal hikayat diriku, maka kunamai akan dia Hikayat Abdullah. Maka adalah kurencanakan dalamnya dari zaman moyangku sampailah kepada masa aku diperanakan oleh ibuku dalam negeri Melaka—barang dipelihara Allah daripada segala marabahaya dan bencana—sehingga barang yang kulihat dan yang kudengar daripada hal ehwal zaman-zaman yang tersebut itu, baik dalam negeri Melaka, baik dalam negeri Singapura, adalah kusebutkan dalam hikayatku ini, iaitu sehingga kepada tarikh pengabisan kitab ini. (Sweeney, 2005: 240).

Ergo, listen now, my beloved, to the story of my life that I have written in this book, which I have titled *Hikayat Abdullah*. In it I have composed the story of my life from the time of my great-grandparents right through to the moment I was given birth to in Melaka by my mother — may Allah protect her from all forms of danger and

misfortune — and all that I have seen and heard about matters, affairs, and events that happened during the said period, are contained in my *hikayat*, right up to the last date mentioned therein.

The *Hikayat Abdullah* does not pretend to be history; its *raison d'être* is to recount, at the behest of his employer and friend, Alfred North, who he holds in the highest of esteem — the minutiae of his “origins and all there is to know about [his] life”. Though it contains interesting accounts of historical events, such as the dismantling by the British of the city of Melaka (built when the Dutch were in power); the opening of Singapore by Raffles; the arrival of Lord Minto, Governor-General of India to Malacca, as the British embarked on its attack of Java; Raffles’ enterprise at collecting Malay manuscripts; the British handover of the city of Melaka to the Dutch; the system of indigenous education; the founding of a secular school by Raffles in Singapore; the tyranny and decline of the Malay feudal system; the machinations and apparatus of the Chinese secret society, the T’ien Ti Hui, in Singapore; the superstitious and benighted beliefs practised by the Malay and Chinese societies in Melaka ; the Opium War between the British and China, and so on; it is far from being a treatise on politics, power, influence, national interests, or social commentary. Instead, it is about Abdullah’s own observation based on “all that I have seen and heard about matters, affairs, and events that happened during the said period”. In short, it is as seen from his subjective and personalised viewpoint, a viewpoint which we will be hard-pressed to find in any history book, and whose only importance is personal.⁶ The story told in the following pages is the story of how his strict and studious childhood, under the tutelage of his authoritative and no-nonsense father (himself an accomplished teacher of language), and a doting but equally stern grandmother, aided the development and honing of his intellectual and writerly faculties; was conducive to his self-directed maturity; and facilitated the acquisition of every endowment necessary for successive periods of his life. What interests us chiefly in this respect is the sapient breadth and depth of his inner reality born of an enlightened upbringing which had shaped and conditioned his personality, predisposition, and views of the world around him. Exterior reality — for example, the nature of his work as interpreter to merchants, missionaries, and colonial officials, which brought him into contact with people of different races and creed, and gave him exposure to foreign ideas and ways of looking at things — is important only inasmuch as it influenced this inner reality.

The expression of explicit emotions in his works is another characteristic of Abdullah’s individualism. Emotions should not be construed as being limited to the two umbrella-feelings of *sukacita* (joy) and *dukacita* (sadness), as these are more highly nuanced than the English translation might suggest. Negative emotions of various kinds, brought about by anything from a political setback to the death of his daughter, are not described merely as “sadness”; nor are positive ones brought about, say by getting a book for free to the feeling displayed by a group of prisoners freed by Lord Minto, described simply as “joy”. For instance, seeing the return of the Dutch Resident to Melaka, two days after Colonel Farquhar had set sail in search of a settlement to build for the British, Abdullah was crestfallen:

Maka pada masa itu aku pun sangatlah masyghul hatiku, sebab pada fikiranku bahwa sia-sialah adanya penat lelahku serta usahaku sekian lama ini aku pelajari huruf dan bahasa Inggeris itu. Maka jikalau tiada Inggeris dalam negeri ini kelak, kepada siapakah aku hendak

⁶ The personal and impressionistic nature of his accounts is intimated moreover by Abdullah in his preface, for he remarked that after all: “*segala hal ehwal yang tersebut itu semuanya perkara-perkara yang telah lalu zamannya*” [all such matters, affairs, and events are echoes of time past] (2004: 3).

menjual daganganku itu?

