READING INTO ONE’S SELF IN THE BERPETUALANG KE ACEH TRILOGY

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Abstract: This research examines Radzi Sapiee’s travelogue in the form of a trilogy, which documents his travel experience as a writer. The study aims to review the success of the trilogy in discussing postcolonial discourse, and its search of identity. This study employs the research framework by Thompson, who divided travel writing into two sections namely touristic travel and exploration travel, to analyse Radzi Sapiee’s quest, to find himself through a spiritual journey, which led to self-awareness causing existential changes. As such, Thompson’s search of identity and the others (2011) will be the main framework of this research to be applied to the Radzi Sapiee’s travelogue trilogy comprising of three books - Mencari Diri dan Erti, Menjejak Salasilah Kesultanan yang Hilang (2015), Menelusuri Jejak Leluhur (2016) and Membela Syair Kesultanan Aceh (2018). This study seeks to determine whether the writer had consciously sought this experience, or if he was just seeking to validate his instincts. The analysis of the data is divided into three sections following Thompson’s framework: exploitation and the others, hegemony of the mind, and effect on the others. The study found that this travelogue injects new life and provides a source of motivation and pride to the people of the Malay Archipelago who had long been considered as inferior to the western power. Radzi Sapiee has utilised literature as a cultural weapon to instil awareness and nurture pride in a heritage that had long been forgotten. The writer also uses literature as a medium to redeem the dignity and cultural legacy, as well as an identity which had been suppressed for a long time, by colonialism. In a wider context, this writing represents an effort to deconstruct and reconstruct a culture, and an individual in the culture.

Keywords: Aceh, Travelogue: Radzi Sapiee, Self-identity, Malay-Muslim

1. Introduction

Travelling opens opportunities for new experiences which broaden the mind of an individual and make them adept at facing the realities of life. According to Ahmad Fouad Abd. Mubin (2017), people travel for different reasons such as to fulfill an inclination or a challenge or as migration in times of political and economic crisis. Experiences gained from traveling help travellers to see the world and to learn from the richness of its history and civilisation revolution (Yassin and Ahmad, 2018). Travel
literature falls under the non-fiction genre. This genre, also known as travelogue, maps the journey of travellers. Travelogues are factual narratives which came into existence in the Malay literary world, as the product of assimilation of the European culture with the local society, beginning as early as the 17th century when the colonials arrived in the Malay archipelago (Noriah Taslim, 2010, 58).

Kingsley (1989, 34) defined travelogue as “… a record of events, sights and personal feelings which a traveller experiences as they go from place to place”. This definition looks at travelogue as the documenting of people, events, and the writer’s thoughts or feelings while travelling from one place to another. Meanwhile, Borm (2004, p. 17) describes travelogue as:

…any narrative characterized by a non-fiction dominant that relates (almost always) in the first person journey or journeys that the reader supposes to have taken place in reality while assuming or presupposing that author, narrator and principal character are but one or identical.

From these two definitions, we can therefore conclude that the genre of travel literature is written from the first-person point of view, focusing on the experiences of a traveller or writer throughout the course of their adventure.

In the context of Malay literature, travelogue refers to:

genre sastera di mana masa dan waktu, hal-hal berkaitan dengan persekitaran tempat yang dilawati (sama ada di dalam atau di luar negara). Peristiwa, sejarah, sistem sosibiudaya, ekonomi, politik tempat tersebut, pemikiran dan perasaan yang dialami oleh seseorang penulis semasa menjelajahi dunia asing disertakan ke dalam teks sastera.

[a literary genre whereby the date and time, things regarding the surroundings of the places visited (locally or abroad), events, history, sociocultural system, economy, local politics, writer’s thoughts and feelings while exploring a foreign place are documented in literary texts.] (Amin, 2012, p.24)

This genre has two main purposes; to present information or facts to readers and to raise awareness among readers on matters relating to a place using literary text as a medium (Hamid, 2013, p. 158). These adventure stories are said to focus on the journey of the character from one place to another narrated with the objective to tell stories based on new experiences and discoveries (Mana Sikana, 2013, p. 65). The experiences refer to observation, thoughts, description and accomplishments gained throughout the adventures.
In brief, for the purpose of this study, the travelogue genre will refer to creative works documenting the travel experience of a writer – the places they visited, the people they met, descriptions of the culture they encountered or experienced at the travel destinations – which are written using the first person point of view.

Mana Sikana (2013) believes that travel literature has existed in the world of Malay literature since a long time ago, evidenced written by Lauddin. Unfortunately, this genre has been neglected in the Malaysian Malay literature (Johan Jaafar, 2003). The reason for this could be that criticism of travel literature is fairly new and limited and has yet to obtain serious attention from researchers and local literary writers (Saravanan Veeramuthu, 2019). Criticism of this genre has just started to gain momentum among Malaysian literary critics. As such, a more detailed study into this genre should be presented to the Malaysian literary society. This research aims to contribute towards the growth in travel literature criticism, in addition to nurturing this approach systematically.

2. Research Objective

There is an obvious gap which necessitates this research. In brief, this research attempts to examine the discussion on self-identity in travel literature and in a written work by Radzi Sapiee, to highlight the facets and issues which have yet to be studied in the criticism of the travelogue genre. The objectives of the research are as follows:

1. To examine the extent to which this trilogy is effective in terms of discourse on post-colonialism.
2. To identify the search of self-identity and other aspects in Radzi Sapiee’s travelogue trilogy.

