

# ***Sastera Islam as an Emerging Literary Orientation in Modern Malay Literature***\*

Azhar Ibrahim Alwee  
National Institute of Education

## **Introduction**

*M*odern Malay literary tradition has developed gradually since the nineteenth century. Its development, like in other literary traditions, is marked or influenced by the ideological trends of the time. Three dominant literary and ideological orientations can be identified in modern Malay literature, though it must be emphasized here that it is only ideal-types, as far as this discussion is concerned. Each group represents a certain style of thinking and certainly has differing views on several issues. Certainly these literary-ideological orientations are not pure types and it is not uncommon that in many literary works, such orientations may overlap or be present at the same time.

First, is the group with an ideological strand that reflects some elements of feudal romanticism that glorifies Malay feudal past as substantial component in defining Malay culture and ethnic nationalism. To proponents of this group, the Malay feudal past, with all its power symbolism and chivalric virtues, is seen as the cultural paragon of '*keMelayuan*' (Malayness). This group has the most support from the literary establishment and dominant power holders. Often, this group made claims, apart from always had been seen, as being patriotic and nationalistic.

The second group, though at times erroneously labeled as "secular-oriented," projects in their thinking elements, humanistic thinking, which believes in using literature for espousing the notions of progress, freedom, solidarity, social justice and humanity. This

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group too manifests nationalistic/patriotic sentiments, but they are much more critical of the feudalistic thought in their society. Generally, they uphold the notion of '*kehidupan kemanusiaan*'. In some ways, they showed some elements of socialistic ideas or seem to be favoured to speak for the small man or the proletariat (*rakyat marbean*). This group is also known as the 'modernist' (for a lack of better term), who explored new and critical issues in Malay society, and their writings aim towards reforming their society.

The third orientation, which is the focus in this essay, consists of the proponents of *sastera Islam*, whose presence have been clearly felt in the period of religious revivalism in contemporary Malay society.<sup>1</sup> Basically, this group upholds the vision that Islam should be the thrust of Malay literary tradition and takes a rather assertive stand in rejecting all other literary orientations.

Speaking of *sastera Islam* as an emerging genre, its expression and style of thinking is parallel to the ideational art as conceptualized by Pitirim Sorokin, whereby "it is a part of religion, and functions as religious service. It is a communion of the human soul with itself and with God...it is [purported as] sacred in its content and form." The other traits of this idealistic art are: (a) God as the true-reality value; (b) its 'heroes' are pious personalities; (c) little attention being paid to the "persons, objects and events of the sensory-empirical world"; (d) "its objective is not to amuse, entertain or give pleasure, but to bring the believer close to God"; (e) "it does not admit any sensualism, eroticism, satire, comedy, caricature and farce"; (f) symbolism predominates to denote the supersensory religious feelings and (g) as it emphasizes the internal spirituality and values, the outward manifestations of objects or persons are made simple, devoid of complexity and ostentations.<sup>2</sup>

Generally, all the above-mentioned literary orientations can be said to be belonging, in varying degrees, to 'mainstream' literatures. To say which is the dominant orientation amongst the three is not easy, yet none can be said to be in the periphery or being marginalized. Each of these orientations can be said to be competing for dominance and acceptance. However, in as much as the three literary orientations reflect diversity, they share

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<sup>1</sup> Read, Chandra Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti Sdn. Bhd., 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Sorokin, Pitirim, *The Crisis of Our Age* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1992), pp. 27-28.

some commonalities in their literary objectives, namely the artistic commitment to educate and direct Malay readers/society to a desired goal and vision.

Literary orientations reflect a number of things, such as (a) value orientations; (b) prevailing or predominance of certain styles of thought amongst the intelligentsias; and (c) the competition or the conflict of valuations. The different literary orientations, apart from exemplifying several styles of thought, are an arena where competition of ideas and values took place. As Shaharuddin Maaruf opines:

“Malay literature has always been the battle ground of ideas and values waged between different social groups representing diverse interests. As such it is a clear trend of thought, their bearers and how they stood in relation to each other. Through the literary device, writers seek legitimacy for their values and morality, while undermining or eroding their opponents. Indeed, if it can be agreed that the history of the people is really the development and evolution of their ideas and consciousness, as they react to problems and challenges confronting them, or to life in general, Malay literature is Malay social history in the art form.”<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, in studying the literary orientations, not only have we gathered some insights into the prevalent thought amongst the Malay intelligentsias, but also the way in which they understood their socio-political and economic conditions. Moreover, the absences and presence of ideas/themes in the literary orientations may tell us some of the strengths and limits of modern Malay literature and its potentialities for the future as well as the achievements it has made so far.