At that time, I felt utterly dejected because I thought that all my toil and trouble and my diligence for such a long time in learning the English language had been in vain; and if there should be no English in this town, to whom should I sell my services? (Sweeney, 2005: 357).

In fact, Abdullah is very demonstrative and is unabashed to express the whole gamut of his emotions in his work. He tugged at our heartstrings, for example, in his outpouring of grief over the death of his daughter:

Siti Lela itu sakit. Setelah sampailah aku ke Melaka, maka sangatlah budak itu sakitnya. Maka dalam dua tiga hari lamanya, telah berlakulah kehendak Allah atas hamba-Nya, maka ia pun matilah. Maka terlalu besar dukacita hatiku, istimewa bondanya, sebab sangat kasih hatiku akan budak itu baharu tujuh tahun 'umurnya, serta ingatannya pandai menghambat hati ibu bapa, maka dari sebab segala perkara ini, sangkutlah hatiku akan dia. Maka setelah sudah ditanamkan di masjid Keling, maka kuulang-ulangilah kuburnya pada tiap-tiap hari dengan percintaanku; tergambar-gambarlah budak itu dimataku.

Siti Lela fell ill. When I arrived in Melaka, her illness worsened. Two or three days later, God's plan for His servant was done, and she died. My grief was immeasurable, more so her mother's, because I loved her so dearly—my child of only seven years who brought us such joy and happiness when she was in our lives; and for all these reasons, I was immensely fond of her. After she was buried in the cemetery at Kampong Keling mosque, I visited her grave everyday with my grief-stricken love. The image of her still plays in my mind's eye. (Sweeney, 2005: 517).

We smile at the thought of a young Abdullah grinning in impish delight at getting a 'free' book from Mr Milne — that perhaps he was a little unaware that it was a missionary's job to spread the word of God and to give away a copy of the Bible to anyone who would accept it, or that there was actually a price to pay for this book; for ironically it was this 'free' book that would later get him into trouble with his father:

Maka kataku: 'Kitab apa ini?' Maka jawabnya: 'Kitab Injil.' Lalu katanya: 'Ambillah tuan satu, pergi baca.' Maka kuambil serta memberi terima kasih. Kemudian kataku: 'Tuan, sahaya terlalu suka hendak belajar baca Inggeris' Maka jawabnya: 'Baiklah, sahaya boleh ajar; akan tetapi ajar sama sahaya baca Melayu.' Maka jawabku: 'Baiklah, tuan, nanti esok sahaya datang, tuan.' Maka aku memberi tabik, lalu kembalilah ke rumah dengan sukacita. Pertama-tama suka sebab aku mendapat kitab itu cuma-cuma dan kedua sukacita sebab mendengar khabar dan budi bahasa Tuan Milne itu terlalu baik ia bertutur itu dengan hormatnya, dan ketiga suka itu sebab ia sudah berjanji hendak mengajarkan aku bahasa Inggeris.

I asked: ‘What book is this?’ And he replied: ‘The Gospel,’ and then he said: ‘Take one, and read it.’ I took it and thanked him; and then said: ‘Sir, I should very much like to learn to read English.’ He replied: ‘Very well, I will teach you, but you must teach me to read Malay.’ I replied: ‘Very well, sir, I will come tomorrow. I bade him goodbye, and went home elated. In the first place I was happy at getting that book for nothing; and secondly, I was glad to have met Mr. Milne, that he was very kind and courteous, and spoke respectfully; and thirdly, I was rapt because he had promised to teach me the English language. (Sweeney, 2005: 324).