3. Literature Review

Amin (2012, p. 13) asserts that there are certain quarters who see travel literature as a medium to validate western power. These perceptions are formed due to travelogues being written through the westerners’ perspective. In the last few decades however, the Eurocentric characteristics have faded, and the essence of the texts revolve around self and identity. Thus, there is a shift in the world view portrayed in travel literature, especially those documenting the travel of people from the East (SP Veeramuthu, 2019). It will be interesting to investigate the extent to which this reality is highlighted in Malay travel literature.

Historically, travelogues written during colonialism especially towards the end of the 19th century and early 20th century tended to include modern western knowledge such as sciences (Amin, 2012, p. 13). According to Mohamad Saleeh Rahamad et. al. (2009,
p. 3), this trend was initiated with the objective of the colonisers, to utilise literary texts as a cultural weapon, to validate their colonialism agenda. Meanwhile, in the postcolonial era, Gandhi (1998, p. 142) stated that people who were colonised also utilised literature as a medium to reclaim their honour and cultural legacy as well as their identity which had long been suppressed by the colonisers. Looking back at the ‘degrading’ history of colonisation, postcolonial writers engage in reflection, searching for their sense of self by reassessing the experience through new interpretation (Said, 1995, p. 66). This is driven by the need to redeem the humiliation brought about by the experience of being colonised. Whether or not this situation applies to Malay travel literature is an issue worth exploring and this research aims to assess the reality in light of the current Malay travel literature.

The first trace of the travelogue genre in Malay literature comes from the result of collision with the western world. However, the growth of this genre has shown an interesting development. Amin (2012, p. 24) once stated this as an evolution. Generally, Malay travelogues document the writer’s travel experience, presenting the experience in the form of creative and interesting narrative mixed with life lessons. Studies have shown that Malay travelogues are not only rich in creativity, but also loaded with didactic elements (Amin, 2012, p. 24). As such, Mishra (2014, p. 45) describes travelogue as follows:

*For most of the readers travel book is an escape to an imaginary land which is far from the reality of this mundane world. It is a way to get transported to a forlorn land with all safety in their homes. For the writers themselves, it is often somehow a way of preserving a present for themselves and a past of posterity. In an era of modernisation it helps to preserve the natural landscape of a place and also feel its atmosphere. It is a dimension of the recorded part that does not exist in history books. It also gives an account of the culture, history and geography of a place.*

This statement expands the concept of travelogue as a genre that accounts for events related to the culture, history and geography of a travel destination. Travel writing also preserves the glory of the past by capturing memories. This research will examine the extent to which the past glory of the Malay Archipelgo is evident in Radzi Sapie’s writing.

Interestingly, it has been reported that at the end of the 20th century and in the beginning of the 21st century, the style of writing in Malay travelogues is characterized by an inclination towards inclusion of Islamic-oriented knowledge. How far the selected travelogue depicts this, is another interesting aspect to be explored. Thus, this research
aims to investigate the ways in which Radzi Sapiee has attempted to re-interpret his journey of self-searching through his particular lens as a Muslim.

Several studies have been carried out on Malay travelogue as a literary genre. These include a research by Awang Azman Pawi (2010) who studied Muhammad Haji Salleh’s selected travel writings in Dewan Sastera (2000-2006). To summarise, this research examines the postcolonial cultural aspects reflected in the thoughts and attitudes of the writer, including his opinions, ideas, propositions and way of thinking as a postcolonial writer. The research found that the postcolonial attitude of the writer is not only critical of the colonisers, but also towards his own people. Although Awang Azman Pawi writing is just a review of Muhammad Haji Salleh's work, his analysis is similar to the approach of the current research which seeks to examine the portrayal of self-identity in travelogues.

Another study on travelogue literature in the Malay literary world was carried out by Yassin and Ahmad (2018). The subject of the research was a poem by Fahd Razy. This poem is an adaptation of the writer’s experience while abroad. The title of the selected poem for the research was “Nota Kecil Menyeberang Usia” which comes from his anthology of poems titled Menggeledah Nurani (2008). The research model employed for analysis was the Malay Identity Model which comprises of three aspects namely Islam as a way of life, shariah-compliant Malay custom and culture, and the Malay language as the medium to impart knowledge and ideas. The difference between Yassin and Ahmad’s research and the current research is the genre studied.

Nurul Hafiza Hariri and Shirley Idris (2017) also studied a travelogue which was written as a poem. This study examined the physical and mind journey of a well-known Malaysian writer, Kemala. The study found that Kemala utilised travelogue as a channel to share his experiences, feelings, thoughts and opinions in addition to providing information about the culture, society and places he visited. The study concluded that the travelogue had a larger purpose than simply documentation of travel; the writer wants to show through his travelogue his identity as a Muslim. Compared to the current research, again the difference is in terms of the genre studied.

