

English in Malaysia and Malaysian Literature in English: The development, the challenges and the prospects

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Abstract: The situation in which the language and the literature in Malaysia are placed is interestingly complicated, and thus, it deserves serious attention. The present paper provides an account on the process of the development of the literature in English in Malaysia, in line with the position of English in the country. The primary aim of this paper is to assess the values and the prospects of English and the literature in English in Malaysia. Chapter 1 provides an introduction followed by chapter 2 in which background information about Malaysia is provided. Chapter 3 briefly delineates the introduction of English language into Malaysia, and Chapter 4 outlines the development of Malaysian Literature in English followed by Chapter 5 discussing the challenges and prospects of Malaysian Literature in English. Chapter 6 provides the conclusion of this paper.

Key words: English in Malaysia, Malaysian Literature in English, Introduction of English into Malaysia, Status of English in Malaysia

1. Introduction

As Low and Azirah Hashim (2012) pointed out in the introduction of *English in Southeast Asia*, Singaporean English would be the most recognised English variety in Southeast Asia, but certainly the English variety in Malaysia is also drawing scholars' attention in recent years. In addition to the previous studies listed in the comprehensive bibliography provided in *English in Southeast Asia*, there have been even more studies that vigorously discussed various issues concerning the English variety published in the past few years (Hamidah Yamat, Nur Farita Mustapa Umar, & Muhammad Ilyas Mahmood, 2014; Stephen, 2013; Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014).

The English variety called "Malaysian English" is spoken with great familiarity by a large number of people living in Malaysia. Therefore, though the sole official language of Malaysia was changed from English to Bahasa Malaysia—a language formalised based on Malay, which is basically identical to the aforementioned language—after the independence from the Britain, English is widely utilised—sometimes fully, and in numerous occasions,

partially— as an effective communication tool among the peoples there.

Thus, the linguistic aspect of the English variety has been widely described and explored in numerous scholars' previous studies. Platt, Weber, and Ho (1983) is one of the early instances that tried to comprehensively capture the English varieties in Malaysia and Singapore. The work not only tried to describe the spoken form of the English varieties, but it also covered the written form of it consulting various media such as newspapers, advertising leaflets, and literature in English. What Platt, Weber and Ho (1983) did has been succeeded by various other studies from various perspectives, and most recently saw a contribution that covered even wider range of English varieties in Southeast Asia (Low & Azirah Hashim, 2012). The English variety used in literature was later further explored by Azirah Hashim (2007).

As shown above, previous studies widely explored the English variation in Malaysia from linguistic perspective. Compared to them, those from literary perspective came much later. Precisely, there had been ones that concerned the literature in English in Malaysia such as Yap (1960), MacLeod (1966) and Subramaniam (1977), but those were rather sporadic and apparently, the literature in English had not much been paid attention until recently.

Interestingly, as the existence of the studies concerning the literature in English listed above shows, certain scholars have had interests in the literature, but there had scarcely been any academic project done concerning the literature in English in order to systematically understand it throughout the time of British colonisation and even after that. It is possibly because the urgent need to build an unified multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nation state had the national efforts predominantly concentrated rather on sophisticating the sole national language, Bahasa Malaysia, than the "language of colonisers", English.

It is a Bangladeshi scholar's concerted efforts to know more about the local literature that stimulated other scholars to carry out studies in relation to the literature in English in Malaysia, or "Malaysian Literature in English".(He chose the literature in English because it was the only choice available to him because he could not appreciate other ones written in other languages).

Thus, in a sense, both English and the literature in English in current Malaysian society are ambivalent in nature since both of them were brought by others and then developed in the society. Therefore, the position of them also is ambivalent in the county when it comes to discussing the official role of them due to political issues surrounding the national language and English. In that sense, the situation in which the language and the literature in Malaysia are placed is interestingly complicated, and thus, it deserves serious attention.

The present paper provides an account on the process of the development of the literature in English in Malaysia, in line with the position of English in the country. The primary aim of this paper is to assess the values and the prospects of English and the literature in English in Malaysia. Hopefully, it conveys some of the intriguing aspects of the language and the literature in Malaysia.

