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MD. Salleh Yaapar

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### **Abstract**

Published in 2003, 1515 by Faisal Tehrani is a unique text within contemporary Malay literature. Among recent novels in Malaysia it is one of the most difficult readings, but probably the most refreshing and rewarding one. Perhaps it is also one of the most multifaceted narratives, with elements of romance, adventure, history, legend, postcolonial discourse, postmodernism, socio-political criticism, feminism, and even fantasy. Consequently, the novel also lends itself to various ways of reading: from the perspective of postcolonial, postmodern, socio-political, and feminist theories, or a blending of all of them. Although the novel appears to be postmodern and unique, it in fact is connected not only to postmodernism and magic realism (as associated with Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel Garcia Marquez), but perhaps more importantly it draws on a long established tradition of Malay folk literature, specifically the folk romance known as cerita penglipur lara (tales of soother of cares).

MD. SALLEH YAAPAR

# The Empire Strikes Back: Re-Writing Malay History and Identity in Faisal Tehrani's Novel *1515*<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Published in 2003, *1515* by Faisal Tehrani is a unique text within contemporary Malay literature. Among recent novels in Malaysia it is one of the most difficult readings, but probably the most refreshing and rewarding one. Perhaps it is also one of the most multifaceted narratives, with elements of romance, adventure, history, legend, postcolonial discourse, postmodernism, socio-political criticism, feminism, and even fantasy. Consequently, the novel also lends itself to various ways of reading: from the perspective of postcolonial, postmodern, socio-political, and feminist theories, or a blending of all of them. Although the novel appears to be postmodern and unique, it in fact is connected not only to postmodernism and magic realism (as associated with Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel Garcia Marquez), but perhaps more importantly it draws on a long established tradition of Malay folk literature, specifically the folk romance known as *cerita penglipur lara* (tales of soother of cares).

## *1515*: THE GENESIS

The novel *1515* has an interesting genesis. It is penned by Faisal Tehrani a prolific, innovative and highly imaginative author who belongs to a rather young and restless generation of Malay writers. The novel was written for a competition, namely the Hadiah Sastera Kumpulan Utusan (Utusan Group Literary Awards), and won the First Prize in 2002 for Kategori Novel Remaja (Adolescent Novel Category). When it was published in 2003 by Utusan Publishing and Distributors, Kuala Lumpur, it was tagged as Novel Remaja (Adolescent Novel). The adolescent or youthful image was enhanced by the cover design which depicts a charming girl in the pose of a woman warrior of yesteryear ready for war and adventure. However, a cursory reading of even the first chapter suggests that *1515* is a novel whose reach extends far beyond the adolescent category. After a complete reading it is clear that it is a work of a higher order. Written in a 'writerly' fashion, the novel presents an intricate and complicated story with a complex discourse that is not easily comprehensible to many adults, let alone adolescents.

## *1515* AND THE FATE OF MELAKA

Basically, the novel *1515* deals with the kingdom of Melaka (Malacca) and the Malay people of the past as well as of today. Established in 1400, Melaka was

a prosperous, powerful and well-known Malay sultanate, especially towards the end of the Fifteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, in 1511 the sultanate was defeated and was for a long time ruled by the Portuguese. Beginning from 1641 it was in turn seized and colonised by the Dutch. Then, starting from 1824 until Malaya gained its independence in 1957, it was ruled by yet another European power, the British.

The fall of Melaka in 1511, and its continuous subjugation by a succession of European powers, has been a painful and traumatic experience to the Malays as a people, haunting them even until today. Faisal Tehrani's novel is a reflection of this and more. It is a form of postcolonial discourse that aims to revisit the unpleasant history and to rewrite it from an alter-native perspective and in a form that is more desirable or palatable. The story and discourse involves especially two unique characters with a unique relationship, namely Nyemah Mulya of the past and Dr. Adi Fimiyun Abdul Hadi of the present.

#### **NYEMAH MULYA AND ADI FIMIYUN**

Nyemah Mulya is an incarnation of the past with a restless voice from beyond the grave. Adi Fimiyun is her descendent with whom she communicates from time to time. In fact, he complements her, and is the voice of the present as well as the future.

In the prologue to *1515*, around the year 2002, and from beyond the grave, Nyemah Mulya, a 15 year old woman warrior of the Melaka sultanate, writes to historian Dr. Adi Fimiyun of present day Malaysia. She invites him to collaborate with her in rewriting the history of Melaka. The restless soul feels frustrated that in history Melaka was defeated by the Portuguese, and that she herself was abducted and made a slave in Lisbon. Thus, together with Adi Fimiyun, she would like to revisit the past and replace what is shameful with something pleasant.

