

# THE REPRESENTATION OF THE MALAYS IN JOURNALISTIC AND SOCIOLOGICAL NARRATIVES

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## Introduction

History provides us with narratives that tell us who we are, where we came from and where we should be going. It defines a trajectory which helps construct the essence of a group's identity, how it relates to other groups, and ascertains what its options are for facing present challenges. A group's representation of its history will condition its sense of what it was, is, can and should be, and is thus central to the construction of its identity, norms, and values. Representations of history help to define the social identity of peoples, especially in how they relate to other peoples and to current issues of international politics and internal diversity<sup>1</sup>. History works powerfully on the psyche, as do myth and folklore, because it is the ostensible truth about us<sup>2</sup>. In short, history plays a crucial role in understanding and constructing one's culture, one's identity and one's worldview. No culture can deny this fact, including the Malays.

The Malays have had literatures written about them for centuries. These literatures generally cover their history, lifestyle, politics, religion and anything related to them. The first known reference to Melayu, or the county of the Malays, occurs in Chinese texts of the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, relating to a place or polity in eastern Sumatra thought to have had its centre near the present-day city of Jambi. Another strong Sumatran influence on Malay history was Parameswara, a prince of Palembang ancestry, who is believed to have founded the Malay kingdom of Malacca around 1400. Malay customs, kinship systems, language and artistic traditions continue to flourish in east Sumatra and especially in Jambi area, where the early Malay kingdom was eventually transformed into a sultanate which lasted from the early seventeenth century

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<sup>1</sup> James H. Liu and Dennis J. Hilton, "How the Past Weighs on the Present: Social Representations of History and Their Roles in Identity Politics." *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 44, (2005), 537.

<sup>2</sup> Tenzin Rigzin Sevagram, "Harnessing History for Decolonisation", an online article available from [http://www.multiworld.org/m\\_iversity/articles/harness.htm](http://www.multiworld.org/m_iversity/articles/harness.htm)

until the Dutch assassinated the last sultan, Sultan Taha<sup>3</sup>. According to Barnard and Maier, the word 'Melayu' appears in seventh-century Chinese sources with reference to Sumatra, and it has been wandering around Southeast Asia ever since, carrying with it notions of a culture, a people and a location. The term may have first been used in Kalimantan, or possibly around the Melayu River on Sumatra. But then, origins are often vague in a world that is constantly undergoing transformation. The words 'Malay' or 'Maleis' begin to appear in British and Dutch writings in the seventeenth century, reflecting both local usage and tales by the Portuguese, Spanish and others who arrived earlier. These three words – Melayu, Malay, Maleis – have been used with reference to a confusing variety of configurations of human beings, locations, languages, customs, states, and objects between Patani and Timor, Manila and Banda Aceh, Makassar and Bangkok, Pagarruyung and Batavia, as well as along the Melaka Straits. Like true manifestations of the *dagang* (foreign, alien), the major figure in Malay tales, the Malays are always on the move and transforming themselves, often very elusively, and theirs is a contested and wandering identity<sup>4</sup>. Thus, it is clear here that the history of the Malays has been tracked down to several centuries back. By right, having all the literatures about the Malays documented, it should not be a problem to understand the Malays. Who are they? How do they think? How do they see the world? The history is there. The literatures about them are there. So, what is all the fuss about studying and understanding the Malays and their culture when everything is already there?

According to Muhammad Haji Salleh, a culture arises from a people and their specific environment and history. Moulded over the centuries by complex processes and combinations of these forces, they help to produce special characteristic and identities. He adds that a culture is like a great old tree from the earth of history, traditions, societies and worldviews. A literature (the word itself is European), a literary mind, is a great branch of this tree. Malaysian literature for example, has its various presences – the oral, chirographic and written forms – and is as dependent on the Malaysian worldview as would Kenyan, Thai, Filipino or Nigerian literatures on their outlooks on life and their respective philosophies. No foreign frame of literary evaluation, or set of

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<sup>3</sup> Fiona Kerlogue, "Jambi Batik: A Malay Tradition?", *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 33, no. 96 (July 2005), 187.

<sup>4</sup> Barnard and Maier, *Melayu, Malay, Maleis: Journey through the Identity of a Collection*, in Timothy Barnard (ed.), *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity across Boundaries*, (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004), IX.

canons or measurements have been found to judge them as fairly, as sensitively as their own, because they are the leaves and the flowers of these subterranean roots. Tragically though, these sets of traditional standards have been alienated and eroded by colonialism, colonial literary scholarship, by English, Spanish and French standards and approaches to literature, the new contemporary passion for theories out of Europe and America; and not to forget, all of the teachers and critics who have been taught within the frame of western literary concepts and who have prolonged and given them local life in their own respective countries<sup>5</sup>. Thus, even though there are a lot of literatures about the Malays, most of them do not belong to Malay writers. They belong to western writers and as explained earlier by Muhammad Haji Salleh, this makes their literatures about the Malays arguable simply because they (the West) do not have the same worldview as the Malays.

This happens because both the Malays and the West sit in different circles. The Malays represent the former colony while the West is the former colonialist. In other words, the Malays are the 'servant' while the West is the 'master'; the Malays are the 'inferior' beings under the wings of the 'superior' West. Hence, all these affect the 'truth' in the literatures about the Malays. Zawiah asserts that whatever 'truth' is presented will always be partial truths. The colonialist writer works within the constraints of her/his imperial ideological framework and can only represent the natives in the way that this ideological agenda allows her/him. Whatever 'truth' she/he offers will be the result of a construction of her/his colonialist 'self' as subject in relation to the colonised 'Other'. Both are locked into their respective positions, frozen into a hierarchical relationship by the assumed superiority of the colonising society. The result is that the 'Other', the source of the other side of the story, is marginalised, suppressed and silenced<sup>6</sup>.

Having this 'inferior-superior' relationship in mind, it is hard to deny that the literatures about the Malays written by Malay (local) writers are influenced by how the West writes about the Malays. How the Malays look at themselves is actually the reflection of how the West looks at them. The Malays' perception about themselves is parroting the Western perception about them. Thus, to further study these claims, this

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<sup>5</sup> Muhammad Haii Salleh, "Reclaiming Worlds: Theories in the Texts, in Fadillah Merican *et. al.* *A View of Our Own: Ethnocentric Perspectives in Literature*, (Bangi, Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1996), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Zawiah Yahya, *Resisting Colonialist Discourse (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)*, (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2003), 34.

paper looks at the representation of the Malays in journalistic and sociological narratives from both perspectives, the West and the Malays (Others).

### **Malay Images and Identity**

Since Malaya was once a colonised nation, most of the literatures about the Malays come from colonialist writers. The problem with this is that the writings about the Malays could be bias and misleading as the colonialist writers do not have the capacity to describe the Malays as they come from different culture and upbringing. According to Zawiah, the colonialist writer works within the constraints of her/his imperial ideological framework and can only represent the natives in the way that this ideological agenda allows her/him. Whatever 'truth' she/he offers will be the result of a construction of her/his colonialist 'self' as subject in relation to the colonised 'Other'. Both are locked into their respective positions, frozen into a hierarchical relationship by the assumed superiority of the colonising society. The result is that the 'Other', the source of the other side of the story, is marginalised, suppressed and silenced<sup>7</sup>. For example, let us look at how the Malays are described by Alleyne Ireland. Alleyne wrote

“As far as my own observation extends, I should say that the Malay of the peninsula is the most steadfast loafer on the face of the earth. His characteristics in this respect have been recognized by every-one who has come in contact with him. He will work neither for himself, for the government, nor for private employers. He builds himself a house of bamboo and attaps, plants enough rice to fill out the menu which stream and forest afford him, and for nine tenths of his working hours, year in and year out, he sits on a wooden bench in the shade and watches the Chinaman and the Tamil build roads and railways, work the mines, cultivate the soil, raise cattle, and pay the taxes<sup>8</sup>.”