2. Background Information

Before going into the main theme of the paper, basic information about Malaysia should be provided for the better understanding of the development of English language and the literature in English.

2.1 Malaysia

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country which comprises 11 states in the Malay Peninsula and two states in Borneo located in Southeast Asia.

For Peninsular Malaysia, due to its interaction with peoples from other parts of the world, there are various people of ethnic groups living in the country in addition to the 53 % of Malays and 11 % of Orang Aslis, or indigenous people: namely, 25 % of Chinese (who can be further categorised into smaller groups such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Teowchew etc), 10 % of Indians (who are predominantly Tamils, but there are also other people who belong to other groups such as Punjabis) (The Commonwealth).

In Sarawak, the main indigenous people—Iban, Bidayuh and Orang Ulu with the Melanau being early settlers—are known as Dayaks, and in Sabah, the Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau and Murut (The Commonwealth).

2.2 Language and Literature in Malaysia

The sole national language is Bahasa Malaysia, but the peoples there speak various other languages as well as the national language. Prominent ones are Chinese (Mandarin Chinese as the medium of instruction in Chinese schools, and other Chinese dialects such as Hokkien and Cantonese), Tamil (the medium of instruction in Tamil schools) and English.

Same holds true to the national literature. Although there have been literary works written by Malaysian writers (or, in some period of time, by Malayan writers) in Chinese, Tamil and English as evident in early literary magazines such as *The New Cauldron* (1949-60), the national literature of Malaysia is defined as ones written in Malay language as suggested in the concept of The National Literary Award: “The National Literary Award is the recognition awarded by the Malaysian Government to writers who write in the Malay

Language and who, through works of acclaimed quality, have contributed significantly to the nation's development in literature.” (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1998)

The selective attitude towards the languages and the literatures in the country makes a striking contrast to the one in Singapore, the former member of the Federation of Malaysia until it left the Federation in 1965. While Malaysia selects Bahasa Malaysia as its sole official language and the literature written in Malay as its sole national literature (, which is awarded only to a citizen of Malaysia), Singapore selects English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil as its official languages and the national literary prize, named “Singapore Literature Prize”, is:

open to Singapore citizens and Permanent Residents whose works of fiction (novels or short stories), poetry, and non-fiction have been published in Singapore or abroad during specified period of time in any of Singapore's four official languages—English, Chinese, Malay, or Tamil (The National Book Development Council of Singapore)

Although Malaysia and Singapore used to belong to the same state—the Federation of Malaysia—the development of these countries after the separation transformed them into totally different countries. The consequences resulted from the development that those two countries had undergone cannot simply be judged preferring the case in Singapore as a success. Both of these consequences had values in their own ways. The following chapter traces the development of English in Malaysia along with the political changes that surrounded the language.

3. Introduction of English into Malaysia

Before the arrival of the European Powers, there were small states in the Malay Peninsula which mostly were subjugated by other overwhelming powers existed in neighbouring regions. However, the power balance between those states were constantly changing, and in the fifteenth century, Malacca gained prominence as an important entrepôt for the spices of the Moluccas and Banda islands, Indian textiles and Chinese silks and porcelain (Shennan, 2015, p. 17).

On arrival of the European powers, Malacca first fell to the Portuguese in 1511, and later was seized by the Dutch in 1641 (Shennan, 2015, p. 18). When the influence of the Dutch declined in the eighteenth century due to the political situations and the external threats from the pirates, the British came to play an important role in the region.

The British slowly extended the influence over the region first acquiring a small island

in the northwestern part of the Malay Peninsula—which is, Penang—from the Sultan of Kedah in 1786 followed by the seizure of Malacca from the Dutch in 1795 and the signing of Pangkor Treaty in 1874, which ultimately led to the establishment of “Resident system” allowing them to “indirectly” rule some of the Malay states (Hooker, 2003, p. 7; Ng; Shennan, 2015, pp. 19-21).

It was, undoubtedly, the British who first brought English into Malaysia, but as Asmah Haji Omar (2012) pointed out, the year 1786 should not be taken as the year that the language was introduced to the region (pp.155-156). In the early days, English was used only among Francis Light and other English people with much simplified version of it with their workers and servants (Asmah Haji Omar, 2012, pp. 155-156).

