



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

KERIS MAS' JUNGLE OF HOPE: A SOCIOLOGICAL READING

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By

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The intention of this research is to analyse Keris Mas' *Jungle of Hope* from a sociological perspective. Keris Mas, Malaysia's first national laureate, wrote *Rimba Harapan (Jungle of Hope)* in 1998. In 1990, the novel was translated into English by Adibah Amin. The themes in the novel identified for analysis are Conflict between the old and the new ways of life, Adapting to change, Fear of being displaced, Faith in God and Exploitation of human beings. These themes are analysed based on the three major sociological theories, namely, Functionalism, Marxism and Symbolic Interactionism that are believed as able to provide a sociological perspective to the analysis of the themes selected. While functionalism are able to provide a better understanding of the themes of conflict between the old and the new ways of life and Faith in God, Symbolic interactionism can be seen as being able to provide an insight into the theme of Adapting to change. Marxism, on the other hand, provides a better understanding of the themes related to Fear of being displaced and exploitation of human beings.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan Ijazah Master Sastera

**TEMA-TEMA DAN ISU-ISU DALAM KARYA KERIS MAS *JUNGLE OF
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Pengerusi: Profesor Madya Hj. Rosli bin Talif, Ph.D.

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Tujuan kajian ini diadakan adalah untuk menganalisa karya Keris Mas berjudul *Jungle of Hope* dari perspektif sosiologi. Keris Mas, Sasterawan Negara Malaysia yang pertama, menghasilkan novel *Rimba Harapan* pada tahun 1988. Pada tahun 1990, novel tersebut telah dialihbahasakan ke bahasa Inggeris oleh Adibah Amin. Tema-tema yang telah dikenalpasti untuk tujuan analisis adalah Konflik di antara cara hidup tradisional dan cara hidup moden, Penyesuaian kepada perubahan, Kebimbangan tentang ketidakserasian disebabkan pemindahan, Beriman kepada Tuhan dan Exploitasi sesama manusia. Tema-tema tersebut dianalisis berdasarkan kepada tiga teori sosiologi yang terkenal iaitu *Functionalism*, *Marxism* dan *Symbolic Interactionism*. Teori-teori ini dipercayai mampu menyediakan suatu perspektif sosiologi kepada penganalisisan teme-tema yang telah dikenalpasti. Teori *functionalism* didapati mampu memberikan pemahaman

yang lebih mendalam mengenai tema konflik di antara cara hidup tradisional dan cara hidup moden dan tema Beriman kepada Tuhan. Teori *symbolic interactionism* pula didapati berkemampuan memberi pengetahuan yang mendalam tentang tema Penyesuaian kepada perubahan. Manakala teori *Marxism* pula mengukuhkan pemahaman tentang tema-tema yang berkaitan dengan Kebimbangan tentang ketidakserasian disebabkan pemindahan dan Exploitasi sesama manusia.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This research intends to analyse Keris Mas' *Jungle of Hope* from a sociological perspective. Keris Mas, the first national laureate in Malaysia, wrote *Rimba Harapan* in 1988. Subsequently, the novel was translated into English by Adibah Amin in 1990. In 2000, the novel was selected as one of the novels to be studied in Malaysian secondary schools in line with the requirements of the recently introduced Literature in English component of the English Language syllabus for secondary schools. This new development leads to the book gaining a considerable amount of attention quite unlike other translated Malay novels. The inclusion of *Jungle of Hope* in the list alongside the likes of *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck and *The Return* by K.S Maniam may also be seen as a timely recognition to writers of Malay literature in Malaysia who, prior to this, only seem to enjoy limited readership in Malaysia.

Jungle of Hope is said to be the best novel ever written by Keris Mas. Adibah Amin, in her foreword to the novel, claims that it is arguably Keris Mas' finest work and that it has allowed the author to "delve deep into the dark recesses of the human psyche – both individual and collective – without the protection of irony" (*Jungle of Hope*, v).