Amin (2012) is another researcher who did a study on Malay travelogues. The comparative study reviewed the development of Malay travelogues, in addition to discussing the dominant characteristics, form and writing style in western and Malay travelogues. The master’s thesis found that there are similarities and differences between Malay and western travelogues. The study also confirmed that religious elements are more prominent in the 21st century Malay travelogues compared to the travelogues from the 19th and 20th century.
A study by Noriah Taslim (2010) has also researched travelogue literature. The subject of the study is a narrative of 19th century travel, written in the form of Malay poetry called syair by a Malay writer from Bangkahulu. The travelogue described and mapped the journey made by Raffles and his wife Lady Sophia from Padang to the rural Minangkabau. The genre is different from the current research, as the author of the travelogue was not part of the travel expedition itself.

Two prior studies have been carried out on the author and the text that will be analysed in the current research. S.M. Zakir (2009) wrote a review on one of the books that will be studied in this research, titled Berpetualang Ke Aceh: Mencari Diri dan Erti by Radzi Sapiee. The review was published in the Milenia Muslim magazine. The review covered the content of the book and it also highlighted the unique features of the book to the readers. S.M. Zakir believed that the travelogue was successful in depicting an interesting and exciting historical narrative. The main purpose of the review was to introduce the book to the readers because of the prominent Islamic values in it.

Saravanan Veeramuthu (2019) also studied the Travelogue trilogy novels by Radzi Sapiee; Mencari Diri dan Erti: Menjejak Salasilah Kesultanan yang Hilang (2015); Menelusuri Jejak Leluhur (2016) and Membela Syair Kesultanan Aceh (2018). The study analysed the travelogues in terms of their structure, in addition to analyzing Radzi Sapiee’s adventures as a postcolonial traveler who was trying to find himself through his writing. Findings from the study show that his books are a source of motivation and pride for people from the Malay Archipelago whose skill and capability had previously been considered as lacking, in comparison to the westerners. The study noted that the author used the events he had learned through oral narration or through his reading of history and literature to help him navigate his way, as he explored this reality. The author successfully used emotional nuances to reflect on Aceh and its glorious past and history.

Studies on travelogue literature are far more inclined towards the poetry genre, while research on other genres have been quite limited in Malaysia. While two studies have been carried out to examine the work of Radzi Sapiee, an in-depth discussion on the aspects of self-identity has yet to be done. Thus, the research aims to contribute and discuss in greater depth Radzi Sapiee’s travelogues. There is a clear gap for the study to offer more input and to explore issues which have yet to be discussed in travelogue criticism.

4. Research Framework and Methodology
This study will use the book trilogy titled Mencari Diri dan Erti: Menjejak Salasilah Kesultanan yang Hilang (2015), Menelusuri Jejak Leluhur (2016) and Membela Syair
Kesultanan Aceh (2018) published by Hijjaz Record Publishing (HRP) as the source of data. These books are the revised versions which the writer said, have gone through the process of “improvisations” from his first book titled Berpetualang ke Aceh (BKA). The BKA trilogy series has been republished by HRP in a fresher, more colourful format, complete with added information such as images and maps. The current study aims to analyse Rasyid’s conflict and his process of self-searching while traveling through the three texts. Using this trilogy, this study will discuss the characteristics of self-identity portrayed in these travelogues. The discussion will be based on Abdullah Hassan’s framework of characteristics. This study is carried out to examine how Radzi Sapiee as a traveler, attempts to piece together his identity, in his writing.

In the context of travelogues, there are two types of travel outlined by researchers. For Amin (2012, p. 7) there are two types of travelling, one of them is the outer travel, referring to the physical travel. Maarof Salleh (2008, p.2) has further described outer travel as travel that capture the physical surrounding using the five senses of – vision (eye), smell (nose), touch (skin), hearing (ear), and taste (tongue). Meanwhile, there is the inner travel that refers to mind and feelings when travelling which are more subjective (Amin, 2012, p. 7). Muhammad Fakhruddin (2013) also divided travelogues into two categories namely movement and journey that happen physically and spiritual travel which involves a shift in intellectual understanding and an increased devotion and as a consequence becoming spiritually stronger. Both of these researchers are looking at the same aspects although they use different terms to refer to the classification.

Similarly, Thompson (2011, p.10) also divided travel into two kinds– touristic travel and exploration travel. Touristic travel refers to a more systematic sort of travel that put emphasis on things that will fascinate the travelers as well as put them at ease because they use travel as a form of escapism. The focus here is on amusement and entertainment. The traveler is busy distracting himself. Exploration on the other hand is the sort of travel that is in-depth, there is a real engagement with places and people. Exploratory travel is therefore a fitting style for travelogues.

Travelogue in this context refers to the definition of ‘travel’ proposed by Thompson (2011, p. 9) which is the encounter between one’s own self and thoughts, with the others, as a story plot. Novi Sri Purwaningsih (2015, p. 3) said the journey to search for yourself is a spiritual one, where there is an existential shift, involving increased levels of confidence. Meanwhile, the others refer to colonialism, neocolonialism and postcolonialism (Novi Sri Purwaningsih, 2015, p. 4). Firstly, colonialism refers to how colonisers exploited the colonised people including the others. Secondly, neocolonialism refers to a new type of colonisation which pertains to hegemony or
indirect control of the mind. Thirdly, postcolonialism is concerned with the effects of occupation on the occupied people including the others.

