ABDULLAH MUNSYI- A MODERN MALAY INTELLECTUAL OF NEW CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Munshi Abdullah, or Abdullah Bin Abdul Kadir, is considered by many scholars as an early figure of modern Malay laureate because of his against the traditional norms writings. His two works; Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah (The Voyage of Abdullah), 1838 and Hikayat Abdullah (Abdullah’s life story), 1849, are among his important and meaningful chronicle memoirs in Malay literature. This paper laments Abdullah’s true, new and different ideas which serve as a dividing line between him and the writers before and during his time. Abdullah’s writings contain sharp criticism which addressed to the feudal and Malay community involving leadership, language and cultural practices. Such critics arose from his education background and his social interaction with the British. It gave him new thoughts and perspectives in his writings, based on his observations and experiences which were not rigid, comparing to most of the conventional writings at that time, that incorporated elements of myth, fairy tales and legends. Besides, Abdullah is also well-known for translating works into Malay, including Christian epistles for missionaries. Some condemn Abdullah’s work as a sign of his Anglophile persuasions, but at one level Abdullah’s criticism is inextricably related to his understanding of the weaknesses of his people. Besides his remarkable ideas, the most undeniable contribution of Abdullah is the printing work. His writings paved the way for a significant phase in the development of both Malay language and printing. He boosted the production of Malay works through his writings which previously were handwritten in manuscript forms. It was he who introduced the printing and publication of Malay books in the early 19th century and brought great changes in the world of Malay literature. His writings brought the analysis of Malay world which is very comprehensive and encompassing and finally become a great subject in these modern days.

Keywords: Abdullah, Malay, critic, modern.

Introduction

Munshi Abdullah, or Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir was born in 1797 in Malacca (Malacca is one of the states in present Malaysia) and died in October 1854. The word Munshi @ Munshi, is derived from Old Persian means 'teacher'. During his lifetime, he was a language teacher and translator who was not proficient in Arabic and Tamil but also Hindustani, English and Malay. His 'Hikayat Abdullah' or “Abdullah’s Narration” was about daily life of the Malays published in 1849. Abdullah was known as 'The Fonder of Modern Malay Literature' and was the first Malay to publish books. The book remains a reliable and accurate reference on
early Malay history to this day.

Abdullah was raised by his father Sheikh Abdul Kadir, a pious and Arab-Indian descent. At the age of seven, he started learning Quran, the Muslims holy book and later translated an Arabic book into Malay (Shellabear 1947:13). So, I would follow whatever lessons to the boys, that's my game, from waking up to the six in the evening. There was nothing else except listening to the noise of studying and reciting.

The stressing on knowledge environment had shaped his interests to study harder. When he was 11, Abdullah earned his pocket money by writing the text of Qur'an. Two years later, he taught Islam to the Indian team soldiers who served in Malacca. His interest in reading Malay manuscripts led to his exploration in Malay literature and corpus study.

When Stamford Raffles arrived in Malacca in 1810, he hired Abdullah as a translator. The later copied notes, stories and Malay manuscripts collected by Raffles. The exposure and experiences working under Raffles, making Abdullah to be well educated and knowledgeable.

Abdullah learned English from Rev. Milne, a Baptist preacher who eventually appointed him as his Malay language teacher. Other Western missionaries followed, and Abdullah joined them, translating the Gospels. Another missionary arrived in September 1815, Rev. Claudius Henry Thomsen became Abdullah's good friend. He and Thomsen translated parts of the bible into Malay, and produced lots of other evangelical Christian printed materials. At the turn of the 20th century some of these books continued to be published and were distributed in Malay vernacular schools as textbooks, until after the first world war.

That was the beginning of his life as a Malay world's great men of letters. Abdullah wrote Malay literature from the heroic myth, fantasy and feudal exploits as being lamented (Winstedt) as “ a realism that …is in accord with the genius of a race of extroverts.” Abdullah established himself as someone prominent yet his thinking and works were considered as' against the norms’. The norms here were referred to the time during his era. Unlike many of the old Malay which focused more on myth and supernatural, Abdullah’s writing otherwise based on observation, experience and knowledge. His arguments covered various areas such as society, religion, politics, economics and morality. Zuber (1966:9) laments: Abdullah was the fist against the normalcy, the one who was against and breaking the inherit tradition, the one who turned his pen from telling the ghostly tales or imaginaries to the world of facts.

