UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

AN ISLAMIC READING OF MORAL ISSUES IN MALAY NOVELS

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

MALAY MORAL DILEMMA: AN ISLAMIC READING OF MODERN MALAY NOVELS

By

NORA MOHAMED NOR

December 2006

Chairman   **: Noritah Omar, PhD**

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This thesis centers on reading modern Malay literature as a site for understanding the Malay dilemma in upholding their religious beliefs against both traditional cultural beliefs and modernization brought about by westernization. Using a sociological approach within an Islamic framework, the study investigates how the Malay authors depict Malay characters who transgress Islamic teachings. The analysis particularly follows the guidelines of the three Islamic principles: Belief, Law and Moral Conduct. At the same time, it explores the social struggles of the Malays with morality within the contexts of themes such as poverty, pervasive folk culture, religious conservatism, unscrupulous middlemen and irresponsible leadership. The works selected are English translated works originally written by A. Samad Said, Shahnon Ahmad and Khadijah Hashim. The three authors are representative writers of their time who are considered to have applied their creativity to foreground Malay as a resilient ethnic group in the face of adversity and social struggles.

The research suggests that Malay characters in the selected novels represent Malays who have an increasing lack of knowledge in Islam, leading readers to understand that Malay Muslims have mostly transgressed the Islamic teachings. This may due to the fusion between culture and religion in traditional Malay society, and is mirrored by the emergence of modern hybrid values practiced by contemporary Malay society in the advent of westernization and in the face of hardship. Thus, studies on modern Malay literature which use the Islamic approach give a better picture of Malay social and religious struggles.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

DILEMA MORAL MASYARAKAT MELAYU: PEMBACAAN MENURUT PERSPEKTIF ISLAM TENTANG NOVEL-NOVEL MELAYU

Oleh

NORA MOHAMED NOR

Disember 2006

Pengerusi   :Noritah Omar, PhD

Fakulti   :Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi

Tesis ini memberi tumpuan pada sastera Melayu moden sebagai sumber untuk memahami dilema masyarakat Melayu dalam menegakkan pegangan agama mereka yang bertentangan dengan kepercayaan budaya tradisional dan juga budaya moden yang lebih bersifat kebaratan. Berdasarkan pendekatan sosiologi islam, kajian ini menyelidik bagaimana penulis-penulis Melayu memaparkan watak-watak Melayu yang melanggar ajaran Islam. Analisis kajian ini berdasarkan tiga prinsip agama Islam: Aqidah, Syariah, dan Akhlak. Seterusnya, ia mengkaji pergolakan sosial masyarakat Melayu dalam konteks nilai-nilai moral yang merangkumi tema seperti kemiskinan, budaya rakyat kolot dan kepercayaan agama yang kolot serta penglibatan orang tengah dan kepimpinan yang tidak bertanggungjawab. Karya-karya bagi kajian ini telah diterjemahkan dari teks asal A. Samad Said, Shahnon Ahmad, dan Khadijah Hashim. Ketiga-tiga penulis ini mewakili penulis semasa yang telah mengaplikasikan kreativiti mereka untuk memberi gambaran

tentang masyarakat Melayu sebagai kumpulan etnik yang gigih menghadapi kesukaran hidup dan pergolakan sosial.

Kajian ini juga menyarankan bahawa watak-watak Melayu dalam novel yang dipilih adalah mewakili masyarakat Melayu yang semakin kurang pengetahuannya tentang Islam, dan seterusnya memberi gambaran kepada para pembaca bahawa kebanyakan masyarakat Melayu Islam telah melanggar ajaran Islam. Ini mungkin disebabkan penggabungan di antara budaya dan agama di dalam masyarakat Melayu tradisional dan seterusnya dicerminkan melalui kemunculan nilai-nilai hibrid moden yang dipraktikkan oleh masyarakat Melayu kontemporari dalam menghadapi unsur-unsur barat dan kesulitan hidup. Oleh yang demikian, pengajian sastera Melayu moden yang menggunakan pendekatan Islam mampu memberi gambaran yang lebih jelas tentang pergolakan sosial dan agama yang telah lama berlaku dalam masyarakat Melayu.

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I certify that an Examination Committee has met on 12 July, 2006 to conduct the final examination of Nora Mohamed Nor on her Doctor of Philosophy thesis entitled **"**An Islamic Reading of Moral Issues in Modern Malay Novels" in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

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This thesis submitted to the Senate of the Universiti Putra Malaysia has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee are as follows:

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.

