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The development of the popular malay cult novel

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Abstract
Since the late 1990s the popularity of the popular Malay cult novels in Malaysia has grown enormously. Writers of the popular cult novels such as Ramlee Awang Murshid, who were sidelined at one time, began to attract the attention of literary critics. They form the new wave of young writers who are becoming popular very quickly, taking advantage of a new segment of readers born in a society dominated by commercialism, urbanisation and technology. Popular Malay authors who write cult novels have also taken advantage of developments in information and communication technology that enhance the popularity of their works.
INTRODUCTION
Since the late 1990s the popularity of the popular Malay cult novels in Malaysia has grown enormously. Writers of the popular cult novels such as Ramlee Awang Murshid, who were sidelined at one time, began to attract the attention of literary critics. They form the new wave of young writers who are becoming popular very quickly, taking advantage of a new segment of readers born in a society dominated by commercialism, urbanisation and technology. Popular Malay authors who write cult novels have also taken advantage of developments in information and communication technology that enhance the popularity of their works.

THE POPULAR CULT NOVEL AND POPULAR CULTURE
Writers of popular cult fiction base their writings on their readers’ taste and their readers not only become avid fans but also extremely loyal to them even to the extent of creating home pages and blogs to communicate directly with the authors and with other fans. In Malaysia the success of the popular cult novel is due to the tremendous economic development of the country since the 1990s. Consumerism has grown in tandem with the physical, social and economic development of Malaysia. Consequently, adolescence has become the target of the capitalists because of their lifestyle and fashion consciousness. This development can also be seen in the materials they read, such as the popular magazines and novels. These young adults have better education and associated literacy skills, and also greater consuming power compared to the older generation. Consequently, the readership of the popular Malay cult novel has also grown proportionately and this development has a great impact on the commercialisation of the cult novel.

The commercial element of the popular cult novel is related to popular culture which is the dominant force in the appearance of this fiction. According to Jowett,

To succeed popular culture cannot stray far from the recognizable formula, or categories, because the audience will experience difficulty in relating to it: but it must also constantly provide an interesting variation on the theme. It is within the context of these recognizable categories, or genre, that all of popular culture is created.

(Jowett ii)

Popular culture has its roots in capitalism. In other words the popular cult novel is a business product of a capitalist economy with profit as the overriding aim; and, unlike the literature of high culture, the target of the capitalists is the mass
of readers who will read popular materials. Generally, the cult novel readers, who are mostly adolescents, read these novels for pleasure. Their knowledge of literature is minimal. In the Malaysian education system today, literature as a subject in high schools and universities has been marginalised. In schools, the brighter students are not encouraged to take literature classes. Parents have also contributed to this pattern of study because they believe that literature as a subject will not benefit their children’s pursuit of a career. This system has produced only a small number of adolescents of high literary competency. Canonical literature is the domain of a higher culture representing a high aesthetic, intellectual and creative value. The self expression of the author is of prime importance; the mass reader is never the target. On the other hand the popular cult novel exists in a world of supply and demand. A high demand comes from the mass of readers who want stories that will fulfil their taste and cater to their preference and this in turn is exploited by the capitalists to earn good profits.

**Popular Malay Cult Novels and Writers**

Cult novels sell like hot cakes. The publication of the popular Malay cult novel is a part of a fast expanding industry known as the ‘creative industry’. Malay writers of such fiction include Ramlee Awang Murshid, Norzailina Nordin, Liza Zahira, Aisyah Sofoea, Anis Ayuni, Sri Diah, Sharifah Abu Salem, Damia Hanna, Nobi Sulaiman, Mariam Abu Bakar, Siti Rosmiza and Kresya Resya.

Many local publishing companies such as Kaki Novel Enterprise Sdn. Bhd., Alaf 21 Sdn. Bhd, (a subsidiary of KarangKraf Sdn. Bhd.), Buku Prima and Creative Enterprise Sdn. Bhd. (to name a few) have made creative writing an economic activity that generates handsome profits. Cult novels are sold in thousands of copies. To encourage writers of the cult novel to be more productive the publishing company Krangkraf Sdn. Bhd. via Alaf 21 Sdn. Bhd. gives an award called the ‘Gold club Award’ to writers of cult fiction. Those who have received the award include Aisyah Sofoea, Kresya Resya, Anis Ayuni, Sri Diah, Sharifah Abu Salem, Liza Zahira and Ramlee Awang Murshid. Each of these writers’ novels has sold more than three hundred thousand ringgits. The market being small in Malaysia, three hundred thousand ringgit sales is considered a great achievement. This award also proves that they have the potential to garner a strong pool of cult readers. Local newspapers like Berita Harian also give awards to these writers based on their popularity.