The Malay as described by Alleyne above is one of the proofs of the construction of the image of the Malays by the west. The Malays are perceived as a society that is

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<sup>7</sup>Zawiah Yahya, *Resisting Colonialist Discourse (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)*, (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2003), 34.

<sup>8</sup> Alleyne Ireland. *The Far Eastern Tropics*, 115-116. Quoted from Syed Hussein's *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, (London: Frank Cass 1977).

too laidback, or in other words, lazy and having the attitude of easily satisfied with what they have (even though they could have gotten something better, they just let it go as they have no determination to go the extra mile to grab it). Ironically, after centuries passed by, these brandings are still visible today, and adopted by local journalistic narratives, as shown in the analysis of *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Melayu*<sup>9</sup>, which will be discussed later in this paper.

According to Asmah<sup>10</sup>, the Malays have all the time been branding themselves, both positively and negatively, showing that they are able to appraise themselves as they do others. At the same time, the Malays get branded from others as well. Branding of the Malays by themselves and by others takes place everyday in ordinary conversations, but not much gets into writing for the obvious reasons that people do not want to “appear nasty”. This in itself is an indication that branding of a person or a character leans more towards the negative rather than the positive. People branding is quite different from branding of goods, because branding in the latter case implies only quality, and that is positive. Goods are meant to be sold for profit, but people are objects of observation, and this activity may or may not have a purpose orientation. And if there is a purpose orientation, there often appear the two opposite poles of the person’s image. In other words, the branding, the labelling or the representation of the Malays most commonly carry more negative connotations than the positive and usually this is subject to the objectives of the branding itself. Why is the branding done? Who does the branding serve?

Having discussed about branding, it would be interesting to see how Salleh Ben Joned describes the Malays in his poem entitled *Haram Scarum*. Here is the poem:

### **Haram Scarum<sup>11</sup>**

Drinking, gambling, lying, bribery,-  
and all kinds of whoring too –  
all of them perfectly okay.  
And to hog it all’s not taboo.

All sins of course; but nothing really

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<sup>9</sup> *Berita Harian/Berita Minggu* and *Utusan Malaysia/Mingguan Malaysia* from 10 July 2005 – 30 July 2005. This timeframe covers the week before, the week and the week after the 56<sup>th</sup> UMNO general assembly which took place from 17-23 July. The papers are analysed to gather issues about the Malays, thus actually analysing how the Malays at present are branded or labelled.

<sup>10</sup> Asmah Omar, *Malay Images*, (Malaysia: Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, 2005), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Salleh Ben Joned, *Poems Sacred and Profane*, (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Cipta Sdn. Bhd, 2002), 34.

a trip to the Holy of Hollies  
cannot fix for Eternity:  
God bless man's enterprise.

But that – that's different, untouchable!  
We're Moslems, and terribly Malay.  
Some things are just unmentionable;  
the rest are ok if we pray.

We'll go the whole hog if we must  
to redeem our pride as a race;  
like the giddy hare in a rut,  
we'll *halal* everything save that.

It's hogwash what those swines say:  
That we Bumis mount pig-a-back,  
Like a pack of boars hacking our way  
Up the slippery slope of success.

Our one dislike we have to keep  
to preserve our identity;  
so long as we hate pigs and pray,  
we'll remain Moslem and Malay.

Salleh through his poem has given a thought provoking and cynical conception of the Malays, which clearly sways more towards the negative ideas that he has about them. For example, in the first stanza, he talks about the negative behaviour of a selfish (*hog*) Malay where drinking, gambling, lying, bribery and other kinds of misbehaviour are actually common for Malays - *all of them perfectly okay, And to hog it all's not taboo*. It is normal for a Malay to behave so. Is it? In the third stanza, he writes

*But that – that's different, untouchable!*  
*We're Moslems, and terribly Malay.*  
*Some things are just unmentionable;*  
*the rest are ok if we pray.*

From this, it can be said that Salleh sees the Malays as 'blank-headed' terrible Muslims who just follow blindly the teachings of Islam whereby as long as a Malay prays, everything will be fine (despite all the misdeeds/wrongdoings conducted). Here, Salleh is describing the Malays as if they are a race that cannot differentiate between the good and bad (you pray but at the same time you gamble, drink and so on). It is as if the

Malays are intellectually incompetent. In stanza four, Salleh also propagates that the Malays are selfish.

*We'll go the whole hog if we must  
to redeem our pride as a race;  
like the giddy hare in a rut,  
we'll halal everything save that.*

Here, Salleh states that the Malays will do anything and everything to get what they want (*We'll go the whole hog if we must*) up to the extent of 'manipulating' and 'misusing' religion – *we'll halal*<sup>12</sup> *everything save that*. The Malays are described to be misusing religion, the concept of *halal* (even though, ironically, it is *haram* in Islam) to get things that they want. Thus, Salleh is actually questioning the quality of the Malays as Muslims. Are they Muslims by practice or are only Muslims because they are Malays<sup>13</sup>. Salleh also pokes savage fun at the conventional Malay-Muslim emphasis on food taboos and ritual. In the last stanza he writes *so long as we hate pigs and pray, we'll remain Moslem and Malay*. The Malays are described to have a shallow definition of being a Muslim whereby as long as they hate (do not eat, touch) pigs and they pray, they are on the right track of being a Muslim regardless the fact that there are a lot more to do in order to be a good Muslim.

This poem is a very good example of how a Malay sees his or her own society. The question is; is the way he/she sees his/her society originally his/her own or is it influenced by the Western depictions of the East?

### **The Positive and Negative Traits**

Norraesah<sup>14</sup>, after putting Swettenham's<sup>15</sup> and Mahathir's<sup>16</sup> writings about the Malays side by side, has come up with a simple summary where she lists out the

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<sup>12</sup> *Halal* is a condition in Islam when something is approved. For example, when an ingredient in a meal is comprised with things that are approved by Islam, it is considered as *Halal*. On the other hand, when something is not approved in Islam, it is termed as *Haram*. For example, when an ingredient in a meal is comprised with things that are not approved by Islam, it is considered as *Haram*. *Halal* and *Haram* are not only applicable to food but also in every aspect of a Muslim's life.

<sup>13</sup> In Malaysia, Islam is the religion of the Malays as it is inherited from their ancestors.

<sup>14</sup> Norraesah Mohamad's *The Malays in Business & Entrepreneurship* in Asmah Omar, *Malay Images*, (Malaysia: Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, 2005), 58.

descriptions of the Malays done by the two. What is transpired from the summary is that there are more negative traits as compared to positive traits even though the book *The Malay Dilemma* is written by a local Malay. To be clearer, let us look at the summary:

Negative	Positive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lazy</li> <li>• Lethargic</li> <li>• Conservative</li> <li>• Disorderly and undisciplined</li> <li>• Complacent</li> <li>• Incurable borrower</li> <li>• Extravagant</li> <li>• Suspicious of innovations</li> <li>• Not adaptable to change</li> <li>• Easy going</li> <li>• Idyll</li> <li>• Generally poor interest in trade &amp; craftsmanship</li> <li>• Misconception of political power (without other strength as guarantee to all)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kind</li> <li>• Polite</li> <li>• Courageous</li> <li>• Trustworthy</li> <li>• Good sense of humour</li> <li>• Good talker</li> <li>• Loyal</li> <li>• Respect for authority</li> </ul>

**Figure 1.** Norraesah's summary of Malay traits based on her reading of *Malay Sketches* and *The Malay Dilemma*.

From this, it is evident that the Malays are represented as having more negative traits than the positives. However, do these descriptions reflect the truth about the Malays? Are all Malays as described above? Is there any solid evidence or facts that can support these descriptions? Or do these descriptions come from a small population of the Malays, thus generalisations or stereotyping is made? The Malays should not just swallow these descriptions without contesting and challenging them. Perhaps there is truth in the descriptions above but the way they are treated should be changed. This is because they do not represent all Malays and they have very little valid evidence/facts to support such representation. Thus, they cannot be accepted as the Malay traits. Perhaps they could be said to represent some Malays but not, all as not everyone is the same.