NORA MOHAMED NOR

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Malay novel provides an important source for the study of Malay culture and society. Through the portrayal of Malay characters and their interactions and relationships which occur in a certain situation or environment, the reader may gain an insight into the thoughts, beliefs, cultural behavior and practice of Malay individuals and society. Thus the Malay novelist, through his writing, presents the social conflicts and problems faced by Malay society, drawing upon economic, political or cultural factors and giving the reader glimpses towards understanding the psychological and sociological make-up of the Malays.

Within Malay literary texts, the novelists' description of society inevitably reveals a picture of the Malay mindset deeply ingrained within the Islamic belief that Malays uphold. Within this literary framework, it may also be possible to understand how Islam is used in the textual contexts, allowing writers to create space for readers to understand Islam, particularly how Muslims abide to or go against the Islamic code of ethics, beliefs and attitudes. This thesis investigates how Islam and Muslims are positioned in Malay literary space in which the notion of deviance of how the Muslims' misconducts become one of the major themes in modern Malay literary texts. Such highlights of this general misconduct can be seen as pervasive, and mirrors the lived reality of Malay society.

Positioning Malay novels as a site for reading the reality of Malay society may be seen as both a serious and contestable effort. This thesis positions itself as a site for reading Malay literary novels as a way of exploring Malay morality which not only reveals the state of Islamic transgressions by Muslims, but also is a means of understanding of the Malay cultural dilemma of balancing tradition and modernity. In investigating the connection between Malay and Islam in both locations, fiction and reality, it is imperative to look at how Islam has changed the Malay mindset or Malay worldview. Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, a major scholar in the study of Islam in the Malay world becomes the major reference to the Islamization of the Malay world.

The spirit of the Malay is rooted in Islam as assertd by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas in his study of the influence of Islam on Malay society as early as the fifteenth century. The spread of Islam in the Malay society is highly influenced by Sufism, which is highly "intellectual and rationalistic" (Syed Muahammad Naquib *Islamic Culture* 126). This gave rise to the presence of intellectualism and rationalism of the Malay worldview which was not present in pre-Islamic times. The emergence of rationalism and intellectualism created a powerful spirit which revolutionized the Malay worldview, turning it away from animism or the belief in spirits and the supernatural and Hinduism (126). Indeed, it prepared the Malays for the coming modern world. The Islamic appeal gave "the small man a sense of his individual worth as a member of the Islamic community - a sense and worth and also the nobility denied in pre-Islamic time" (Hurgronje quoted in Syed Muhammad Naquib *Islamic Culture* 126-127). The relationship between Islam and the Malay identity is elaborated by Mohd. Yusof Hassan in his book, *Dunia*

Melayu; it explains that the spread of Islam in the Malay world discloses two implications that are still relevant in the present era (16). The first, it strengthens the recognition of the Malay race through its new identity – the belief in Islam. The other, Islam is a religion that provides a distinct demarcation between the Malays who are Muslims and non-Muslims. For example, the Polynesian people, who are non-Muslims, are not accepted as having the same identity as the main Malay group of Malay–Indonesian. Underpinning this religious identity, Islam and the Malay society are defined as inseparable if not identical. Therefore, it can be said that the Malay religious identity has marked the Malays more than their ethnic or racial identity. In the public view, once Islam is centered in the Malay world, the Malay identity is assumed to be the Muslim identity.

Based on the Malays' pre-Islamic cultural experience, it has been argued that although the Malay individual is imbued in Islam, he is still greatly influenced by his cultural heritage – the traditions he has had with him before he was converted to Islam (Mohd. Taib *Malaysian World-view* 2). Thus today although Islam provides the Malay individual with the foundation of his life as a human being, he is still attached to his cultural roots. In reality, many facets of his life are still dictated by his pre-Islamic past and also his new experiences with other cultures gained in the later years. The tension between their indigenous heritage and other cultural experiences is seen to be a challenge to the Malay's adherence to his Islamic worldview.

Apart from Islam as a cause for dynamic progress of the Malay society, modernization through Western cultural influence also became an important social

process that had an impact on the Malay worldview and lifestyle. With the advent of Western colonialization as early as the sixteenth century when Malacca fell to the Portuguese followed by the Dutch in the seventeenth century, the Malay world, although initially showing considerable resistance to Western ideas and practices, eventually began to feel the impact of, and gradually accepted 'modernization' (Hussin Mutalib 22). The culmination of the Western influence in Malaysia was manifested through the British rule between the nineteenth – twentieth centuries (27-28). Therefore, influences from Islam and the West converge to form a unique Westernized yet Islamic Malay identity in the thoughts and behaviors of the Malay people (Mohamad Abu Bakar 354).