As such, the search of self-identity or the others as proposed by Thompson (2011) will be the main framework for this research, to be applied to Radzi Sapiee’s travelogue trilogy - Mencari Diri dan Erti: Menjejak Salasilah Kesultanan yang Hilang (2015), Menelusuri Jejak Leluhur (2016) and Membela Syair Kesultan Aceh (2018).

5. Analysis and Discussion

This section will be divided into three sections based on Thompson’s framework which are exploitation and the others, hegemony of the mind and effects towards the others.

5.1 Exploitation and The Others

Exploration of identity and one’s roots is a process which every individual needs to go through. According to Fromm, people need to have an awareness about themselves and their identity. Studies on identity have drawn the attention of researchers from various fields such as natural sciences, politics, socio-culture, economy, nationhood, etc. (Jalil and Othman, 2017). A verse from the Quran says “Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves.” According to Soedarsono (2013), ‘what is in themselves’ refers to determination, desire, thinking, identity, personality and spirit. As this section will focus on the concept of identity, it is therefore pertinent to first discuss the definition of identity.

According to Ahmad Mohamad Said (2009) identity refers to the qualities, characteristics, or natural traits of an individual or a nation that form the identity or character of the nation. The relationship between the identity of an individual and the nation is described as follows:

Jati diri bangsa tidak dapat dipisahkan daripada jati diri individu… Kita melihat lakukan individu bagi menentukan jati dirinya, dan jati diri individu kemudian membentuk jati diri masyarakatnya. Dengan melihat jati diri individu, kita dapat memahami jati diri masyarakat dan dengan melihat jati diri masyarakat, kita dapat memahami jati diri individu.

[The identity of the nation could not be separated from the identity of an individual… We look at the act of an individual to determine his identity, and an individual’s identity then form his society’s identity. By looking at the individual’s identity, we can understand the identity of the society and by looking at the identity of the society, we can understand the identity of the individual.] (Abdullah Hassan, 2009: p. 61)
Encyclopaedia Americana (2006) defined identity as sameness as distinguished from change or difference. Sarhitt and Allen state:

... identity is built up from interactions with the occupants of complementary statuses... a part process of the self, representing those cognitions arising from placement in the social ecology. (Sarbin dan Allen, 1969: p. 550)

Abdullah Hassan also listed five traits of identity (Abdullah Hassan, 2009, p. 61). The five traits are: sharing the same origin; believing in the same religion, speaking the same language, practicing the same culture, and living in the same geographic region. Out of the five traits, Ahmad Mohamad (2009) believes that the most important and dominant factor influencing identity is religious faith. This is because religion is the foundation that influences the entirety of an individual’s perception of self, the Creator, the world, as well as his or her position and role in this world. In fact, religion is a symbolic point that marks the identity of a society or a community (Ahimsa-Putra, 2015).

In this travel narrative, the author attempts to return to the past colonial period which left a lasting effect on the fate of his people. The journey made by the protagonist is marked by self-searching, internal self-building and recognizing his position in his surroundings. His travel as depicted in the travelogue is not a mere journey from one geographical location to another, but more of a transition for the author towards maturity and peace within himself. This travel also functions as an instrument to scrutinize his personality and mentality which had been oppressed by the discourse of western scholars who see the East as inferior. Thus, Radzi Sapiee tries to build a new perception to smash the negative view of the Malay Archipelago as an unknown, lowly place of no significance, prior to being a western colony. The author portrays the glory of the Malay Archipelago before the arrival of the westerners and how the westerners attempted to dominate and destroy the native civilisation by proposing various theories and perceptions that threatened the development and the very thinking of the people from the Malay Archipelago. Taking from this context, Radzi Sapiee attempts to protect the tradition of the Malay Archipelago society and this effort is in line with Alfred’s argument which is as follows:

Indigenous governance systems embody distinctive political values, radically different from those of the mainstream. Western notions of domination (human and natural) are noticeably absent; in their place we find harmony, autonomy, and respect. We have a responsibility to recover, understand, and preserve these values, not only because they represent a unique contribution to the history of ideas, but because renewal of respect
for traditional values is the only lasting solution to the political, economic, and social
problems that beset our people (Alfred, 1999: p.5).

Although Rasyid’s travel was driven by the need go on a journey to find himself which
in turn became a catalyst for his mental and psychological growth, the author did not
underplay the importance of the images of the places visited, as an element that
complemented the travel.

The travel of the protagonist, Muhammad al-Aminur Rasyid bin Muhammad Ali Wasi
in this text is portrayed as a ‘journey’ to visit new places in search of himself, and in a
bigger context, to appreciate the glory of the country and its culture. Rasyid’s visit to
Aceh in the plot of the travelogue emerges as an opportunity for him to work towards
freeing himself from the clutches of his ego, which had kept him from appreciating his
roots, shackled by western ways of thinking. This could be seen as an indirect reference
to the people of Malay Archipelago who had been colonized. The colonial period
becomes representative of the constraints that they face. The mind and thoughts of the
author are represented by the character of his protagonist. The character of Rasyid is
created by the author in an attempt to search for himself. Radzi Sapiee or his real name
Mohd Fahrulradzi Mohamad Sapiee is a mathematics graduate from University
College London. Born in Muar, Johor Darul Takzim on 26th November 1970, he has
produced 12 books (Radzi Sapiee, 2015, p. 233). He is also a freelance writer, publisher
and author who used to be a journalist. He went to Sekolah Ismail 2 in Muar, Sekolah
Menengah Sains Johor in Kluang and Sekolah Tinggi Muar before he went to further
his studies in London. Initially, Radzi Sapiee has a liberal view but slowly his self-
validation changes and he begins to look at his tradition from the lens of a Malay
Muslim. This change transforms Mohd. Radzi Sapiee’s interest and initiates his work
in the history of the Malay world.