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<sup>15</sup> Swettenham, Frank, *Malay Sketches* (U.K.: Bodley Head Ltd., 1895/1984), Republished by Graham Brash (Pte) Ltd: Singapore

<sup>16</sup> Mahathir Mohamad, *The Malay Dilemma* (Singapore: Donald Moore, 1970).

Similar to Norraesah, Asmah in her book *Malay Images*<sup>17</sup> has laid out eleven traits of Malays which she concluded from her readings of the papers compiled in the said book. These traits serve as clusters which would eventually 'brand' the Malays. The traits are:

1. **Other-Centricity**

*Malays are other-centric. They are willing to compromise vis-à-vis the other racial groups in Malaysia, so that the country can remain stable and peaceful. They are willing to be the metaphorical candle that burns itself so that others can be happy. The Malays are also prone to having the notion that people other than them are always better (inferiority complex?). They also have the willingness to compromise and be considerate in conflict situation.*

2. **Steadfastness in Their Belief in Destiny and Fate**

*The Malays have gone a bit further in believing that no matter how good you are and how hard you work, you will not be rewarded more than what you have been predestined to get (over-interpretation or misinterpretation of Qada' and Qadar<sup>18</sup>, thus demotivating them from competing with other fellow Malaysians).*

3. **Dependency Mentality**

*The Malays are always asking for assistance in terms of government subsidy. They need assistance in order to compete economically.*

4. **Fierce Loyalty to the Ruler**

*While Islam teaches one to be loyal only to the ruler who is 'adil' (just), the Malays appear to go overboard in their manifestation of loyalty to the ruler. They become loyal to any ruler as long as he is a ruler. This unwavering loyalty has negative effects as they lose their freedom and dignity.*

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<sup>17</sup> Asmah Omar, *Malay Images*, (Malaysia: Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, 2005), 4-13.

<sup>18</sup> In Islam, Qadar and Qadar basically means one is already predestined to everything in his life. In other words, a Muslim's life is actually mapped out and he only needs to follow it.

5. **Complacency**

*Knowing that the privileges (accessibility to privileges allotted to the Bumiputeras/Malays) are there for the taking based on their indigeneity, the Malays become easily satisfied with the little profit that they get out of business ventures. To them they are only happy to do that much, 'asal cukup makan' (as long as there is enough to eat).*

6. **Having Islam as the Most Important Identity Feature**

*The Malays are not Malays if they are not Muslims even though they may speak the Malay language and practice Malay culture. Islam has to make up the third inevitable component in order for one to be qualified to use the term 'Malay'. The Malays are preoccupied with the afterlife, especially life in hell. Thus this concern for what is awaiting for them in the afterlife has much influenced the way the Malay leads his life. They are also devoted to fulfil the fifth pillar of Islam, which is performing the Hajj in Mecca. The Malays also use the 'tudung' (veil) as a symbol of their Muslim identity whereby it carries the messages of decency, virtue and piety.*

7. **Fondness for Beauty in Expression**

*The Malays are inclined to create verses of great beauty. This is apparent in their usage of 'pantun' and jawi calligraphy.*

8. **Looking at the World: General Mass Noun in a Countable Form**

*The idea of nouns such as 'pisang' (banana) and 'gadis' (girl) being mass nouns means that in the Malay mind they are, according to syntactic categories, on the same plane as 'tepung' (flour) and 'air' (water). Hence, for the Malays, some countable nouns are treated as countable.*

9. **Use and Non-Use of Language**

*In pre-modern times, Malays entertained themselves in verbal activities indicating how gregarious they were, and they have not changed much in this sense even though there are now numerous forms of entertainment available*

*to them. However, language does not play much role in meal times, then and now. This means that in Malay culture, having a meal together is not a social event, rather it is an event of thanksgiving in which the participants respect the food and the situation in which they partake of God's bounty.*

10. **Conflict and Conflict Handling**

*In comparison with the Swedes, the Malays seem to be more involved in verbal conflict than do the former. This is due to the history and culture of the Malays.*

11. **Ability to Persevere and Change.**

*Malay acceptance of the foreign elements that attract them has enriched their own culture through a process of assimilating these elements into their indigenous inventories or through creating new ones. The Malay propensity to adopt and adapt has also been the subject of many academic forums and publications.*

Looking at table 1 and Asmah's traits above, it is clear that there is a mixture of positive and negative images of the Malays. However, what seems to be the concern here is that the Malays, even though in certain areas, are labelled positively, yet what always under the spotlight are the negatives. In as early as 1512-1515 A.D, Tom Pires, a Portuguese, described the Malays as "they were a jealous nation because the wives of the important people were never to be seen in public. When the wives did go out, they moved around in covered sedan chairs, with many of them together"<sup>19</sup> In contrast to this, Duarte Barbosa, also a Portuguese, wrote that "They are polished and wellbred, fond of music, and given to love"<sup>20</sup>. The two description given to the Malays above are clearly in contrast of each other. The former is describing the Malays negatively and the later vice versa. Even though both statements are juxtaposing each other, what both of them

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<sup>19</sup> Tom Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tom Pires*, 268. Tr. and ed. Armando Cortesao. Hakluyt Society. Vol 2. 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, no. 90, London, 1944, cited in Syed Hussein's *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, (London: Frank Cass, 1977), 35.

<sup>20</sup> Duarte Barbosa, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, 176, Tr. And ed. M. L. Dames. Hakluyt Society, Vol 2. 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, no. 49, London, 1921, cited in Syed Hussein's *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, (London: Frank Cass, 1977), 35.

share is that they come from foreigners, not locals. So, what do these two statements (along with other labelling/descriptions about the Malays by foreigners) are actually telling us?

Having this information for centuries before attempts made by local scholars (Syed Hussein<sup>21</sup>, Zawiyah Yahya<sup>22</sup> and some others) to contest the misrepresentation, it is understood why it is so difficult for the Malays to break the intellectual monopoly by the West. After several centuries, it is undeniably a hard task to reverse the image of the Malays that has been constructed by the West, except for perhaps less than a handful of scholars/researchers interested in Malay sociology or history. According to Ruzy Suliza, local scholarly interest in Malay traditional literature appeared relatively late: it was only after the establishment of the first university in Singapore that Malays began to question western misconceptions about Malay literature<sup>23</sup>. The Malay community at large, as Johan Jaafar says it, is not interested to venture into the issue of Malay identity whereby the most that they would talk about are only about common issues such as Malay privileges, political differences (among Malays) and religion<sup>24</sup>. The knowledge about Malays (image/identity) as presented by the West is accepted without being critically analysed or contested. According to Shamsul, "...most knowledge about the Malays that has been constructed and elaborated in an orientalist mould by colonial administrator-scholars has been used without being problematised<sup>25</sup>". He also says that "Indeed, they (knowledge about Malays) have been used and perpetuated in the form of governmental and official policies up to the present day<sup>26</sup>". So, what is at hand here? Even the authorities are using the colonial knowledge<sup>27</sup> about the Malays in their operations. If the top level people are into the idea (colonial knowledge about the Malays), what more with

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<sup>21</sup> Syed Hussein Al-Attas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, (London: Frank Cass, 1977).

<sup>22</sup> Zawiyah Yahya, *Resisting Colonialist Discourse (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)* (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> Ruzy Suliza Hashim, *Out of the Shadows: Women in Malay Court Narratives*, (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2003), 16.

<sup>24</sup> Johan Jaafar, "Mencari Identiti Kemelayuan: Kita Hilang Akar dan Jadi Rakus?," *Berita Minggu*, 13 August 2006, Di Luar Jangkaan.