As a result, the West has certainly caused much confusion in the Muslim world especially with the introduction of Western ways of thinking, judging and believing emulated by Muslim scholars and intellectuals who have been overawed by its scientific and technological prowess (Syed Muhammad Naquib, *Islam and Secularism* 15). Their reactions reveal their lack of true understanding of Islamic as well as Western worldviews, their essential beliefs and modes of thought. Syed Muhammad Naquib further criticizes the Muslim Community as being conscious and unconscious disseminators of unnecessary confusion and ignorance. He declares that "The situation in our midst can indeed be seen as critical when we consider the fact that the Muslim Community is generally unaware of what the secularizing process implies" (16).

Secularization is defined as the deliverance of man from any religious and metaphysical control over his reason and language; it encompasses political and

social aspects of life as well as cultural, for it signifies "the disappearance of religious determination of the symbols of cultural integration" (Harvey Cox quoted in Syed Muhammad Naquib, *Islam and Secularism* 17). This implies a historical process that is irreversible, in which society moves away from religious control and closed metaphysical worldviews.

Certainly, Islam is different from Christianity as regards to secularization; the whole experience will not necessarily affect the Muslims' beliefs in the same way it does the beliefs of the Western society (15). Secularization when applied to describe Western man and his culture and civilization cannot be accepted as true if it is intended to describe what is happening in the society of the Muslims and perhaps to other Eastern religions and their adherence (25). The main reason is Islam totally rejects any application to the concepts of secular or secularization because they are alien to every aspect of the Islamic way of life; they are natural only to the intellectual tradition of Western-Christian consciousness and experience (25). In the case of Islam, man is expected to submit to his faith through his sincere subjugation to Revealed Law or *syari'ah* expressed in the teachings, sayings and model actions of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) or *sunnah* (26 – 28).

The whole process of secularization or westernization of the Muslim Community may have inevitably led some Malays to view their cultural traditions as being parochial, and consequently reject or dismiss them as being culturally restrictive. On the other hand, the Western idea of progress is seen to influence the Malays' adaptation to social change (Mohamad Abu Bakar 355). The tension between

tradition and Western modernization brought about by these experiences has inspired Malay novelists to explore related themes and issues in their literary works. It is justified then for David J. Banks, an anthropologist, to declare that the Malay novel is "an important source of analyses and criticisms of the Malay culture from within" (Banks 1).

Background of the Study

When literature is used as a source of insight into a society, both modern and traditional forms are usually used for reference. Traditional Malay literature, particularly its oral literature, is found to particularly function as moral lessons in a society fixed in its cultural beliefs and traditions. However, with Western influence on the Malay society, modern Malay literature (especially the novel), tends to express the general moral consciousness much less directly (Banks 2), although still providing an insight into the traditional and modern state of the existing culture including personal and private experiences. At the same time, it informs the social, economic and political problems prevalent in the Malay society. Writers of modern Malay literature are perceptive of these problems as commented by Tham Seong Chee in his book on *Malays and Modernization: A Sociological Interpretation:*

> Writers of modern Malay literature have throughout, implicitly or explicitly, regarded themselves as social critics. Literary writings therefore are manifestations of their perception and awareness of the forces of modernization impinging on their society.
>
> (Tham 211)

According to Banks, modern literature also provides a window into the human consequence of political ideology (3). The Malay novels especially both the post war and post independence periods are deeply involved with the economic and political factors central in the evolution of the Malay society. Banks argues one of the avowed purposes of these novels is to raise "consciousness" because the political thinkers in Malaysia have used Malay literature to present their views to a popular audience (3). The ideas expressed by Malay writers have represented an attempt to cultivate consciousness for progress and stability within the society that includes in their belief and practice of Islam. To be more precise, Ungku Maimunah describes the literary scenario as a preoccupation with the plight of the poor and the conduct of the leaders (Ungku Maimunah *Antara* 58). Modern Malay literature portrays Malay characters as Muslims who seem to have forgotten their religious values that their behaviors and actions transgress Islamic morality. It is important to note that the Malay writers such as A. Samad Said, Shahnon Ahmad and Khadijah Hashim have made immorality as the centre of their themes which may be read as an indirect way of questioning the practices and cultural values of a Malay.