### ***Sastera Islam: A Utopian Literary Vision?***

Ever since the period of the so-called Islamic resurgence in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there is a growing enthusiasm towards searching and labeling of ‘Islamic’ brand in

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<sup>3</sup> Shaharuddin Maaruf, “Malay Literature as Social History,” in E. Thumboo (ed.) *Perceiving Other World* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1991), p.333.

several intellectual fields. The resurgence is not only marked by the mood of *dakwah* (that is, to make Muslims better Muslims), it also saw the eagerness to Islamicize all spheres of cultural, social and intellectual life, ranging from ‘Islamic’ social sciences to ‘Islamic’ economics, ‘Islamic’ management, ‘Islamic’ literature, ‘Islamic’ art, ‘Islamic’ theatre, ‘Islamic’ sciences, and many more.

In the literary and the arts scene, this “Islamization” has been welcomed with great enthusiasm and support. It is not uncommon to find experts in Islamic theology or jurisprudence to discuss literature, language, economics, politics, policies and so forth. One’s piety, especially in public life, is often the yardstick to determine the ‘efficacy’ of one’s comments or opinions. Great credence is therefore given to even religious jurist-consults (*fuqaha* or even *du’at*) on what is art/culture/aesthetic, etc<sup>4</sup>. Apparently one’s depth in religious knowledge, gives him/her some kind of ‘license’ to speak about “Islamic art”, “Islamic science,” and so forth, even though that person may not be an expert in the fields.

In this essay, we are not attempting to discuss the polemics of *sastera Islam* that had attracted significant attention within Malay literary circles.<sup>5</sup> Our aim is to delineate the characteristics of the discourse on *sastera Islam*; that is, of its vision and concern, and the historical background that explains its emergence. The problems and limitations of this discourse will be analyzed in the final part of the essay, linking it to the overall intellectual-artistic preoccupation amongst Malay intelligentsias.

## **The Era of Islamic Resurgence<sup>6</sup>**

Generally, the response of the Malay literary circles to the ‘Islamic resurgence,’ in the seventies until the present, varies.<sup>7</sup> It must be noted here that the views on *sastera Islam*, especially amongst Malay literary figures, be it in support or criticism against it, is not

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<sup>4</sup> See for example, the Malay version of *Islam dan Seni* by the famous Azharite *faqih*, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qardawi (Bandung: Pustaka Hidayah, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> The polemic between Shahnun Ahmad and Kassim Ahmad is one case in point. Refer *Polemik Sastera Islam* (KL: DBP, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Read, Chandra Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia* (Selangor: Penerbit Fajar Bakti, 1987) and Zainah Anwar, *Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia: Dakwah among the Students* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Ungku Maimunah, “Sastera Islam: Malaysia’s Literary Phenomenon of the 1970s and 1980s,” *The Muslim World*, vol. LXXIX, nos. 3-4, pp. 232- 248.

uniformed nor is it consistent throughout.<sup>8</sup> Generally, the proponents of *sastera Islam*, in recent times, have been an assertive voice, not only in claiming their literary vision as *the* path that modern Malay literature should take, but also in assailing criticisms against other literary visions.

### **Criticisms against the ‘Humanistic-Secular’ Malay Literature**

In their conviction of such an endeavour, the proponents of *sastera Islam* easily repudiate the development and achievement of modern Malay literature since the nineteenth century, which to them, were devoid of Islamic spirituality (*kerohanian Islam*). Generally, colonialism, and especially modern secularism, has been blamed for disparaging Malay cultural life from Islam. In as much as the revivalists call for the ‘conversion’ of Malay Muslims towards a more Islamic way of life, the proponents of *sastera Islam* aspire to see that Malay literature (and Malay cultural life, for that matter) should be more Islamic in its spirit and form.<sup>9</sup>

One of its proponents is Mohd. Affandi Hassan, who asserts that the only literary culture which the Malays should adopt is the Islamically-inspired *persuratan baru* or genuine literature. To Affandi, the classical Malay literature of the past, which he termed as *Sistem Persuratan Melayu* (Malay System of Letters) was based on the *Taubidic* approach, that is, the affirmation of the Oneness of God. Modern Malay literature, however, he lamented, is based on secularization and this is deemed as “the most traumatic experience in Malay intellectual, literary and cultural life.”<sup>10</sup>

Another well known scholar, Muhd Kamal Hassan, a political scientist, considered *sastera Islam* as *literature engagee*, though this had been claimed by the proponents of other literary styles.

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<sup>8</sup> One need to say the changing views on the subject as made by Shahnnon and Mohd Affandi Hassan.

<sup>9</sup> Within this strand of thought, they also lamented how modern Malay language had parted away from the spirit of Islam, losing away the semantic meanings of the Islamic tradition, more so when romanised Malay is used as opposed to the Jawi script, which they deemed as making Malays closer to their Islamic identity.