It was in the early years of the 19th century that English language was truly introduced into the region with the establishment of Penang Free School in 1816 later followed by other English schools (Asmah Haji Omar, 2012, p. 156). Those students who graduated from the English secondary schools had no other choice but to go to England or other Commonwealth countries in order to pursue tertiary education until when Raffles College and King Edward VII College of Medicine were set up respectively in 1905 and 1925 in Singapore (Asmah Haji Omar, 2012, p. 157; “Our History,”)². Those two individual institutions were later merged and renamed as University of Malaya in 1949, and much later, in 1959, divided into two different universities, one in Singapore and another in Kuala Lumpur (“Our History,”).

This is how English language was introduced into Malaysia, or more precisely, Malaya. It is more convincing to say that the language was introduced into Malaya when the English schools and the institutions for tertiary education were established than to say it was done so in other period of time because it was this very period of time when Malaysians started to utilise the language and started the creative writing activity in the language.

Despite the efforts of the students to fully utilise the language and to make it their own, the language would later be pushed into a status of a mere “common language” after the independence in 1957, when Malay was selected as the sole national language of the newly independent country. In the course of building the country, a number of language policies were initiated to further reinforce the importance of Malay, which resulted in weakening the status of English in the country.

However, English, recently, has been re-evaluated as an important asset to realise the development of the country and to gain knowledge, and more emphasis is put on to take the language more seriously (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014, p. 255). The status of English in Malaysia is still constantly changing as shown in the recent disturbance surrounding the

language policy³ (Stephen, 2013, p. 4), and is always a main issue in education policy that preoccupies the ministers and educationists in the country.

Although the status of English has undergone political turbulence after the independence up until now, the tradition of literature in English initiated by the early English-educated elites who studied at University of Malaya has never ceased even after the language lost its official status as the medium of instruction in public schools. The following chapter briefly delineates the development of the literature in English in Malaysia.

4. Malaysian Literature in English

Some scholars recently started re-evaluating the works of former colonial officers such as Sir Frank Swettenham, Sir Hugh Clifford, Sir George Maxwell and Anthony Burgess (Holden, 2000; Mohamad Rashidi Pakri, 2014), and thanks to those studies, the literary activity in colonial Malaya has been well explored if not completely. The tradition of literature in English by Malaysians started much later than those of colonial officers'. Previous studies agree that the roots of literature in English written by Malay(si)ans can be traced back to the publication of literary magazines in 1940s–50s. *The New Cauldron* (1949-60) is among the earliest attempts from the students of University of Malaya to establish their own literature in English (Mohammad A. Quayum, 2007b, pp. 16-17; Souza, 2001, p. 4) followed by other literary magazines and books by Malay(si)an poets (Patke & Holden, 2010, pp. 50-51).

However, the early attempts by the students of University of Malaya were after all English-educated elites' isolated activities, and thus, losing its official status soon after the independence, the practice of writing literature in English remained a marginal activity. Therefore, although there had been sporadic attempts to publish Malayan/Malaysian Anglophone writers' works such as *Literature East & West* (1966) edited by A.L. Mcleod and *Twenty-two Malaysian Stories: an Anthology of writing in English* (1968) and *Malaysian Short Stories* (1981) edited by Lloyd Fernando, the works soon after the publication went out of print, and were not widely available to the public.

Thus, when Mohammad A. Quayum, as he recollects in the preface of his *One Sky Many Horizons* (2007), first moved to Kuala Lumpur after his lectureship at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and visiting fellowship at Flinders University of South Australia, he could not find any recently edited collection of short stories though he was longing for the local literature to immerse himself in to better understand the culture of Malaysia (Mohammad A. Quayum, 2007d, p. viii).

Lloyd Fernando's *Malaysian Stories* and *Malaysian Short Stories* were seemingly the

only good ones at the time when he was looking for collections of short stories, but they have been out of print and were out dated, so he edited a collection of short stories from Malaysia and Singapore himself (Mohammad A. Quayum, 2007d, p. ix). After that, he vigorously contributed to forming the literature on Malaysian Literature in English editing collections of Malaysian Literature in English as well as publishing scholarly works such as *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader* (2001) and *Colonial to Global: Malaysian Women's Writing in English 1940s—1990s* (2003).