The study of Malay socio-cultural values is made possible in both traditional and modern literature. According to Sharifah Maznah, Malay value system is the essence of Malay humanity, which could be described as fundamental to the Malay philosophical notion about their society (Sharifah Maznah 43). For example, the essence of Malay humanity is seen within the context of the nationalism as a force to communal and emotional ties amongst Malays. The Malays became more conscious of their identity and national pride when the British colonized them and

the Japanese invaded them during the Second World War. To the Malays, nationalism involves cultural identity, social unity as well as racial consciousness. This idea is supported by Hans Kohn in his book, *Nationalism: Meaning and History*, the root of nationalism does not begin as a movement directed towards forming a new independent nation, but rather it is aimed towards the formation of a social organization and in some cases towards a clan, tribe, or religious group (quoted in Bazuriah 7). Consequently, related issues such as patriotism, colonialism and politics become more important as the core of human values practiced by the Malay society. Although the novels in the post war period delve into anti-colonial themes, the impact on Malay cultural values is also focused as the effects of colonialism (British and Japanese) upon the society (Banks 24), and social problems such as corruption, economic deprivation and dissipation of moral values are addressed as " the direct heritage of the War" (27).

Malay literary works in the post war period present a "distinct character" because the writers have begun to realize their social position and also the deprived condition of the people at that time (Ungku Maimunah *Antara* 50). The socio-economic inequality pervaded between the masses and the British as well as the Malay elite has influenced the writers to empathize with the poor or disadvantaged. Social issues capture greater attention other than moral and ethical issues that have been the preoccupation among Malay writers since pre-war (50).

There is also a strong contention that the socio-political reality pervaded in the post war and post independence literary works expose new breed of Malay leaders who are educated and orientated with Western knowledge, yet they fail to be

responsible to reach the masses and to improve the economy of the poor Malays (57). The social role of Malay literature during these historical ethoses is very concerned with poverty. The literature of these times is concerned with the struggles and sufferings of the poor Malays on the one hand, and on the other, their commitment to their lands and their will to survive against all the adversities. One of the causes of the continuous suffering of the poor is the moral decadence among various individuals who include the elite Malays, government officers and political representatives that are corrupted and hypocritical striving for their own vested interests (70). One of the writers' main concerns is the problem faced by the Malay society in the rural areas (Banks 25). Amongst themes highlighted in Malay novels are Malay poverty, pervasive folk culture, religious conservatism, unscrupulous middlemen and irresponsible leadership. Subsequently, the writers didactically express that these difficulties could be overcome if the Malays especially the rural Malays are ready to change, to accept new ideas and to practice unity among them. In light of Malay writers' concerns, Malay literary works are claimed to have thus instilled the "spirit of optimism" that seems to contribute to the task of nation building (26).

If Bank postulates Malay literary works as an important source to study cultural change, Virginia Matheson Hooker has also examined them critically in order to trace the social change within Malay society. Hooker explains that the Malay fictional narratives make visible the Malay community especially "the domestic world of individual Malays, in their homes and on their land" (Hooker 12). The social concerns of these narratives indicate that the authors are sensitive to "the role of moral values and particular qualities (or virtues) in social change" (12).

Through her literary analyses of Malay novels, Hooker provides an insight into the Malay values and ethics and how their behaviors have affected change in the society. The social contexts have captured the attention of early modern Malay fiction writers. It is only after the Second World War that Malay literary writing openly presents its involvement with society (Hooker 13, Tham 222). In understanding the text, one will thus discover its multiple settings and intents – social, political and historical (Hooker 12-13). Looking deeply into the socio-historical context in the study of Malay literature would certainly provide a greater insight into the problems and progress of the Malay society in all aspects of their lives (Keris Mas 442-446).

Most importantly, Malay literary works, especially the novels, explore the Malay society in great depth. The Malay society according to Ediruslan Pe Amanriza upholds three aspects, which are the main basis of a dynamic Malay society (quoted in Siti Aishah vii). First of all, there are the Malay customs, which involve interactions among members of the society. Then, there is the Malay tradition which upholds the relationship between man and his environment. Finally, underlining the social interactions in the Malay society is a strong view on the proper code of conduct and ethics (Siti Aishah xi). With the acceptance of Islam among the Malays, there arose a need among the Malays to gain Islamic knowledge and to steep in religious observances replacing the non-Islamic or unethical code of conduct and practices (Mohd.Taib *Malaysian World-view* 55). Thus, one can conclude that the basis of the refinement of conduct among the Malays is to believe and practice Islamic values.

