

Malaysian and Indonesian Literature: A Brief Comparison

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article History: Submitted Nov 13, 2019 Revised Nov 29, 2019 Accepted Des 6, 2019 Published Des 13, 2019	<i>Malaysia and Indonesia have many things in common. These two countries are called 'bangsa serumpun' or one group nation. In terms of location, the two countries are very close. In terms of language, the two countries are also very close because they can understand each other by using bahasa melayu or Malay language. As a result of this closeness, the literature of the countries also has many similarities. This essay will compare the development of contemporary literature in these two Asian countries. This essay will also describe how the literature of the two countries influenced one another. The main focus is the similarities and the differences between their literature. To make it easy the term used in this essay to describe the two countries is nusantara. Nusantara is derived from Sansekerta's language that describes the archipelago of Malaysia and Indonesia.</i>
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Introduction

For many centuries, Malay language has been used in *nusantara* not only as a communication tool in *nusantara* but also as a contact language for people in *nusantara* to foreign people. Some evidence has been found that Malay language has been used since the seventh century. The use of the language had been found in Palembang (South Sumatra), Bangka, Minangkabau (West Sumatra) and South Malaysia (Teeuw, 1979). From the same resource it can be concluded that in the empire of Sriwijaya, Malay language became the contact language. The empire of Sriwijaya played an important role in ruling *nusantara* in the seventh century. This means that the language itself was very powerful in Southeast Asia at that time because the empire of Sriwijaya became a trading center. Up until now, the use of Malay language has been very powerful.

In Indonesia which has more than 200 different dialects, Malay language was proclaimed as the official language in 1928. The congress of many youth organizations declared that they would use Bahasa Indonesia (Malay language in an official form) as a means to unite the nation. This was a political decision since at that time; Indonesia was still under Dutch colonialism.

Malaysian and Indonesian contemporary literature began almost at that same time. This is possible because the countries have similar language and the publication of Indonesian literature

could be read in Malaysia and vice versa. Another thing that had in common was that the forms of literary works of both countries had the same roots. For instance, the original form of Malaysian and Indonesian traditional poems was the same that was called *pantun*. A pantun is a quatrain with an abab rhyme. Each line contains between 8 and 12 syllables. The first two lines prepared us in image, sound, and suggestion in the last two. The following is an example:

Tinggi tinggi si matahari, (a)
Anak kerbau mati tertambat, (b)
Dari dahulu saya mencari (a)
Baru ini saya mendapat (b)

This kind of poem is very popular both in Malaysia and Indonesia until today. However, *pantun* is rarely used in Indonesian literature nowadays. It is used only as a spoken entertainment in some particular ethnics in Indonesia. Another similar thing in the two countries' literature is the themes that appear in literary works. The most common theme was about the teaching of Islam. Every form of literary works usually put message about how to be a good Moslem. This could be understood since the majority of the population of the two countries was Moslems.

However, in the development of contemporary literary works of the two countries, the themes have changed following the development of the political movement of each country. Literary works were not used only as arts but also a media to send messages to people struggling for independence. This could be proven from the eras of literary works of the two countries which adjusted to the interest of national goal, independence.

Contemporary Indonesian Literature

Modern or contemporary Indonesian literature started in 1920 when the first expression of modern poems was published in Jong Sumatra. The writer was Muhammad Yamin, an 18-year-old student from Minangkabau. His poem's title was *Bahasa, Bangsa* (Language, Nation) (Teeuw, 1979). The poem is quoted:

Bahasa, bangsa

Selagi kecil berusia muda
Tidur sianak di pangkuan bunda
Ibu bernyanyi lagu dan dendang
Memuji sianak banyaknya sedang
Berbui sayang malam dan siang
Buaian tergantung di tanah moyang

Terlahir dibangsa, berbahasa sendiri
Diapit keluarga kanan dan kiri
Besar budiman di tanah Melayu

Berduka suka, sertakan rayu
Perasaan serikat menjadi padu
Dalam bahasanya, permai merdu

Meratap menangis bersuka raya
Dalam bahagia bala dan baya
Bernafas kita pemanjangkan nyawa
Dalam bahasa sambungan jiwa
Dimana Sumatra, disitu bangsa,
Dimana Perca, disana bahasa

Andalasku sayang, jana bejana
Sejakkan kecil muda taruna
Sampai mati berkalang tanah
Lupa kebahasa tiadakan pernah
Ingat pemuda, Sumatra malang
Tiada bahasa, bangsapun hilang

Language, nation

When it is small and of tender years,
The child sleep in its mother's lap,
Its mother sings songs and lullabies to it,
Praising it as is right and proper,
Rocking it in love night and day,
In its cradle suspended over the land of its ancestors.

Born into a nation with its own language,
Surrounded by its family and relations,
It will grow up in wisdom in the Malay land,
In sorrow and in joy and in grief
Its feeling of solidarity is consolidated
By its language, so beautiful and melodious.

