Preamble

The history of the Malay world details the exposure and acceptance of foreign influences. After the practice of ancestor worship and Animism, Malays then accepted Hinduism, which introduced them to polytheistic and superstitious beliefs. After the arrival of Islam, however, polytheism was replaced by the concept of Tawhid, the acknowledgement of the primacy of a monotheistic God, which also had the effect of jettisoning superstition. Islam was, in turn, challenged by the arrival of external forces, most significantly by the Western worldview; this introduced secularism by way of the colonisation of the Malay archipelago. This brief chronological account is vital, since the range of each distinct cultural influence denote four distinct cultural stages in the history of the Malay world: the Animistic, the Hinduistic, the Islamic, and the Western colonisation periods. Naturally, each stage exerted its own pull on various aspects of Malay culture, particularly on the local literature, which will be the focus of this article. It is interesting to note that most Western scholars are seemingly inclined to emphasize the significance of each period on Malay culture and literature save for the Islamic. To explain this statement, the views of some Western scholars will be gleaned over in the following section.

1 See R.O. Winsted, A History of Malay Literature (Malayan Branch of Royal Asiatic Society XVII, Pt. III, January 1940.)
Malay Culture and Literature: A Brief Observation of the Western Perspective

This discussion will touch upon the views of several Western scholars on Malay culture and literature. Bernard H.M. Vlekke (henceforth Vlekke), for one, finds that Hinduism is more responsible for the development of Malay artistry than Islam – evident in the discovery of tombstones in an Islamic cemetery in Java, which embody Shaivite motifs despite their inscriptions being in Arabic. N.J. Krom (henceforth Krom) shares Vlekke’s suppositions in his premise that it was through Hinduism that high culture was transmitted onto the Malays. As well as temples, monuments, idol sculptures, reliefs and arches, Krom finds that even mosque architecture during the Islamic period display elements of the Hinduistic. Thus, Krom surmises that Hinduism was the most significant cultural catalyst in the shaping of Malay civilisation; as he states: ‘... [Hinduism] enriched Nusantara [Malay-Indonesian] culture as it was a valuable Hindu cultural heritage, or shall we say raised it into real culture’ [emphasis added]. [(Hinduisme) memperkaya kebudayaan Nusantara [Melayu-Indonesia] sebagai warisan berharga dari milik kebudayaan Hindu, atau yang barangkali boleh kita katakan telah menaikkannya ke dalam kebudayaan yang sebenarnya]. The demotion of Islamic contribution can also be seen in the works of J.C. Van Leur (henceforth Van Leur), who assumes that the pace of Islamisation in the Malay archipelago in the 15th and 16th centuries was not due to the inherent qualities of Islam per se, but rather external factors such as the decline of the Hindu dynasties, the burgeoning regional spice trade, as well as competition from Christian missionaries. Given the overt reliance on factors unrelated to the faith proper, Van Leur theorises that it must have been impossible for Islam to infuse the Malays with ‘higher civilisation’:

The acceptance of Islam...had nothing to do with the transmission of a “higher civilization”. Javanese political motives and tactical considerations of the aristocracy brought about Islamisation ... The expansion of Islam later gained strength through the eruption of

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4 Ibid., p. 257.
5 Ibid., p. 260.
the struggle with the Portuguese in Asia, after which the Moslems consciously counteracted every Christian influence.7

Where the context of literature is concerned, certain Western scholars point to the backwardness of Malay literature before the arrival of colonial powers. It is important to note that in so doing, they implicitly negate the significance of other cultures, including Islam, which had previously been embraced by the Malays. For instance, Alfred North (henceforth North) states that: ‘...[he] had never found anything in the Malay language except silly tales, useful indeed as showing how words are used, but containing nothing calculated to improve the minds of the people’.8 R.J. Wilkinson (henceforth Wilkinson) echoes this argument; he writes: ‘the truth is that the Malays have been progressing on much the same literary road as ourselves [the West] but have not yet got as far as we have’.9 Wilkinson sees evidence of the Western-influenced evolution of Malay literature in the ‘modernity’10 of the collective works of Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi Abdullah (henceforth Abdullah) – a progression only achieved through Abdullah’s close relationship to his colonial friends:

The pioneer of the new literature was the well-known writer Abdullah, who was born at Malacca and came, during his boyhood, under the influence of Sir Stamford Raffles... His most famous work, however, is his own autobiography, the *Hikayat Abdullah*, which was written at the request of an English friend.11

North claims that it was his initiatives that drove Abdullah to create ‘modern’ works:

... I suggested to him [Abdullah] that he might compose a work of deep interest, such as had never been thought of by any Malay ... I then gave him a list of topics on which it would be proper to enlarge a little, in writing a memoir of himself.12

10 The term ‘modern’ and ‘modernity’ in this article are flanked by inverted commas so as to avoid confusion: Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas considers the tradition of Malay letters to be ‘modern’, where the term is taken to refer to the presence of intellectualism and rationalism, as opposed to myths and supernatural tales, in Malay literature. Thus, the terms ‘modern’ and ‘modernity’ in the context of this article refer to the concept used by the West after the rise of modernism, as explained in footnote no. 18.
The assertions that a Malay writer could achieve 'modernity' only by way of the direct infusion of Western influences, such as by the close relationship between Abdullah and Westerners, illustrate North's and Wilkinson's emphasis on the significance of the Western role in progressing Malay literature. As stated earlier, this distinctly Western emphasis effaces the significant role of any other culture upon the Malay world, most notably that of Islam, which was already established in the Malay archipelago. On the whole, the Western perspective represented by the views listed above denote the contributions of cultural forces beyond that of Islam, specifically the extant remnants of Hinduism and the West upon Malay civilisation and literature respectively.

In light of the above, this article will attempt to put forth a different perspective, through the study of scholarly works that deal exclusively with the role and contribution of Islam in Malay literature. This will somewhat balance the partiality of most Western scholars towards the Western cultural impact upon the Malay world, and simultaneously broaden the discussion on Malay culture and literature. To this end, this article will examine Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu (1972) by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (henceforth Al-Attas), The System of Classical Malay Literature (1993) by V.I. Braginsky (henceforth Braginsky) and Medan-medan dalam Sistem Persuratan Melayu (1994) by Mohd. Affandi Hassan (henceforth Affandi). The choice of these three works is based on the originality and the pertinence of the ideas on Islam and Malay literature contained within. Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu, the contents of which were first presented in Al-Attas' Inaugural Lecture, addresses the hitherto neglected significance of Islam in the Malay world, and has now become a seminal reference point for studies on Islam in the Malay world. Braginsky's work, which also formed the basis of his Inaugural Lecture entitled Unity in the Diversity of Traditional Literature of South East Asia (1996), is not only a comprehensive hierarchical

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study of classical Malay literature, but more importantly, also houses his theory on the creation of Malay 'literary self-awareness' (kesedaran diri sastera). Al-Attas and Braginsky are both professors of Malay studies, and their respective texts are groundbreaking explorations of Malay literature and culture; Affandi's *Medan-median dalam Sistem Persuratan Melayu*, on the other hand, is still relatively new but nevertheless substantive in its ideas on Islam and Malay literature. This is evidenced by his contestation of Muhammad Haji Salleh’s inaugural Lecture, entitled *Puitika Sastera Melayu: Satu Pertimbangan* (1989), besides the polemical debates arising from the work amongst Malay literati.15 Affandi is a renowned writer and literary critic, and is mostly known for generating the literary notion of *Persuratan Baru.*16 Besides

15 Before being published in book form, *Medan-median dalam Sistem Persuratan Melayu* was serialised in *Dewan Sastera*, a literary journal published by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP); DBP is a semi-governmental agency and an authoritative body on language and literature in Malaysia.

the three works listed above, other publications of said authors will also be utilised to substantiate their main ideas.

Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas

As stated earlier, Western researchers such as North and Wilkinson conferred the status of ‘Father of Modern Malay Literature’ on Abdullah – thereby inaugurating his works, such as *Hikayat Pelayaran Abdullah* (1838) and *Hikayat Abdullah* (1840), as ostensible indicators of the beginning of the period of ‘modernity’ in Malay literature. Although commonly accepted and perpetuated as ‘fact’ in the history of Malay literature, Al-Attas refutes the idea that Abdullah deserved the title, based on his premise that Islam was most influential upon Malay history and culture. Al-Attas finds that the very framework used by these Western scholars to gauge the ‘modernity’ of Malay literature was innately flawed: the intellectualism and rationalism used to measure ‘modernity’ were physical-bound, and did not acknowledge a spiritual/metaphysical dimension. In account of spiritual aspect, he

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17 This idea was first put forth by Al-Attas (1970) in his published doctoral thesis entitled *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri* (Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Malaya), in the context of comparing the literary contributions of Abdullah and Hamzah Fansuri. In his Inaugural Lecture, this view was reiterated in the context of the role and contribution of Islam to Malay history and culture.

18 In the 15th century, the West was freeing itself from the Dark Ages, which was marked by the paucity of intellectualism. It was the Renaissance movement, which strove to revive the glory of the Greek intellectual tradition, that ignited intellectual growth. The West then identified some of the sources of their backwardness, one of which was traditional values. Subsequently, some of the institutions which were the custodians of these values were challenged. One of the institutions that came under scrutiny was the Catholic Church. This opposition to the Catholic Church – the Christian Reformation – was significant as it signalled the decline of religious/spiritual values in Western society. It was at this juncture that modernism surfaced to free Western society of traditional values, and this included the belief in matters of a metaphysical and transcendental dimension. The new emphasis was on the function of the human intellect which revolved around a physical dimension. The recognition of this function, the need for rationality (at the physical dimension), and the abandonment of the metaphysical and transcendental, gave birth to a modern Western culture that was more worldly, in that there was now a separation between worldly and religious/spiritual matters. For more details on the rise of modernism in the West, see Sydney E. Ahlstrom, 1972. *A Religious History of the American People.* New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 71; Peter Childs, 2001. *Modernism.* London: Routledge, pp. 1–18; Astradur Eysteinsson, 1990 *The Concept of Modernism.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp.1–49; & Pitirim A. Sorokin, 1941. *The Crisis of Our Age.* New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc. p. 20. With regard to the Christian Reformation and the decline of the Roman Catholic Church in the context of Western sexuality, see my discussion in Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani, ‘Gerakan Reformasi Gereja di Eropah dan Kesannya Terhadap Pegangan
sees neither intellectualism nor rationalism in the works of Abdullah, which contain only bare descriptions of the author’s everyday life; even Abdullah’s language use and writing style are in continuance with the *aliran lama* (old wave), or courtly language used in the 15th century, in which Al-Attas sees no sign of ‘modernity’.¹⁹ Thus, he finds that the anointment of Abdullah to the status of ‘Father of Modern Malay Literature’ is no more than a ‘Western construction’, to propagate a sense of self-importance in the effects upon the Malay civilisation:

It is a clear inclination with Western Orientalists, who with apparent intention relate significant events in the history of Islam in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago – such as the emergence of rationalism in the Malay-Indonesian outlook of life, as well as the appearance of a new identity in the history of Malay-Indonesian language and literature – with the arrival of Westerners and their culture in this region.