His admiration for the past tradition of Malay society are the building blocks in the
development of Rasyid’s character. Rasyid is created as a rebellious character and so
has a conflicted personality in his young age. However, this identity goes through a
transformation when he finds himself driven to search for his roots. Consequently, he
goes on journey to find himself. In this search for himself, the protagonist who has a
rebellious but a courageous personality, faces all sorts of obstacles in following his
heart. Although this trait has resulted in many negative effects, Rasyid’s character
leverages on this negative side to help him face the challenges in his life.

Therefore, the adventure in this travelogue is aimed at clearing himself of all
superimposed ideas and attitudes and going within in search of his true self. The author
admitted to this in the following statement:
Berlatarbelakangkan pengalaman sebenar, penulis mencari jejak perjalanan nenek moyang dengan masuk ke Aceh ketika ia masih darurat akibat peperangan antara puak pemisah GAM (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka) dengan TNI (Tentera Nasional Indonesia), penceritaan dibuat dalam bentuk travelog separa fiksyen.

[Based on his real experience, the author searched for the trace of his ancestors’ journey by entering Aceh while it was still in emergency state due to the war between the Free Aceh Movement and Indonesia National Army, the narrative is told in the form of semi-fiction travelogue. (Radzi Sapiee, 2018: p.xi)]

This statement is a clear evidence of the reality that led the writer to produce this travelogue. The writer has even admitted to the semi-fictitious nature of this work. This is in accordance with Abdul Rahman in the magazine Dewan Sastera, who said travelogues are written works with literary value which could attract readers. Aceh becomes an externalized symbol of of his inner self, which the writer wants to explore. Meanwhile, ‘the state of emergency’ at Aceh is similar to the challenges in the author’s life as he begins his travel.

This travelogue is used by the author to explore the transformation that an individual goes through, to form and shape his identity. What makes it particularly interesting is, that the purpose of the travelogue is not only to seek out literary or historical locations. Rather it is a journey towards the self. To start the journey, Radzi Sapiee uses his position as a Malay Muslim as a base to build his identity. This is because the link between Malay and Islam is inseparable. This stand is clearly stated in the following excerpt:

Perlembagaan negara Malaysia ada menyebut takrif Melayu adalah orang Islam yang bermastautin di Negara ini, bercakap dalam bahasa Melayu dan mengamalkan adat-istiadat Melayu

[In the Constitution of Malaysia, it is stated that the definition of a Malay is a Muslim who resided in this Country, speaks Malay and practices Malay customs.] (Radzi Sapiee, 2015, p. 40)

Here, the author has shown to us that his stand is in line with that of Ahimsa-Putra (2015) who believe that religion is a symbolic point that marks the identity of a society or community. The author is convinced that religious faith is an important aspect in his search because that has helped him with success in finding himself. Cultural and geographical similarities among the Malay society become the catalyst for him to explore the identity of his heritage. What is even more interesting is that Radzi Sapiee does not use the ‘old route’ of the western scholars who saw the kingdoms of Srivijaya, Malacca and Majapahit as the centre of Malay society, in the height of its glory, in the
history of civilisation. The author instead tries to present new ideas and approaches that do not echo the old thinking and opinion which were biased towards western or colonial discourse. This concern is expressed as follows:


[Let everybody know that there used to be a huge Islamic government which had long existed in the East. Not just talking about Malacca, Malacca, Malacca. Or Sriwijaya, Majapahit, Sriwijaya, Majapahit for early kingdoms, (I am) growing tired of it.] (Radzi Sapiee, 2015: p.40)

Radzi Sapiee tries to break the shackles of colonial discourse by presenting alternative thinking with the evidence he believes in. The trilogy’s author is able to articulate his thoughts well, using fresh and vibrant expressions to convince his readers. The approach used by Radzi Sapiee is commended, for introducing something different, in addition to acting as a motivation to reassess his own self. The idea presented by the writer is aided by evidence from sources such as literary texts, hadiths, a combination of evidence which could be questioned and debated but certainly make for interesting reading.

5.2 Hegemony of The Mind

When reading the trilogy, the excitement and joy experienced by Rasyid’s character is communicated to the reader. The character offers the readers an exceptional experience. The writer has made this possible through the drastic transformation experienced by Radzi and also by being courageous to discuss issues that are rarely mentioned by other authors. Radzi’s work brings to the table something different because of his daring to conduct this sort of research. A daring that can perhaps be traced back to his career of writing. Usually, authors from different fields write on the side because they are driven by their hobby. This is completely different from the author of the trilogy. Radzi is willing to set aside his career and family, to travel that would eventually lead to his finding peace. All this time, his mind is trapped and troubled because of his disconnection with his inner self. He travelled to find himself so he could soothe his troubled soul.