We lament and wail, and also rejoice,
In times of good fortune, catastrophe and danger,
We breathe so that we can go on living
To continue to use the language which is an extension of our spirit
Wherever Sumatra is, there is my nation,
Wherever *Perca* is, there is my language.

My beloved *Andalas*, land of my birth
From my childhood and youth
Until the grave envelopes me,
I shall never forget my language
Remember, O youth, Sumatra is distress
Without a language, the nation disappears.

This poem is the best description of how Indonesian people struggled for their own language and culture.

In the period of 1930s to 1940s, Indonesian literature was still focusing on some ethnics' background and problem. The most common literary works came from ethnic Minangkabau in West Sumatra. Many popular literary works especially novels were talking mostly about Minangkabau's tradition. Some popular artists from Mianangkabau were Marah Rusli with his phenomenal work *Sitti Nurbaya*, Abdul Muis with *Salah Asuhan*, Tulis Sutan Sati with *Sengsara Membawa Nikmat* and Hamka with *Di bawah lindungan Ka'bah*. Teeuw (1979) described this era as the cultural focusing era.

In the early 1940s, Indonesian literary works started to talk about the struggle to become a freedom country. The desire to be free from Dutch colonialism started to be the main attention of many Indonesian artists. The most popular artist in this era was Chairil Anwar. An influential critic in Indonesian literature, H. B. Jassin, called Chairil Anwar as the pioneer of generation 45. The year 1945 was chosen as the name of the generation because Indonesia gets its independence on 17 August 1945. The most common theme of Indonesian literary works at that time was independence and becoming one nation. This shows that literature had been used as a means to achieve the national goal. Literature was not only seen as an art but also as a way to think and behave.

From 1950s to the early 1960s, Indonesian literature's themes were mostly talking about the leadership in Indonesian government. The bad situation especially economic crisis had made many Indonesian people suffered from poverty. The poverty and tyranny government became the main themes in literary works. The artists wanted government to pay more attention to people's lives not only the power. The artists also supported the students' movement in criticizing Soekarno's regime. The regime was influenced by PKI or Partai Komunis Indonesia (Indonesian Communist Party). Interestingly, PKI also was supported by a group of artists which was called LEKRA or Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (The institution of People's Culture). The conflicts between the two groups of artists who were pro and against Soekarno became very hot at that time. The criticisms from Indonesian artists through their works had made government worried. As a result, some artists were jailed by Soekarno's government. That was the time when literature had a very powerful influenced in people's life in Indonesia.

From the 1970s to nowadays, the main themes of Indonesian literature have changed as the change of political situation in Indonesia. Themes like corruption, power, and poverty are always very interested in many artists. One thing has never changed is that literature has played an important role in people's life in Indonesia. However, the role of literature slowly but sure has been reduced by modern media such as television and internet.

Contemporary Malaysian Literature

Interestingly, contemporary Malaysian literature started almost at the same time as contemporary Indonesian literature. The establishment of Balai Pustaka in 1920 by the Dutch in Indonesia had inspired Malaysian artists. Most students and youths in Malaysia had known some works produced by Indonesian artists because Balai Pustaka reached Malaysian readers. The popular artists in Indonesian literature had also become very famous in Malaysia in the same period of time. The names such as Amir Hamzah, Armin Pane, Sitor Situmorang were among the very respected artists in Malaysia.

Just like in Indonesia, Malaysian literature was also influenced by the political moments in the country. According to Ungku Maimunah Mohammad Tahir (1987), Malaysian literature can be divided into four eras. These eras are based on the political moments that happened in Malaysia when this country was still under British colonialism.

The first era was called Pre-War Writing. This era was started in the 1920s to 1940s. During this era, Malaysian artists were still looking for their own identity. Indonesian literary works were still used as guidance for many Malaysian artists. Many Indonesian artists inspired many newcomers in Malaysian literature. Even some of them became models for newcomers. Amir Hamzah, Hamka, Chairil Anwar were the inspirations for Malaysian artists who were looking for their own identity. A good example of this was one big name in Malaysian literature, Pungguk. He was considered as a great poet in modern Malaysian literature history. He was influenced by some Indonesian artists such as Sutan takdir Alisyahbana, Muhammad Yamin and Amir Hamzah (Abdullah, 1997). Pungguk had met the artists from Indonesia and admitted that he was inspired by some of them.

The next era of Malaysian literature was called ASAS 50. ASAS 50 stands for Angkatan Sastrawan 50 (Artists generation 1950). This era was the time when the young Malaysian educated masses took apart in literature with one main goal. The goal was to promote the use of the Malay language as a means to achieve Malaysian independence (Tahir, 1987).