<sup>25</sup> Shamsul Amri Baharudin, "Malay' and 'Malayness' in Malaysia Reconsidered: A Critical Review," *Communal / Plural: Journal of Transnational & Crosscultural Studies* 9 no. 1, (April 2001): 70.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>27</sup> Knowledge about the Malays that has been constructed and elaborated in an orientalist mould by colonial administrator-scholar.

the commoners? What about the media? What about *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia*? This is really something to be seriously thought about for they are the mainstream media in this nation, for obviously whatever that is published by them is easily accessed by the public (the Malays at large).

Similar to the ideas about the Malays discussed earlier where most of them portray negative images, both *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia* seem to be having the same thoughts. After a close observation on what is being printed during the duration of study<sup>28</sup>, it is interesting to see that the Malays are represented negatively by the two, thus in general, seconding the notion that the Malays are problematic. Among the issues brought up are:

1. The Malays are incompetent – both papers repeatedly highlight this issue by reporting what is said by Malay leaders about their society. The Malays are said to be incompetent especially in terms of economy and education. The Malays are constantly reminded to improve their competency so that they will not be left behind by other races in their own country. The Malays are reminded to go to greater heights and not easily satisfied with what they already have.
2. The Malays are losing their identity – the Malays are reported to have lost their original identity and this is basically due to the little emphasis given on religion and it is also said to be due from the influence of media globalisation. The Malays are reminded that they must maintain their identity to ensure the safekeeping of their sovereignty.
3. The Malays are generally corrupt – all along the timeframe, there are a lot of coverage on bribery practiced by the Malays, especially Malay leaders and businessperson.
4. The Malays need attitude 'fine-tuning' – the Malays will never succeed if their attitude is not changed. The Malays are said to be lazy, not motivated, having low self-esteem and confidence, unwilling to venture into new things and easily satisfied. Both newspapers continuously propagate that the Malays need to leave all those behind should they want to smell success.

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<sup>28</sup> The week before, the week and the week after the 56<sup>th</sup> UMNO general assembly which took place from 17-23 July 2005. The timeframe is chosen because it is during this time that issues, agendas, ideas and anything related to the Malays are given the highest priority/attention in the Malay dailies.

Looking at the issues penned by both newspapers, which represent the Malays, it can be said that the way the Malays are looked at has not changed much since the early days. With all the negative portrayals and representations of the Malays, which have been going on for centuries, can it be concluded that all the said are true? Is it true that the Malays are problematic? Is it true that the Malays are comprised of all those negative attributes? So, what is actually happening here? Are the two newspapers' ideas about the Malays their own or do the ideas derive from the West's ideas whereby the two just adopt them and thinking that they are originally theirs?

### **Representation Revisited**

Resistance is something that is very difficult to exercise especially in a community that was formerly colonised and could be considered as quite green in the field of independence. Zawiah, in her book *Resisting Colonialist Discourse* says that "literary discourse is a great seducer and as thinking readers we must wilfully resist this seduction. It is only when we wilfully resist the charms of discourse that we are engaged in real criticism, analysis and thought. To decide not to resist is to decide to give up our rights as a reader and to abandon intellectual responsibility."<sup>29</sup>

The Malays, being the majority population in this country, have always been the subject of discussion by all tenets of society, be it the commoners or people in authority. Despite having our independence for nearly half a century, there seems to be certain issues that are still boiling in the Malay society nowadays. These issues range from identity, economy, education, moral and social problems, ethics, attitude<sup>30</sup> and others that, if a generalisation could be made, it would project that the Malays are problematic. This is in accord with Frank Swettenham's *Malay Sketches* which labels the Malays more negatively than positively, as quoted by Norraessah and Abu Bakar in their

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<sup>29</sup>Zawiyah Yahya, *Resisting Colonialist Discourse (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)* (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2003), 11.

<sup>30</sup> Summary of coverage of the Malays in *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian* dated the week before, the week and the week after the 56<sup>th</sup> UMNO general assembly which took place from 17-23 July 2005. The timeframe is chosen because it is during this time that issues, agendas, ideas and anything related to the Malays are given the highest priority/attention in the Malay dailies.

works<sup>31</sup>. However, are all these true or are they actually the constructed image of the Malays, which resulted from our former colonialist's definition of us?

In relation to the question, it is important to be aware that early scholarly studies of Malay historical chronicles were conducted by expatriate (colonial) officers who itemized and studied the manuscripts in earnest. Local scholarly interest in Malay traditional literature appeared relatively late: it was only after the establishment of the first university in Singapore that Malays began to question western misconceptions about Malay literature. Malay scholarly research was impeded primarily, perhaps, because most of these manuscripts were taken overseas during colonial rule. Local scholars gained better access to them once educational funds to study abroad became available, and the establishment of other universities in Malaysia sparked further interest in them. But again, only a special group of classicists acquainted with the *Jawi* script (Arabic-influenced alphabets) could study and transliterate the *Jawi* manuscripts into Romanized Malay. Since many versions of any one text exist, research to determine which were genuine texts as opposed to the "corrupt" ones was imperative. As a consequence of this philological rigour and the determination of many local scholars to reclaim the field of Malay traditional literature from the West – to make it their own, to study it through the Malay lens, these local concerns became the main trend of critical analysis.<sup>32</sup>

To add, Edward Said states that a whole body of knowledge has been invented by Western discourse about the East that may have little to do with the brute reality of the place<sup>33</sup>. Sharing similar view, Syed Hussein Alatas argues that the image of the indolent natives of Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines was actually constructed by colonialists exasperated over labour problems<sup>34</sup>. Edward Said also states that our identity in a

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<sup>31</sup> Norraesah Mohamad's *The Malays in Business & Entrepreneurship* and Abu Bakar Nordin's *Pengaruh Nilai-Nilai Melayu Dalam Dasar dan Pelaksanaan dasar Pendidikan Negara*. Both papers were presented at the Second international Conference on Malay Civilisation, which was jointly organised by the Institute of Malay Civilisation, Universiti pendidikan Sultan Idris and International Institute of Asian Studies (IIAS) of Leiden. The conference was held in Kuala Lumpur from 26-28 February 2004. Both papers are compiled in Asmah Omar's *Malay Images* (2003).

<sup>32</sup> Ruzy Suliza Hashim, *Out of the Shadows: Women in Malay Court Narratives*, (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2003), 16.

<sup>33</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1978/1995).

<sup>34</sup> Syed Hussein Al-Attas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, (London: Frank Cass, 1977).

sense, through history, has been virtually created by the interpretation and then representation of ourselves in western discourses. He adds that Orientalism was a library or archive of information commonly and, in some aspects, unanimously held. What bound the archive together was a family of ideas and a unifying set of values proven in various ways to be effective. These ideas explained the behaviour of Orientals; they supplied Orientals with a mentality, a genealogy, an atmosphere; most important, they allowed Europeans to deal with and even see Orientals as a phenomenon possessing regular characteristics<sup>35</sup>. This means that our perception that we have about ourselves is perhaps derived from the Western's perception about the East. What we believe to be our identity is perhaps a mere Western perception and misconception. What we see in journalistic and sociological narratives may not be representing the truth about the Malays.

### **Postcolonial Study**

According to Slemon, "whatever coherence the term 'postcolonial' might have promised in its earliest moments – as an intellectual field or academic discipline, as a critical methodology for social analysis, as a pedagogy, or a cultural location, or a stance – the attributes of postcolonialism have become so widely contested in contemporary usage, its strategies and sites so structurally dispersed, as to render the term next to useless as a precise marker of intellectual content, social constituency, or political commitment. Postcolonialism has become discontented – a suitcase blown open on the baggage belt<sup>36</sup>.

Part of the challenge in understanding postcolonial theory is appreciating the multiple ways that the term "postcolonial" is interpreted by scholars from different disciplines such as literature, history and communication. The term postcolonial is used in various, disjunctive ways, prompting a journal editor to declare, "No one speaks for

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<sup>35</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, (London: Penguin Books, 1978/1995), 42.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen Slemon, "Introductory Notes: Postcolonialism and its Discontents." *A Review of International English Literature* 26 (1995), 7-11 cited in Frank Schulze-Engler, "Exceptionalist Temptations – Disciplinary Constraints: Postcolonial Theory and Criticism," *European Journal of English Studies* 6, no. 3 (2002), 289-305..

