

Islamic Teachings in the Modern Malay Novel *Interlok*

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Abstract

*Islam has been the religion of the Malays in the Malay archipelagos since the 14th century A.C. This paper intends to describe the influences of Islam on the Malay literature by selecting and citing textual evidences or proofs from the Malay novel entitled *Interlok* written by Abdullah Hussain, born in 1920. The main purposes of this paper are to present the Islamic teachings found in the novel as well as the forms of Islamic teachings such as theological, ethical and ritual.*

Keywords: Modern Malay novel, Islamic teachings, Malay characters .

Introduction

The Malay novel *Interlok* (Interlock) is chosen for many reasons. First, this novel is the Malay literary textbook for the Malaysian students in Form Five preparing for their public and national education certificate named Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE) or in Malay or Malaysia language Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) for 2011. The decision to make this novel the literary textbook for these Malaysian students was made by Malaysian Ministry of Education in 2010. The ministry decided on the novel because of its literary merits and its themes and messages. The novel is about three ethnics, the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians about forty years ago. According to Baradan Kuppusamy (2011), this novel “should be read by all Malaysians, not just as a literature tool in Form Five, because in a nutshell, it tells the story of Malaysia and how the nation was born through the eyes of three mains characters – Seman, Chin Huat and Maniam – and their families.... In the contested political landscape today, *Interlok* is a must read for all Malaysians because it reminds us of the different strands that started in isolation to fit a colonial need but later their descendants came together as struggling nation.” According to Iii Liyana Mokhtar (2011), “*Interlok* was written in 1971 and focused on the challengers faced by three deprived families – Malay, Chinese and Indian – in eking out living.”

Second, the novel was disliked by some Indians in Malaysia due to few words considered pejorative or derogatory to Indians. “Several individuals and Indian organisations are protesting and want the novel banned simply because in one paragraph on page 211, the words *kasta pariah* or pariah caste are mentioned in the context of how the Tamils were recruited from various parts of South India and how they were packed into crowded ships and suffered long and dangerous journeys to arrive in this country.”(Kuppusamy 2011). The political pressure made by these Malaysian Indians led to the appointment of the independent panel to look into their protests against this novel. Malaysian Ministry of Education appointed the panel members and their chairman in January 2011. The panel was chaired by the Distinguished Prof. Datuk Dr. Shamsul Amri Baharuddin who is also the Director of Institute of Ethnic Studies at National University of Malaysia. The Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia who is also the Minister of Education reported to the members of Malaysian Parliament on March 24, 2011 the findings submitted by the panel to the Malaysian Cabinet. The report about the findings of the panel was published in daily Malay newspaper *Utusan Malaysia* on March 25, 2011. Out of 106 points protested by some of Malaysian Indians against the novel *Interlok*, only 19 points considered relevant and taken into consideration for some changes in wording and phrasing of some sentences found in the novel.

Third, the novel is about three Malaysian ethnic groups namely the Malay, the Chinese and the Indian families. The Malays were the paddy planters, the Indians were the rubber estates workers and the Chinese were the traders. Historically, the novel covers the period of the early 20th century when Malaya was under the British colonial rule, the Japanese occupation and rule, the British rule, the Malayan independence from the British rule. The main theme of this novel is the cooperation and integration between these three ethnic groups namely the Malays, Chinese and Indians. They had different economic activities for their livelihood, different religions and customs but they were the Malayan peoples. The religion of the Malays in the novel is Islam, the religion of the Indians is Hinduism and the religion of the Chinese is Buddhism or Chinese traditional religion.

Abdullah Hussain, the novel author

He was born in on March 25, 1920 at Sungai Limau Dalam, in Yan district in the State of Kedah in Malaya. In 1926 he joined the Malay school located in Sungai Limau until standard five. He joined St Michael School in Alor Star from 1932 to 1933. In 1935 he joined the Anglo Chinese School in Alor Star until standard seven. When the Japanese occupied Malaya in 1943 he was sent to Singapore for three months to join the administration course named in Japanese *Syonan Koa Junrenzo* (Abdullah 2010: 423) In 1939 he became the assistant store keeper in the tin mining company in Pahang. He left he job in Pahang and went to Penang to become the assistant in the newspaper publication company named *Sahabat* and then he became the assistant editor of the newspaper named *Saudara* also published in Penang in 1940. He worked as a clerk in the British army camp located in Sungai Petani, Kedah in 1941. He became the journalist for the newspapers named *Merdeka*, *Berita Indonesia* and weekly journal named *Merdeka* in 1951. From 1961 to 1964 he became the assistant editor at Oxford University Press and from 1965 to 1968 he became the senior assistant editor at Franklin Books Programme. He was the editor of the journal named *Angkatan Baru* (New Generation) from 1965 to 1968. He was the research officer at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) from 1968 to 1978.(Abdullah 2010: 424).