<sup>10</sup> Refer Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, “Mohd Affandi Hassan’s Notion of Persuratan Baru: A Preliminary Exploration,” in L.J. Mallari-Hall (ed.) *Texts and Contexts, Interactions between Literature and Culture in Southeast Asia*, pp. 121-133.

Generally, the enthusiasm on *sastera Islam* is not only evident amongst the literary figures, but also amongst literary academics and commentators. Some welcomed it as the long awaited thrust of Islam in Malay literature, as if Malay literature has not been or less 'Islamic' in its outlook since the past. But some questioned as to whether it is necessary to be preoccupied by the intent (*niat*) and conceptualization of *sastera Islam*.<sup>11</sup> Others are cautious and called for a sober understanding, to avoid falling into a myopic and narrow understanding of *sastera Islam*.<sup>12</sup>

The proponents of *sastera Islam* can be identified with the group which strongly advocates cultural Islamization amongst the Malays. To them, Malays as Muslims should develop and nurture a genuine literature based on the fundamentals of Islam. In achieving this, they must first purge out the foreign (Western) imports and secularist tendencies, which they believe have tainted Malay literature. This espousal can be seen not only in works which carry 'Islamic' themes and symbolisms, but also the literary theoretical framework which should replace the existing conventional (Western-derived) ones.<sup>13</sup>

In recent years, we witnessed several leading men of letters (*sasterawan*) eagerly changing their literary themes – novels, short stories, poems, dramas and essays – to a more 'Islamic' ones. Some welcomed it as a revitalization of modern Malay literature. Shahnnon, for instance, who in the sixties and seventies wrote the themes on Malay politics and poverty in his works, was experimenting on *sastera Islam* in the eighties as shown in his novels, such as *Ummi dan Abang Sheikul*, *al-Shiqaq I* and *Tok Guru*. Apart from Shahnnon, there emerged some new writers who became so-called specialists in *sastera Islam* such as Mohd. Affandi Hassan, Shafie Ibrahim, Kemala and few others.

Generally, the proponents of *sastera Islam* demonstrate several characteristics. It must be noted here that as a literary trend, it is rather recent. Its main preoccupation is not so

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<sup>11</sup> See Dinsman, "Soalnya Kenapa Kita Mesti Bercakap Tentang Sastera Islam," *Devan Sastera*, Ogos, 1977.

<sup>12</sup> See Mana Sikana, *Sastera Islam di Malaysia* (KL: Sarjana Enterprise, 1983)

<sup>13</sup> Refer Ungku Mainmunah, "Mohd. Affandi Hassan 's Notion of Persuratan Baru A Preliminary Exploration," in Mallari-Hall, Luisa J. (ed.) *Texts and Contexts, Interactions Between Literature and Culture in Southeast Asia*, pp. 121-133.

much *literary*, but to use literary medium in entrenching spirituality and religiousness amongst Malays. In recent times, this group has gained momentum in the form of support and appraisal, from the establishment, through organizations in various states, and regional and international seminars and conventions on *sastera Islam*.

Interestingly, even those who are outside the literary circles, but generally recognised as well-versed in Islam, suddenly become the spokesmen or proponents of *sastera Islam*. As Mana Sikana aptly noted: “*Dunia kita hari ini, siapa yang pandai bercakap tentang Islam akan segera naik.*”<sup>14</sup> In the context of a heightened feeling of the need to go back to the authentic tradition, *sastera Islam* has been hailed as the only course and vision in which modern Malay literature must take. The feeling of superiority and efficacy of their religious paradigm characterized such thinking. Islam, to them, is the answer to all human predicaments, and therefore a Malay literary tradition based on Islam, should not only spiritually sound but also a blessed endeavour (*ibadah*).

Generally, critics have observed that the discourse does not take in the form of a serious literary reflection or the appreciation of the vast amount of Muslim literary achievements in the classical period. This phenomenon can be seen as part of a larger phenomenon of cultural Islamization, which unfortunately, is characterized by enthusiastic rhetoric rather than a sober intellectual discernment.

Apparently, there is an absence of a serious intellectual discussion on the Muslims’ diverse artistic and literary heritage, although glorifying their excellence is not uncommon. One may pose a question: In the midst of this religious ‘conservatism,’ will there be an acceptance of a novel that is written along the philosophical-rationalistic theme such as Ibn Tufail’s *Hayy bin Yaqzan*? The answer is most probably in the negative. Most likely, the ‘legitimate’ themes, considering the prevailing religious orientation in contemporary Malay society, will be on ideas of piety, repentance, conversion, death, man’s sexual cravings and his downfall, the beauty of polygamy, spiritual journey, and even retribution of human sins.