Briefly, *Jungle of Hope* is about a group of Malay farmers who are forced to sell their ancestral land and move into the jungle to open up new land for farming. The story follows the life of the protagonist, Pak Kia, who was driven into the jungle by a potent combination of natural disasters – a severe drought followed by a particularly serious flood and modern economic pressures as a result of the post-World War I colonial policy of encouraging rubber planting and tin mining on a large scale. The book documents Pak Kia's struggles in coping with the challenges presented by the onslaught of his rapidly changing environment. The story is set in areas around Bentong, Pahang in the late 1920s to early 1930s.

I have selected *Jungle of Hope* for this study due to two reasons. Firstly, it is one of the least known novels in the Literature in English component. This is due to the fact that, while the other novels in the component are either simplified, abridged or original versions of novels from the "great" Western literary canon such as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Hawkins's *Prisoner of Zenda* and Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Jungle of Hope* is a novel which, before its inclusion to the said list, is just another translated Malay novel with a very limited circle of readership. Presently, *Jungle of Hope* is being read by at least a third of the upper secondary school student population which amounts to about 180 000 a year. The sudden interest in this novel created by the selection is simply phenomenal. Needless to say, because of its limited readership prior to the selection, nothing substantial has been written about this novel. Thus, it is hoped

that this study will contribute towards an insightful literary discussion on the novel.

Secondly, I find the sociological aspect of the novel as the most important asset of *Jungle of Hope*. I believe this may be also one of the reasons why the novel was selected into the list as it chronicles the struggles of its Malay characters against the onslaught of post- World War 1 modernisation. The characters with their external and internal conflicts and their community in the novel with its warts and all seem to beg to be cracked open and analysed. The “malayness” of the novel - due to the themes and issues discussed that are directly concerning the Malays of the post-World War 1 era - allows us to examine the issues that are facing the Malays in dealing with the advent of modernisation.

This work is divided into five chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction for the proposed research. It includes the following sections: Introduction, Problem Statement, Scope of the Study, Objective of Study, Significance of Study, Limitations of the Study, and Conceptual Theory.

The second chapter is divided into three sections. The first section provides a complete biography of Keris Mas, the author of *Jungle of Hope* as it is important for us to investigate “the writer’s social origins and of the effect which social factors had on his work” (Daiches 1963: 358). This section will assist us in

understanding the writer's views on the issues in the novel. Apart from that, this section also contains comments on Keris Mas and his works from other writers and critics of Malay literature.

In the second section, an extended survey of the sociological theories to be discussed in this research is outlined. This section looks at the three major sociological theories, namely, functionalism, Marxism and symbolic interactionism. It also identifies the main proponents of these theories and their stand on certain sociological institutions such as the family, and religion.

The third section presents an overview of the Malay Consciousness which attempts at chronicling several events in Malaysia's recent history that provide glimpses of the Malay consciousness at work. While the main contributors towards this section are Malays or Malaysians themselves, views from former colonialists are also included to provide a balanced account of the topic selected.

Chapter Three is divided into two part whereby the first part deals with the study of the characters in *Jungle of Hope*. It is felt that an in depth look at characterisation would allow us to see their significance in our discussion on the themes and issues of the novel. The second part of this chapter contains a chronological synopsis of events where all efforts are made to include all the major events in the novel. This section is included mainly to provide the link

between the major events in the novel and the themes and issues that are discussed in this research.

The fourth chapter is divided into five sections to discuss the themes that have been selected for this research. The first section deals with the theme of the conflict between the old and the new ways of life where the conflict between Pak Kia and his brother, Zaidi, is highlighted. The second section deals with the theme of adapting to change with concentration on Pak Kia, who at the beginning of the novel is portrayed as an icon of resistance to change, finally manages to embrace change in his new community. The third section of this chapter looks at the theme of faith in God. In this section the role of religion in society is discussed in relation to the novel. The fourth section of this chapter includes an analysis of the theme of fear of being displaced where the concept of alienation and self-imposed exile will be looked at in relation to the idea of displacement as a result of colonialism. The fifth section examines the theme of exploitation of human beings in *Jungle of Hope*.