Thus, interestingly, one of the most significant contributions was made by a scholar from the outside of Malaysia. Mohammad A. Quayum not only provided the primary sources such as literary works written by Malaysians and interviews of prominent writers for later scholars, but also selectively gathered critical articles with which scholars now can further extend their studies.

Here lies the intriguing aspect of Malaysian Literature in English. Unlike Singapore, literature in English in Malaysia has no backup from the government, and so it has long remained obscure both to the public and to the scholars. However, it somehow caught attention of a scholar and was brought back to life again.

Although the students of University of Malaya's literary activity did not develop into an established national literature in English, the tradition of Anglophone writing did continue even after the independence when English was pushed into secondary status being replaced by Malay.

The tradition of Anglophone writing in Malaysia after the independence was pioneered by poets such as Wong Phui Nam and Ee Tiang Hong, and by writers such as Lee Kok Liang and Lloyd Fernando followed by "second generation writers" such as Shirley Lim, K.S. Maniam, Cecil Rajendra, Kee Thuan Chye and Hilary Tham (Mohammad A. Quayum, 2007b, p. 18).

Besides those writers listed above, there are some "relatively new" writers such as Chuah Guat Eng, Nirmala Raghavan, Dina Zaman, Marrie Gerrina Lois, Karim Raslan and Amir Muhammad (Mohammad A. Quayum, 2007b, p. 20). The expression relatively new is applied here because the writers listed above are certainly younger than the first and the second generation writers, but they are already in their 50s or above except for Amir Muhammad, Dina Zaman and Karim Raslan, who are still in their 40s now.

There are even younger writers who casually publish their works in a collection of short stories, and who even publish a novel, but, as Muhammad Haji Salleh once wrote, it is necessary that we wait few years more to do them justice (Muhammad Haji Salleh, 1988, p. xi). One has to see whether their works withstand the test of time.

5. Challenges, and Prospects

5.1 Challenges

Chapter 4 briefly outlined the development of Malaysian Literature in English. Although the body of publication is rather small compared to other countries such as India, South Africa and even Singapore, considering the political challenges that the language has faced after the independence, it can be said that the Anglophone writers have made meaningful accomplishments as once Mahammad A. Quayum evaluated (Mohammad A. Quayum, 2007c, p. 38).

This chapter will discuss the challenges that the Anglophone writers in Malaysia have faced after the independence, and also the prospects in line with the current political situations in the country.

First and foremost, the greatest challenge that the Anglophone writers in Malaysia have suffered is the change of the status of English after the independence of the country. The status of English as the official language was replaced by Bahasa Malaysia by the implementation of the National Language Act of 1967 and it was further reinforced through an Amendment Act in 1971 making it illegal to dispute or question the status of the aforementioned language ((Quayum and Wicks 53) quoted in Mohammad A. Quayum, 2007c, p. 35). The policy initiated by the Ministry of Education in 1969 that aimed at changing all English-medium schools to Malay-medium schools, which was virtually accomplished throughout the country by 1983, was another serious step taken by the authority (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014, p. 255).

As (Mohammad A. Quayum, 2007c) accurately pointed out, the scarcity of readership, criticism and the lack of the freedom of writers are the other noticeable challenges that the current writers have been facing (p.40). The scarcity of readership will be obvious if one visits a large bookshop in Kuala Lumpur and tries to search for the works written originally in English by local authors. One can only find very limited titles, which will possibly be out of print in few years and forgotten. Even those works of “canonical” authors such as Lee Kok Liang, Ee Tiang Hong, Wong Phui Nam, Shirley Lim and K.S. Maniam might not be available. If there were needs from the readers for the works of local Anglophone writers, those works should be available at least in a large bookshop in the capital city of the country.

As to the scarcity of criticism, the situation has been changed since Mohammad A. Quayum has initiated an online journal named *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature* in 2007 in order to “generate quality research in the areas of Asian Englishes and Asian writings in English, including Asian literatures in English translation and Asian

diasporic literature” (Mohammad A. Quayum, 2007a, p. 1). *Asiatic* now provides a place for scholars to share their thoughts on literature in English in Asian countries. However, the attempt has started less than ten years ago, and thus, still the body of criticism concerning Malaysian Literature in English is relatively small.