According to Nyemah's narrative, the leaders of Melaka of her time were morally decadent. Thus, although in the Fifteenth century the sultanate was materially wealthy and powerful, it was only a matter of time before it would be wiped out by foreign intruders, namely the Portuguese who were already lurking around. Fortunately, Nyemah, was well versed in religion and equally adept in martial arts. She hailed from a religious family and studied in Mecca. She was saintly and even had dreams of ascension to the sky. In short, in the face of the impending calamity, though a female she was destined to be the saviour of Melaka.

Actually, Nyemah Mulya the warrior is not new to Adi Fimiyun the historian, and the idea of an alternative history of Melaka does not come as a surprise to him either, as it has been on his mind too. In fact, around the year 1996 Adi Fimiyun wrote a Ph.D. dissertation precisely on the warrior herself. In doing so he was supervised by Professor Nyemah Mulya whose husband, Muhammad Fernando Jose, is a descendent of the female warrior. The bright and well-known professor has taught at Princeton and at SOAS, University of London, and is the author of *Amnesia Sejarah* (Amnesia of History).

While Adi Fimiyyun was researching in Portugal, the inspiring professor impressed on him her revised historical perspective on Melaka and its people. According to the professor, in 1511 Melaka fell to the Portuguese. Viceroy Alfonso de Albuquerque robbed the kingdom's treasures and abducted young Malay maidens, including the female warrior Nyemah Mulya, to be shipped to Lisbon. When his ship sank near Sumatra in 1512, he took all the trouble to save the girl, and in 1513 presented her to King Manuel of Portugal who made her a slave. Later, however, she was saved by a gentleman, Mario Rabal of Portuguese-Spanish parentage, who married her. Nyemah Mulya lived successfully in Ourem for more than 100 years. She even built a mosque in Nazare and converted the local people to Islam.

Based on the professor's narrative, Adi Fimiyyun conducted an exhaustive research and wrote a brilliant dissertation which was later published as a book entitled *Jejak-jejak Nyemah Mulya di Portugal* (Footprints of Nyemah Mulya in Portugal). Impressed by the pioneering work and the high quality of his writing, the University of Lisbon conferred on Adi Fimiyyun an Honoris Causa in November 2002. However, due to the well-known September 11, 2001 incidents in New York, the conferment gave rise to discontent among some Portuguese citizens. One may view this as a foreshadowing of the Islamophobia that is rapidly on the rise in Europe and North America now.

#### AMNESIA AND REMEMBRANCE

The idea of a revised history of Melaka in Faisal Tehrani's novel becomes more complicated but interesting when around the year 2003 Dr. Adi Fimiyyun suffers from dissociative and selective amnesia. The illness is due to an incident that occurred during a boating trip. It makes him forget that the English lady, Aminah Maude Brown, is his wife, that he has a Ph.D., and that once he was in love with Frida Mohamad whom he used to fondly call Ida. He even forgets why he was interested in the year 1511. One day Maude, who is a part-time model, reminds him of Frida's art exhibition at the Petronas Twin Tower in Kuala Lumpur. He attends the exhibition, but while there he has a problem remembering things and people that he meets, including his former thesis advisor, Professor Nyemah Mulya. As for Maude, although forgotten and ignored by her husband during such situations, she still takes very good care of him, and even takes him back to London for medical treatment.

There is an element of irony in Adi's illness. While he suffers from dissociative and selective amnesia he is aware that the Malays suffer from amnesia of history. Also, there are times during his forgetfulness that he remembers or recovers certain matters that are of great significance. During his therapy sessions, for example, Nyemah Mulya the warrior emerges in his consciousness with her inspiring stories. Through him the woman narrates another version of Melaka's revised history. Actually, there is a fusion here between Nyemah Mulya's narration and Adi's own recovering and re-writing of history. The combined, revised version involves

