

Constructions of the Self and Other: Re-visioning Melaka in Selected Literary Works

Noraini Md Yusof, Ruzy Suliza Hashim
School of Language Studies and Linguistics
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Bangi, Malaysia
e-mail: animy@ukm.my

Noraini Md Yusof, Ruzy Suliza Hashim
Centre for Gender Research
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Bangi, Malaysia
e-mail: animy@ukm.my

Abstract—This paper addresses from a New Historicist viewpoint the changing constructs of the identity of Melaka as evident in literary re-visionings of the 16th century Melaka-Portuguese encounters. The deconstructive nature of New Historicism allows us to disclose that the diverse discourses present Melaka in duality; in some texts Melaka is a great empire while in others, a fallen state. Our findings focus on two re-visioning texts to reveal the agenda behind the writers' constructions and the ways the state attempts to negotiate the freedom, as well as constraints, of the time and space it dwells in. By deconstructing each aspect of Melaka, we foreground the ideology that is operating in the construction of each. This page from the history of Malaysia remains significant today as it foreshadows the subordination of Melaka (and ultimately other parts of the Malay Peninsula) albeit in different time and space. The complexity of the issues implicated in the identity construction of a state and its nation, as reflected by the various images of Melaka in literature, is also prevalent in present-day Malaysia.

Keywords-identity; re-visioning; Melaka; self; other

I. INTRODUCTION

The Melaka-Portuguese altercations in the 16th Century receive significant space and mention in historical discourse from both eastern and western traditions. The fall of the Sultanate not only marks its final passing, but it also foreshadows the subordination of Melaka, as well as parts of the Malay Archipelago, to other Western colonizers albeit in different time and space. The historiography of Melaka in *Sejarah Melayu*, believed to be written circa 1612 [1] depicts this episode. Literary discourse too pays tribute to these events; texts in which this historical episode forms an integral backdrop to the narrative include *The Conquest of Malacca* [2], *Hikayat Anggun Che Tunggal* [3], *Zaman Gerhana* [4], *Balada Tun Fatimah* [5], *Arus Balik* [6] and the latest, *1515* [7]. We maintain each to be re-visionings of the 16th century Melaka-Portuguese encounters.

Literary discourse on Melaka has presented two constructed faces to the world: one in her glory as a great empire and the other, her fallen state; the choice of Melaka's identity is dependent on the perspective the writer writes from. A reading of the contrasting perspectives reveals a dichotomy that is ambiguous as well as disruptive. The line dividing hero and villain, black and white or right and wrong is blurred. In one text Melaka is a proud, cosmopolitan

Sultanate with maritime power, while in another she is defeated, a nation conquered. This disparity: Melaka – the Malay empire and Melaka – the Portuguese colony intrigues a study on the machination of nationhood in literary writing. Both are constructs, the products of their writers who view the state as the Other or as their own, namely the Self. This paper, thus, addresses from a New Historicist viewpoint the changing constructs of Melaka in two of the re-visioning texts, namely *The Conquest of Malacca* [2] and *1515* [7]. Relevant issues as pertains to *Sejarah Melayu* [1] will be referred to when necessary to provide an alternative perspective to the Western historical view. The deconstructive nature of New Historicism allows us to examine each aspect of Melaka from a local perspective to foreground the ideology operating in the construction of each. These constructions disclose the complexities implicated in the identity construction of a state and its nation which are also issues prevalent in present-day Malaysia.

II. IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE STATE AND NATION

From a New Historicist viewpoint, historical accounts are merely representations of history that are written in and influenced by the concerns of a specific time and place. The psychological and ideological position from which a text is viewed must be made clear. The individual identity and its cultural milieu are deemed “mutually constitutive (they create each other) and dynamically unstable” [8]; they occupy, mirror and define each other. As such, the sense of self is molded by and also molds the culture the individual is born into. In relation to literature, texts are cultural artifacts that present “the interplay of discourses, the web of social meanings, operating in the time and place in which the text was written” (ibid, 288). And so, similarly to the dynamics of individual identity and society, literary texts too shape and are shaped by their historical contexts.