'the postcolonial.' No one place contains its diversity and discord"<sup>37</sup>. The general assumption that runs across these definitions is that the attention paid to the "discourse and ideology of colonialism" is as significant as a study of "the material effects of subjugation under colonialism and after"<sup>38</sup>.

Postcolonial study is a form of study on the effects of the former colonialists on the cultures of the countries that they had colonised. Postcolonial theory and its theorists articulated a critique of colonialism which substantially differs from anti-colonial narratives of the 1960s and 1970s<sup>39</sup>. For example, India is still a colonised country. The British rulers of India did physically leave the country in 1947, after 200 years of direct rule, but while leaving they made a 'transfer of power' to that class of Indians who they felt were most like them; who in fact were 'Indian' only ethnically, having otherwise acquired deep and abiding aspiration for all things Western. By giving over power to this class the British were in fact ensuring that the structures they had created and put into place in this country at every level during their rule, would continue to function as before (and thus serve British/Western interests) without requiring the physical presence of the British on Indian soil (which in any case was by then becoming a difficult and expensive proposition). In other words, Britain was ensuring that for all practical purposes, India would remain a colonised country<sup>40</sup>.

What is transpired here is a condition where a state is free physically but in terms of the mindset, the people are still much captivated. This is the danger where we think that we are an independent society/nation but actually we are not. We will not be a totally independent society/nation as long as we are unable to see the game that is being played onto us by the West.

## Understanding Identity

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<sup>37</sup> Stephen Slemon, "Introductory Notes: Postcolonialism and its Discontents." *A Review of International English Literature* 26 (1995), 7-11, cited in Angeli R. Diaz "Postcolonial Theory and the Third Wave Agenda." *Women and Language*, 26, no. 1 (2003), 10.

<sup>38</sup> Quayson, A., "Postcolonialism and Postmodernism." (2000)cited in H. Schwarz & S. Ray (Eds.), *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell), 87-111, cited in Angeli R. Diaz "Postcolonial Theory and the Third Wave Agenda." *Women and Language*, 26, no. 1 (2003), 10.

<sup>39</sup> Castro-Gomez Santiago, "Latin American Postcolonial Theories." *Journal of Peace Review*, 10, no. 1 (1998).

<sup>40</sup>Tenzin Rigzin Sevagram, "Harnessing History for Decolonisation", an online article available from [http://www.multiworld.org/m\\_versity/articles/harness.htm](http://www.multiworld.org/m_versity/articles/harness.htm)

The problem in understanding identity, what is included and what-by virtue of its exclusion-describes what is included, is a problem of definition. When one speaks of one's identity as American, or Nigerian, or Korean, what does one mean? These identities are protean, contingent, and temporal, not fixed, deliberate, and permanent as cultural preservationists would have us believe. The meanings of "Self" and "Other" are both indigenously created and imported from outside<sup>41</sup>. In relation to this, the Malays have been labelled (or labelling themselves) in so many ways for centuries and even now. Talks about Malay identity is an ongoing process and is highly likely to continue to be an "in" thing for many-many years to come. Ahmad Murad says that "the representation and embodiment of our identity is certainly problematic. How we know ourselves and how we have selected that knowing determines the *facts* accumulated about us<sup>42</sup>". According to Maznah and Koon, "in whatever way it is conceived or defined, 'identity' is both a source of strength and weakness; it can be politicised and naturalised as if it is organically derived. In fact it is imbued with ambiguities, vulnerable to manipulation and is both oppressive, as well as liberating since it is open to reinvention and reconstruction<sup>43</sup>". Paci asserts that "to a great extent identity is shaped by local conditions. The languages, shared common experience, artefacts, and material manifestations are expressions of culture, everywhere influenced by local conditions. In addition, every local culture adapts to outside influences"<sup>44</sup>. As discussed earlier, the concern here is whether the way the Malays look at themselves is originally theirs or is it coming from the point-of-view of the orientalist? Are the writings/ideas about the Malays in Malaysia based on first-hand experience or are they prescribed by the West?

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<sup>41</sup> Araeen, "A new beginning: Beyond Postcolonial Cultural Theory and Identity Politics", *Third Text*, 1, no. 50 (2000), 3-20 in Scott Robert Olson, "Contaminations and Hybrids: Indigenous Identity and Resistance to Global Media." *Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education*, 2, no.2 (2002), 3. Available online from <http://www.utpress.utoronto.ca/journal/ejournals/simile>

<sup>42</sup> Ahmad Murad Merican, "Prophets, Philosophers and Scholars: The Identity of Communication and the Communication of Identity." Paper presented at The International Conference on Media and Communication: Communication, Globalisation and Cultural Identities, Putrajaya, Kuala Lumpur, September 26-28 2005, 11.

<sup>43</sup> Maznah Mohamad and Wong Soak Koon ed. *Risking Malaysia: Culture, Politics and Identity*, (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2001), 23.

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Hannibal Paci, "Narratives of Natives: Deconstructing Postcolonialism through Colonial Eyes." *Ethnohistory*, 48, no. 1-2 (2001), 351.

According to Ahmad Murad, Malay and Malaysian journalism history, for example, has been chronicled as an extension of the European history and now as part of the American order of freedom and democracy, and for good measure, of responsibility, human rights, and now human dignity. History and our collective consciousness have pulled us to conform to these concepts and categories, and continue to shape our identity and how it is transmitted, understood and internalized by us as 'non-knowing' subject and objects<sup>45</sup>. He also reiterates that "we cannot appreciate and comprehend culture if our identity is not visible to us"<sup>46</sup>. What this basically means is that our ideas about ourselves are actually coined by the European/Western knowledge about us. So, are our perceptions of ourselves authentic or are they distorted?

In relation to the question, it is crucial to be aware that, in Malaysia, most historians and other scholars in the humanities accept 'colonial knowledge' as the basis and the parameter of Malaysian and Malay history, and they do so in what seems like an almost unproblematised manner. It cannot be denied that politico-academic attempts are being made to 'indigenise' Malaysian history and that the 'Malay' viewpoint has been the privileged one. Those attempts are, of course, an admirable endeavour, and yet it is important to realise that this emphasis on the Malay perspective has been motivated primarily by the 'nationalistic' need to reinterpret history, and not by the urge to question the ways historical knowledge *per se* has been constructed. In Malaysia, historical knowledge, a crucial element in every identity formation, is still based on colonial knowledge. In this connection the question of the good and bad sides of the paternalism which informed this knowledge is not a very relevant one<sup>47</sup>. Hence, it is very clear here that in order to be able to see (understand?) our own identity, history must not be forgotten and what is meant by history here is our own history (Malay history/Malayan/Malaysian history), not the West's history about us. We have quite a

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<sup>45</sup> Ahmad Murad Merican, "Prophets, Philosophers and Scholars: The Identity of Communication and the Communication of Identity." Paper presented at The International Conference on Media and Communication: Communication, Globalisation and Cultural Identities, Putrajaya, Kuala Lumpur, September 26-28 2005, 12.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>47</sup> Cheah Boon Kheng, "Writing indigenous history in Malaysia: a survey on approaches and problems. *Crossroads.*" *An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 10, no 2, (1997), 33- 81, cited in Shamsul Amri Baharudin, "Malay' and 'Malayness' in Malaysia Reconsidered: A Critical Review." *Communal / Plural: Journal of Transnational & Crosscultural Studies*, 9, no. 1(2001), 69-80.

number of writings on Malay history but ironically most of them came from non-Malay writers and yet, we submit to what is written.