Islamic culture in Malay literature emerged after the advent of Islam in the fifteenth century (Ismail Hamid 36). Classical Malay literature developed and was greatly followed by other genres as a result of the new religion (47). The main focus on Islamic values in the Malay literature is to project the positive elements of man and his society. For example, the individuals need to cooperate with one another towards a single unified society at all times, and to invite others to be righteous. The following quotation from the *Quran* categorically describes how and why the individuals in society should be united and uphold righteousness:

> Whatever ye shall spend in the cause of God, shall be repaid unto you, and ye shall not be treated unjustly.
>
> (The *Quran* 8:60)

Therefore, the elements conveying Islamic values in the Malay literary works should be fully explored to broaden one's mindset instilling a greater meaning about life and to develop an appreciation for Islam. Elements that implicate the importance of Islamic values within the context of moral decadence need to be taken seriously so as to realize the true path of Islam in one's life. For this study, the Malay novels act as a window for the reader to understand further the socio-cultural upheavals of the Malay society as it evolves from its historical past to the present, which is the modern era.

Statement of the Problem

Contemporary Malay novels articulate, in broad and general terms, a core of values that structure the author's narrative world. These core values constitute a firm basis

of worldview (Ungku Maimunah *Antara* 115). In order to understand the narrative world, one has to explore the real state of Malay Muslim world and their struggles in centering Islam as *ad-Din*. Islam, which has penetrated into the Malay worldview as a religion and a basis for the code of conduct, thus should form a formidable stronghold for the mental as well as emotional stability of the Malay individuals. However, circumstances such as economic and political instability, social disparity, and personal ambition, or material pursuit compel these individuals to be destabilized in their compulsion towards Islamic way of life, especially those related to the code of conduct and ethical demands. The Malay individuals with their historical past and multi-cultural interactions are often confronted with a choice, which is based either on Islamic principles, or that of other cultural beliefs and behaviors. At times, the latter is preferred because it seems to be more realistic and pragmatic for a particular time and place, or perhaps it fulfills the individual's contrived desire at that very moment in time. Thus in modern times, the Malay society tend to confuse their Islamic values and practices with their pre-Islamic traditions leading to the adoption of religiously and culturally hybrid rituals and practices – fusion between animism and worship (Tham 250), and also Western ideology of liberalism and capitalism (Mohd. Kamal Hassan 12).

Nevertheless, it is very important that the Malay society like any other Muslim societies in facing these challenges submit to Islam as the *ad-Din*, the total way of life. The greatest challenge is from the Western world. Their cultural and intellectual dominance upon the whole world, particularly the Muslim world, is pervasively overpowering. However, Abul A'la Maududi, one of the contemporary

Islamic thinkers states that Islam is powerful enough to withstand any kind of
challenge and influence because:

> Islam represents a whole civilization, a complete culture, and a comprehensive
> world order. It provides moral guidance in all walks of life. This is why Islamic
> values are not solely for the ascetic who renounces the world, but for him who
> actively participates in different spheres of life, and works within them. The moral
> values which people look for in convents, monasteries, and cloisters, are placed by
> Islam right in the mainstream of life.
>
> (Abul A'la Maududi 13-14)

Syed Muhammad Naquib supports this viewpoint by outlining the worldview of
Islam as a religion that is conscious of its own identity from the time of its revelation,
that:

> When it appeared on the stage of world history Islam was already
> 'mature', needing no process of 'growing up' to maturity. Revealed
> religion can only be that which knows itself from the very beginning;
> and that self-knowledge comes from the Revelation itself, not from
> history.
>
> (Syed Muhammad Naquib *Islam and the Challenge* 29)

Islam as a religion is further defined by G.H. Jansen in his book, *Militant Islam,*
highlighting its element of totality and comprehensiveness in the belief and practice
which is a robust antithesis to the socio-cultural subjugation of the West:

> … it cannot be repeated too often that Islam is not 'merely a religion'.
> It is a total and unified way of life, both religious and secular; it is a
> set of beliefs and way of worship; it is a vast and integrated system of
> law; it is a culture and a civilization; it is a polity and a method of
> governance; it is a special sort of society and a way of running a
> family; it prescribes for inheritance and divorce, dress and etiquette,
> food and personal hygiene. It is a spiritual and human totality, this
> worldly and otherworldly.
>
> (Jansen 17)