the adventures of Albuquerque and Nyemah Mulya herself. It goes as follows: Viceroy Albuquerque invaded Melaka with the objective of controlling trade within the Malay Archipelago as well as destroying Islam therein and replacing it with Christianity. In order to defend the country against the Portuguese invaders, Nyemah Mulya the female warrior was made the commander of the Melakan forces. In the ensuing battle Albuquerque initially managed to gain control of the city mosque. However, Nyemah Mulya was able to kill him and drove away the Portuguese forces. Then, leading an armada of Bala Tentera Nusantara (Nusantara Military Forces), she headed towards Portugal for a pre-emptive strike on Lisbon. Along the way Nyemah Mulya liberated Goa in India from the Portuguese and married a rich Chinese-Muslim gentleman in Jeddah. Later on, in 1515, with the help of Turkey and Spain, she defeated Portugal. According to the narration, there are three versions regarding her strategy and method in attacking Lisbon. The first version involves the construction of a giant duck, *à la* the Trojan horse of *The Aeneid*, as a gift to the king. The second version involves the enlisting of divine help that came in the form of eagles which hurled fire-stones on enemy forces.<sup>3</sup> The final version relates the construction of a giant tunnel from the seashore to the city. Thus, Malay forces ruled Portugal from 1515 up to 1580. After that Malay political power began to decline in Europe. However, traces of the Malay people may still be seen in Portugal even today, particularly in the coastal town of Ericeira 35 km northwest of Lisbon.

As the story continues to unfold Nyemah Mulya and her husband finally returned to Melaka in 1517. In Melaka she started a system of education based on Islamic principles. Unfortunately, she was falsely accused of being a witch or magician as well as a traitor to the Sultan. At the same time, her Chinese husband was accused of activities intended to undermine Malay sovereignty. As in the famous case of Hang Tuah in *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (The Tale of Hang Tuah), the ruler, Sultan Ahmad Shah, was quick to listen to slander and acted rashly, ordering the military to raid the couple's house. In the event Nyemah Mulya was dragged to prison and later was produced in court with a swollen face.<sup>4</sup> Without any proof, the kangaroo court hurriedly sentenced Nyemah Mulya and her husband to death by burning at the stake, very much like events during the Spanish Inquisition. Naturally, there were discontents and massive protests from within and outside of the country, the worst ever in the history of Melaka. However, protesters were rudely suppressed by government forces.

What is interesting at this stage of the story is the fact that although the couple was burnt at the stake in public, they did not die. This puzzled the authorities, including the Sultan. Finally, Nyemah Mulya informed the Sultan that in order to ensure their death he should kill them himself, and this must be done by using arrows and by reciting the sacred phrase 'Dengan nama Allah beta bunuh wali Allah' ('In the name of Allah, I kill Allah's friends). Finally arrows pierced the couple's bodies, but while Nyemah Mulya's husband died, the brave and saintly

woman remained alive. Instead, as with Remedios the Beauty in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, white light beamed from her body, and she miraculously ascended to the sky (306).

The foregoing narrative becomes the basis of Dr. Adi Fimiyun's next book, *1515*. The scholarly book was launched in September 2004, that is, a year after Faisal Tehrani's own novel *1515*, was published. Nyemah Mulya thanks Adi Fimiyun very much for his collaboration (actually for being her instrument) in writing the book, and in assigning her a place in the history of Melaka and the Malay people.

The foregoing line of narration suggests that amnesia could be positive as it breeds remembrance. In the case of Adi Fimiyun, it certainly gives rise to historical memory. It also becomes apparent that Adi Fimiyun is the alter ego of Nyemah Mulya. Both are actually two sides of the same coin. In fact, according to Nyemah Mulya, Adi is her descendent.

### **STRIKING BACK AND WRITING BACK**

Faisal Tehrani's novel offers an interesting and intriguing postcolonial as well as postmodern discourse. It is indeed a discourse on Melaka as a former colony, that is, formerly a part of the European colonial empire in the East. Once a prosperous and powerful Malay sultanate, Melaka was colonised for a long time by a succession of European powers. This is an historical fact that is difficult for the Malay psyche to accept. Faisal Tehrani's novel is an attempt to revisit the past, and to write in literature an alter-native history — one that is more acceptable to the natives.