Apart from these two umbrella-emotions, more variegated emotions such as fear, courage, shame, envy, warmth, or loneliness appear explicitly in his texts as strong, distinct emotions, either of himself or of other protagonists. The same holds true of thoughts and sensations. On various occasions — for example, when Abdullah explains away why some spiteful and envious people in his village called him “Abdullah *paderi*” (Abdullah the priest) in order to goad and provoke his father to forbid him from learning the English language— we are given a glimpse into the author’s thought process and the strength, not only of his inner reality, but also of his self-assuredness.⁷

The same tendencies can be detected in his last work, the *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah dari Singapura sampai ke Mekah (The Story of Abdullah’s Voyage from Singapore to Mecca)* (1854). His unfinished Meccan travelogue⁸ is, on one level, an account of his journey by sailing ship to the holy city of Mecca to perform the Muslim pilgrimage, but on another deeper level, the spiritual journey of a devout Muslim man in his late 50s, whose inner reality is now tempered with humility, whose brashness and egocentricity are now attenuated by self-contemplation and acceptance. Compared to his two earlier texts that portray a self-assured and outspoken man who takes pride in his position in a society which he

⁷ “Sebermula adapun orang2 yang menghasut bapaku itu sekalianva pucatlah mukanya. Tiadalah berdaya lagi karena tiada lulus kehendaknya. Dan lagi rnereka itu sekalian cuma2 duduk makan tidur tiada berpekerjaan. Maka halku diberi Allah rezeki rna'mur, pada tiap2 bulan mendapat wang dan mendapat pelajaran. Maka makinlah bertambah2 pula dengki rnereka itu oleh sebab aku mengajar segala paderi dan Inggeris dalam Melaka bahasa Melayu, dan kuertikan dengan bahasa Inggeris. Maka tiadalah dapat jalan mereka itu hendak membuat barang apa2 kepadaku. Maka digelar oleh mereka itu akan namaku ‘Abdullah Paderi’. Maka pada sangka rnereka itu yaitu suatu nama keji dan ‘aib. Dan lagi diumpat oleh mereka itu akan daku, sebab baik dengan orang putih. Lagipun mengajarkan akan dia bahasa kita suatu dosa. Maka adalah pada fikiranku, adapun amarah dan dengkiunya itu sebab ia bodoh, akulah cerdik. Bolehkah orang bodoh itu rnenjadi guru paderi dan orang2 putih? Dapatiada orang yang pandai juga boleh jadi.” [All the people who had tried to incite my father were mortified. Alas, there was nothing more that they could do, for their desire did not come to pass. All of them were doing nothing withal but eat and sleep, having no occupation, while God gave me plenty to eat. and every month I received money as well as instruction. The resentment they harboured towards me grew because I was teaching all the missionaries and the English in Malacca the Malay language, and what more teaching it to them in English. And because they could not think of a way to get to me, they began to taunt me by calling me ‘Abdullah the Priest,’ thinking that this would shame and humiliate me. They reviled me, moreover, because I was friendly with the Europeans, and believed that my teaching them our language was a sin. But the way I see it is that their anger and malice was because they were stupid, while I was wise. Could those imbeciles ever be a teacher to the missionaries or the Europeans? Without doubt, only an educated person can.] (Sweeney, 2005: 346-347).

⁸ Abdullah’s last work, as Witkam points out, is “in fact an unfinished story as the author died in Mecca shortly after his arrival in Arabia...One of Abdullah’s travel companions brought back his papers to Singapore and the text was published shortly afterwards. Abdullah Munshi’s account therefore only treats his trip from Singapore to Mecca.” (p. 216)

lambasts for its backwardness and shortcomings; in this work, we find piety in his recognition of human frailty and insignificance when compared to the omnipotence and greatness of God and his palpable sense of awe at His creations. Here, the awesomeness of nature is taken as testimony to the greatness of God.

