

BOOK REVIEWS

From Class to Culture: Social Conscience in Malay Novels since Independence. By David J. Banks. Monograph Series no. 29. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1987. Pp. 200.

Dr Banks is an anthropologist who has selected a range of post-independence Malay novels to use as a source of sociological and anthropological data for Malays and Malay culture. This approach is almost a direct reversal of Clifford Geertz's exploration in his recent book *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988). Professor Geertz uses literary theory to examine anthropological writings, while Dr Banks uses literary works to extract information for cultural anthropology. Is the latter, however, a valid way to proceed or, for heuristic purposes, fruitful?

In his final chapter (p. 145) Dr Banks himself raises the question of the differences between social science and fictional or artistic descriptions. *From Class to Culture* boldly uses the novels for purposes other than those intended by their authors yet Dr Banks does not explore the implications of his methodology which is a basic issue and at the heart of his study. He seeks common ground between the social sciences and the novels at the level of shared concerns. The conclusions he reaches at the end of the book seems rather "tame", but the reader can sense the potential for a different kind of engagement. There is a lively tension between the different stances of social scientist and author and the nature of the tension invites further definition.

By sharpening the differences between them we may better determine the position of the writers (social scientists and authors) to their material. Through their differing stances we can detect preconceptions as well as conceptions about Malay society. It is the engagement between preconceptions which may lead to understanding of the intellectual ad-

vances in the culture of Malays and non-Malays, and highlight the methodologies and devices used by authors and social scientists.

In his "Introduction", Dr Banks states that the novel is "probably the most accessible way for the Western reader to approach Malaysian society through the intellectual development of Malays, its largest ethnic grouping". From Malay novels, he continues, the reader may learn the author's views on social and political issues, the author's conception of permissible behaviour, detailed descriptions of ceremonies and rituals (which can be compared with observations by social scientists), and study samples of colloquial Malay speech patterns.

Without too much difficulty, one may formulate social science hypotheses with the help of these novels and compare these hypotheses with those of social scientists. This will enable social scientists to broaden their views and to eliminate the remnants of ethnocentrism too often cloaked in the garb of one or another theory implying universal values among members of intellectual elites.

Dr Banks argues that although they differ in goals and emphases, Malay novels and Western social science are both involved with the same economic and political factors. He stresses that he does not claim to offer "definitive Malay interpretations" of the novels, but merely wishes to make accessible to Western readers the materials in the novels.

Before discussing the novels, Dr Banks provides a brief résumé of pre-twentieth century and early twentieth century Malay literature. Experts on pre-modern Malay literature may not agree with Dr Banks' description of this literature (for example, his assessment of the language of the *hikayats* as being "stilted"; unfortunately Amin Sweeney's perceptive and illuminating study *A Full Hearing* [University of California Press, 1987] was not available at the time Dr Banks prepared his work), but he does establish the background out of which modern literature emerged. His general approach is to select prominent Malay writers, describe their personal backgrounds and the main political events of their time, then through a synopsis of the plots of some of their novels, highlight their thematic concerns.

The writers he chooses are A. Samad Ismail (whose novels he describes as important because they confront "the Malaysian national

question most openly and forcefully of all Malay writers", p. 63), Abdullah Hussein, A. Samad Said, Arena Wati, A. Wahab Ali, Jihaty Abadi, Khadijah Hashim, Fatimah Busu, S. Othman Kelantan, Anwar Ridhwan, Shahnon Ahmad, and Keris Mas.

From his examination of the themes of novels by these authors, Dr Banks proposes the following points as landmarks in the development of modern Malay literature: concern for the "backwardness" of Malays; a focusing on the village; an examination of the internal dynamics of village society; the effect of external influences on the village; and the exploration of the moral and spiritual development of creative individuals in the village.

After reading Dr Banks' exposition there is a sense of a missing part. There is a story here, but not the whole story. On reflection this seems largely because the novels do not speak for themselves. Dr Banks has set the agenda by his selection of the novels, his grouping of the novels (into various chapters according to his interpretation of their themes) and the questions he asks of the novels. Of course a researcher has to establish an agenda, but in this study the agenda appears as the foreground. The novels are perceived by the reader as background, while the résumé of political and socio-cultural "history" which accompanies each group of novels is "middleground". To restate this impression: Dr Banks' foregrounding of his approach obscures the intentions of the Malay authors he presents.

There is some recognition in Dr Banks' work of the individual talents of particular authors and some attention is given to innovative writing, but in general the processes *he* identifies as important are dominant. Two obvious effects of Dr Banks' approach are the narrowing of interpretation into predetermined channels so that much that falls outside these channels is lost. Combined with this is an element of manipulation of both Malay authors and their material, to conform to the framework of the study. The following passage has examples of both effects, the narrowed interpretation and the rather pragmatic explanation of two authors' choice of character types.

These rather negative portraits of Malay villages in the novels of Jihaty Abadi and Yahaya Ismail which view village problems in

light of tradition and the imperatives of development, do not present detailed or deep portrayals of Malay culture and its values. While they do contain some material on village culture and values, this information seems intended to show that Malays experience the universal human desires for power, recognition, and success in the struggle against poverty. In effect, as recent developments in Malay nationalism, they have changed the villager from a helpless captive bound by social constraints into a potential entrepreneur. As a result, Malay culture is treated as an organizing structure through which universal drives for power, recognition, and success must express themselves. The average villager is often a victim in the social process. This approach probably originated in the pre-independence, anticapitalist novels of Ishak Haji Muhammad, Ruhi Hayat, and Malay socialists who approved of the Malay language as a repository of Malay cultural values while they strongly criticized oppressive village social forms.