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<sup>14</sup> *Sastera Islam di Malaysia*, p. 22.

Ever since the discourse on *sastera Islam* began, there are many writings (mostly in essays) by various literary, cultural, religious and academic personalities. But most of these essays are directed towards affirming and advocating the need of *sastera Islam*, that is, Islam must be the thrust of the Malay literary endeavour. The assertion that a God-conscious feeling must be included in all of man's activities is constantly repeated, alongside inculcating other values deemed as 'Islamic', to the point that it becomes a cliché and loses its significance since it is often expressed (and could be anticipated by readers) in a mechanistic way.

It must be noted here, that this cultural Islamization, though a rather recent trend, must not be interpreted to mean that Islam had never been central in Malay literary thought. In the past, Malay writers who are Muslims, such as Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, Rashid Talu, Keris Mas (or Hamka and A A Navis in Indonesia) had written literary works that portrayed values of Islam without having to make distinction and proclaiming their works as *sastera Islam*.

In other words, even without pronouncing overtly about *sastera Islam*, the religious dimension in good literary works, in varying degrees of expressions, is naturally expressed. For instance, a novel about the life of destitute and poverty leading to prostitution and its consequent moral dilemma, cannot be simply dismissed as decadent or irreligious, because such a narration made us realize and think about the plight of the poor, especially amongst women. This empathy and concern towards the human plight are certainly part of a larger humanistic spirit of the religion.

To emphasize our point again, the main argument made by the advocates of *sastera Islam* is that modern Malay literature is devoid of Islamic spirituality. Foremost, humanism (*kemanusiaan*), with its man-centered worldview, which has permeated in modern Malay literature, is rejected as an anathema to the God-centered religious worldview. *Kemanusiaan* is simply seen as extension of Western secularism, deprived of any good values as enjoined by the religion.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Muhammad Kamal Hassan, "Seni, Sastera, Agama: Suatu Kesepaduan," in Simposium Serantau Sastera Islam, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, 16-18 Nov. 1992.



## The 'Search' for Un-Godly Expressions

Repudiating Malay literary writers, past or present, is very well-noted within this group (proponents of *sastera Islam*). If Abdullah Munshi is no longer accepted as the “father of modern Malay literature,” the target of criticism against him is now directed at branding him as the lackey of colonial power and the Christian missionaries. For that, Abdullah’s criticisms of injustices, neglect of education, corruption and the like, are credited to Western/colonial values, which Abdullah was said to be exposed to and indoctrinated by his colonial masters. Unfortunately, by making these claims, such thinking gives credibility to Western thought as if it is only through their ideas and values that Abdullah was able to criticize Malay feudal excesses. In fact, it is the religious values of Islam, which formed part of Abdullah’s thinking that called upon man to guard against moral transgressions and injustices in their society.<sup>16</sup>

Established Malay-Indonesian writers such as Masuri S N and Chairil Anwar are evaluated negatively, for their writings are void of “Islamic principles.” Masuri’s inclination in writing, (as represented in his poem, *‘Ini Nasi Yang Kusuap’*), which can be said to be categorized as “*sastera untuk masyarakat*” (literature for society) had been criticized for its impiety for not acknowledging God’s graces. Thus, any affirmation about man or society means a denial of God’s omnipotence. As such, Masuri’s literary orientation of “*sastera untuk masyarakat*” is religiously erroneous, as one commentator, Isa Kamari writes:

*“Seni untuk masyarakat tidak kurang murtadnya dari semboyan ‘seni untuk seni’....Sumber daya gerak yang diberi Tuhan kepada seniman hanya dapat dieksploit oleh seniman pada tahap perhubungan datar sedang pengembalian sumber daya gerak itu kepada asalnya tidak dapat dilaksanakan. Misalnya lihat sekali lagi sajak Masuri yang berjudul ‘Ini Nasi yang Kusuap’ ini. Masuri atau sesiapa saja tidak harus mengembalikan jasa Pak Tani seterusnya kepada kesyukuran kepada Tuhan. Inilah satu-satunya gejala yang hilang dari kesusasteraan kita. Kurangnya penglibatan rohaniyah*

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<sup>16</sup> On the evaluation of Abdullah’s ideas, read Shahrudin Maaruf, *Malay Ideas on Development: From Feudal Lord to Capitalist* (Singapore: Times Book International, 1988), especially Chapter II.