From 1978 to 1979 he led the language and literary unit of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in Sabah branch. From 1979 to 1981 he joined Universiti Sains Malaysia (Malaysian Science University) in Penang as the innovator. In 1982 he left Malaysia for Brunei and led the literature development section in Brunei. From 1993 to 1996 he became the fellow guest at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) in Kuala Lumpur.(Abdullah 2010: 425).

Abdullah Hussain has been a prolific and versatile Malay Muslim writer by writing short stories, novels, biographies, autobiographies, translations and literary essays. He has written 25 novels, 3 anthologies of short stories, 9 translated books, and 6 biographies. His novel entitled *Imam* won the Malaysian Literary Award 1994/95 and prior to this award, the same novel won the National Novel Award 1992/93. He was granted the title Sasterawan Negara (national literati) in 1996. He was the eighth national literati. In 1981 he won the S.E. A. Write Awards in Bangkok, Thailand.(Abdullah 2010: 425). The Sultan of Kedah awarded him with the honorary title Dato' in 1995 and the King of Malaysia awarded him with the honorary title Datuk in 1996.(Abdullah 2010: 426).

Among the titles of his short stories winning the awards are "Kario Buruh Kebun" (Kario the garden worker) 1950, "Tuhan, Bagaimana Akan Kau Cari-Nya" (God, how do you look for Him?) 1977, "Sahabat" (Friend) 1979, "Cahaya Langit"(the Heaven light) 1983.(DBP 2000: x). Abdullah wrote short novels or novelettes entitled *Dia.. Kekasihku* (He or She is my lover) 1941, *Kasih Isteri* (Wife's love) 1941, *Amin Pemuda Desa* (Amin the village youth) 1947, *Berenang di Lautan Madu* (Swimming in the honey sea) 1957, *Kalau Tidak Kerana Tuan* (If not because of you) 1957, and *Janganlah Jangan* (Do not do) 1964. He wrote serial novels published in the newspaper *Sahabat* with the titles *Binti Penghulu* (PENGHULU'S daughter) and *Harta dan Jodoh Menanti di England* (Property and spouse waiting in England). There were 38 series for the two serial novels. Other novel titles written by Abdullah Hussain are *Terjebak* (Arrested) 1964, *Peristiwa* (Occasion) 1965, *Rantau Selamat* (Safe area) 1965, *Aku Tidak Minta* (I do not demand) 1967, *Kuala Lumpur Kita Punya* (Kuala Lumpur belongs to us) 1967, *Interlok* (Interlock) 1971, *Intan* (Gem) 1973, *Noni* (Noni) 1976, *Buih di Atas Air* (Bubbles on the water) 1980. *Konserto Terakhir* (the final concert) 1980 and *Masuk ke Dalam Cahaya* (Enter into light) 1983.(DBP 2000: xi) He translated the works written by English writers into the Malay language such as *Orang Tua dengan Laut* by Ernest Hemingway 1961, *Bumi Bertuah* by Pear S. Buck 1962, *Mutiara* by John Steinbeck 1962, and *Angin Timur Angin barat* by Pearl S. Buck 1964. He also translated the work by Arabic Egyptian writer Naquib Mahfouz 1986 *Lorong Miqdad* and the work of Maulana Mohamad Saeed 1987 *Isabella*. (DBP 2000: xi-xii).

According to Abdullah Hussain, the literature can strengthen belief in the religion. The good literature can refine human characters and can enhance their belief in the religion through the good ethical values trustworthiness, sincerity, honesty, loving, sympathy and considerateness.

He considers his contribution in the literary works as a means of Islamic missionary activities to call to the way of Allah by doing the good and commanded actions as well as by avoiding and leaving behind the evil and prohibited actions.(DBP 2000: 288).

Islamic teachings

Islamic teachings can be classified into faith or belief, ethics and worship or ritual. Islamic faith covers six main pillars of faith namely belief in Allah, His Angels, His Books, His Prophets, and the Day of Judgment or the Final Day. These Islamic articles of faith are found in the Koran (2: 177 and 2: 285). Muslims also believe in Allah's predetermination since Allah is believed to be one, omniscient, omnipotent and eternal. All created beings are temporal and transient.

Islamic ethics covers two categories of the ethical principles and values for Muslims to guide them in their lives; there are the recommended and good ethical principles and values such as such as honesty, justice, courage, thrifty, selflessness, sincerity, and there are condemned and evil ethical principles and values such as stingy, evil intention, selfishness and greediness. Islamic worship or ritual is known as the pillars of Islam consisting of five namely expressing by words that there is no gods but Allah and Muhammad is Allah's prophet or messenger, prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadan, the payment of Zakah (the bodily and property taxes) and the pilgrimage in Mecca once during a Muslim's life provided he or she is able to go to Mecca and perform the pilgrimage rituals. There are five times of prayers daily need to be perform by Muslims according to the stated times namely *zuhr* (after noon), *'asr* (the time after noon until the sun sets, *maghrib* (the sun sets), *'isha'* (after the sun sets until the dawn and *subh* (the early dawn until the sun rises). Prayers and reading the Koran are mentioned in this novel. The Malay Muslim family who perform the prayers are Musa, his son Seman and his wife Halimah or Limah. Halimah prays every day and requests Allah to provide his son with a spouse since she wishes to see a grandson or granddaughter before she passes away.(Abdullah 2010: 4).