Sebermula maka kemudian daripada itu rnaka angin ada kencang, lalu berlayarlah hendsk menyeberang Kep Gamri. Allah, Allah, Allah! Tiadalah dapat hendak dikhabarkan bagaimana kesusahannya dan bagaimana besar gelombangnya, melainkan Allah yang amat mengetahuinya. Rasanya hendak masuk ke dalam perui ibu kembali; gelombang dari kiri lepas ke kanan dan yang di kanan lepas ke kiri. Maka segala barang2 dan peti2 dan tikar bantal berpelantingan. Maka sampailah ke dalam kurung air bersambaran, habislah basah kuyup. Maka masing2 dengan halnya, tiadalah lain lagi dan fikiran melainkan mati. Maka hilang2lah kapal sebesar itu dihempaskan gelombang. Maka rasanya gelombang itu terlebih tinggi daripada pucuk tiang kapal. Maka sembahyang sampai duduk berpegang. Maka jikalau dalarn kurung itu tiadalah boleh dikhabarkan bunyi muntah dan kencing, melainkan segala khalasi selalu memegang bomba. Maka air pun selalu juga masuk ke dalam kapal. Maka adalah pada masa itu tiadalah apa yang kedengaran melainkan segala tali2 kapal itu berdengung2. Maka anginnya itu datang seperti dicurahkan orang rupanya, makin kencang2. Akan hari cuacanya terang, terkadang kelihatan cahaya matahari, akan tetapi angin tiadalah dapat dikatakan, apalah lagi gelombang. Maka kelihatan laut itu putih seputihnya. Maka adalah hal masing2 berpegang2 di tali. Maka beberapa kali layar pecah2 dan tali putus2. Maka pada ketika itu hendak menangis tiadalah berair rnata melainkan masing2 keringlah bibir. Maka berbagailah berteriak nama Allah dan Rasul karena Kep Gamri itu, kata mu'alimnya, sudah termasyhur ditakuti orang: 'Kamu sekalian mintalah do'a kepada Allah, karena pada tiap2 tahun di sinilah beberapa kapal yang hilang, tiadalah mendapat nama lagi, tiada hidup barang seorang, ah, ah, ah!'

Dengan hal yang demikian, tiga malamnya dan dua harinya, dengan kasihan dan tolongan Allah, adalah reda sedikit anginnya. Maka lepaslah Kep Gamri. Maka gelombang pun berhentilah. (Sweeney, 2005: 277).

Crossing the treacherous waters at Cape Comorin, the extreme southern point of the Indian subcontinent, Abdullah described vividly how the stormy seas struck terror in his heart and the hearts of his fellow passengers. When he looks at the expanse of the ocean when it is calm, he sees power, beauty, and harmony. He acknowledges the force of nature as being among God's cornucopia of great creations. And, in the face of such awesome force, he feels man's insignificance by comparison in the greater scheme of things; realises his own weakness, his smallness, and his mortality. In contrast to a younger Abdullah in his earlier work, where his bravado was on display, expressing his readiness to put his life on the line to accomplish the mission that was entrusted upon him, in his last work, against the backdrop of raging turbulent seas, the punishing harsh conditions and the outbreak of pestilence that killed a number of his fellow pilgrims on board the ship during their journey, his ego shrank to

diminutive proportions, as he surrenders his fate to his maker. Abdullah's prose here is of the highest order, as Witkam remarked:

It is evident how good an observer the author is, and how great his literary talents are....[T]he storm inspires him to pen a well-written account of danger and fear. Descriptions of the frailty of a sailing vessel in the storm are topical and can already be savoured in Homer's works. Abdullah's account of the strength of the storm and the emotions of the ship's passengers stands out and shows his mastership over language." (p. 217)