Abdullah had stressed the importance of human capital in that 18th century saying that Malays could be a great nation if they dared to make the changes and leave the old and obsolete life styles. He had a great interest in studying the structures of various languages and resulting to critical reasoning and notions in life. The language used in his works had a huge impact on spoken language and a foreign language. He also put the English words in his writings, like in Hikayat Abdullah, the words character (page 5), engineer (page 6), secretaries governments (page 6), electricity (page 115), arithmetic (page 117), commission (page 165) were used. Using English words was a new thing in the literary works at that period.

Research Methodology

The study examines the work of an early figure of modern Malay laureate, Abdullah Munsyi which ideas are considered against the norms of his time. Abdullah legacies were five autobiographical works which being compiled into the modern version by Amin, from 2005 to 2008 and some other related work by Hill (1970), Coope (1949), Kassim (ed). 1964, Keat (2004) Rosnani, Zahari et.al :-

(i) Syair Singapura Terbakar (Poems on Singapore Fire) 1830 that related to the great fire in Singapore.
(ii) Kisah pelayaran Abdullah (The Voyage of Abdullah) ,1838 which recorded his
travels to Terengganu and Kelantan, the two east coast states in Peninsular of Malaysia.

(iii) Hikayat Abdullah (Abdullah’s life story), 1849 which told some of the memorable events during his stay in Malacca and Singapore.

(iv) Dawa’ Al–Kutub (Cure of the Heart), 1883 that was written after the death of his daughter with the aim of giving solace to those who have experienced the same.

(v) Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah ke Judah (Abdullah’s travel to Jeddah) which recorded his travel to travel for pilgrimage but he died upon arriving in Jeddah.

(vi) Hikayat Kalilah dan Daminah, a translation of an Indian work, Hikayat Panca Tanderan.

Originally, these works were written using classical Malay language in Jawi script. The main theme of these manuscripts addressed to the feudal and Malay community involving leadership, language and cultural practices. Such critics arose from his education background and his social interaction with the British. It gave him new thoughts and perspectives in his writings, based on his observations and experiences. Consequently, after the work has been systematically analyzed, it leads to the discussion on the Abdullah’s discourses and consciousness towards the Malay people during his time.

Results and Discussion

There were many factors led to Abdullah’s life. Firstly, he came from a family which emphasized on education. Since childhood he was exposed to religious education and Malay grammar. He mastered the Qur’an at the age of seven and began to be a Malay language teacher at the age of 14. He became knowledgeable through his few good Malay teachers who were expertise, and creating his own talents and reformations towards Malay literature.

...Those are my teachers who teach me the all secrets of Malay language

Hikayat Abdullah 1:37-40:chapter 4

He was exposed to western powers in Malay archipelago, one was British colonization in this region which had caused the power of the feudal began to decline. His good relationship with western people as he worked as a Malay language teacher to them expanded his thinking in line with the modernization brought by the west. He was a correspondent to Stamford Raffles and worked with Pastor Thomson who was a principal of Anglo-Chinese College in Malacca. (Shellabear, 1947). It gave him new thoughts and perspectives based on his observations and experiences which were not rigid, comparing to most of the conventional writings at that time that incorporated elements of myth, fairy tales and legends. In his works, the characters were presented covering all levels of society, from the king until the common people. He openly criticized communities especially the Malay rulers who he labeled as not educated, low morals and cruel behavior in East coast of Peninsular during his trips there. He showed his unlikeness towards the attitude of the Malays in that areas about their poor cleanliness and laziness. In his works too, he displayed a lot of characters that associated to himself, his family and others as a human being with advantages and disadvantages.

This western powers also brought along the modernization like printing which enabled Abdullah to print and publish his work like Syair Singapura Terbakar (1830), Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah (1838), Hikayat Abdullah (1849) and Dewa-ul-kulub (1883). Abdullah considered the advantages of printed paper were correct, faster, more vivid in characters and cheaper. Printed works could be spread to all walks of life where by such work were enjoyed by the palace alone before. Abdullah also recorded his name as the author for producing his work
which was something new as most authors did not acknowledge their work at that time.

**Abdullah’s Discourse and Malay Society**

There were some of Abdullah’s discourses which are applied in today’s society, the Malay particularly. He became the first modern Malay writer who through some of his books, depicting the intricate, vivid descriptions of the ordinary lives of the Malay people in the peninsula. He was a native’s eyewitness accounts of British administration and rule in the first half of nineteenth century.