*serta rasa ketubanan telah menyebabkan kesusasteraan kita kurang berkesan kepada masyarakat.”<sup>17</sup>*

Even the reformist Syed Sheikh al-Hadi and Abdul Rahim Kajai are dismissed as being ‘secular’ because they were influenced by Western ideas and values. *Hikayat Faridah Hanum* by al-Hadi is simply dismissed as “unIslamic.” As one writer commented: “...penulisan *Hikayat Faridah Hanum* itu masih dianggap terkeluar daripada landasan sastera Islam yang sebenarnya. Hal ini dapat diperincikan pada faham bercinta dabulu sebelum berkahwin, pergaulan bebas antara teruna dan dara, babak ranjang dengan puisi erotisnya dan berkasih-kasihan tanpa mengikut landasan Islam yang murni.”<sup>18</sup> Such an evaluation indeed tells a great deal of the writer’s conception of religion.

In order to make justifications for *sastera Islam*, the approach seems to be directed towards denouncing modern Malay literature as secularistic, which according to them, is void of the values of ‘*manusiawi*’ [or humanity in the religious/spiritual sense]. To this circle, Hamzah Fansuri and few other writers of the *tasawuf* discourse, is an epitome of creative expression based on Islamic spirituality. The discontinuation of this Sufistic tradition is seen as a great loss to Malay literature and culture as a whole. This point is made clear by Shahnnon Ahmad, one of the respected Malay literary figures. Shahnnon sees the correlation of the development of secularism in the Western world since the Renaissance, with the development of secularistic paradigm in the Malay literary scene.

If the West left the spiritual medieval epoch to a secularistic one since the Renaissance, the Malay literary scene bears a parallel development. Shahnnon laments the fact that there is no continuity of the medieval/ spiritual literary tradition as initiated by Hamzah Fansuri in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

*“Sepatutnya kesusasteraan Melayu meneruskan perjalanannya mengikut landasan manusiawi yang dimakna dan dirintis oleh tokoh-tokoh awal seperti Hamzah*

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<sup>17</sup> Cited in Hadijah Rahmat, *Sastera dan Manusia Melayu Baru*, pp.68-9.

<sup>18</sup> Read, Nurazmi Kuntum, *Teori dan Pemikiran Sastera Islam di Malaysia* (KL: DBP, 1991), p. 16. Compare this assessment on Al-Hadi by S Othman Kelantan, “Konsep Sastera Islam,” *Devan Sastera*, Ogos, 1977. p. 10.

*Fansuri.....Tapi terbukti jatidiri kesusasteraan Melayu yang dirintis oleh Hamzah Fansuri digelapi oleh pemikiran-pemikiran baru yang sebenarnya dibawa oleh pemikiran era Renaissance.....taufan Renaissance begitu besar sekali sehingga akal budi dan hati nurani yang nampak begitu kuat berteguhkan konsep perhambaan dan pengabdian kepada Allah itu turut berkecai..”*

Shahnon, not only laments the ‘secular’ content in modern Malay literature, but even in the introduction of new literary forms or genres originated from the West, though he acknowledged this new form contributed to Malay literary development. Shahnon’s lament is reflective of the popular romantic notion of the glorious spiritual past, in contrast to the modern day decadence that is influenced and dominated by the secularistic West.

*“Tapi tradisi yang dibawa oleh Hamzah dan lain lain penyair sufi kemudiannya diganti dengan cereka seperti cerpen dan novel seperti yang dirintis oleh Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, Ahmad Rashid Talu....Kajai dan kemudiannya oleh Keris Mas, A Samad Said, Wijaya Mala. Meskipun Tongkat Warrant dan Masuri S N dan beberapa orang lagi meneruskan tradisi puisi tapi roh keislaman yang dulunya dirintis oleh Hamzah Fansuri sudah luput.....”*

In fact, Shahnon evaluates negatively on this so-called ‘secularistic’ trend in Malay literature that has emerged since the early decades of twentieth century. We shall quote at length of his disparaging remarks on the development of modern Malay literature which he deemed as too humanistic, devoid of any spirituality:

*“[D]ilibat dari sudut manusiawi ialah penampilan manusia dengan manusiawinya yang sudah terpengaruh dengan manusiawi sekularis seperti yang berkembang di Barat. Karya-karya al-Hadi dan Talu dan yang seangkatan dengan mereka jelas menampilkan manusia-manusia yang hanya memberati diri berkomunikasi lewat badaniyah dan paling jauh akaliah yang sudah disebatikan dengan makna manusiawi ala sekularis dengan membawa unsur-unsur pembaharuan yang lebih mendekati diri dengan manusia sekularis.”*