Though his self-assuredness may have diminished somewhat in his middle years, what remains unwavering are his curiosity and critical faculty. His last work, the sea voyage from Singapore to Mecca, records his experience along his journey on his Hajj pilgrimage. He set off from Singapore on 27 February 1854 aboard the pilgrim ship, **Subulus Salam**, via Penang, the Straits of Melaka, Perak Island, Aceh, crossed the Indian Ocean to **Galle in Sri Lanka**, Cape Comorin, Cochin, Calicut, Socotra Island in the Arabian Sea, through the Bab Iskender (the eastern straits off the coast of the Arabian Peninsula), through to Mocha the port city of Yemen, then to Hodeida, landed in Jeddah, visited the tomb of Eve on 5 May stayed in Jeddah for two days, then rode a camel and walked to Mecca until he made it into Mecca wearing the Ihram to perform his Hajj. We continue to get glimpses of Abdullah's inquisitive and restless mind throughout his work; for example, during his short stay of six days in Alfiah, India, he was able to find out how many mosques there were there, who built one of them and how much it cost to be built; he investigated what produce were traded there — what type of goods were banned from being imported into the city and what it produced for export; he recorded the fauna he found, noted the ethnic make-up of the city's populace, explained the system of currency used, and even knew what the going rate of the dowry was in that neck of the woods (Sweeney, 2005: 278)! He also drew a map of the harbour in Jeddah, and jotted down his impressions of the place while waiting to go ashore, which attracted the attention of the Turkish authorities who were suspicious of what he was doing, and were afraid that he might be engaged in espionage. His keen interest to know the history and culture of the people in the places he visited while en route to Mecca is patently manifest. Of course, Abdullah also commented on what he observed, like the custom of Hindu women in Alfiah going topless in public (where toplessness was the norm for women among several indigenous peoples of South India until the 19th or early 20th century), or the multitude of beggars and vagrants, who he reckoned constituted half of the entire local population, who were engaged in beggary in one form or another. However, the tone of his comments here is far more restrained and softened by understanding; not as scathing as the comments he expressed in his earlier work; for example, when he criticised the practices and mores of the local inhabitants during his travel to the east coast of Malaysia.

His last work is more redolent in terms of its religious and spiritual conceit. It records the physical journey of its author as he traversed halfway around the globe to fulfil his religious obligation, as well as a spiritual journey of a Muslim man named Abdullah (which incidentally means servant of Allah) as he came to terms with the subservience of human limitations to God's infinite might. Compared to his two earlier texts in which the narrating persona is a loud and outspoken man full of self-aggrandizing hubris, and who exalted in his position in a society which was weak and full of shortcomings; in this work, there is a sense of humility when he juxtaposes human insignificance with the power and greatness of God and the wonder of his natural creations; and a sense of surrender to God's Magnitude and

Higher Power. For a landlubber like Abdullah who was on his first sea voyage into open seas, the raging waters and towering waves were both mortifying and unfathomable, and we sense his loss for words in describing the terrifying force of nature he encountered: “*Maka kapal sebesar itu menjadi seperti kulit sabut di tengah laut, dihempaskan gelombang itu timbul tenggelam. ...Tiadalah dapat hendak dikhabarkan bagaimana kesusahannya dan bagaimana besar gelombangnya, melainkan Allah yang amat mengetahuinya*” (“A ship as big as that had become like a coconut husk bobbing in and out of the waters, smashed by the crushing waves. ...It is well-nigh impossible to describe just how terrible and how huge the waves were, save to say that only Allah knows”) (Sweeney, 2005: 275–276). For a man who prided himself on being well-schooled, able to read, write, and speak several languages, and possessed of an insatiable curiosity, the limits of human (to wit, *his*) knowledge is something, Abdullah began to realise, not without shortfall. It brings up the age-old questions in Islamic epistemology concerning “the abilities and limits of the human mind, and therefore...the essence and *raison d’être* of the human being. To what extent is the human mind free to ‘seek newer and newer worlds’, until the limitless has been accomplished? Or to what extent is the human mind limited, not free to question and ordained only to serve?” (Nuseibeh, 2002: 825). If Abdullah leans more towards the former in his earlier works, he oscillates to the latter in his last, conceding what he knows not, in deference to the omniscience of God whenever he is confounded by what he observes: “*...ombak di tepi itu terlalu besarnya pada musim teduh, Allah yang amat tau adanya*” (...the rip currents that break along the shoreline are too strong at low tide, only Allah knows why” (Sweeney, 2005: 280); “*Maka adalah hal dalam kapal itu melainkan Allah sahaja yang amat mengetahui bagaimana hal seksanya hendak makan dan duduk dan tidur sebab terlalu banyak orang*” (“As to the condition on board the ship, only Allah knows best how torturous it was to eat, sit and sleep, made all the more insufferable because there were too many people” (p. 279); “[*Taib Sultan*] membuat kolam itu, terlalu indahnya perbuatannya itu, melainkan Allah yang tau berapakah belanjanya membuat itu” ([*Taib Sultan*] built a fountain of such beauty and fine craftsmanship, only Allah knows what it cost him to have it built”) (p. 282).