[...memang merupakan satu kecenderungan yang nyata tampak ada pada para orientalis Barat, yang seolah-olah sengaja mengaitkan kejadian-kejadian penting dalam sejarah Islam di Kepulauan Melayu-Indonesia – seperti timbulnya paham rasionalisme dalam pandangan hidup Melayu-Indonesia, timbulnya unsur-unsur moden dan sifat-sifat baru dalam sejarah bahasa dan kesusasteraan Melayu-Indonesia – dengan kedatangan orang-orang Barat dan kebudayaannya ke daerah ini.]²⁰

More importantly, however, Al-Attas goes further to say that Western involvement in Malay literature actually caused its regression: works published during Malay literature’s period of ‘modernity’ are bereft of the very intellectualism and rationalism found in works published in the earlier Islamic period. Western claims of ‘modernity’, he finds, in actuality only lie in the creation of genres which were, until then, non-existent in Malay literature, such as novels, short stories, dramas and new poetic forms. Al-Attas believes that a more legitimate gauge of ‘modernity’ would be the examination of its content proper.²¹ According to him, the Malay literary works commonly paraded as ‘modern’ fail on this account, since they only showcase the confusion arising from conflicting values within Malay culture. As he states:

The *pujangga* (literati) and writers who classify themselves as representatives of something ‘new’ in Malay-Indonesian literature actually consist of people who do not understand the true meaning

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²⁰ *ibid.* p. 47.
²¹ *ibid.* pp. 53–56.
of the intrinsic identity of the West, and the intrinsic identity (sifat-sifat asasi) of their own culture; the views of people who, in terms of culture, represent marginal societies, or those who occupy unclear and superficial positions within that culture, are necessarily limited. These confused people, who mainly consist of city dwellers, might be Western-educated but cannot truly comprehend Western culture or their own, and thus, the values that are imparted in this 'new' literature are the confused values of those who cannot differentiate between the false and the true.

What Al-Attas means by the 'intrinsic identity' (sifat-sifat asasi) of Malay culture refer to those that are based on Islamic principles, espousing both intellectualism and rationalism; he holds that it was through Islam that these elements were sewn and nurtured in the Malay worldview, as will be discussed later. At this stage it is sufficient to note that Al-Attas considers the relegation of Islam as a result of colonisation, which is manifest in the loss of natural self-worth and intrinsic identity in 'modern' Malay literature. This is what Al-Attas refers to as 'deislamisation'. Thus, the loss of Malay values is synonymous with the loss of intellectualism and rationalism – values which were only instilled after the Malay embracement of Islam:

I propose it is the active loss of Islamic history that ultimately caused the loss of the intrinsic identity of our nation, which has to be rediscovered. It was Islam that perfected the identity and nationhood of Malay-Indonesians.

[Saya mengusulkan pendapat bahawa dengan dihilangkan sejarah Islam inilah yang mengakibatkan kehilangan sifat mandiri bangsa kita yang sekarang ini perlu dicari-cari. Sebab Islamah yang menyempurnakan paham keperibadian sendiri, paham kebangsaan terhadap masyarakat Melayu-Indonesia.]23

22 Ibid. pp. 54-55.
23 Ibid. p. 56.
As has been stated, Islam is considered by Al-Attas to have instilled the intrinsic identity and values of the Malays. This is because, according to Al-Attas, it is through Islam that Malays learned of intellectualism and rationalism, which are also, as stated earlier, legitimate measures of ‘modernity’ in literature. As opposed to ‘modern’ Malay literature, he finds evidence of intellectualism and rationalism in 16th and 17th century Malay literary works (during the Islamic period).\(^2\) Islam’s espousal of intellectualism and rationalism are clearest in the introduction of both the *Tawhid* doctrine, which freed Malays from the grip of supernaturalism and myth (*tahyul, khurafat*), and the concept *al-haiwan al-nathiq* (man as rational creature), which awakened Malays to the high potential of the judicious human mind. These changes were significant when the very definition of ‘literature’ during the Islamic period evolved, coming to refer to intellectual texts produced by Islamic scholars, as opposed to the collection of fairytales, tales of the supernatural, and myths, which were produced by *bomohs* (medicine men) and court writers during the animistic and Hinduistic periods. The works produced during this period were complex and wide-ranging in nature, dealing with philosophy, metaphysics, and logic, such as those classified as *tasawuf* (Sufism), *kalam* (theological dialectic) and *mantiq* (logic):

Although they [court writers] preferred fairytales before, they are now involved in the writing and interpretation of Islamic historical, *tasawuf* and *filsafat* [philosophical] studies, because they are no longer exclusively responsible for the appreciation and valuation of literature, but rather intellectual writers and expert translators, who produce their works not for a select minority, but for the cultural and moral enrichment of the masses, as well as for the awareness of the nobility of the human race and the greatness of God through Islam.