The last chapter is the concluding chapter, which includes a discussion on the possible hypotheses that I have put forward. The five themes that are discussed in the fourth chapter are examined based on the hypotheses that have been proposed. An attempt is also made to ascertain whether Keris Mas, as one of the founding members of the 50s Generation movement, has a hidden agenda

- relating to his views on the problems faced by the Malays under the rule of the British government - when he was writing *Jungle of Hope*.

Problem Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine the themes and issues in *Jungle of Hope* from a sociological perspective in the hope that it will provide us with an insight into the early 1920s and late 1930s Malay society that is portrayed in the novel. It is felt that the novel will allow us to analyse the conflicts and challenges that a particular community in Bentong had to face and overcome in dealing with the demands of the post-World War I colonial government and the impact that these demands had on the villagers of Ketari and Benus in Bentong. In Pak Kia, we see the epitome of traditional Malay man who is set in his ways and belief. In Pak Kia's brother, Zaidi, we see the emergence of the new Malay influenced by the *Kaum Muda* (Young Faction) movement. In Pendekar Atan, the antagonist, we see another type of Malay character that spectacularly decides to go the other way and takes the easy way out by betraying his own people.

The themes and issues that run through *Jungle of Hope* are specifically Malay and deal with the life of individual Malays and his roles in his community. The non-Malay characters are never directly referred to. Towkay Chan's character, for instance, is introduced through Pendekar Atan's thoughts and actions. As in the case of Tuan Pekok, the character does not make a physical

appearance in the text but rather his destructive hands may be symbolically seen choking the community via his ever expanding tin mines and the subsequent floods that resulted because of the activities at the mines. While critics may argue that this rather ethnocentric view of events in the novel is restrictive, it could also be seen as an attempt by Keris Mas to focus on the problems that are faced by the Malay community under the oppressive rule of British colonialists.

Scope of Study

The core of this study will involve an in-depth look at some of the themes and issues in *Jungle of Hope*. The sociological aspect of the discussion will rely heavily on the theories of society as mentioned by Haralambos and Heald (1980), McNeill and Townley (1986) and Goldthorpe (1996). Since the story is set in the 1920s and 1930s, contemporary issues of that period such as the *Kaum Muda* (Young Faction)-*Kaum Tua* (Old Faction) dichotomy will also be discussed in detail.

Briefly, Haralambos and Heald (1980) examine three theories of society, namely, functionalism, Marxism and interactionism. Functionalism begins with the observation that behaviour in society is structured. It believes that relationships between members of society are organised by rules. Therefore, it sees social relationships as “patterned and recurrent” (10). It also sees shared values as the key to the maintenance of order and stability in society. Thus, value

consensus integrates the various parts of society. In a nutshell, functionalists believe that individuals will tend to identify and feel kinship with those who share the same values as themselves.

Marxism, on the other hand, offers a radical alternative to functionalism. Marxism believes that society's institutions, belief and value systems are determined solely by economic factors. Thus, the concept of the ruling class that controls society emerges. Members of the ruling class, in Marx's words, "rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas" (14) These ideas justify their power and privilege and conceal from all members of society the basis of exploitation and oppression on which their dominance rests.

The interactionists, meanwhile, are concerned with definitions of situation and self. While functionalists stress that roles are provided by the social system, interactionists claim that roles are often "unclear, ambiguous and vague" (17). Thus, this lack of clarity leads to the members of society having rooms for negotiation, manoeuvre, improvisation and creative action. In short, interactionism focuses on the process of interaction in a particular context.

Therefore, as mentioned earlier, this study will be considering all the three theories of society as mentioned above. While the society in *Jungle of Hope* may share the notions of the theory of functionalism, the intervention by the British colonial government seems to be relevant to the concept of Marxism and its

views on capitalism. In addition, interactionism seems to be able to explain Pak Kia's thoughts and actions and his subsequent self-imposed exile from his society.

Further discussions on the theories of society can be seen in the Literature Review section under the sub-heading of Sociological Theories.