Lebai Man is an Islamic religious teacher in the novel. He teaches Muslims reading the Koran and prayers. He has a daughter who has finished reading the Koran many times.(Abdullah 2010: 4). Seman thinks that his father Musa is a very religious man since he does not think the worldly possession or property such as the land and the house is really property. His real property is his religious rituals, his donations and property for the everlasting abode in the hereafter. Seman felt proud of his father religiosity. (Abdullah 2010: 11).

Seman learned reading the Koran at the house of Lebai Man who came from Sumatera in Indonesia and lived in Malaya. He is a well known Islamic religious teacher and leader of the prayers in that village known as Kampung Nyiur Condong (KNC). This Islamic religious teacher has a daughter named Upik who learned reading the Koran from her own father and many times she finished reading the whole Koran. Her skin is while.(Abdullah 2010: 27-28). Musa wanted his son Seman to read the Koran, to learn how to pray and to read some prayers as his preparation for his eternal life in the hereafter.(Abdullah 2010: 38). Seman knows well that Allah controls his destiny, his efforts, his sustenance and his spouse. Life and death are both in Allah's hand.(Abdullah 2010: 49).

Seman knows that when a Muslim dies, in this case his own father, he must inform other Muslims about his death, they must come and visit the dead Muslim body; they must wash the dead body, make ablution for the dead body, cover the dead body with the white clothes, pray for the dead body and then take it to the Muslim cemetery to be buried in the ground there.(Abdullah 2010: 53-54). After her husband Musa passed away, Halimah focused on worshipping Allah because she thought her own death is coming soon. In her heart she quietly requested Allah to make her son Seman having a sound mind, not to make him insane because she did have other person except her son to depend on for her life to come.(Abdullah 2010: 61).

Seman did not lose his mind although his father suddenly passed away and left him and his mother without any property for their living. Seman accepted what had happened as his destiny decided by Allah.(Abdullah 2010: 93). After his father died, Seman focused on worshipping Allah and he always requests Allah to protect and help him. He went back to Kampung Nyiur Condong and prayed with other Muslims led by Lebai Man during the congregational prayer for the *'isha'* prayer. Seman felt his prayer was accepted by Allah.(Abdullah 2010: 293-294).

Seman and his mother left the village before dawn. They went to the rubber estate looking for the job as a rubber tapper. He was able to secure the job because Indian man named Maniam was the very good friend of his father Musa. He worked as the rubber estate for about two years and six months before he decided to go back to his old village Kampung Nyiur Condong.(Abdullah 2010: 296-297 and 303). Seman went back to his old village and arrived at the village mosque on Friday and he joined other Muslims for the Friday prayer.

The Friday sermon was read by Lebai Man.(Abdullah 2010: 304). Seman was attracted to Gayah, the daughter of Mat Raggi and his wife Bedah Raggi, the rich paddy grower in the village. Seman requested Lebai Man to go to Gayah's house and enquiry about her if she is still available for him. Initially his intention to get married with Gayah was turned down by her father and mother. However, Gayah insisted on her parents to accept the intention of Seman to marry her. He parents did not have other choice but accept Seman's intention although he was poor but he was diligent and hard working youth in the paddy fields according to Gayah's father.(Abdullah 2010:310-314). After Seman got married to Gayah, his mother Halimah decided to live alone in the traditional Islamic religious institution where the Muslim men and women and old and young learn Islamic teachings under the Islamic religious teacher Lebai Man in the village Kampung Nyiur Condong.(Abdullah 2010: 317).

The traditional Islamic religious institution for learning and teaching Islamic teachings known as the *pondok* was popular in Malaya in the later period of the British colonial rule. The Malay Muslim reformists criticized this traditional Islamic religious institution because it prepared the Muslim students for their lives in the hereafter rather than for their lives in this world.(Ibrahim 1994: 101-105).

Conclusions

Based on the characters in this novel namely Seman, his father Musa and his mother Halimah, they are the Malay Muslim people who prayed according to Islamic teachings. Moreover, Lebai Man and his assistant were responsible for teachings of the Islamic teachings and reading the Koran to the Muslim children and youth in the village. There were the Islamic institutions in the village namely the mosque and the house of Lebai Man for the Muslims to perform the prayers in group and the house of Lebai Man became the place for the Muslim children to learn reading the Koran.

Although no other Islamic rituals like fasting during the month of Ramadan and giving the *zakat* were mentioned in the novel, the obligatory prayers are mentioned in many times and places in the novel. The Islamic teaching in theology namely believing in Allah is found in the novel.

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