Besides the development of rational and intellectual thought, Al-Attas also points to Islam’s contribution to the medium of Malay literature, the Malay language: it changed from a primarily aesthetic medium to

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24 Ibid. pp. 23–24.
25 Ibid. p. 20.
one that was intellectual and scientific in nature.\textsuperscript{26} In the pre-Islamic period (especially in the Hinduistic period), the Malay language was ideally suited to the expression of beauty, but was lexically unable to convey philosophical and metaphysical thought. This inherent flaw, according to Al-Attas, was overcome by the acceptance of lexical items from the Arabic and the Persian — two languages that played considerable roles in the progression of Islamic civilisation and knowledge — to conceptualise notions that had been, until that point, largely alien to the Malays. The exposure to Arabic and Persian also birthed the new Malay alphabet, which was phonetically tailored to spoken Malay, that is the Jawi writing and spelling systems. Al-Attas finds the conception of the Jawi script to be especially significant, because for the first time, Malays had their own writing and spelling systems, which subsequently became the medium of Malay literary activity in the 16th and 17th centuries.\textsuperscript{27} These linguistic ‘innovations’ led to a profound ‘new wave’ of literary ventures, which was a marked development from the \textit{aliran lama} usage of courtly language.\textsuperscript{28} The extent to which Islam permeated local culture, and nurtured the seeds of progress in Malays, is clear when Al-Attas’ equates Islam to Malay culture: ‘the nature and reality of Malay culture and civilisation are the nature and reality of Islam, and the two cannot be separated in a true scholarly sense.’ [“\textit{Sifat dan hakikat peradaban dan kebudayaan Melayu itu adalah sifat dan hakikat Islam, dan keduanya tidak dapat dipisahkan dalam konsepsi ilmiah yang sejati}.”]\textsuperscript{29}

With relation to intellectualism and rationalism which are, as stated earlier, measuring points for ‘modernity’, Al-Attas also states that the prominent Malay author Hamzah Fansuri (henceforth Hamzah), is more deserving of the title ‘Father of Modern Malay Literature’ than Abdullah. Hamzah, a 16th century Islamic intellectual, explores metaphysical and philosophical issues in his literary works, framed in language that was simultaneously scientifically objective and artistic. As Al-Attas states: He [Hamzah Fansuri] was the first person to use the Malay language rationally and systematically, framed the beauty of pure thought; which is contained within language that is crafted in a way that seems to transcend thought.’: “[\textit{Beliaulah (merujuk kepada Hamzah Fansuri) manusia pertama yang menggunakan bahasa Melayu secara rasional dan sistematis; yang dengan inteleknya merangkumi keindahan pikiran murni; yang dikandung dalam bahasa yang telah diolah sedemikian rupa hingga mampu menyusul lintasan}.”]

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid. pp.21–22.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid. pp. 40–44.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid. p. 45.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid. p. 56.
alam pikiran.”30 Given his aforementioned dismissal of Abdullah, Al-Attas believes that Hamzah’s achievements far overshadow that of Abdullah’s. In doing so, he demonstrates the primacy of Islamic cultural influences, and at the same time, challenges the legitimacy of the views of Western scholars such as North and Wilkinson on the impact the West has had upon Malay culture.