As already mentioned above, in Adi Fimiyun's *Jejak-jejak Nyemah Mulya di Portugal* it is said that Albuquerque succeeded in capturing Melaka. In the fateful event Nyemah Mulya was taken prisoner. Together with other Malay-Muslim maidens, she was shipped to Portugal and made a slave in Lisbon. But, she finally 'strikes back' by building a mosque in a town in the European country and converting the local people who were mostly Christian to her religion, Islam. She even left her descendents in the country. But whereas Adi Fimiyun's first book is rather mild, his second apocryphal version, *1515*, is more radical. The element of 'striking back' is crystal clear here. In this book it is said that Nyemah Mulya, the saintly woman warrior, physically defeated the invading Portuguese forces in 1511 and killed Albuquerque himself. She then militarily attacked Portugal and finally captured Lisbon in 1515. She returned to Melaka as a victor in 1517. Thanks to her victorious exploits, Malays ruled Portugal until 1580. This is the significance of the title of the present paper 'The Empire Strikes Back'. It refers to a former colony striking back militarily at its former colonial master, specifically in a revised, fictional version of history.<sup>5</sup>

However, the novel is not only about striking back militarily at the former colonial master as reflected in Adi Fimiyun's book, *1515*. It is also, and more so, a dialogue with the dominant Western power in general and with the Malay

past and present history in particular. It is about writing back, that is, engaging with and responding to colonial as well as established texts in a fictional manner. Through his novel *1515* Faisal Tehrani is re-inscribing the history and identity of the Malays as a people who founded the great Melaka sultanate but was later colonised and humiliated by Western powers. Faisal is a present-day young Malay-Muslim who was raised in present-day Melaka, one of the states within Malaysia.

Tehrani's novel portrays the Malays as a people with dignity. Their kingdom, Melaka, was a powerful trading nation in the Southeast Asian region, and although their political elites were corrupt, the people were steeped in religion and culture. When attacked by foreign invaders, they were not cowardly. By highlighting characters like Nyemah Mulya, Dr. Adi Fimiyun and Professor Nyemah Mulya, the novel makes a claim for the moral integrity and fighting spirit of the Malays today, and calls them to take command of their own lives by acquiring higher education and fostering a global outlook.

Faisal Tehrani employs a revisionist narrative in a way similar to that employed by the great Mexican author, Carlos Fuentes, in his novel *Terra Nostra* (1975). In *1515*, the history of the Malay people as recorded in its formal grand narrative is revised — rewritten from an alter-native, postcolonial perspective by the novelist. This is similar to the perspective taken by Fuentes in his rewrite of the Latin American formal grand narrative in *Terra Nostra*. In this postmodern master piece, Fuentes blurs time zones by making Felipe II of Spain marry Elizabeth Tudor of England and brings her to live with him at El Escorial near Madrid. He also intermingles Latin American writers of the 1960s Boom period with classical Spanish historical figures, thereby presenting a grandiose postmodernist revision of official history by providing an alter-native, apocryphal history of Spain and Latin America.

Actually, the 'striking-back' element or motif, that is, the military attack on the colonial master in Faisal Tehrani's novel *1515* is not completely new in Malay literary tradition. It has a precursor in earlier, oral postcolonial discourse. In fact, it is a distant, sophisticated echo of some Malay folk romances, the *cerita penglipur lara*, especially *Hikayat Anggun Cik Tunggal* (The Tale of Anggun Che Tunggal) and *Hikayat Malim Dewa* (The Tale of Malim Dewa). *Hikayat Anggun Cik Tunggal* was orally narrated by Pawang Ana in the early decades of the Twentieth century and edited by R.O. Winstedt with the assistance of Raja Haji Yahya. *Hikayat Malim Dewa* was also narrated by Pawang Ana and Raja Haji Yahya, and edited by R.O. Winstedt and A.J. Sturrock. The tales used to be popular among village folks both in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, were used as prescribed texts in secondary schools in Malaysia up to 1970s.

In *Hikayat Anggun Cik Tunggal*, the Prince Anggun takes revenge against Raja Pertogal (King Portugal) and the lusty Raja Bedurai Puteh of Tambang Papan (King White Viceroy, read Albuquerque based in Goa) who has been terrorising

Malay kingdoms, namely Tiku Periaman (now Tiku and Periaman, two separate principalities in Sumatera), and abusing Malay princesses. Equipped with supernatural powers, the dashing prince strikes back by destroying their ships, invading their countries and marrying their princesses. In *Hikayat Malim Dewa* the Malay hero is Malim Dewa. Like Prince Anggun, Malim Dewa also boldly strikes back at the kingdom of Maharaja Pertukal (Emperor Portugal) killing thousands of people, including the emperor himself. As discussed earlier, in Faisal Tehrani's novel it is said that Nyemah Mulya defeated the invading Portuguese forces in 1511 and killed Albuquerque. She also attacked Portugal and finally captured Lisbon in 1515. Thus, in this respect although *1515* might appear at first to be quite novel, it is in fact part of a long tradition in Malay literature when the *cerita penglipur lara* is understood as part of a literary inheritance.