Throughout the process, Rasyid’s search is geared towards understanding the meaning of Malay Muslim in the context of the history of the Malay Archipelago. Rasyid’s character reflects the opinion of Azhar Hj. Wahid (2011) who believes that the Malay
society in this region in the post-independent period had to carry the responsibility of rebuilding history, culture, language, and literature with all the shortcomings, psychological constraints, current problems and a sense of resistance left behind by the colonials. As a result, the construct of the travelogue has captured the history of Aceh Islamic nation which could be traced to the rise of the Perlak, Samudera-Pasai and finally Aceh Darussalam governments. This writing moves the readers to feel the strong emotions of the character brought forth by various dramatic tensions. Rasyid’s travel is not just a search for himself, it is vibrant with elements of literature and history suitable for the development of the plot of the travelogue.

The experience of the writer as he explores Aceh, is compelling. His experience as a journalist is also an asset, which makes the reading experience more worthwhile. The author has stated that he was driven by the need to find himself after feeling suffocated by personal problems. The writer’s travel is presented in great detail to the readers. Take the following example about the name Aceh. It is obvious in the following excerpt:

‘ACEH’ adalah singkatan untuk ‘Arab, China, Eropah dan Hindi’. Kerana menurut mereka, bangsa Aceh adalah bangsa campuran empat bangsa utama dunia. Dan mereka semua diikat oleh satu faktor yang sama iaitu Islam!

[‘ACEH’ is short for ‘Arab, China, Europe and Hindi’. Because according to them the Aceh race is a mixture of four main races of the world. And they are all bonded with one factor which is Islam!] (Radzi Sapiee, 2015: p.42)

Traveling broadens the horizon of knowledge and view of a person. Travel not only leads to collision between an individual with his culture and foreign cultures, but also encourages understanding and social integrity. The question is why was Aceh chosen by the author? The purpose of the travel is stated clearly by the author in the following excerpt:

Rasyid hanya berniat untuk menggali kembali cerita-cerita lama berkaitan Aceh untuk tatapan peribadi, demi mencari jawapan kepada beberapa persoalan yang telah lama menghantui dirinya.

[Rasyid only intends to dig old stories about Aceh for personal viewing, to find the answers for several questions which have long haunted him.] (Radzi Sapiee, 2016, 188)

The reader is able to identify the purpose that drives the protagonist Rasyid to embark on this journey. It is fair to say that the travel has more of an internal or spiritual nature. The young man with Aceh ancestry on his father’s side, feels compelled to reassess his chaotic life in which he has lost his job, and he is left with a broken marriage. In the
travelogue, Rasyid is depicted as a brilliant character who surpasses all the other students in his studies. However, at a young age, he is sent to live in a boarding school for his studies. This situation results in a deep loneliness within him. The loneliness threatens to overwhelm him and Rasyid sees the travel to Aceh as his mission to return to that safe place within himself that symbolizes home. This is illustrated in the following lines:

Baru Rasyid terfikir sebab hidupnya boleh jadi begini, kenapa jiwanya terasa begitu bercelaru. Baru tersadar dirinya telah kehilangan perasaan home sweet home, rumahku syurgaku sejak berumur 12 tahun lagi.

[Rasyid began to understand why his life has come to this, why his soul feels so troubled. He just realized he had lost the feeling of home sweet home since he was twelve.] (Radzi Sapiee, 2015: 22)

His stay at the boarding school had put him under pressure such as being bullied by his seniors. As a result, his character toughened to face all the pressures. After passing all the obstacles, he managed to complete his study in Mathematics at University College London. The character of Rasyid is portrayed as having to go through many challenges in life. The journey of his life is inspiring to readers motivating them to make their own changes in life. The personal note becomes a real-life evidence for readers to work on their weaknesses. Difficulties often compel one to seek solutions for a change. The route taken by Radzi Sapiee is an expression of this desire for a change. His unusual interests force him to quit his position as a sports journalist for an English newspaper in Malaysia. His family problems lead to the end of his marriage and his relationship with family members is also affected because of his extraordinary interest, which others find difficult to understand. All of these, only fuel the writer to seek his identity. He is also driven by a bigger desire which is:

Rakyat Aceh sendiri ramai yang sudah buta sejarah akibat usaha pihak tertentu dalam menghilangkan kegemilangan bumi bertuah itu, serta menghakis jati diri sebenar mereka”.

Many of the people of Aceh themselves do not know their history because certain quarters had attempted to erase the glory of the blessed land and diminish their real identity.” (Radzi Sapiee, 2016: p.188)

This travelogue reveals how Rasyid goes through the process of learning about his soul which had been rebellious towards his situation and reality. In the course of this, Rasyid is more and more inclined towards the identity nurtured by his spirit as a Malay Muslim which in turn determines his behaviour. After chasing all the given opportunities, Rasyid still found himself empty, living life with no real meaning or purpose. The
physical and internal travel he that he undertakes, brings Rasyid closer to his religious faith. This situation has brought about changes in Rasyid, for earlier he was someone who used to live a free life without care for sin nor rewards. Driven by an inner urge, he embarks on this momentous journey. This travel takes Rasyid from Kuala Lumpur to Teluk Intan, Lumut, Penang, Medan, Langat, Babusalam, and then to Aceh.