The System of Classical Malay Literature (1994) by V. I. Braginsky

This part of the discussion will focus on Braginsky’s views on Islamic cultural influence on Malay literature, specifically in the construction of Malay ‘literary self-awareness’ (kesedaran diri sastera). What Braginsky denotes by the term ‘literary self-awareness’ is the clear and comprehensive conceptualisation of a community of the nature, form and function of its literature.31 He finds that this ‘self-awareness’ is most apparent in the Malay literary works produced during the Islamic period, corresponding to the marked intellectual progress of the Malays from the Animistic and Hinduistic period.32 As opposed to the royally-sanctioned literary exclusivity during the Hinduistic period, Malay literature during the Islamic period were rife with an all-encompassing sense of its own validity and function – which, at the most basic level, is motivated by the development of knowledge:

The most significant ideological phenomenon marking this period [Classical Malay] was the transition from the outward propagation of Islam to the deepening of the religious awareness of its believers... As Islamic awareness deepened, its influence on the literary process became ever stronger. As a result, many new religious, didactic, bellettristic and historical works came into being. Moreover, several novel genres and genre forms emerged, as did whole new fields of literary activity. The role of individual authorship became more pronounced. Of no less importance was the reinterpretation, in line with the conceptions and re-imagining affected such notions as the creative process, the function of beauty, the didactic value of literature and the modes for creating literary works. In a word, this period saw the emergence of self-awareness in Malay literature.33

Braginsky’s emphasis on the Islamic period, as the point during

30 Ibid.
33 Ibid. p. 29. His views on the significance of Islam on traditional Malay literature are also elaborated in his 1995 Inaugural Lecture. See V.I. Braginsky, 1995. Unity in the Diversity of Traditional Literature of South East Asia (An Inaugural Lecture Delivered on 25 May), pp. 26–27.
which Malay ‘literary self-awareness’ was formed, can be seen in his hierarchical classification of traditional Malay literature according to type, function and nature, in his ‘System of Classical Malay Literature’.34 The system is split into three spheres: the ‘Sphere of Spiritual Perfection’, the ‘Sphere of Benefit’, and the ‘Sphere of Beauty’. Though stratified, the spheres integrate with one another based on their importance, when viewed from the Islamic principle. The ‘Sphere of Beauty’ is placed on the lowest rung because the texts contained within are crafted primarily for sensory manipulation. Included in this sphere is the poetic form of the syair, that emphasises ‘beauty of sound’ with its songlike rhythm and cadence.35 The hikayat (romance) genre, which stresses the ‘beauty of content’, is also placed in the lowest hierarchical position due to its belletristic emotionality, which overwhelms the flawed storytelling style.36 These features are evident in romantic and allegorical syairs, such as Syair Bidasari and Syair Selindang Delima, and adventure hikayats, such as Hikayat Indera Putra and Hikayat Berma Syahdan.

The ‘Sphere of Benefit’ comprise of such genres as hidayat (literature of mirrors) and sejarah and salasilah (historical literature). The placement of this sphere in the second rung is due to its didactic qualities for the impartation of Islamic knowledge and morality, functionally more important than the ‘Sphere of Beauty’. The works in this sphere mostly deal with themes gleaned from the Qur’an or the Hadith (Prophetic Tradition), complemented by interpretations and explanations in narrative form; these works include Tajul Salatin, Bustanul Salatin, Hikayat Bayan Budiman and Hikayat Bakthiar.37

Works in the highest rung of the system, the ‘Sphere of Spiritual Perfection’, such as Hikayat Yusuf, Kisah Al Anbiya’, Syair Burung Pingai, Syair Sifat Dua Puluh and Syair Ibadat, are written with the intent of spiritual fulfilment, so as to comprehend the nature of the Creator, Allah SWT.38 Generally, the works classified within this sphere are of the hagiographic and kitab (religious mystical treatises) genre. Hagiographic works deal concern important events in Islamic history, as well as showcase the greatness of Islamic prophets and warriors; whereas kitabs centre on the question of aqidah (creed) and syariat (conduct) in Islam, besides exploring metaphysical issues concerning the Creator, as can be seen in Sufi allegorical verse and prose.39