### POSTMODERNISM AND MAGIC REALISM

However, unlike the accessible popular folk romances that preceded it, the novel *1515* is not written for a popular audience — it is not reader-friendly or 'readerly', but is written in a 'writerly' manner, favouring the author's delight in a rich, nuanced and thus elusive text over a more direct storytelling. Written by a young man who has written a Master's thesis as well as essays on postmodernist and postcolonial fictions and those of magic realism, the novel's theoretical and 'literary' influences are apparent. After reading twenty pages of the novel, readers of contemporary fiction would immediately recognise that *1515* has a postmodern tendency: the narrative is disjointed and fragmented; the plot anti-chronological and confusing; the point of view puzzling; the voices contradictory; and the meaning ambiguous. All this makes the novel a difficult and challenging, but rewarding reading.

*1515* also has elements of magic realism. Like the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, particularly *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it skilfully blends past and present, history and legends, facts and fiction, the natural and the supernatural. In fact, in *1515* Faisal even blends authentic and false footnotes. But although magic realism like that employed by Marquez and Fuentes might be recognised as the direct antecedent of *1515*, it is not in fact strange to Malay literature, being found in the most traditional Malay narratives, including the great works *Sulalat as-Salatin* (popularly translated as Malay Annals) and *Hikayat Hang Tuah*.

### CONCLUSION

The discussion above shows how the author of *1515*, Faisal Tehrani, fictionally negates the dominant discourse — the conqueror's grand narrative of history — by re-writing Malay history and identity from the point of view of the traumatic colonial experiences of Melaka and the Malay people at large. Although postcolonial and postmodern influences on Faisal Tehrani's novel are easily accounted for, it is important to recognise that this kind of 'alter-native' perspective has a long history in the Malay literary tradition, if we understand that

tradition to embrace orature. It can be found specifically in folk romances of the adventure type such as *Hikayat Anggun Cik Tunggal* and *Hikayat Malim Dewa*. However, the focus in these tales is more on romantic love, with males occupying the centre stage, whereas the protagonist of *1515* is a lady, and a powerful one at that — a shift away from tradition that reveals the influence of modern feminism. Nevertheless, consciously or unconsciously, these texts may have been the seeds of which the novel *1515* is a mature fruit.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> An earlier and shorter version of this essay was presented in Malay at Seminar Sastera Bandingan Antarabangsa, 7–9th June, 2007, Kuala Lumpur, and published in the proceedings edited by Ahmad Kamal Abdullah, Mohd Jusoh Majid and Muhammad Ikhrum Fadhly Hussin.
- <sup>2</sup> A recent study (headed by Abdullah Ghazali of University of Malaya) claims that the Malay sultanate began in 1278, and not in the 1400s. See ‘Mallaca’, *Malay Mail*, April 17, 2010.
- <sup>3</sup> ‘However, Nyemah prayed to God and invoked eagles to come down from the sky and hurl fire-stones on the Portuguese army in and around Lisbon. As a result, the city was on fire for twenty-one days with thick smokes hovering around and could be seen from Montserrat’ (221).  
This brings to mind the story of the *Ababil* birds and the defeat of Abrahah’s forces mentioned in al-Fil, 1–5, in the *Qur’an*. According to this passage, prior to the time of Muhammad, Abrahah, the Abyssinian military commander in Yemen, decided to force the Arabs to make their pilgrimage to his church in San’a, instead of the Kaaba in Mecca. To that end he invaded Mecca with an army of mighty elephants. However, before he was able to destroy the Kaaba, Abrahah and his army was attacked and defeated by the *Ababil* birds that hurled stones from the sky.
- <sup>4</sup> There is an indirect reference here to the political scenario in Malaysia. In the late 1990s there was a fall out between the then Deputy Prime Minister, Dato’ Seri Anwar Ibrahim, and the Prime Minister. Consequently Anwar’s house was stormed and he was taken into police custody. On September 29, 1998, he was produced in court with a swollen face and a black eye.
- <sup>5</sup> The phrase is inspired by the title of the 1980 science fiction film, *The Empire Strikes Back*, directed by Irvin Kershner, and by Salman Rushdie’s article ‘The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance’, *The Times* (London) July 3, 1982 and the title of the famous book on postcolonial theory and praxis, *The Empire Writes Back*, by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin.

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