Popularity is the main factor for giving such an award, and popularity is seen as having no regard for literary quality by serious readers who are intellectually mature and very particular about the aesthetic aspect of the literary text. When the main focus is on the taste of the readers or followers, the question of literary quality is of no importance. What is important is what the readers want. The cult novel is evaluated by the mass readers. Such a standard of judgment is also applied to the popular cult novel in Western countries such as America. If a work of fiction receives an extraordinarily high rating from the readers it is regarded as
a successful literary product and the rating can be seen in popular charts such as *Writer’s Digest Book* (America). In Malaysia, the popularity of a novel is gauged by the number of reprinted editions and this type of rating is used by the publishers to promote their popular novels. These literary awards encourage writers of the popular cult novel to be more productive, which in turn maintains and ‘grows’ readership, which increases profits. The sustainability of the creative industry, particularly the creative writing industry, is directly related to the number of cult readers. Malay cult novels are being sold in big and established book shops such as Borders in Penang and Kuala Lumpur and MPH Bookstores Sdn. This phenomenon was once rare, but lately, even local restaurants are interested in selling Malay cult novels. These new environments have created new opportunities for the development of the popular Malay cult novel.

Why are there so many readers of the cult novel? The most basic and important answer is, cult novel writers write to please and fulfil the taste of their followers or readers. The cult novelist pays particular attention to readers who are familiar and at ease with such products. Among the sub-genres of the cult novel attracting the interest of mass readers are fantasy, mystery, horror, romance, travel, science fiction and the thriller. Generally, romance is the most popular sub-genre of the cult novel. But sub-genres that feature characters that conform to the super hero type, are also enormously popular. Ramlee Awang Murshid is famous for his popular cult novels which blend a number of sub-genres such as thriller, mystery, revenge and mystical, but also follow the super-hero model of popular film and comics. Malay popular cult novels by Ramlee are very local in content and this can be seen from the characters used. Ramlee uses familiar historical events (like the occupation of Malacca by the Portuguese), local places (like Kuala Lumpur, Sepang, Hulu Melaka and Istana Melaka [Malacca Palace]), characters like the Sultan of Malacca, and those drawn from the legends of Hang Tuah, Hang Lekiu and Puteri Gunung Ledang.

Ramlee has created a character by the name of Laksamana Sunan who appears in the tetralogy novel series that includes, *Bagaikan Puteri* (2005), *Cinta Sang Ratu* (2007), *Hijab Sang Pencipta* (2008) and *Cinta Sufi* (2010). Laksamana Sunan has the characteristics of a super hero, being skilful in self-defense (*bersilat*); having the ability to foresee the future; and being an all round ‘good guy’. Another super-hero type character is Tombirou, who appears in the trilogy *Tombiruo* (1998). He is as an ugly-looking guy, with a good heart who fights illegal logging. Ramlee’s cult readers love these characters because they operate within the convention of the super hero, and in order to meet the high demand of avid readers, Ramlee maintains a steady stream of serial/sequel novels which generates substantial profit.

But although each sub-genre adheres to a specific formula in its creation, and thus it is said that popular cult fiction is formulaic and is less open to experimentation than literary fiction, some of these genres overlap. Ramlee’s novels for example, include several sub-genres, as seen in his most recent work, *Cinta Sufi*. This cult
novel is the fourth of the *Bagaikan Puteri* tetralogy. Each novel of the tetralogy takes a different theme, and the superhero, Laksamana Sunan, is positioned against a different background and with a different antagonist. In other words, while not deviating from its basic conventions, there is room in the popular cult novel for invention. The role of convention is explained by Jowett:

The conventions ensure that the subject matter falls into a recognizable and comfortable category, while the inventions provide the surprise (which can either be in the narrative, or in the aesthetics of presentation) which differentiates this item from the many others competing for the public’s attention and money. (Jowett vii)

Jowett is not speaking specifically about Malay cult novels, but the stereotypical characteristics are easily identified. The cult novel follows generic conventions but allows space for the author’s creativity. That creativity can be found for example in the variety of backgrounds against which a super hero like Tombiruo moves and the various antagonists he encounters. These changing scenarios allow the author to reflect upon and engage with the contemporary and shifting concerns of his audience. The problems upon which his novels focus, and the means used by his protagonist to solve them, then serve to differentiate him from other authors writing within the same convention.

As mentioned earlier, the cult novel has many sub-genres such as romance and crime mystery both of which neatly fulfil the conventions so the writing produced does not spring any surprises on readers who have acquired a taste for a form that must conform to their expectations. However there is still a need for invention so as to create a uniqueness that establishes the identity of the writer, and sets him or her apart from other cult writers in the eyes of the readers.