Braginsky sees Sufi literature as the manifestation of the evolution of

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35 Ibid. p. 47.
36 Ibid. p. 48.
38 Ibid. p. 62.
39 Ibid.
Malay thought, evident in the doctrines and philosophies contained within, such as the *wahdahtul wujud* (existential monism) doctrine present in most of the *syairs* of Hamzah Fansuri.\(^{40}\) It is important to note that Braginsky's observations not only confirm Hamzah's considerable capabilities, but also echo Al-Attas' stand that Sufi *syairs* embody the intellectual and rational development of the Malays.\(^{41}\)

To reiterate, Braginsky's classification of texts within his 'System of Classical Malay Literature' shed light on a few conceptions of Islam's role and contribution to Malay literature. One such conception is the role of Islam in shaping 'literary self-awareness' (*kesedaran diri sastera*) in Malay literature, where literature is produced within the *Tawhid* framework of knowledge, which espoused knowledge, and jettisoned the supernatural and mythical elements opposed to the framework.\(^{42}\) The embrace of Islam, he states further, developed the collective intellect of the Malays, so much so that it gave rise to an awareness of the function of literature as a didactic tool:

> Writing, letters, literature, 'the deeds of the reed pen' formed the heart of Malay culture, just as they had laid the cultural foundation of the Muslim world... The most enduring part of their cultural heritage was literature, mostly created after the adoption of Islam...Malay culture during its heyday saw the Universe as a book, a work of literature.\(^{43}\)

It is ironic, given his origin, that Braginsky's views are not in tandem with those of his Western counterparts such as North and Wilkinson, who generally held that Malay literature before the arrival of Western forces reflected the backwardness of Malay intellectual capacity. Thus, Braginsky finds that Malay literature had already achieved high intellectual development, before the onset of colonisation, and more importantly, that this achievement can be entirely attributed to Islam.

*Medan-medan dalam Sistem Persuratan Melayu* by Mohd. Affandi Hassan

This part of the discussion will focus on the work of Affandi, which centres on Islam's role in changing the cosmogony of the Malays. Affandi finds that this change was brought about by the introduction of the *Tawhid* concept, which in turn triggered the intellectual evolution in

\(^{40}\) Ibid. p. 68.


\(^{42}\) For the comparison of the respective contributions of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism to Malay literature, see V.I. Braginsky, 1998 *Yang Indah, Berfaedah dan Kamal: Sejarah Sastra Melayu dalam Abad 7–19*. Jakarta: INIS.

\(^{43}\) Ibid. p. 1.
the orientation of Malay literature during the Islamic period, from the pre-Islamic (animistic and Hinduistic) literary ventures which merely concerned the worship of mystical powers, and the glorification of nobility.44

According to Affandi, the significance of Malay letters during the Islamic period in terms of its understanding and function, as opposed to pre-Islamic literature can be understood through the classification of literary domains. These domains are systematically organised in his 'Sistem Persuratan Melayu' (System of Malay Literature). The system is divided into three domains: Medan Cerita (story domain), Medan Bukan Cerita (non-story domain) and Medan Petua (didactic domain).45 The 'story domain' (Medan Cerita) includes works of the hikayat genre, such as Hikayat Amir Hamzah, Hikayat Hang Tuah and Hikayat Malim Deman, which are classified thus because of its dominant feature, the story. Nevertheless, Affandi states that although these works are primarily story-driven, they are in keeping with the tenets of Islam, in that matters of divinity are foregrounded. The 'non-story domain' (Medan Bukan Cerita) contains various Malay poetic forms such as the pantun, syair, seloka, gurindam and nazam. According to Affandi, works in this domain reflect Malay wisdom, and are framed by the use of adorned language.46 The works in the 'didactic domain' (Medan Petua) are grouped together based on their practicality as well as their social benefit; these works consist of the mantera (religious incantations), sastera kitab (literary treatises), kitab undang-undang lama (ancient legal treatises) and petua pentadbiran (administrative guides) genres, and include Hukum Kanun Melaka and Kitab Jaya Waras.47 Affandi points out that genres are not necessarily fixed within specific domains, but are instead determined the function of the literary work: for instance, although the non-story domain mainly consists of syairs or pantuns, elements of these forms can be found in works that are contained within the story and didactic domains. It is important to note that Affandi does not assume that hikayats or manteras that are peppered with syair or pantun forms are flawed, but are instead all the