Rulers like Taib Sultan may have built ornate fountains and fancy pools to demonstrate the power of man over nature, and to illustrate the grandeur of their rule, but for a writer like Abdullah, nature is not something to be conquered, but a trope he uses to reflect his and his community’s own specific ideas and beliefs regarding their life and the world that surrounds them. The fragments of his worldview evolve in line with the different phases of his life. In all these texts, Abdullah has a concept of nature which is clear and consistent — that nature is a medium and topos to evaluate, and by which to compare (*via* analogy and metaphor) the human self, nation, society, country, and the divine with. In short, nature is the closest and most accurate mirror image to reflect and describe both the outer reality of the world (the perceived) around him as well as the individual and personalised inner reality (of the perceiver). This may not always be communicated in a direct or overt manner, but in fact often hidden or alluded to behind metaphorical imageries, idioms, proverbs or similes, for Abdullah in his *Hikayat* remarks *en passant*: “*...orang yang berakal itu tiada suka mendengar perkataan yang lanjut, melainkan sekadar mengambil kias dan ibarat sahaja adanya*” (“...intelligent people do not like to have words elaborated to them, except what they can infer from allusions and metaphors of their meaning”) (Sweeney, 2008: 257).

He uses nature as metaphors to encourage readers to think and to find the meaning intimated behind his allusions. For example, the expression of his personalised thoughts, emotions, mental state, as well as his conception of his inner reality, reflected in proverbs and similes (in which even the *pembayang maksud* — literally, “reflection of the real meaning” or

“foreshadower”⁹ — often has relevant metaphorical implications) is unambiguously a salutary gesture to his readers’ intelligence, as it is an indication of his style to put across his message not so much by telling but rather by subtle and nuanced hints, innuendos, and insinuations. Abdullah, in a conscious, intelligent, and creative manner, uses these semantic ‘mirrors’ to evaluate himself against other individuals, compare his society with other societies, and appraise his own people against other races. As a creative writer, he managed to build for himself the persona of the paragon-author, and portrayed himself as a shining light in the Malay community and the local population living in the British colonies; even more so among the provincial Malays living in the states ruled by the Malay rulers.

Interestingly, although the basic functions of nature images as a reflection — from a cultural, conceptual-cognitive, and discursive perspective — remained the same, the central dimension and writerly purpose of his metaphoricity evolved in accordance with his own life’s journey, circumstance, age and maturity. When he wrote *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah ke Kelantan* at age 42, he relied on the cold, clinical faculty of his mind, his logic and reason, to comment on what he fully saw and experienced first-hand of his surrounding cultural and natural milieus. His voyage to Kelantan was his first exploration within the Malay kingdom outside of the power of the British, and the experience gave him the opportunity to get to know the heartland Malays, their customs, and indigent life, and made him begin to appreciate the advantages of ‘the modern western world’ which he was introduced to and benefited from, under the rule of British colonial power. In it, he describes the benefits that he derived from being an educated and respected state representative and tells of his adventures while carrying out the task and the mandate given by the Governor and the traders in Singapore which he wore like a badge of honour throughout his voyage. This was the self-image that he wanted to portray, described using the metaphors of nature in his early work.