**The Impact of New Media**

In Malaysia, the Malay writers of the cult novel have taken advantage of the new media such as the internet, facebook and blogging to encourage a more dynamic interaction with their readers. Nowadays, almost all the popular Malay cult writers have their facebook or blog site. Ramlee’s fans created a club called the Ramlee Awang Murshid Fan Club (RAMFC) which holds various activities such as meeting the author, thereby creating an effective communication channel between Ramlee and his readers. But through use of the new media — in this case the creation of a home page (http://www.kelabram.com) — the club also brings readers together who are geographically scattered throughout Singapore, Brunei and Indonesia as well as Malaysia. The homepage created an e-space in which fans could discuss the author, his works and current activities organised by RAMFC. The club holds activities like ‘The Exploration Race’, which is currently popular on television, in which participants search for the *keris* (a Malay traditional weapon of self-defence) named Nagroe in the tetralogy, *Bagaikan Puteri*. In this game, participants take on the names of the various characters in the tetralogy such as Laksamana Sunan, Haryani, Maharani, Putri Kober
Gandring and Maggala and enact similar scenarios to those played out in the novels. Fans become active participants in the life of the various novel series that is not limited to the adventures imagined by Ramlee himself. To some extent fans become acolyte authors, mimicking and guided by their author-hero.

Ramlee himself communicates through email with his readers via the home page of Alaf 21 Sdn. Bhd. Email communication like this allows readers to take part in the creative process — their deep personal investment in the lives of the characters and associated constructive criticism can influence future novels in the series or the genre. Here is an example of an email correspondence between Ramlee (RAM) and one of his readers:

**Normaiza**: I would like to suggest to Mr. Ramlee that he write another novel, a continuation of the *Bagaikan Puteri* 3, where Sunan and Haryani meet in a new story. This is because I have just read *Cinta Sang Ratu*, but I don’t feel there is a continuation from *Bagaikan Puteri*.

**RAM**: Insyaallah the ‘hijab’ will be unveiled.

[Here RAM promises to satisfy a reader’s desire to hear more of the story of Sunan and Haryani in the next novel – the mystery of their disappearance will be uncovered.] (http://www.alaf21.com.my [my translation])

RAMFc and the home page created for him by the publisher have increased Ramlee’s readership and celebrity status. Contributing to this effect are the ‘cult readers’ who set up their own pages and blogs so that they can comment on the novels: see for example the home page created by a Ramlee fan at http://www.kelabram.com or Lizz, at http://whiteharajuku.blogspot, who writes about how she/he was attracted to Ramlee’s novels. According to the blog writer, *Bagaikan Puteri* attracted him/her to read Ramlee’s other novels, one of the reasons for the attraction being Ramlee’s writing style which incorporates different sub-genres in a single text. In another blog, Alias Padzil’s fanatical admiration of Ramlee’s novels demonstrates the author’s cult status:

As an avid fan of Ramlee Awang Murshid the last month has been full of anticipation as I wait for his new novel. The book *9 Nyawa* inspired by his son will hit the market soon, but I may not be able to be the first reader this time as in the case of the novel *Hijab Sang Pencinta*… I love to read the type of books produced by brother Ramlee. They are so different and full of suspense. The occasional religious sentiment does shake the spirit of the reading. This makes it more interesting for me, for us readers this aspect is the magnetic attraction to his works. At one time while reading *Hijab Sang Pencinta* the puzzling ending drove us crazy, including me. What is more, this is a trilogy so the end will come after three books, but I feel that there ought to be a continuation. And three months ago my sister (Ilya Kuantan) informed me about *Cinta Sufi* [the last of the tetralogy]. ([my trans] http://datomarsani.blogspot)

As a writer of the cult novel, Ramlee has many fanatical readers who love his novels, and, like Alias Padzil, they will wait with great anticipation for the arrival of the next novel. The new media has created a new wave of cult readers that contributes to the development of the popular Malay cult novels. Fans of these
writers utilize the new media to get in touch with each other and thereby build a huge and powerful network that feeds into and sustains the creative industry. The writers themselves, in their active involvement in the new media, participate in this circuit, for Ramlee of course is not the only popular Malay cult novel writer to promote his works and communicate with his fans through the new media.

CONCLUSION

The popular Malay cult novel is reader, author and publisher-driven. Cult readers consume popular Malay cult novels but not all popular Malay novels are cult novels. The continuous appearance of cult novels in trilogy and tetralogy forms is a sign of the growth of popular Malay cult novels in Malaysia. Although the story itself, and its popularity with readers, is the paramount aspect of the product’s success, the willingness of the author to involve him or herself with readers also appears to be integral. Ramlee is a good example of this process. The cult writer writes to satisfy the literary taste of his/her readers and this becomes a strong creative force. The readers wait loyally for the latest cult novel. The interactive capacity of the new media to build the relationship between reader and author has accelerated the development and proliferation of the popular Malay cult novel. Although readers have some influence on authors of cult novels through this interactive media, the co-operation between publisher and author, and the twin forces of capitalism and consumerism, nevertheless operate to lure and cultivate a seemingly unquenchable urge in readers to consume popular fiction that ultimately discourages any aspiration to or desire for novels of higher literary quality.

WORKS CITED