To add, Ahmad Murad says that the crux of communication study problem is not merely in the omission or the distortion of matters of facts of our society and being; but being of the dominance of a Eurocentric (also read American) worldview for the continued maintenance and expansion, even survival of a certain way of the production and reproduction of knowledge. It is the perpetuation of its own intellectual paradigm. And we succumb, in our thinking, areas of research and intellectual foci to an approved way of seeing, understanding and being – at the expense of excluding ourselves – making our existence irrelevant – marginalizing and alienating our being. Thus far, there is no shadow, even a faint one (and how can there be any) of a viable conceptual structure, other than the object that cast the larger shadow<sup>48</sup>. Again, this attests the notion that the East is under the domination of the West in terms of intellectuality and worldview.

### **Globalised Culture, Universal Identity**

One of the most troubling charges against globalisation is that it undermines local cultures. Local cultures everywhere are said to be under siege by mass culture produced in Hollywood<sup>49</sup>. Benjamin R. Barber<sup>50</sup> and Samuel Huntington<sup>51</sup>, argue that globalisation of business has actually fuelled the rise of traditional ethnic and cultural social

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<sup>48</sup> Ahmad Murad Merican, "Prophets, Philosophers and Scholars: The Identity of Communication and the Communication of Identity." Paper presented at The International Conference on Media and Communication: Communication, Globalisation and Cultural Identities, Putrajaya, Kuala Lumpur, September 26-28 2005.

<sup>49</sup> Baran and Davis, *Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future*, (United States: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2000), 348.

<sup>50</sup> Benjamin R. Barber, "Jihad vs. McWorld" (New York: Times 1995), cited in Baran and Davis, *Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future*, (United States: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2000), 348.

<sup>51</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), cited in Baran and Davis, *Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future*, (United States: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2000), 348.

movement. Both of them argue that efforts to establish a favourable climate for global business have ignited a backlash from traditional cultures. For example, fundamentalist Islamic groups are gaining power in many Middle Eastern nations by arousing local resentments against global organisations. At the same time, long-suppressed ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples are demanding the right to practice their traditional cultures from Scotland and Wales to the Balkans, Africa and India.

According to Zawawi Ibrahim, globalisation causes massive increase in inter-cultural flows of people, images, information and goods (due to improved communication technologies, etc). This makes the idea of cultures separated by sealed borders impossible to sustain<sup>52</sup>. In other words, globalisation has opened the door for cultures in the world to interact or mix with each other, and in a certain extent, influencing one another. For instance, globalisation has made it possible for the Malays to learn about other cultures, thus now it is considered normal if a Malay has spaghetti for lunch (it would be weird 20 years ago).

Marshall McLuhan<sup>53</sup>, about forty years ago, has predicted about the coming of globalisation through his concept of global village. According to him, global village is a form of social organisation that would inevitably emerge as instantaneous, electronic media tied the entire world into one great social, political, and cultural system. If this statement is analysed carefully, what it means is that in the end, there will be only one grand culture in this world, where everyone shares the same values, beliefs and lifestyle. This actually attests the argument that Baran and Davis put forward when they say that globalisation is actually marginalising or undermining local cultures. They also argue that the phenomenon of local cultures being undermined is likely to be less important for Americans but will be central for people in smaller nation states that are being absorbed into larger international communities<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Zawawi Ibrahim, "The Anthropological Journey and Its discourse on Culture: Rethinking Communication Studies in a New Terrain of Contestation.", Paper presented at the Communication Study and Human Sciences: A Transdisciplinary Colloquium. Mara University of Technology. 30-31 July 2003.

<sup>53</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

<sup>54</sup> Baran and Davis, *Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future*, (United States: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2000), 348.

## Imperialism

The phenomenon where the mind of the Malays is still captivated by the Western values is actually a new kind of imperialism which walks hand in hand with globalisation. It is known as intellectual imperialism (which means the domination of one people by another in their world of thinking)<sup>55</sup>. Since the West is considered as the 'superior' force, whatever they say is just swallowed without being contested. In other word, this phenomenon is also known as a captive mind. According to Syed Hussein, a captive mind in the non-Western world as one that is parrot-like and non-creative and whose thinking is based on Western categories and modes of thought<sup>56</sup>. He also adds that the captivity is self-induced and it is the result of the overwhelming preponderance of Western intellectual influence on the rest of the world. It is also the fertile ground for the impanation of intellectual imperialism which has significantly multiplied throughout the non-Western world and has occupied various positions in society, with its strong and pervasive influence.

Intellectual imperialism can be related to cultural imperialism. This is because they share quite similar traits. Schiller defines cultural imperialism as the sum of processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating centre of the system<sup>57</sup>. It is apparent that both forms of imperialisms result in the West being the dominant position. In this case, the Malays are still dominated even though there seems to be no force involved (is it?). Phillipson<sup>58</sup> notes that the imperialist structures ensures that the West has a near monopoly of scientific research, whether into technological questions, Third World development issues, or English language pedagogy. The structural resources of the Centre/(West) (universities, research institutions, publishers, funding agencies) are vastly greater than those available in Periphery (non-West) countries. The cultural resources of the Centre (ideas, theories,

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<sup>55</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas, quoted in Faezah Ismail, "Intellectual Captivity of Freedom.", online article available from [http://www.multiworld.org/m\\_iversity/articles/capt.htm](http://www.multiworld.org/m_iversity/articles/capt.htm)

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>57</sup> Schiller H.I., *Communication and Cultural Domination*, (New York: White Plains.:Sharpe, 1976), cited in Robert Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 58.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 58.

experience) are constantly renewed, with the Periphery remaining in a dependent situation.

Through imperialism, it is the West that benefits the most while the Other (the East, the Third World) remains in a dependent situation. By having this position, it is much easier for the West to spread their values without being refuted. According to Syed Hussein, European colonial writers, the amateur scholar administrators, loved to dwell on the sensational incidents of native life as part of their general attempt to portray the character of native society. Piracy, injustice, disorder, warfare, tyranny, which existed during the period were exaggerated in order to justify colonial rule which was alleged to have brought about the very opposite situation<sup>59</sup>. The West, knowing the advantage that they have, have directly or indirectly manipulated the Malays, in making them believe that the values that they offer is better than what the Malays have. Hence, by this, the West would remain their status-quo as the superior being.

### **Linguistic Imperialism**

According to Phillipson<sup>60</sup>, English language is the key to the process of cultural imperialism, which indirectly leads to intellectual imperialism. He adds that linguistic imperialism is that the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages. He also says that English linguistic imperialism is one example of *linguicism*, which is defined as 'ideologies, structures, and practices which are use to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language'.

English linguistic imperialism occurs due to the powers that it has. Kachru<sup>61</sup> tabulates the parameters of the power of English as follows:

***Demographical and Numerical:*** unprecedented spread across cultures and languages; on practically every continent.

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<sup>59</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, (London: Frank Cass, 1977), 130.

<sup>60</sup> Robert Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 47.

<sup>61</sup> Braj B. Kachru, "The Power and Politics of English", *World Englishes*, 5, no. 2-3 (1986), 121-140.

**Functional:** provides access to most important scientific, technological, and cross-cultural domains of knowledge and interaction.

**Altitudinal:** symbolizes - certainly to a large group across culture – one or more of the following: neutrality, liberalism, status and progressivism.

**Accessibility:** provides ‘intranational’ accessibility in the Outer Circle and international mobility across regions.

**Pluricentricity:** this has resulted in the ‘nativisation’ and ‘acculturation’ of the language. These two are then responsible for the ‘assimilation’ of English across cultures.

**Material:** a tool for mobility, economic gains and social status.

The culture of English and the civilization unconsciously became the standard or measurement for all things, including language use, metaphors, poetic or narrative forms and all things important. The English language itself seeped into their lives, sentences, and the fabric of thinking itself. It coloured everything, including the personalities of the student themselves. Their linguistics preferences and facility and their pride of language and later rhetorical prowess were intertwined with the qualities of the English language. It became the loom where the intellectual maturity of a person was woven. Seen from this new perspective, nurtured by colonial education and imported standards and aggressive judgmental attitudes Malay literature was not “well-made”, not sophisticated, (not only because there has not been much study of the works but also because they failed to follow western models of composition), closer to the oral, and therefore belonging not even to literature. It was not possible for the native peoples of Malaysia to produce original works or show any literary genius<sup>62</sup>.