**Modernization**

The idea of modernity from Abdullah was from his predicament towards the British which he really admired. However, he suggested modernity should be adapted according to his mold while maintaining the importance of Islam as a way of life. He also stressed the creation of knowledge for a race and the importance of it, and the need to pursue knowledge either through story or writing. In his view, knowledge was the basis of life and generating civilization. In his book, Hikayat Abdullah, he emphasized the efforts and how to obtain knowledge; and another writing Pelayaran Abdullah Ke Kelantan, he emphasized the need to pursue knowledge for a prince.

**Culture**

Abdullah had positive attitude and thoughts towards the Malay culture. He was so keen to learn and internalize the Malay language and for him the language should be learnt by Malays and showed his regret when they did not learn it. Such awareness drove him to learn new knowledge from west, British in particularly. Abdullah had a strong feeling against obsolete customs and beliefs especially something superstitious and unislamic especially in his society that day. For him, some of the matter was nonsense and should not be followed because it could be a barrier to the advancement of the Malay race. Abdullah questioned the discrimination in the community that allows the aristocrats whom for him was old fashion, unjust and cruel, did anything they wished, especially to the poor people.

**Language**

He was also astute on the must to have a appropriate grammar system for the Malay language as other languages possessed. As he studied English grammar in depth, he managed to apply it for Malay language, believing a good Malay grammar book would enabled the expansion of the language among the Malay kids themselves. Abdullah was very conscious of the disorganized and the frenzied condition of the Malay language then especially its writing and spelling to the extent that he prayed that Allah would spare his life to enable him to lay the foundation of the Malay language. (Abdullah Munshi, Hikayat Abdullah: an annotated translation by A.H.Hill. Za’ba, a modern Malay scholar, attributed to Abdullah the beginning of modern Malay literature based on his works which departed from earlier work. (Hassan, 1988)

**The Disagreement**

Two of autobiographical Hikayat Hikayat Abdullah and Abdullah Cruises to Terengganu and Kelantan, criticized the Malays’ lifestyles to according to him were not comparable to the west.

He saw the decline of feudal position of the Malays and the social position of the Malay community which was very sad. At the same time, he appreciated how good colonial rule was.
Nevertheless some Malay scholars described Abdullah as a chaotic and has no self identity. Many contemporary Malay scholars have critised Abdullah for is excessive praise of the Englishmen to the point of being blinded to their weakness too. (Rosnani). Somehow, deeply thought, this happened because of his surrounding as most of his life was entangled with the English. Because of that, his concept about life was not in line with the classical literature and touched the elements of Modern Malays which were irritating to him.

He was very observant and feeling unpleasant to see the life of Malays.

"And yet, along the roads and lanes are filled with dirty garbage and mud and shrubs, full of snakes, almost nothing can live there even tiger: Do they care?"

And

“so all the trees and seeds, if being planted, would grow well, because I see all lushes are fertile. I see out of one hundredth, only ten perhaps work. The others just yarn default all days. They are poor and wicked with four to five weapons attached to their bodies.”

Abdullah Cruises to Terengganu and Kelantan.

There was his further criticism in his visit to Kelantan (one of the states at the border of Siam) claiming the people were in poor hygiene, enjoyed entertainments, not knowledgeable and lazy. He said that the people loved eating dirty and smelly food. On the page 61 of Pelayaran Abdullah, he did mention about the dirty glass which was similar to the coconut shell. He further added about the people of the state:

The floors of the house are not flat and more like see saw with star looked roof, and the foul smell comes from the house. It is full of rotten fish, smell of drains and piles of garbage. They place the cesspit and latrine under the house, facing their sleeping place. For such manners they live and stay forever, and expose themselves to diseases.(page 789)

Such criticism somehow offended the people from the mentioned state in this modern days. Those critics, who accused Abdullah as being too obsessed of everything English, may not be entire right. Abdullah was not slow in condemning the English men for their bad and immoral characters. He showed his dislike towards Crawfurd one of the British residents who for him was rash, unfriendly and was slow to listen to the opinions of others. (Zahari, 2008)

Today, we cannot blame Abdullah for great appreciation and admiration towards the English people by saying they brought a lot of knowledge and progress. For him, they possessed diligent attitude and he really admired Raffles who for him worked hard. as we ourselves have preferred and encompassed that same system, too. As for the development of the Malay community, the Malays still sheath behind tot other races in many aspects especially in economy and education.