This much vaunted self-image flourished and became even more elevated in his second work, the *Hikayat Abdullah*, when he was at the peak of his career as a teacher and Malay interpreter, but also as a self-styled pioneer intelligentsia of his society who was highly regarded by community leaders, traders, and Western administrators alike, and whose services were highly sought after by entrepreneurs and political leaders in Malacca and Singapore. At the zenith of his power and success, Abdullah witnessed the results of the contributions sown by him and by the British political leaders who he respected. With the eyes and the mind of one who now carried a lot of clout in society, he uses the metaphor of nature to reinforce the image of himself *vis-à-vis* both his fellow Malays and the Western personages he came into contact with. In language, Abdullah draws on metaphors of nature, perception, experience, and oral tradition to reflect a broad portrait of himself as a thinker of his society, an expert, educator, and lover of the Malay language.

In the final voyage of his life, at the age of 58, it seems as if Abdullah felt he did not need to stand out and prove himself to anyone anymore. Having now established his influence as a writer and thinker whose words hold sway in public, the tone of his last work is unequivocally more deferential to a higher power — that of Allah, the omniscient and omnipotent Maker. His final journey was not made at the behest of mortals, but at the command of a divine calling; the call to pilgrimage to Mecca. Abdullah, the servant of Allah,

⁹ Asmah Haji Omar refers to the *pembayang maksud* in traditional Malay literary forms such as *pantun*, *perumpamaan*, *bidalan*, etc. as “images of the real meaning” (1992: 178), as opposed to Koh’s preferred term, “foreshadower” (2009: 44), to refer to nature imagery used to suggest the actual meaning of the *maksud* (purpose or message).

who since young had never been tempted in his faith, even when working closely with Christian missionaries to translate the Bible, remained unswayed in his religious conviction, and, on the contrary, showed a piousness that submits to the will of God. The goal or mission of this final voyage was a clear one — to worship. The discoveries he made during this journey of the bounty of God's creations, his encounters with foreign cultures and societies, and the staggering and formidable force of nature he had hitherto never witnessed in his life, brought about humility and indubitable acceptance of God's greatness. Abdullah's voyage from Singapore to Mecca is a journey of a pilgrim who sees with the eyes of his conscience, who plumbs the depths of his inner reality, and explores the reality of the universe and the nature of the divine with serene acquiescence. This last voyage of Abdullah's instantiates symbolically the long human journey through the turbulent and tempestuous ocean of self-importance and ego to arrive at the calm and deep harbour of the Supreme Self, the Creator of Nature.

When Abdullah liberated himself from the bonds of his ego, when he tried to use his conscience free from the constraints of only what the naked eye can see, of only what the limits of the human mind can comprehend, the beauty and profundity that escape the sterile, calculating eye of reason, his account felt more sincere, lyrical, and beautiful. This is revealed in a short poem he wrote in which he describes his emotions as he entered the holy city (incidentally, it is also the last few lines he wrote in his book), which became the ink that sealed his final work:

*Serta masuklah aku ke dalam negeri yang mulia
Maka terlupalah aku akan ni'mat dan kesukaan dunia
Seperti mendapat syurga dengan isinya sedia
Mengucaplah aku beribu2 syukur akan Tuhan yang Mahamulia
Terlupalah beberapa kesusaan dan syeksa di jalan
Oleh sebab berahi dan rindu akan bait Allah itu beberapa bulan.*

And so I entered the glorified city
Thus forgotten were all the joys and luxuries of the world
Like achieving heaven with all its contents ready
I submit my gratitude in the thousands, to God, The Most Glorified
Forgotten were the pains and sufferings in the journey
Overcame by the intimate longing for the temple of God for several months¹⁰

¹⁰ Translated by Raimy Ché-Ross 2000. "Munshi Abdullah's Voyage to Mecca. A Preliminary Introduction and Annotated Translation," in *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 28/81: 200.

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