Muhammad Haji Salleh also adds that in England, during the early 1920s, only the professionally trained scholars would have dared to write the history of English literature, but in colonies it was almost a free-for-all affair. And for more than five decades it defined, framed and decided how Malay literature should be read. It is doubly

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<sup>62</sup> Muhammad Haji Salleh, “Unwriting with the Voice: Orality as a Post-Colonial Literary Apparatus in Malaysian Literature.”, cited in Fazilah Merican and Ruzy Suliza Hashim, *Native Texts and Contexts: Essays with Post-colonial Perspectives*, (Bangi: Faculty of Language Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2001), 8.

ironic that after so many decades this book<sup>63</sup> is a preferred reference for the study of Malay literature and is an important research tool in Europe, even though there has been at least one bigger and more complete historical study (Harun Mat Piah et al., 1993) and many other works on this literature in Malay/Indonesian, English, Dutch and French<sup>64</sup>.

Having most of the earlier writings about the Malays in English language, it is not a surprise to see why our perception of ourselves has a lot of similarities with how the West perceives us. With all the 'powers', it is not difficult for English language to execute its job in assisting imperialism and globalisation. How can we overcome this? How can this form of imperialism be fought or resisted?

### **Counter-Eurocentrism and Non-Occidental Views**

Eurocentrism has formed the basis for a trend of thought that believes that human civilization is fundamentally built upon the domain of Rome, Paris and Athens, and the blossoming of human society, is indebted to European thinking. Eurocentrism is a culturalist phenomenon in the sense that it assumes the existence of irreducibly distinct cultural invariants that shape the historical paths of different peoples. Eurocentrism is therefore anti-universalist, since it is not interested in seeking possible general laws of human evolution. But it does present itself as universalist, for it claims that imitation of the Western model by all peoples is the only solution to the challenges of our time. Eurocentrism is a specifically modern phenomenon, the roots of which go back only to

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<sup>63</sup> This book is referring to Richard Winstedt's *A History of Classical Malay Literature*. Muhammad Haji Salleh argues that Winstedt very amateurishly classified Malay literature, basing his knowledge only on some texts from Perak, Negeri Sembilan and Johor, but not on the majority of the literature of the other states of Pahang, Terengganu, Kelantan, Kedah, Pulau Pinang, Brunei, Sarawak, Sabah and the Malay-speaking areas of Sumatera, such as the Deli, Serdang, Minangkabau, Siak, Rekan Palembang, and those of Bima, Lombok, Ambon, of which he knew almost nothing. It is tragic for Malay literature that a man knowing a few texts could dismiss the whole of Malay folklore as being borrowed and quoted all around the world as the single authority on this literature.

<sup>64</sup> Muhammad Haji Salleh, "Unwriting with the Voice: Orality as a Post-Colonial Literary Apparatus in Malaysian Literature.", cited in Fazilah Merican and Ruzy Suliza Hashim, *Native Texts and Contexts: Essays with Post-colonial Perspectives*, (Bangi: Faculty of Language Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2001), 9.

the Renaissance, a phenomenon that did not flourish until the nineteenth century. In this sense, it constitutes one dimension of the culture and ideology of the modern capitalist world. Eurocentrism refers to an essential dimension of the capitalist ideology, its manifestations would be characteristic of the common dominant attitudes of all of the societies in the developed capitalist world, the centre of the world capitalist system<sup>65</sup>.

In contesting Eurocentrism, perhaps the term Counter-Eurocentrism could be used. Counter-Eurocentrism as the term suggests, is the notion that goes against what is preached by Eurocentrism. It is an integral part in resisting the domination of the West. By having this in mind, the Malays for example, would be able to see that not everything about the West is great and not everything that is asserted by the West is truthful. The Malays would be made aware that they also have good values and that there is nothing wrong if they have different perceptions about themselves as compared to the West. For example, when Thomson wrote "Being a Mahomedan, we were not introduced to his wife or family; these were kept out of sight in the inner room", he was portraying that women were treated unfairly in a Malay (Muslim) society. A Malay reading this can contest this statement as he or she knows that women are given very good treatment in Islam, in contrast to what is represented by Thomson<sup>66</sup>.

Similar to Counter-Eurocentrism, non-occidental view is another form of resisting the western domination of the East. As Occidentalism is an act of studying and understanding the West, non-occidental view is an alternative approach used to go against the western representation of the east. It is not termed as occidental view for occidental view would mean putting the West under the microscope and then labeling them as how the East sees them. This is no different from Orientalism where the West labels the East as what they see us and as a known fact, it is culturally bias. Therefore, non-occidental view is an approach to resist the domination of the West, and at the same time, not being bias. For example, the Malays, when analysing or reading literatures about them should have an objective mind and eliminate the negative assumptions about the West (the writer) even though what is written about them (by the West) may be unfair or one-sided. What is important is the ability to read a text justly

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<sup>65</sup> Saied Reza Ameli, "Eurocentrism and Islamophobia", (Wembley: Islamic Centre of England, Islamic Human Rights Commission, October 1997), 1.

<sup>66</sup> John T. Thomson, *Glimpses into Life in Malayan Lands*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1864/1984), 57.

without discriminating its writer. In short, it is the context, content and values in the text that should be contested, not the writer.

To make way for non-occidental views, the Malays need to liberate their mind from the powers of the western discourse. The Malays need to be able to resist the idea of their image that has been constructed by the West. They need to be aware that whatever that is written about them (by the West) can actually be challenged. To do this, it is appropriate to look at what Zawiah's,<sup>67</sup> where she has outlined seven critical reading guidelines in order to challenge the western discourse/text. They are:

1. A text is a *construction*, not a mirror of life or a reflection of reality and truth. An awareness of the constructedness of the text as a human artefact will create that distance so essential to critical thinking. Therefore, the Malays need to be aware that what is written or published about them is not necessarily true, thus they actually have the option to filter what they perceive as true and what is not. They do not have to accept blindly everything that is fed to them.
2. Smuggled imperceptibility into the texts are assumptions about race, gender and class which readers should challenge rather than accept. In other words, when a piece of writing about the Malays is published, it is not totally based on truth or facts; it may be produced based on assumptions (which could derive from stereotyping) about the Malays. Hence, the Malays need to realise that it can be contested as it is not based on truth or facts.
3. Neither the text nor the author/narrative voice is a unified entity. There are inconsistent, conflicting elements in both that cannot be reconciled or smoothed over. Therefore, it is in the nature of the text that it should provoke competing meaning and responses. The Malay need to be aware that a text, in this case, the text about them, is always open for interpretation and responses. There is no one way of interpreting, understanding or responding to a text. Hence, the Malays should be aware that it is them and not the West who decide on how a text should be understood and read.
4. A text will always offer a particular perspective or point of view and a preferred meaning that will be made to look most intelligible to the reader. But

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<sup>67</sup> Zawiyah Yahya, *Resisting Colonialist Discourse (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)*, (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2003), 15.

the reader does not necessarily have to accept this. For example, the Malay can always have a different view or opinion about what is written about them and that view or opinion still can be accepted. In short, there are many ways of looking at things and the way provided by the West is not necessarily be the only option.

5. There are gaps, absences or silences in the text that a reader could fill in with his own cultural or social values. His/her historical and cultural specificities should count and be brought to bear on the reading. For instance, the Malays can relate their personal experience and values to their reading and come up with their own understanding of the text without submitting to the Western values embedded in it.
6. The aesthetic yardstick is not the only measure of a good work of literature. In fact, criticism may not even have to involve value-judgement.
7. Resistant reading offers a more equitable relationship between text and reader. The reader is not at the mercy of the text. The reader should not be passively taking in all the hidden values and messages in the text. The reader's job is not merely to crack the shell to get the nut out. The reader should be *making meaning* and *significance* through active engagement with the text. As discussed in the fifth point, the Malays should create their own meaning and understanding of the text based on their own values. They should not just submit to the prescribed meaning in the text.