Feminism

At some point, Abdullah was ahead in the idea of feminism or women’s right. Among others, he criticized the attitude most men who lacked of responsibility and again it was not right according to Islam. He also condemned the limitation of movement among the females. He was really admiring the way English woman behaved compared to his people. He was closed to Raffles and his wife whom he wrote:

I noticed that she was no ordinary woman. Every day she worked just like her husband, and did everything in an ordinary and modest way, and with a pleasant face, and she spoke respectfully to the poor just the same as to the
rich.
And he continued his admiration;
…..and I noticed that she was very active in all her ways and in whatever she did, and would not sit quiet for a moment doing nothing.
(The autobiography of Munsyi Abdullah)
This was contrast to the wife of the feudal whom he claimed was lazy and to some extents, controlled the husbands in every manner.

This way of doing is the great difference which I notice between the Malays and Europeans. The Malay custom is that if a woman becomes the wife of a great man, she becomes increasingly proud and lazy, and her behavior is the more naughty, and everything that she says, is to magnify herself.

And
….. she merely sits, or lies around sleeping, or is dressing up, and fixing her hair smoothly or sitting giving orders to slaves, all she knows about is the rice served on her knees.
(The autobiography of Munsyi Abdullah)

Tyranny
Abdullah appreciated the crucial role of the elite as the main source of leadership. Prior to that, he dared to travel to the states in the east coast and made the comparison. For him, a leadership should be organized and as a symbol of what society needs. It is characterized by genuine care or concern for the subjects who in return respect the leaders spontaneously (Zahari, 2008). Somehow, to his disappointment, he found another category of leadership in the Malay society especially in the states he visited. He revealed it was based on oppression and domination. The reign oppressed over the weak which caused fear, revenge and conflicts. In such situation, the ruling class had full power maintaining their domination over the their subjects and protecting their vested interests.

In Hikayat, (which was published after Pelayaran), Abdullah continued with those political comparisons (deemed impertinent) between the Malay and English rulers. At one point, he paid tribute to Queen Victoria but attached the personal habits and behaviors of not only the Malay royalties but some wealthy Malay Men (Zahari, 2008). For him, they were full selfishness and stupidity.

All of them think they are the clever ones….such a feeling arises out of their unwillingness to follow the customs of other people, and furthermore they are not knowledgeable, like the toad under the coconut shell. The toad thinks the coconut shell is the sky. And regarding their extravagant lifestyle, Abdullah wrote,

The children of the nobility had with them only fighting cocks, bamboo pipes for opium smoking, gambling equipment and greed in indulging their desires as a preparation for governing.

Abdullah doomed the Malay rulers whom he considered as old-fashioned, lazy and cruel. He defined them as rulers …. who are unjust and full of oppression, and their needs are undeniable. He added that they were full of bad attitudes:

There are nothing good with these Malay kings except being brutal in manner, they like taking someone’s wives as they wish, as they catch the chicks without fear of god, and no shame for other human beings, and for them killing people is just like killing ants. In his trip to Pahang, he showed his sinister disgust with the way the ruler behaved which created
ridiculous and unnecessary respects from the people. Amongst was that one should not use an umbrella, wear shoes or even have umbrella or good clothing upon passing the king’s palace. For him, such actions were contempt and he couldn’t "help smiling listen to such ridiculous custom".

Abdullah also criticized the kings for acting baselessly, according to their narrow thoughts and not in accordance to Islamic law. They acted blindly following their bad desires and this was prolong to their next generation. Besides, this elite lacked self introspection and reflection towards their own people, contented with their dogmatic traditions which made them felt they were above the law.

And this bad habits from the feudal would be heritage to their inherit who become the kings later on. For Abdullah, they just wanted to maintain their status without any interest to improve and reform the society. They would not dare to do the changes as they were scared such changes would affect their interests. Prior to that, the feudal pampered their kids in a bad manner.

This can be seen when Abdullah wrote...

And except some of the stated kids who are good, the rest are devilish and behaving like animals, this is because they are not taught by their parents since they are young. They follow their desires, and get used to such wicked behavior, like cock fighting, gambling taking opium, robbing and fighting. They are worse than are sole fathers.