“Meskipun karya-karya mereka jelas memperlihatkan gaya baru.....karya tersebut amat berkesan dalam menampilkan permasalahan manusiawi dan diiringi pula dengan ketrampilan bermain dengan bahasa, namun manusia-manusia yang ditampilkan dalam karya adalah manusia-manusia baru yang lebih terpengaruh dengan sekularisme yang tercetus di Barat.... Manusia dalam karya-karya mereka lebih memperlihatkan kerapatan komunikasi antara manusia dengan manusia saja untuk bertemu dan meleraikan keprihalan yang bermasalah. Keagamaan tidak lagi menjadi jujuk yang bertonggakkkan segala hal, tidak seperti yang terdapat dalam karya-karya Hamzah Fansuri.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Absence of a viable tradition of literary criticism on *Sastera Islam***

The ascendancy of *sastera Islam* is not only due to the growing revitalization of religion in public sphere, but also because there has been a relative absence of a viable tradition of literary criticism to deconstruct some of its incongruence.<sup>20</sup> The literary orientations of feudal romanticism and *sastera Islam*, assert their presence because there has been no or very little criticisms of such discourses. Indeed, in several cases, there are overwhelmed appreciation and appraisal of such discourse, and to embark on criticism against it, one often has to engage a rather lone battle.<sup>21</sup> Those who engaged in literary criticisms, both toward *sastera Islam* or the feudal romanticist, generally belonged outside of the ‘mainstream’ Malay literary circle. To be critical of feudal romanticist, one may be easily identified as having no passion for ‘Malayness’ or even as somebody who is too Westernized who failed to appreciate cultural ‘authenticity’.

Similarly, to be critical of *sastera Islam*, one is easily accused of the inability to appreciate the Islamic tradition, too Westernized or secular, or having the intent to downgrade Islam. In this paper, we are of the view that the discourse of *sastera Islam*, albeit

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<sup>19</sup> Shahnnon Ahmad, “Kesusasteraan Melayu & Kesusasteraan Dunia: Satu Pertembungan Menihikan Manusiawi,” in Seminar Kesusasteraan Bandingan. Kuala Lumpur, Nov. 1995.

<sup>20</sup> Refer Kassim Ahmad, “Kemelumut yang berpanjangan: Kritikan sastera di Malaysia kini.” in *Telaah Sastera Melayu*; Lisbeth Littrup, “Development of Malay Criticism,” in *The Canon In Southeast Asian Literatures*, and Sahlan M. Saman (ed.) *Kritikan: Situasi Mutakhir dan Arab Masa Depan*. See Bibliography.

<sup>21</sup> At one time, it was practically Kassim Ahmad alone that was critical of Shahnnon's idea of *Sastera Islam*.

its pious and moralistic pronouncement on creating a God-conscious milieu, may have its repercussions. Such a discourse, especially defined as the literature written by God-conscious Muslims, based on Islamic worldviews, is inevitably a closed discourse. As it is, only the works of Muslim authors can be considered as belonging to this created genre of *sastera Islam*. Its exclusivism, albeit in its pronouncement of the universality of Islam, would only make buttress the image of parochialism and religious narcissisms

The clamour for the creation of *sastera Islam*, was never seriously thought philosophically or conceptually. The vagueness of how to interpret *sastera Islam* is exemplified by the following statement by Hashim Awang, who affirms that *sastera Islam* has unique forms and characteristics and thus requires a special methodology which does not depart from the Islamic values. He writes: “*cara menilai kesusasteraan [Islam] dengan menerapkan pendekatan yang berteraskan keimanan dan bersendikan akidah Islam. Ia bersandarkan pada ciri-ciri kerabbaniah, yang ternyata bersamaan dengan sandaran yang menjivai penciptaan kesusasteraan Islam.*”<sup>22</sup> While Muhammad Affandi Hassan writes: “*...hakikat seni Islam, juga seni persuratannya, bukanlah peniruan (mimesis) seperti dalam seni Barat, tetapi berasaskan bentuk (constructional atau struktural: al-naẓm) Dengan itu seni Islam memberi keutamaan kepada pemikiran dan makna; tetapi pemikiran dan makna itu diberi bentuk sehabis indah dan unik melalui stylisation...*”<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, Shahnnon himself proposed three basic yardsticks in evaluating the artistic aspects of *sastera Islam*, which are apparently quite technical in its approach. First, there must be clarity and the rejection of any obscurantism and ambiguity. Second, the use of a language style which is easy to be understood, yet could be appreciated for its beauty. Third, the technique of narrating the stories are not to be done in a complex way such that it could cause misunderstanding.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the hallmark of defining *sastera Islam* and its criticism approach are always understood as the incorporation of Islamic themes in literary production, alongside its Islamic symbolism, imageries, characterizations, and language style. Of course, certain

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<sup>22</sup> Hashim Awang, “Metodologi Kesusasteraan Islam: Kaedah Penilaian,” in S Jaafar Husin (ed.) *Nadwah Ketakwaan Melalui Kreativiti*.(KL: DBP, 1995), pp.36-7; Three approaches being highlighted are: (a) Artistic approach; (b) Social approach, and (c) Dakwah approach.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Hashim Awang, “Metodologi Kesusasteraan Islam: Kaedah Penilaian,” in S Jaafar Husin (ed.) *Nadwah Ketakwaan Melalui Kreativiti*.(KL: DBP, 1995), p. 38.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

themes, characters, symbolism and criticism, which is seen as not/less Islamic must be a taboo. In its extreme manifestation, the discourse of *sastera Islam*, especially in its *dakwah* mood, may turn into propagandistic tone, possibly sacrificing the literary value.