A literary text is not produced, in a vacuum. Recognizing the intricate bond between the writer and his or her text, one is able to analyze the ways a writer produces the text as well as the factors that influence and contribute to the production. As the writer is an individual who is influenced by the surroundings and events that happen in the past or present, the writer becomes a product of his or her time and place. As the writer is a social construct, then the text produced is a construction, therefore embodying, either consciously or

unconsciously manifested, the same influences that affect or have affected the writer.

A New Historicist reading of texts takes into account the subjectivity of the writer. The reality is that global events significantly color the perceptions with which we view ourselves, others and the world we live in. Questions on who, what, where, why and how we are resound as we attempt to make sense of our past and our present in the face of current changes surrounding us. For example, the events on September 11, 2001, have resulted in exaggerating the ways in which nations view the space they occupy in this world. Conventional concepts like nationhood and patriotism have since made a comeback in the most profound manner and affect world discourse. Narratives on these issues as well as of their history are “created by particular cultural conditions at a particular time and place and expresses a particular way of understanding human experience” [8]; like all discourses they become the vehicle of ideology. Similarly in relation to the discourse on Melaka, the conditions and concerns of the time in which the text is produced shape the way the writer sees himself, his nation, the Others and the world around him. That position is a reflection of the psychological and ideological positions from which the writer writes.

Thus, examining these re-visionings of Melaka’s past provides a study on how they fit within the complexities of the ideologies and agendas competing in the time and place they occur. Ideology works through language, and the nature of discourse is that it wields power to those in charge while simultaneously inciting opposition to that power. As cultural artifacts, texts can be analyzed for the interplay of discourses operating in the time and space they were written. A study of the rhetorical strategies used in the texts revealed the limitations in terms of the writers’ own ideological assumptions and their explicit and implicit agendas. No one discourse can then adequately explain the complex cultural dynamics of power within society. And so like all narratives, the discourse used in history, as well as that of fiction, is inevitably biased to the subjectivity of their writers.

III. ANALYSIS

The workings and trappings of ideology in discourse make a powerful psychological tool. In de Meneses’ epic poem, *Malaca Conquistada* [2], Melaka is constructed as a conquered state, and in being so is denigrated. In one instance, Viegas, an escapee from Melaka, describes the Sultanate to his commanding officer, Albuquerque, prior to the attack as an “...opulent Malacca, which may be famous just because of the treacheries experienced there by us...”, and where among “inhuman, avaricious people we found a King, who does not keep faith or any law” and is “persuaded by evil counselors” (ibid 37). This denigration is further repeated by later Western Imperialists who portrayed the religions of defeated nations as contrary to theirs. The cultural or religious differences encountered in the 16th century by the Portuguese were misconstrued and perceived as wrong, uncultured or sometimes as acts of black-magic.

Discourse on Melaka is incomplete unless the historiography, which is the basis of the state’s identity as an empire-builder in the region, is incorporated into the

narration. However, in de Meneses’ poem, Alaida, a young native of Melaka who is besotted with one of Portugal’s knightly soldiers, depicts the Melaka of her birth as being founded by a king who “break[s] the sacred law of hospitality and sever[s] the close knot of friendship” (ibid, 69). This propagation of such degenerated ideas has certainly proven beneficial to the Portuguese victors since in effect, it heightens the perceived powers of their own self and might. The continued persecution of the conquered people of Melaka and their faith helps to reinforce those perceptions. In the eyes of these Portuguese soldiers, the people of Melaka were the Others to be looked upon with derision and suspicion for not only having the wrong language, but also culture, skin color and religion. Similar suspicion and prejudice of the Others had colored Portuguese worldview in the 16th Century.