It is an emblem of a trivial mind, Abdullah contended, to accentuate inconsequential things while ignoring the consequential or significant ones. Being a reformist minded and conscious of the idea of progress and human development as enjoined by Islam, he was very critical of the wrong priorities of the Malay feudal ruling class. (Siti Aishah, 1996)

Abdullah had a great sense that the negative traits portrayed by the ruling class would remain because they were above the law. For him, if the Malays were given a chance to work, accrue the fortune and have a firm and established government, they would be equal to the colonials. Siti Aishah (1996) said such courage to critic the rulers was a sign that he was a great thinker. In a way, such bad attitudes of the rulers influenced the attitudes of the people as a whole.

Some consider Abdullah’s criticism of the ruling feudal as a sign of his Anglophile persuasions, but Milner (1978), argues that on one level Abdullah’s criticism of the Malay rulers is inextricably related to the Munshi’s understanding of economics. Abdullah like Scottish social philosopher and political economist Adam Smith (author of An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations) Milner says, espouses a social philosophy that privileges the individual in the sphere of the economic state of his society. Siti Hawa (2010) pinned few reasons that made Abdullah had such perspectives and views. Firstly, prior to history of colonialism and imperialism in the region. The kind of nationalism that has established among many Malays in response to colonialism scowls on all critics of Malay society. It is bigotries that lacks objectivity. Critics of Malay society run the risk of being regarded as anti-Malay and pro non-Malays. Abdullah is a victim of such narrow nationalism and partisanship. Secondly, Abdullah is regarded by some as a traitor mainly for his ideological reasons. His thinking is basically reformist in that he looked for the grassroots of Malay problems within Malay society itself. Such a perspective is inevitable to have a somewhat disturbing outcome on the making. The dominant Malay elite therefore sense the need to decry
Abdullah and the views he gave.

**Printing work**

As Abdullah taught Malay to Medhurst, a missionary, he learned the use of the Malay letter-type. The first Malay book printed using the letter type was the translation of the Ten commandment, followed by the Vocabulary, a list of two thousand words in Malay and English and a translation of an English Arithmetic book. In his Hikayat Abdullah, he describes his experience:

Mr. Medhurst taught me how to arrange the letters, how to hold the block and how to set the pages so that the printed sheets could be folded properly one after the other. After three or four months of practice in all these steps I could do the work on my own without his assistance. As time went on, I became more and more conversant with the technique of printing, and knew how to avoid slips when operating the press itself or in setting the type, or in using too much or too little ink.

Abdullah considered the advantages of printed paper were correct, faster, more vivid in characters and cheaper. Printed works could spread to all walks of life where by such work were enjoyed by the palace alone before. Abdullah also recorded his name as the author for producing his work which was something new as most authors did not acknowledge their work at that time.

What is substantial to note is that Abdullah found his self-evident that led to a more rigorous use of print and path to progress (Murad). Abdullah conceptualised that print and development commanded the establishment of the "real Malay" (Milner, 1978). He admitted the power of print and for him, print shaped the capacity of society to tell, to narrate stories and to organise itself around an individuality. This can be seen in Abdullah’s preparation and edition of Sulalat as-Salatin, "Genealogy of Rulers". In its oldest known manuscript form, Sulalat as-Salatin denotes a seventeenth-century collection of tales about the rulers of Melaka. The way Sulalat as-Salatin was preserved could very well serve as yet another example of how tradition is invented and imposed. In succeeding copies, Abdullah’s publication turned into extensively accessible in schools and colleges under the title of Sedjarah Melaju – Malay history and Malay Annals. To some Europeans like Raffles and Winstedt, Abdullah’s work was the most imperative and descriptive work of truly Malay literary prodigy. To the Malay modern media scholar like Murad, Siti Aishah and Kassim, Abdullah was ahead of his people and his time. Abdullah tried to wake up his readers from their inertia, stirring them to fight the deteriorations of Malay culture. Abdullah was convinced that European civilisation offered the tools needed to bring this decline to standstill. In Abdullah’s view, the adoption of European thinking and techniques could move the Malays forward. (Ahmad Murad, 2006)

**Conclusions**

Abdullah died at the age of 58 in 1854, in Mecca (some claimed it was in Jeddah). Again, along his journey for the pilgrimage, his journalistic skills came handy to assistance where he described his experiences and people that he met and their manners. A book on this last trip was published but posthumously. Contradict to most of the people of his time who wrote merely on folks, tradition and legends as the main subject, Abdullah wrote based on observations and experiences. His works encompass social, religious, political and moral and economics problems of his day. In short, he has enriched and innovated the Malay language through his style of writing that is evident throughout his works making him as a modern Malay
intellectual to this modern days.

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