Most significantly, the content of *sastera Islam*, may not just call for the spiritual and moralistic life, but used as a platform to denounce secularism and decadence of modern society, or anything that are deemed as irreligious or anti-‘Islam’. Certainly, our religious values call us to speak for the truth; but to simply dismiss the problems of society as due to their unfaithfulness or lacking faith in religion (*kurang iman*) has neither very little intellectual value nor the ability to make a discerning diagnosis. Moreover, the dichotomization made between this life and the hereafter (*dunia dan akhirat*) and between the ‘religious way’ and ‘secular way’ becomes the staple to drum up the ‘Islamic path’ that the group has conceptualized.

Other questions need to be answered. With the production of *sastera Islam*, will there soon be a creation of another exclusive ‘Islamic’ literary criticism (*kritik sastera Islam*)? Who are to be the critics? Is it open to all (Muslim or non-Muslim alike)? Or does it have its own class of critics? What criteria is to be used in engaging literary criticism? Must it be then laden by various religious injunctions and perspectives? Who is to decide which works fall into the category of *sastera Islam*? Who will be then qualified to embark on literary criticism of *sastera Islam*? Are only those who are well-versed in the religious sciences of Islam qualified to be involved in *sastera Islam* or its literary criticism? Will there be a so-called guardian and its inquisitive apparatus? Can unorthodox/unconventional themes (such as prostitution, gender disorientation, sexual repression, intellectual cynicism, identity crisis, apostasy, etc) be explored in *sastera Islam*? What kind of Islam(s) do the proponents have in mind? Is it a traditionalistic Islam (or *fiqh* oriented Islam)? Is it the mystical sufism brand of Islam? Or is it the rationalistic progressive Islam?

But what is feared most is that once the label of ‘Islam’ is made appendage to a discourse, then a critique against works deemed as belonging to *sastera Islam*, is equated to be anti-religion or undermining it. *Sastera Islam*, like any other literary productions and styles of thinking, must be subjected to criticisms, and any claim that it must have an exclusive

“criticism of *sastera Islam*”, is nothing but an intellectual fraud. Also, as we can observe generally today, the questions of the various Islamic intellectual/literary traditions are rarely discussed, since the dominant thinking subscribed to the idea of a monolithic Islamic tradition (and certainly it must be Sunnite), that must be accepted by all Malay Muslims.

Indeed we need to be on guard against any obsessive preoccupation of labeling and identifying which work is to be considered as *sastera Islam* and which is not (thus the attitude of “we are holier than thou” is inevitable). This is a serious problem, especially when religion is understood in a rather narrow manner, albeit when claim is made that religion encompasses all aspects of life. If an outward or symbolic Islamic manifestation becomes a criterion for *sastera Islam*, then the clamour of infusing religious values and ideals in literature becomes another project of an authoritarian propaganda.

Lastly, one need to reflect discerningly as to whether this enthusiasm is an outcome of a genuine intent of reinforcing the universal values of Islam or simply the obsessions of the outward symbolism of Islam – a phenomenon not uncommon in the so-called era of Islamic revivalism. If not carefully thought of, the danger of the image sacrality being built on the discourse of *sastera Islam* is not impossible. At present, the advocacy of *sastera Islam*, is not as strong as the earlier decades. Some critics/authors have realized that there is a need to reassess the long-term effects of the discourse of *sastera Islam*. Though there is an increasing number of works published under the rubric of *sastera Islam*, its effect on the development of modern Malay literature has yet to be discussed and scrutinized thoroughly. But in recent times, there has been a critical evaluation of the discourse. Even Shahnun Ahmad, who was initially a strong advocate of *sastera Islam*, laments:

*“Saya rasa sastera Malaysia secara umumnya sekarang masih belum menampakkan peningkatan yang sepatutnya.....Salah satu sebabnya, kita begitu ghairah dengan soal keislaman dan masing-masing pengarang cuba hendak menerapkan nilai-nilai Islam dalam karya-karya mereka....Tetapi penerapan nilai-nilai Islam ini saya dapati hanya penerapan fakta-fakta sahaja, tidak merupakan penerapan yang bersepadu di antara fakta Islam dengan seni...sehinga kita membaca novel, kita dapati aspek seninya itu begitu tawar sehingga karya itu sebenarnya hanya karya luahan-luahan tentang beberapa*