Objective of the Study

As mentioned earlier, this study intends to provide a foundation for future discussions on the themes and issues in *Jungle of Hope*. Its sociological inclination is an attempt at researching into the workings of the Malay community during the period in which the story is set. In short, this study intends to explore, within the limited scope of a thesis, the Malay characters in the novel and their functions in their society by analysing the themes and issues of the novel based on the three sociological theories that have been mentioned above. Thus, the study attempts to show the relationships between these Malay individuals with their race, religion, immediate environment and society in general.

Significance of the Study

This study will assume that *Jungle of Hope* has been written by Keris Mas after a careful research into the events that led to the opening of Janda Baik, an

area which was once considered very remote and inhospitable to human beings. The pioneers of Janda Baik depicted by Keris Mas in his novel are Pak Kia and other villagers who, due to a combination of severe natural disasters and economic pressures, had to sell off their ancestral land and moved into the deep jungle of Janda Baik. While the disasters may be seen as divine intervention, the emergence of a colonial economy reeling from the effects of the First World War brought about far-reaching consequences to the Malay society (Ariffin Omar 1993: 7).

The colonial government's rush to encourage more people to plant rubber trees to support its own rubber-based economy and its approval for the expansion of countless tin mines resulted in two important phenomena. Firstly, the Malays were duped into giving up planting rice due to the attractive increase in the price of rubber. Suddenly planting rice became economically less viable than rubber. Of course, the floods did not help the situation at all. The villagers were left with very little choice. It was either to sell off their land and get some money out of it or stay and starve to death as their rice fields were flooded. They were also forced to sell off their land as big mining corporations surrounding their areas were expanding at an exceedingly fast rate often resulting in the destruction of the forests and natural elements that used to help to prevent droughts and floods. Left with no choice, individuals like Pak Kia, who preferred their traditional way of life, had to leave their land in search of new areas to open in order to keep their traditional way life.

Secondly, the arrival of Chinese businessmen in what used to be predominantly Malay *kampungs* and towns changed the Malay landscape of the areas forever (Mahathir Mohamad, 1970: 53). The monopoly that these businessmen had eventually led to the arrival of more Chinese into the towns and the retreat of the Malays - either because of stiff competition for businesses or the sudden increase of the price of land in town areas - to the fringes of the *kampungs* or, in the case of *Jungle of Hope*, into the jungle.

As a result of the phenomena mentioned above, in the first decade of the 20th. century, a new movement which began to stir the manifestation of Malay nationalism began to emerge (Roff 1994: 58). This movement, the *Kaum Muda* movement, initially began as a movement that was only concerned with redefining Islam as it believed that the traditional practice of Islam in Malaya was adulterated by impurities of customs and belief derived from *adat* (culture) and from other religions. The followers of this movement felt that these “impurities” needed to be cleansed and that the *ulamas* (religious leaders) who were responsible for the transmission of these imperfections should be corrected.

However, as time passed, the *Kaum Muda* began to undertake the task of reforming the society in their strides. They began to see the arrival of the immigrants, especially the Chinese, as a threat to their race and religion. In *Jungle of Hope*, Keris Mas touches on this issue by depicting Zaidi as a staunch

follower of this group. Thus, this study is significant in the sense that it discusses the impact of the phenomena mentioned above – the British government insistence on tin mining and rubber planting, mainly to fund their capitalistic endeavours, and the resulting arrivals of immigrants from China and India – on the Malays. These are, undoubtedly, real issues to the Malay society in *Jungle of Hope*.

Limitations of the Study

This study will be limited to the sociological perspective of the themes and issues in *Jungle of Hope*. However, the findings on the Malays as a society – their fears, their challenges, their determination and so on and so forth – may appear to be shared by other novels by Malay writers who are Keris Mas' contemporary such as Usman Awang, Ishak Haji Muhammad and A. Samad Ismail, especially those who belonged to the 50s Generation movement - a movement that was set up to represent the generation of 1950s writers - as the themes and issues in their works may have been similar to *Jungle of Hope*.

Conceptual Theory

It is expected that all the themes selected for the purpose of this research in this study, which are Conflict between the old and the new ways of life, Adapting to change, Faith in God, Fear of being displaced and Exploitation of human beings, will be able to be analysed in conjunction with the main