Finally, there are various social and political constraints on the writers in Malaysia. This is, however, not a problem unique to the Anglophone writers, but is a problem that concerns all who write and release their works to the public. With the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual background, the peoples living there have to respect the rights of their counterparts of other ethnic groups as well as keeping their own lest there will be another May 13 racial riot in the future.

5.2 Prospects

Although the official status of English has been replaced by Bahasa Malaysia after the independence and it still remains a mere common language spoken by Malaysians without any official status, the importance of the language has been recognised by the authority and the government of Malaysia is trying to improve the dropped proficiency of English among the citizens. One of the recent moves that has been taken by the authority is the implementation of “To Uphold Bahasa Malaysia and to Strengthen the English language” (MBMMBI) policy in 2012, which aims to enhance the proficiency of English while maintaining the Bahasa Malaysia as the main language of communication, science and a medium of unity and solidarity (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014, p. 256).

In addition, English Literature component is foregrounded in the recently introduced National Education Blue Print (2013-2025), which regards English as a tool and resource to promote English language learning (Kaur & Mahmor, 2014, pp. 119-120). Currently, the works of local Anglophone writers were used as texts in secondary schools together with foreign texts. Although the foreign texts may be used more than those written by local writers (Kaur & Mahmor, 2014, p. 123), it is a great progress that even secondary students nowadays have opportunities to appreciate the works of Wong Phui Nam, Muhammad Haji Salleh, Kassim Ahmad and Cecil Rajendra together with the works of Yeats, Thomas Hardy and Shakespeare.

Furthermore, although Mohammad A. Quayum (2007c) once wrote that the heterogeneous make-up of Malaysian society was a challenge for the Anglophone writers in Malaysia who have no pool of consciousness (p.39), it is this very absence of common background that becomes the Anglophone writers’ source of imagination, that makes their works unique. Therefore, it is rather strength, an advantage with which the writers can produce a unique

piece of writing than a challenge that makes the writers suffer.

In that sense, although the tradition of Malaysian Literature in English is still short and the output of the works is yet small, but considering the ongoing change of the situation surrounding the national language and English, the prospect of Malaysian Literature in English appears to be hopeful. At least one can expect that it might take an interesting turn in near future.

6. Conclusion

The situation in which the language and the literature in Malaysia are placed is interestingly complicated, and thus it deserves serious attention. The present paper provided an account on the process of the development of the literature in English in Malaysia, in line with the position of English in the country. The primary aim of this paper was to assess the values and the prospects of English and the literature in English in Malaysia.

Chapter 1 provided the introduction followed by chapter 2 in which background information about Malaysia was provided. Chapter 3 briefly delineated the introduction of English language in Malaysia, and Chapter 4 outlined the development of Malaysian Literature in English followed by Chapter 5 that discussed the challenges and prospects of Malaysian Literature in English.

Hopefully, the present paper conveyed some of the intriguing aspects of the language and the literature in Malaysia providing a clue to start a research concerning the topic.

Notes

1. This research has been fully supported by USM Fellowship granted from University Sains Malaysia. I would like to thank all the committee members who gave me the opportunity to conduct this research.
2. Asmah Haji Omar (2012) says that the two tertiary institutions set up in Singapore were “the Raffles College for the Arts, and the King Edward College for Medicine and Dentistry” (p.157) and they were established in 1948. However, the official website of University of Malaya provides different information concerning those two institutions. This article used the information provided in the latter source. It is inferred that Asmah Haji Omar (2012) have confused the establishment of those two institutions with the establishment of University of Malaya in Singapore in 1949.
3. Due to the drop of English proficiency among public university graduates after the medium of instruction in public universities was changed into Malay from English, the government was forced to change its national language policy putting more emphasis on English (Ste-

phen, 2013, p. 4). The government initiated a new policy in 2003 and changed the medium of instruction for mathematics and science subjects in public schools to English from Malay. However, this caused disputes from nationalists, and due to the strong protest, the government finally abolished the policy in 2009.

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