*konsep Islam, perwatakan yang daripada jahat menjadi baik dalam Islam, soal-soal taubat dan sebagainya. Tetapi tidak pada aspek-aspek kesenian, sedangkan bagi saya kesenian itu merupakan nadi sebuah karya sastera.....pengarang-pengarang kita masih belum lagi dapat menangkap apakah yang dikatakan novel yang sebenar, Islam dan juga gabungan ataupun kesepaduan di antara estetika dan fakta-fakta Islam.....kefahaman dan kesedaran mereka tentang Islam belum sampai ke peringkat penghayatan. Ini menyebabkan mereka memasukkan unsur Islam itu secara longgokan-longgokan pada sastera mereka dan kita rasa karya-karya itu kadang-kadang lucu dan agak terlalu kering .....Kita rasa terpisah, seolah-olah ia dibuat-buat sahaja. Dan ini menyebabkan mutu kesusasteraan kita itu tidak meningkat.”<sup>25</sup>*

The centrality of universal religious and humanitarian values in literature is certainly an invaluable constituent of a good literature. Instead of enumerating what *sastera Islam* should contain and what are the things it should deliver, we propose that it would be more discerning if such-religiously inspired works should cleverly posed questions rather than enumerating answers, especially in the context of *sastera Islam*, which is so keen to preach explicitly. The views of Goenawan Mohamad on this point are apt:

*“Tugas kesusasteraan bukanlah memberikan jawapan. Tetapi justru memberikan pertanyaan. Seorang pengarang yang biasa membrikan jawapan yang telah siap kepada pembaca dalam menghadapi persoalan-persoalan hidupnya, akan tidak membantu si pembaca dengan baik. ...apabila sastra keagamaan berusaha menjawab persoalan-persoalan yang timbul dalam situasi kita sekarang, dengan cara menyodorkan jawapan yang sudah jadi, .....dengan gaya kekhotbah-khotbah sedikit, maka ia akan menyebabkan kita sebagai pembaca menjadi jemu, malas. Di akhir pertunjukan teater, di akhir sebuah sajak. Di penutup sebuah novel, seorang pengarang haruslah mengetuk pembacanya dengan sebuah pertanyaan yang menggoda, hingga sang pembaca berusaha sendiri menemukan jawabannya, suatu jawaban yang demikian akan bersemi dalam dirinya dan bukan jawaban yang sudah tersedia. Saya kira prinsip ini sesuai dengan*

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<sup>25</sup> *Dewan Sastera*, Ogos 1987.



*posisi sastra keagamaan itu fungsinya yang khusus: fungsi yang tidak bermaksud untuk mengislamkan pembaca atau mengkristenkannya, melainkan fungsi untuk membantu pembaca dalam menyelesaikan sendiri persoalan hidupnya. Dari sinilah mutu sastra keagamaan bias diperbaiki, sebab prinsip tersebut sesuai dengan kodrat kesusasteraan...Sehingga pada perkembangan selanjutnya sastra keagamaan tidak identik dengan khotbah-khotbah yang dibungkus dalam sajak, novel ataupun repertoire.”<sup>26</sup>*

## Conclusion

In sum, a timely rethinking of *sastera Islam* is much warranted. The symbols of religion are emotive as well as evocative. Integral religious values in society, but not merely of its outward aesthetics, are very much welcomed in our cultural life. However, we must guard against the abuse of religious symbolism, especially by those groups which only want to justify their intellectual insularity and the unwarranted exclusivist position.

It is quite naïve to simply read the enthusiasm for the discourse as simply a revivalistic religious fervour, since in all competing discourses, there are groups that have a vested interest to secure; that is, by appropriating religious rhetoric to elevate themselves as the custodian for all the production of human thought, knowledge and artistic creativity. Put simply, an exclusivist and inquisitorial attitude towards arts and literature will have an impact to the overall cultural development in society. Thus our task is to discern critically which of our religious traditions could inspire our literature and culture, and creatively synthesising them with those of our contemporary thought and creativity. Yet, we must be equally convinced to abandon those obsolete and exclusivist formulations and conceptions that only act as impediments to our task and the will to (re)think, rebuild and recreate.

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<sup>26</sup> “Posisi Sastra Keagamaan Kita Dewasa Ini,” in Satyagraha Hoerip (ed.) *Sejumlah Masalah Sastra*. (Jakarta: Penerbit Sinar Harapan, 1982), pp. 144-5.