These guidelines are very crucial in liberating the mind of the Malays from being captivated by the “superior” western discourse. To be able to resist the western discourse would take rigorous effort and consistency. The Malays need to be prepared to take risks in their quest for resistance for it is not an overnight process and as Zawiah<sup>68</sup> says it “resistance is a risk-taking venture because of its refusal to submit to such insistence on ‘correct’ reading or authorized versions. To force a ‘correct’ reading is the beginning of the end of reading”.

In line with Zawiah, Edward Said has also offered some insights on how to resist/recast inherited texts (of the western spear) and/or read them in revisionist ways. He states “to make explicit what is usually allowed to remain implicit; to state that which,

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*

because of professional consensus, is ordinarily not stated or questioned; to begin again rather than to take up writing dutifully at a designated point and in a way ordained by tradition; above all, to write in and as an act of discovery rather than out of respectful obedience to established 'truth' – these add up to the production of knowledge, they summarise the method of beginning about which this book turns"<sup>69</sup>.

In light of Zawiah and Said's resistance, it is also appropriate to look at intellectual captivity, which also plays a significant role in resisting colonialist's discourse. Syed Hussein defines "a captive mind in the non-Western world as one that is parrot-like and non-creative and whose thinking is based on Western categories and modes of thought. The captivity is self-induced and it is the result of the overwhelming preponderance of Western intellectual influence on the rest of the world"<sup>70</sup>. He also adds that intellectual captivity is the ground for intellectual imperialism. Therefore, to prevent being 'mentally colonised/imperialised' the Malays need to have a thinking set that is independent of the knowledge that is constructed by the colonials. However, this does not mean that the Malays should totally reject anything that is constructed and fed by the colonials as Syed Hussein puts it "...we should assimilate useful knowledge from all sources but we need to do this with an independent critical spirit without turning our back on our own intellectual heritage. The phenomena of servility and intellectual bondage are not the same as genuine creative assimilation from abroad"<sup>71</sup>.

What is important here is to be able to synthesise the information that we receive/have to our own advantage. It is no doubt that we cannot control the flow of information but we undoubtedly have the right (whether we realise it or not) to reject what we disagree with and accept only what we believe to be the truth. However, talk is easy. Walking the talk is not. Resistance is not easy. Going against the Western ideas is not easy. It is much more difficult if one does not even see or realise the need to resist, or in other words, when one is under a condition known as having a captive mind. According to Syed Hussein Alatas, a captive mind in the non-Western world as one that

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<sup>69</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1978/1995), 379.

<sup>70</sup> Faezah Ismail, "Intellectual Captivity of Freedom.", an online article available from [http://www.multiworld.org/m\\_iversity/articles/capt.htm](http://www.multiworld.org/m_iversity/articles/capt.htm)

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*

is imitative and non-creative and whose thinking is based on Western categories and modes of thought<sup>72</sup>.

Muhammad Haji Salleh<sup>73</sup>, on the other hand, offers a slightly different view in resistance. His resistance can be said to be much more personal and individual. According to him, “ideally, he is free to will and to choose. As a responsible subject, his choice is based mainly on his own *rasa* (feel). It cannot be measured against any external criteria because ‘they do not stand/on the solidity or edges of your experience’. Ultimately, each individual is a sovereign subject and the sole judge of his or her own choice. He adds that ideally the modern individual, the self, does not have a given definition. That is, it does not live according to the dictates of society and tradition”. Based on this, it can be said that an individual’s choice of life, how he/she perceives him/herself, what he/she thinks of his/her identity, actually depends on him/herself. No one, no external force can dictate one’s mind. Therefore, if seen from this angle, the notions of intellectual imperialism, captive mind, inferiority and related others should not even be in existence. The only problem is, not everyone has the same wavelength as Muhammad Haji Salleh. Not everyone has such high confidence or belief in oneself, one’s culture. Not everyone has had ‘intellectual liberation’ as him. Thus, this approach may seem to be not applicable to everyone, though it can be considered as very ‘intellectually liberating’, if achieved.

## Conclusion

This paper aims to look at the notion of representation, specifically the representation of the Malays in journalistic and sociological narratives. A range of sources have been used and analysed. What is transparent is, it seems that both journalistic and sociological narratives that represent the Malays (be it from local or Western writers), are promoting more negatives traits of the Malays as compared to the positives. Ahmad Murad asserts that “much of the discourse by Malays themselves

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<sup>72</sup> Faezah Ismail, “Revisiting ‘The Myth of the Lazy Native’”, online article available from [http://www.multiworld.org/m\\_ersity/articles/lazy.htm](http://www.multiworld.org/m_ersity/articles/lazy.htm)

<sup>73</sup> Md. Salleh Yaapar, “A Post-Colonial Poet with a Quest for Identity: Self and Other in the Works of Muhammad Haji Salleh.”, *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 33, no. 97, (November 2005), 296.

associate the Malay with negativity – much having to do with the lingering image of the ‘lazy native’ embedded in social and cultural consciousness. We see that image (lazy native) constructed in historical, sociological and journalistic narratives”<sup>74</sup>. To add, as summarised by Norraesah in chapter one, the Malays seem to be carrying more negative descriptions than the positive ones. This is similar to Asmah Omar where she also lays down more negative than positive traits of the Malays. It is understood that if the Malays are described negatively by the Western writers for they do not really understand the mechanics of being a Malay, but when such negative remarks come from local writers, something must be wrong. This leads to the assumption that perception that the Malays have about themselves is actually derived from the Western perception about them. In other words, the way the Malays see themselves is said to be dictated by the way the West sees them.

From the earlier discussion, the West is positioned as the one who possesses power and is superior to the East. This is due to several factors such as colonialism, globalisation, economic domination, education, medicine and technology. Realising this, it is understood why there is little objection to whatever that they deliberate about the East. The literatures that they produce about the East (the Malays) are not contested and problematised, as stated by Shamsul Amri, Syed Hussein and Ahmad Murad, just to name a few. This leads to biasness in the representation of the Malays as the West has all the means to write about what they want without being refuted.

To emphasise, it is clear that the Malays are misrepresented. However, according to the concept of orientalism, the misrepresentation is the way the West builds and moulds our identity so that we will continue to be under their wings of domination. The Malay identity, as the Malays see it, may not be originally theirs. Their identity might actually be set and prescribed by the West via forces such as colonisation, globalisation and imperialism.

In order to prevent this notion of intellectual imperialism from happening or continuously happening, the Malays need to liberate themselves intellectually. The

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<sup>74</sup> Ahmad Murad Merican, “Prophets, Philosophers and Scholars: The Identity of Communication and the Communication of Identity.” Paper presented at The International Conference on Media and Communication: Communication, Globalisation and Cultural Identities, Putrajaya, Kuala Lumpur, September 26-28 2005, 13.

Malays need to have awareness about what is going on around them. The Malays need to be exposed to the concepts of captive mind and intellectual imperialism, as these two (if understood properly) are the core contributors to a well liberated intellectuality. The Malays need to be able to resist the temptation of Western discourse. The Malays need to be on 'alert-mode' so that they will not fall victim to any form of intellectual imperialism. If the Malays could read a text as Zawiah has suggested, they would be able to see that what is written about them is not always accurate and objective. If the Malays understand what Edward Said means by Orientalism, they would be able to see the politics that is fuelling the notion of their representation. If the Malays are aware of the concept of a captive mind and decolonisation, they would be better able to protect themselves from being drowned into the domination of the West.

In short, this paper is only a small portion of the cake. To end, hopefully there will be more studies being conducted on similar ground for the more we research on this matter, the more we learn and the better we can relate to and improve our construction and deconstruction of our identity.

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