Parallel to his journey in the outer world, Rasyid also engages in self-reflection by studying religious texts. This opens up the path for Rasyid to dedicate his life to studying the rise of the Malay Muslim in this region.

Azhar Hj. Wahid (2011) asserted that the locals would trust and accept anything presented to them by the colonials without questioning the truth. This hegemony created by the colonials has such an effect that those who were colonised did not feel oppressed by the people in power. Rasyid’s character in the travelogue emphasises that the role of an author is not only to fulfill the part of a historian by reporting all the events gathered from the social setting but also to engage with the inner struggle that ensues with such oppression. This then becomes the background of the work. Radzi Sapiee’s data is collected from various sources such as interviews, reading of related books, observation of tombstones, dreams, or any clues that could be obtained and that prompt his inspiration. Rasyid is convinced this would breathe new life to the sovereignty and glory of the Malay race.

This travelogue trilogy is a travel with several purposes in mind. This literary text offers guidance, to readers wanting to reassess their identity. Stories are told of the history and glory of Aceh, to inform readers. Said (1979) believed that the colonials had resorted to many tricks to diminish the race that they once colonised by promoting false conceptions according to the colonials’ perceptions or world view.

Rasyid attempts to highlight the history that had been previously neglected in the discourse of scholars, on Malay society’s history. The neglect was planted by the history of colonialism as well as by the attitude of the people who remained unmindful of their own heritage, and its strengths. Cultural domination which is spread through the power of mass media, economy and technology was a helpful tool for the westerners, to colonise the mind of the Eastern societies. Rasyid’s character carries a heavy responsibility to bring to light the hidden truth. In doing so, Rasyid’s travel also nurtures values of pride among the readers. There are lessons to be learnt here, of understanding the glory of their past heritage and taking a rightful pride in it. In this context, Rasyid’s character attempts to deconstruct the narrative that disparages the people of the Malay Archipelago while at the same time reconstructing historical evidence through literary documents to form an understanding of their self-esteem and
5.3 Effects on The Others

Rahimah A. Hamid (2016) believes that literature and colonialism are two terms which cannot be separated because literature was used as a medium by the colonials, to rationalise their occupation of lands and cultures. As such, when reading literary works produced during colonial or postcolonial periods, readers would have to reinterpret all written works by Orientalists or their view of the society (Kamaruddin M. Said, 2007).

Radzi Sapiee’s novel trilogy encapsulates his interest in his father’s lineage which led to his travel. The inspiration to travel came from his dream. The author’s father came from Aceh. These three travelogues novels are the writer’s real-life notes on his experience of tracing his ancestry. The impetus to travel came from a desire to know his roots and to explore the glory that had once belonged to them. As a native, Radzi Sapiee attempts to re-visit evidence that oppose and question the power of the colonials. The opposition is done by challenging the opinion of the orientalists who have, in all this time, viewed the history and development of the Malay Archipelago from their cultural lens. This is obvious in the semi-fictitious travelogue, where the author employs the character of Muhammad al-Aminul Rasyid, to represent himself. The author utilizes various narratives to empower this stand. Radzi Sapiee thus states his purpose of writing the book as follows:

Penulisan dan penerbitan buku menjadi proses luahan ‘lurus bendul’ demi melepaskan beban pengetahuan dan emosi. Penulis sebenarnya menulis untuk kembali menjadi waras, setelah beberapa lama hidup seperti majnun. Gila dalam pencarian diri. [Book writing and publishing become the process of expressing the most honest thoughts to release the burden of knowledge and emotion. The author writes to return to sanity, after living as a crazy man for a while. Crazy in search of self.] (Radzi Sapiee, 2016: xii).

His self-search has been probed and written about by the author in great detail as it his intention to offer new interpretation without being influenced by the conventional ideas and opinions which had been widely propagated, accepted and applied as an academic foundation when discussing the people of the Malay Archipelago. This is done by Radzi Sapiee by using various fields of knowledge, to infuse life into his writing. See the following statement as the proof:
sambil menyajikan sekali fakta demi fakta, terutamanya sejarah lama melibatkan beberapa kerajaan seperti Melaka dan Samudera-Pasai… sesungguhnya kurang 20 peratus novel ini adalah fiskyen yang merujuk kepada dialog, iaitu watak dan situasi diterbitkan untuk memudahkan penyampaian fakta.

[while providing fact after fact, especially old history involving several governments such as Malacca and Samudera-Pasai… indeed less than 20% of the novel is fiction which refers to the dialogues, whereby characters and situations are produced to ease the delivery of facts.] (Radzi Sapiee, 2016: xii).

The supporting fields of knowledge include Islamic studies, sciences, and journalism which are combined with creativity to bring the story to life. The narrative of the trilogy is layered and demands for the readers to possess a curious (?) mind and great patience (Radzi Sapiee, 2015, xii) to be digested and appreciated. Travelogue is an interdisciplinary genre which has begun to gain attention from academic studies. Travelogue as a genre is closely linked to issues such as imperialism, diaspora, multiculturalism, nationalism, identity, gender, globalization, colonialism and postcolonialism (Pulugurtha, 2011).