The choice of different types of characters, whether villagers or entrepreneurs may have more to do with the demands of the plot than with deep beliefs about Malay culture. Similarly, Dr Banks judges that many of the novels written during the first decade of independence “failed” to explore the village world seriously from within (p. 83). This is a “failing” only in terms of particular standards established for a particular purpose.

In Chapter 10, “From Negative to Positive: The Move toward Malay Culture”, there is a brief but tantalizing reference to Anwar Ridhwan’s *Hari-Hari Terakhir Seorang Seniman*. Here is a work which Dr Banks describes as “a kind of culmination” of those Malay novels which deal with complex personal and emotional conflicts (p. 111). The hero prefers to die rather than compromise his (Malay) values and the resolution of the novel occurs on a plane which is both personal and universal, cultural and a-cultural. The aesthetics and thematic concerns of this novel deserve to be analysed, but Dr Banks moves on, shifting his focus to Shanon Ahmad’s works and Anwar Ridhwan is not mentioned again.

There are thought-provoking observations about Malay culture and society throughout Dr Banks’ study which will inspire researchers to test them in their own work. He talks, for example, of the Malay attitude to satire, which if it involves sarcasm is not encouraged by Islam (p. 38). For Malay writers this poses an interesting dilemma, and Dr Banks’

comments will alert readers of Malay literature to seek examples of just how Malay writers do express satire in their work.

Since the 1950s, when the ASAS 50 movement (Angkatan Sasterawan 50, Generation of the '50s) highlighted the social responsibility of Malay writers, authors have been in the vanguard of those urging social change, a point which Dr Banks emphasizes (p. 65). It is rare, however, to find examples in modern Malay literature of characters who are ahead of their time. By this I mean that (as so often noted) Malay literature reflects its society, but rarely steps into the future to forecast and describe the type of character who will succeed in a changed and progressive society. Ironically, such a character, Faridah Hanom, a woman ahead of her time, was described in one of the earliest Malay novels. Faridah Hanom was not only a model for progressive women, she was a success and achieved a happy ending, accepted and admired by her own group and not regarded as a misfit or a failure. Characters like Faridah Hanom, models for progressive behaviour, are not often depicted in modern Malay literature and Dr Banks alludes to this in the concluding comments of his study. He notes that

to date, no Malay author has shown rural characters remaking an urban setting after their cultural values in an aggressive way which would provide a model for rural and urban Malay unity. (p. 151)

It would be a useful and possibly revealing study, to focus on the types of role-model characters which Malay authors have portrayed, and to try and determine whether they reflect their times or are in advance of them.

Dr Banks' discipline is anthropology, not literary theory, though as Geertz's *Works and Lives* (and the references quoted therein) brilliantly demonstrates, the two may be provocatively combined. Scholars of literature who read *From Class to Culture* will note Dr Banks' tendency throughout his book to assume that authors' views are the same as those of the characters they have created. This may be true in some instances, but it is equally possible for authors to project into their characters opinions quite different from their own personal views and ideologies. The author's persona as author (let alone narrator) is separable from his or her persona as a human being. It is risky, therefore, to draw con-

clusions about authors' beliefs based purely on their works of fiction. Literary theory can, as Geertz (and others) prove, contribute greatly to our understanding of all written material, whether "fact" or fiction. Literary theory reminds us that it is important to examine not only *what* is being presented, but also the *way* it is presented. Literary style is not constant and developments (or changes) in style "permit expression of emotions or beliefs formerly hidden" from the reader (V. Matheson and A.C. Milner, *Perceptions of the Haj: Five Malay Texts* [Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies], p. 36).

Dr Banks has devoted a considerable proportion of his book to establishing the social context for the Malay novels he discusses. But the literary context is also vital to any discussion of the novels, because the choice of rhetorical "devices" available to authors largely shapes the presentation of their material. It is the use of literary techniques such as interior monologue, the stream of consciousness, and reproduction of dialect forms which distinguishes Shanon Ahmad's writing from that of his contemporaries, rather than his choice of themes.

An early chapter in *From Class to Culture* describes some of the forms of pre-modern Malay literature. A considerable number of pre-modern works (for example, *Sejarah Melayu*) have the same themes as modern works. One of the most striking is the theme that in Malay society the élite group is responsible for the welfare of the people. The style of presentation has changed radically over time, however, and almost masks the thematic continuity that can be shown to exist.

Dr Banks examined Malay novels for evidence of cultural change which could be used as a source of data by social scientists. A study of literary style and techniques could also be used to show the course of Malay intellectual culture. It is changes in the epistemology of the Western social sciences which have inspired Dr Banks to work with literary material, and for concepts of literary style to be considered relevant to anthropologists and historians. We are all subject to intellectual fashion, which we acknowledge as influencing our choice of methodologies. Dr Banks has indicated the potential that Malay novels have as material for social science research, but if the dimension of stylistic analysis is included, their value is even greater.

In contrast to Indonesian language and literature, Malay language

and literature are not yet studied widely outside Malaysia. A small body of works in English is slowly appearing, but Indonesian literature still receives more attention. Dr Banks' book will be welcomed by those who study Malaysian affairs for the nexus it offers between the literary world of modern Malaysia and that of the social sciences. Many of the issues raised in his book will stimulate further research. Dr Banks acknowledges the help he received from Malaysian scholars while preparing his book. Malaysian writers and academics are generous with their time and energy and their co-operation is invaluable to foreign researchers. We all owe them much for their generosity and understanding. It is through such interchange that new fields, like the study of modern Malaysian literature mature, and *From Class to Culture* is an important part of this process.

The reader will notice quite a few printing errors (one on p. 6 reminiscent of Kuala Lumpur), and Malay scholars will detect a missing line of Malay in footnote 9, p. 161, in a quotation from A. Samad Ismail's *Menimba yang Jerneh*.

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