From a New Historicist perspective, as a cultural artifact of the time and space of its production, the text shapes and is also shaped by its historical contexts. De Meneses’ poem reflects the attitudes and concerns that have influenced the construction of the Portuguese mindset and worldview of that period. In the 16th Century, the Portuguese, as a nation, had themselves been tainted by colonialism, the stains of which colored their attitudes toward themselves and the way they perceived the Others. There was, thus, a need to unshackle centuries of foreign dominance; from a nation that had little natural resources except for the abundance of the sea surrounding it, Portugal struggled to be accepted as a main player in 15th Century Europe. The expansion of their own boundaries in Iberia by the early 12th Century allowed the Portuguese to take the first step toward empire-building; the reclaiming of lands from the Moors and their final ousting from the peninsula gave the Portuguese their first taste for imperial power [9]. Their maritime skills led to the commercial success triggered by Vasco da Gama’s arrival at the Malabar Coast of India in 1498, allowing Portugal to shed its centuries-old mask and to put on a new one for its colonies. That arrival ultimately turned Lisbon, once a little known port located on the fringes of the continent, into the new European center for spice trade. However, when the first edition of de Meneses’ poem was produced it was 118 years after the events in 1511, and that was at a period when Portugal’s influence had shown a decline in power. The Dutch and the Spanish had gained superiority in maritime expansion. Political rivalry, colonial uprising, economic burdens and administrative incompetence contributed to the collapse of the Portuguese maritime empire. Thus, there was a need to elevate Portugal’s splendor and dominance to inspire the people; Through the denigration of their enemies, the resurrection and glorification of the Portuguese heroes in Melaka is testified.

By re-visioning the past, de Meneses empowers marginalized and silenced characters with voice and agency. The act of looking back involves the politics of re-visioning where the past is looked at with a new vision and from a new direction. This new attitude towards the past places historical events as more than just a chapter in cultural history: it becomes an act of survival when the past is believed to be able to contribute to the betterment of the future. “Until we

understand the assumptions in which we are drenched, we cannot know ourselves” [10]. This is a clear definition of what re-visioning entails, as it involves not just merely looking at the past in a new way, but more significantly, for the reason that is so crucial that it defines our identity and survival. Thus, by giving voice to silenced characters de Meneses provides us with alternative perspectives, allowing the forgotten, the weak and the ordinary of Melaka and Portugal to articulate stories that are otherwise previously suppressed by authority. For example, the poem gives voice to, not only Albuquerque, but also other caravel captains, the survivors of attacks and shipwrecks (e.g. de Sa), escaped Portuguese hostages from Melaka (e.g. Joao Viegas) and also the Kings of neighboring states (e.g. King Ardel of Pedir), who cooperate with the Portuguese. These are identities whose voices would be either marginalized or silenced in previous historical narratives, and now their stories reveal to us the bravery of the common soldiers, the gallantry of the hostages and the valor of the fallen men.

Malaca Conquistada [2] is imbued with the patriotism of Portuguese soldiers attacking Melaka. The valor displayed aims to inspire the Portuguese living at the time of the book’s publication to emulate the great deeds of their grandfathers. The Portuguese empire in the early 17th century was already in decline as it faced competition from the Spanish, Dutch and English. They were losing control of the spice trade and colonial lands to the Dutch in Southeast Asia. This deterioration of Portuguese power led to the capture of Malacca by the Dutch in 1641. Thus, Portuguese nationalism operated in the discourse to recover their past glories which at the time of its writing was already waning. Their weapons and continued persecution of the conquered people of Melaka help reinforce their own perceptions of power in the text.

In contrast to Western view of Melaka as the Sultanate defeated by the might of the Portuguese, the other constructed aspect of the image of Melaka is that of an empire. The historiography of Melaka in *The Malay Annals* [1] depicts the birth of the Sultanate, the growth and the fall to the Portuguese as well as the survival of the heritage and tradition of Melaka in Johor and other sites in the Malay Archipelago. A point of significance that has to be noted at this juncture is the fact that Melaka had achieved in the 15th Century what Portugal was only about to venture into in the 16th. Unlike Portugal, Melaka was already a main player in maritime trade, not only within Southeast Asian region, but also on a global scale. The foundation upon which Melaka was built was not newly conceived but based on the political blueprint of the Sri Vijayan Empire and Siam-protectorate Singapore [11]. With political, economical and social support from both east (China) and west (Arab nation) Melaka enjoyed its strategic locale as the land at the crossroads of the monsoons.