The next generation of Malaysian literature was the generation 1960s. This generation was referred to as the era to give substance to independence. Malaysia gains its independence on 31 August 1957. The change of power from British colonialists to Malaysian people did not last smoothly. The complexity of national problems especially in politics became the main theme of Malaysian literary works at that time.

Then, the generation 1970s was the next generation in Malaysian literature. The main themes of literary works were about poverty's eradication which became the main national problem. The most popular name in Malaysian literary works at that time was Ismail Hussein. He was the chairman of GAPENA or Gabungan Persatuan Penulis Nasional Malaysia (Federation of Malaysian national Association). This organization had an important role in leading Malaysian society to have sense of belonging to Malaysian literature. GAPENA actively promoted mass literature by conducting annual competition with people in literature. Even GAPENA could persuade the government to make Malaysian literature as a national issue. In 1971, the government set up literary award as a sign of government attention to Malaysian literature (Tahir, 1987).

Another important thing about generation 1970s was the Islamic movement among Malaysian students. The awareness of making Islam as the way of life for society was developed by

many groups of society in Malaysia including literary society. As a result, the themes of Islam were very common in many forms of Malaysian literary works. Interestingly, this became the monumental moment in Malaysian literary history. Up until now, Malaysian literary works cannot be separated from Islamic influence in choosing the themes.

From the description above, it can be concluded that the history of literary works of the two countries was interrelated with one another. The fact that the two nations were the colonies of other countries produced some similarities. The first similarity is that the time when the development of contemporary literature of the two countries started. This is possible because the Malay language which can be understood by both people of the countries.

Secondly, the two countries divided the eras in literary works were influenced by the political situation of the countries. Consequently, the most common themes of literary works were determined by the issues that appeared at that period. This showed the artists from the countries cared about what was happening in their society.

The last similarity of contemporary Malaysian and Indonesian literature is that literature had power or influence in moving people to achieve a particular goal. For example, in Indonesia, literary works played its role to promote anti-communist movement during president Soekarno's regime in 1966. On the other hand, Malaysian artists had also succeeded to persuade their government to make literature as a national movement and determined the way people think and do something.

Despite many similarities between the contemporary literary works of the two countries, there have been also some significant differences. In terms of the development of literary works, Indonesian literary works seem develop more varied than Malaysian literature. On one hand, Malaysian literature looks very safe in choosing themes of Islamic teaching. On the other hand, Indonesian literature is much richer in choosing themes. This is more likely because the background of Indonesian artists is various from many different ethnics and beliefs.

Another important difference between the contemporary literature of the two countries is the development of forms of literary works. Malaysian literature seems to focus on poems and short stories. Indonesian literature has developed more advances in novels and dramas. The different number of literature' audiences is believed as the cause of the difference. Indonesia with more than 260 million population has more opportunities in developing various forms of literatures to be developed.

In terms of forms of literary works, each country has its own preference. Indonesia has developed many various forms of literary works. The poem was very common in the earlier 1920s. This form of literature is considered as a transition from the traditional form of poem that is *pantun* to the modern one. The next form is novels or romances. This kind of literary works became very popular in the mid-twentieth. Even until now, novel is still used even though not becoming as popular as it used to be.

Short stories have also become less popular than novels. Many novelists sometimes also write short stories. However, that is just as a non-serious literary work. This can be proven, as there is no short story can achieve high popularity in contemporary Indonesian literature. Probably, this is because short story is only considered as a light material of entertainment. Another popular form of contemporary literary work in Indonesia is drama or theater. Drama began for the first time in

1926 when Rustam Effendi wrote his complete scenario, Bebasari (Hadi, 1997). Since then, drama started to develop as one of contemporary literary works in Indonesia. Some names were very popular in this area, for example, Rendra, Teguh Karya, Arifin C. Noor and Putu Wijaya. However, drama cannot be more popular than other forms of literature because of the limitation of audience. Up until now, drama is still performed in some halls in some big cities in Indonesia but only for limited audiences. Nowadays, people tend to watch soap opera on television rather than to go to a theater to watch drama.

Now, let us turn to Malaysia. The development of literary works in Malaysia is not as rich as in Indonesia. Contemporary Malaysian literary works have been focusing on some favorite forms such as poetry and novels. The main themes are also mostly limited to Islamic teaching. Literature has played an important role in leading Malaysian society to be more religious persons. Literature also has significant impacts in social life of Malaysian people (Tahir, 1987).

Conclusion

The crucial fact in comparing contemporary literature between Malaysia and Indonesia is that they are very close to one another. The geographical and language influences have made the literature develop very similar. The political situation in both countries also has a significant impact on contemporary literature. Artists in both countries have used literature as a means to help people in facing different situations of life.

Some significant differences have also been found in the development of contemporary literature. Mostly, the differences are caused by the different types of problems that are found in each country. A large number of population and the heterogeneous of society in Indonesia also have an impact on the differences.

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