The ideas that Radzi Sapiee wants to spread through this trilogy are ideas that are seen as opposing those ideas that have already found a strong root in the society. For Radzi, the discourse is in reality a network of trap laid by the westerners who want to deny the supremacy and glory of the Eastern societies. This is in concurrence with the opinion of Azhar Hj Wahid (2011) who believes that during colonialism, the colonials were skillful in implementing protection policy which was driven by their desire to extort and monopolise trade. As a result, the Malays were left lagging behind in the field of economy and education. Radzi therefore staunchly refuses to trust the western version of history. He further adds:

Apa yang dianggap umum sebagai sejarah rasmi bumi ini sebenarnya tidak lebih daripada kerja Orang Putih untuk menipu orang Melayu hidup-hidup, kerja orang seperti Stamford Raffles, dan Clifford yang mau menggelapkan sejarah sebenar bangsa Melayu supaya fikiran mereka terus terjajah, terpedaya, terpesona dan terkinja-kinja dengan budaya Barat, supaya hilang jati diri Melayu yang sebenar.

[What is generally accepted as the official history of the world is no more than the work of the White People to lie blatantly to the Malays. The work of people like Stamford Raffles, and Clifford was intended to erase the real history of the Malay race so that their minds would be continually oppressed, deceived, fascinated, crazed by the western culture, so that the real Malay identity is lost.] (Radzi Sapiee, 2015: p.39).
Therefore, Rasyid feels obliged to highlight history from the Malay perspective. Radzi Sapiee’s initial desire to trace his ancestry, leads him to explore the history of the arrival of Islam to the Malay Archipelago. Rasyid manages to trace various stories on Malay and Islam history which had never been known or highlighted before. A case in point is the issue of the Prophet’s final message and its connection with Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai. This becomes the principle thread running through the travelogue trilogy. In presenting his argument and criticism, Radzi Sapiee explains the process and mechanism used as a support to provide new interpretation in the discussion of certain social events which had left their impact on the identity of the Malay race. One example is the erasure of Perak Islamisation because of their belonging to the Shia sect. In fact, Radzi’s character clearly wants to realise Azhar Hj. Wahid’s (2011) hope of seeing the Malay society in this region, in the postcolonial era, carrying the responsibility of rebuilding history, culture, language and literature despite the shortcomings, psychological constraints, current problems and hindrances left behind by the colonials.

This travelogue documents the author’s fascinating journey of soul-searching, by delving to the depths of his self. Concurrently, the author attempts to overthrow the colonial discourse which has long dominated the soul of the Malay society, by reminding them of the supremacy and the ability of the Malays in the past. Understanding this is important for them to live their life with a sense of rightful pride. Radzi Sapiee tries to demonstrate the strength of Malay literary works through his travelogue which is offered as an alternative way of thinking and provides answers to long-standing questions and motivating readers.

In his travelogue, Radzi Sapiee attempts to approach the issue of intellectualism by deconstructing it from the colonial perspective, and instil awareness using Islam as a medium. Radzi’s endeavor is to remind the people that the Eastern society’s strength lies in its religious belief which has a long and proven history.

Radzi Sapiee not only uncovers the glorious past history of the Malay society; he also explains historical moments that have a certain meaning in the Malay Archipelago’s civilisation. By employing facts that are cleverly and convincingly interpreted, Radzi Sapiee introduces changes to the interpretation of Malay identity. His task is to reawaken and kindle the spirit of the people of the Malay Archipelago by motivating and instilling them with pride for who they are. For far too long they had perceived themselves as inferior to the westerners. His reading of history and literature, and listening to oral narration of accounts, help Radzi explore this truth. Radzi Sapiee now sees Aceh as a poignant reminder that reflects his pride of a glorious past. The inner journey of the writer also reaches a culmination. He now truly sees himself as a Malay.
6. Conclusion

Reading this travelogue skillfully leads the reader to himself. Radzi Sapiee uses literature as a cultural weapon to elicit awareness and to nurture pride in a heritage which had previously been absent. The writer also utilises literature to redeem the dignity and cultural legacy as well as their identity which had long been suppressed by the power of the colonials. Life certainly become more meaningful when it is authentic and regarded in the larger context of religion, society and family binds. It is only when we connect with other people that we can see our relevance and importance. Thus, this writing represents an effort to deconstruct and reconstruct ourselves in a wider context.

The search of self that enriches the experience of the writer, helps readers to see themselves in Rasyid’s character for a short while. The narrative of the experience is presented imaginatively, and it prompts awareness among readers. The writer’s capability is highlighted when he focuses on his Malay-Muslim basis to search for the meaning of self. This foundation provides Radzi Sapiee the strength to re-interpret his identity more meaningfully.

Based on the discussion of the three novels, it can be concluded that Radzi Sapiee’s travelogues are his honest and sincere writing to share his heart’s desire. In search of himself, he makes a trip which takes him to Aceh. After being rocked by conflicted emotions that contribute to a chaotic life, he is finally able to make peace with himself. The mechanism of travel brings with it a flexibility that causes the writer to move away from old, rigid ideas in search of truth. Buoyed up by the persistence of his desire, his reading and travelling, Radzi Sapiee speaks in a voice, powerful with emotion. All his experiences are creatively written, aided with facts, and presented with infographics which make it attractive to readers. His experience is carefully captured to convince readers of its authenticity.

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