However, issues that were to lead Portugal to its decline in influence a century later were already orchestrating consequences in Melaka. Political rivalry, colonial uprising, economic burdens and administrative incompetence contributed to the weakening of Melaka - the maritime empire. It was the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th

Century that severed the state from its glorious past and opened a new chapter, one that subjugated her into silence. Therefore, unless Melaka’s splendor and role as key-player on the international scene could be revived after her fall to the Portuguese, the state and nation would remain subjugated. An alternative perspective to the fallen state of Melaka was needed to present a more glorified identity. The resurrection of the heroes in Melaka in *Sejarah Melayu* (1612) testifies the agenda in the production of the text; the scribe himself admits to that effect:

“...so that it may be known by all our descendants, and that they may remember it, therefore shall gain profit from it.”

Tun Sri Lanang, *Sejarah Melayu* [1].

And it was for that, the historiography of the Melaka Sultanate is commissioned in 1612, a decade after the fall of Melaka to the Portuguese and at the time facing threat from the Dutch. Written by an aristocrat of Melaka, the perspectives are those of an individual whose identity is that of state. In this perspective, we hear the voices of the aristocracy; the Portuguese, or Benggali Puteh as they are referred to in the text, are silenced and denigrated. The Portuguese are viewed as the Others, strangers who arrive from a foreign land.

In the latest re-visioning of Melaka-Portugal, *1515* [7], the writer reconstructs Melaka by transcending time and space to occupy the landscape of Europe as victor. What is more interesting here is not the image of Melaka as an imperial power in Europe but the ideology operating in the construction of such image. The writer claims Melaka as his own, thereby as the Self. There is no subtlety, for in the very beginning Nyemah Mulya, who is one of the main narrating voices in the text, plainly states her mission – to defy Melaka’s fate; reject her fall to the Portuguese; rewrite history for the nation and religion (ibid ix). As the voice of Melaka, she demands a new identity as a champion, the role that she takes on later in the novel. Such blatant ideology becomes the voice of propaganda, a trend that runs through the whole novel. The issues and concerns of the time and place it is written in transparently shapes the narration in the novel. The people of Melaka and Portugal view each other with suspicion and prejudice. The global after-effects of September 11 are prevalent in the plot; strikes, counter-strikes, pre-emptive strikes and suicide-bombers become strategic tactics in the war between Melaka and Portugal. Issues in today’s socio-political world address violence, for instance in the form of preemptive strikes, and prejudice have travelled through time to now reconstruct the worldview in 1511. Pre-emptive strikes and suicide-bombers are transplanted into the novel from contemporary Afghanistan and Iraq to become Melaka’s war strategy against Portugal. For example, to counter strikes from Portuguese canons, the Malay warriors strap bombs made from bamboo sticks filled with gunpowder to themselves before rowing out to Portuguese caravels in the harbour.

As a Malaysian writing about Melaka, Faizal Tehrani reconstructs the state into a colonizer when Nyemah Mulya leads an expedition of Muslim nations to successfully

colonize Portugal. The voice and agency given to Nyemah Mulya are clearly New Historicist and Feminist. Noraini Md Yusof and Ruzy Suliza Hashim [12] claims “this reconstruction is not merely of the state, for Nyemah Mulya is also transformed into a female Commander-in-Chief of the male-majority Muslim army...allow[ing] this woman to break away from the gender specific roles of the patriarchal society she lives in”. Religion is attributed to the fight between both sides. The two texts, *Malaca Conquistada* [1] and *1511* [7], incorporate religious discourse in their narrations, but it is clear that different ideologies operate in each narrative construction. In the first, anti-Muslim sentiments triggered by Moorish-colonization and religious crusades affect the way the writer portray Portuguese attitudes towards the Muslim inhabitants of Melaka. In the latter, post-Sept 11 terrorism, globalization and issues on Palestine that generated sentiments on anti-Western hegemony influence the writer’s choice of retaliation against the Portuguese.

The ideology operating in *1515* involves nationalistic and religious concerns; the confrontation is not merely between states. Nyemah Mulya manipulates the war into ‘jihad’, the fight for the rights of Islam, in the defence of state, sultanate and religion. It also involves national pride, loyalty to the Sultan and devotion to faith. The writer’s nationalistic agenda to instill patriotism results in his promoting the superiority of Melaka warriors. The ideology operating in the construction of these representations perpetrates Malay nationalism for a sense of pride, belonging and courage in the face of adversity. Even the appropriation of altered ends in the text is the attempt of the writer to change Malay subjectivities in society and culture. The writer’s ideological concern generates his recovery of past victories.

The duality of identity is prevalent in *Malaca Conquistada* and *1515*. In these texts, Melaka, as well as Portugal, occupy the narrative space as either empire or colony. One cannot be both simultaneously. When Melaka was an empire, Portugal was colonized by the Moors. After regaining power, Portugal arrived to conquer Melaka. When Portugal donned the identity of a colonizer, Melaka succumbed to become a Portuguese colony. The two writers employ re-visioning strategies by empowering their protagonists with the noble qualities of a warrior or king-like deity, whose ‘voice’ commands total loyalty from their subjects. For example, the history of the Self is glorified: the Portuguese knights display characteristics of Greek deity and the Melaka Sultans claim heritage with Iskandar Zulkarnain, or Alexander the Great. The Other, depending on perspective, is vilified. Faizal Tehrani’s *1515* utilizes the same strategy in which Nyemah Mulya’s physical being embodies mortal and divine qualities. Just as the supernatural and the fantastic elevate Albuquerque and his Portuguese armada in *Malaca Conquistada* as well as the the Melaka Sultans’ genealogy in *Sejarah Melayu*, Nyemah Mulya’s magical birth and training prepares her for her role as savior of Melaka. The two re-visioning texts are constructs of their writers whose raison d’être are to elevate the nation’s image and identity in the texts.

IV. CONCLUSION

Representations of the Melaka-Portuguese encounter in the three texts are subjective constructions of individual writers who wrote in their own time and space. They also represent alternatives to the depiction of the ways the Melaka and Portuguese peoples negotiate the freedom and constraints of that period in their attempt to make sense of the collision of their worlds. In addition, writers who narrate history as fiction enjoy certain liberties. As writers, they are makers or producers of literature with powers of imagination that liberates them in ways barred to historians. This freedom to change history is an attribute of writers’ creative license. They own the narration. They can manipulate events or characters in history, or even create new ones, to suit their stories. As subjective individuals, writers too are influenced by the ideologies operating in the time and space of their writing.

The complexity of the issues implicated in the identity construction of a state and its nation, as reflected by the various images of Melaka in the three texts, is also prevalent in present-day Malaysia. Notions of ‘nationhood’ and ‘patriotism’ are inseparable in the texts examined. When two nations are in conflict, invocation of patriotic sentiments is at its highest. In the new global world, the people are now exposed to not only marketing, entertainment, education and political strategies, but also, most importantly, to the plurality of voices. New voice presents new perspectives to old issues; a review of the past offers alternative meanings. Hence, in such a present situation what has always been the dominant discourse traditionally has to make way for marginalized ones, allowing more perspectives and fairer representations in the narration of history. An ethnocentric or local perspective to stories of one’s past provides an alternative to narratives from the West. The negotiation of the Self and the Other can still hold centre stage as now, both the Self and the Other, are empowered with voice and agency.

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