44 See Mohd. Affandi Hassan, 1994 Medan-medan dalam Sistem Persuratan Melayu. Kota Bharu: Penerbit Tiga Putri, p.18. It is based on the above context that Affandi's work was referenced in Muhammad Haji Salleh's Inaugural Lecture entitled Puitika Sastera Melayu: Satu Pertimbangan (Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1989), which centred on the animistic and Hinduistic literary legacy. Affandi termed this as a 'regressive effort' (usaha yang menoleh ke belakang) because he considers the pre-Islamic periods of Malay literary history as being backward.
46 Ibid. p. 31.
48 Ibid. p. 31.
The dynamism of all three domains in the system would indicate that Malay literary works during the Islamic period were more geared towards the delivery of content, as opposed to subordinate functions of form and speech. In addition, Affandi also finds that Malay literature, when viewed within the system, contain didactic aspects and moral values, which he assumes are integral features of Malay literature during the Islamic period.\textsuperscript{49}

In his comparison between Malay literature during the Islamic period and the 'modern' period, he finds that 'modern' literary works have largely abandoned the tradition form, and are more open to 'modern' Western philosophical and literary concepts. This is clear in the 'modern' Malay literary works forsaking of the spiritual, which is an integral element of traditional Malay letters, and the active inclination towards what he terms as 'the sensate art'. According to Affandi, 'sensate art' refers to the penchant of a text to delve into matter concerning the evils of human desires, and the subjective moral relation to these elements, evident in the flood of erotic and pornographic works in 'modern' Malay literature.\textsuperscript{50} Affandi points to the West as precursors of this trend, due to the fact that secularist thought was introduced in the Malay world by way of colonialism.\textsuperscript{51} Affandi explains the inclination of contemporary Malay literature to these 'modern' Western philosophical and literary concepts in the excerpt below:

Modern European writers claim that there is no need for intellectual thinking in literature, because literature is not a medium of knowledge; this idea is seized upon by the new writers of 'modern' Malay literature... Because of the propensity to imitate and exhibit individualistic traits, 'modern' Malay literature is no longer "performance oriented" as it was in traditional Malay letters... 'Modern' Malay literature (and modern literature as a whole), in fact, embodies the vacuity of these writers' souls, and the crisis of values with which they contend. This engenders shallow propagandist literature, parochial protest literature, and the profusion of obscene works in society.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid. p. 34.
\textsuperscript{50} Pitirim A. Sorokin states: 'Beginning roughly with the sixteenth century, the new principle [modernism] became dominant; and with it the new form of culture [modern culture] that was based upon it. In this way the modern form of our [Western] culture emerged- the sensory, empirical, secular, and this 'worldly' culture. It may be called sensate [culture]'. See Pitirim A. Sorokin, 1941. \textit{The Crisis of Our Age}. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., p. 20.
dipegang oleh para penulis baru dalam Sistem Sastera Malaysia... Kerana kuatnya kegemaran meniru ini dan menonjol pula sifat-sifat individualistik, maka Sistem Sastera Malaysia tidak lagi “performance oriented” seperti dalam Sistem Persuratan Melayu...Sistem sastera Malaysia (juga sastera moden seluruhnya) pada hakikatnya mencerminkan kekosongan jiwa penulis dan krisis nilai yang mereka alami. Dan ini mengakibatkan lahirnya sastera propaganda yang dangkal, sastera protes yang sempit (parochial), dan berlambaknya karya-karya lucah dalam masyarakat.)

More importantly, Affandi finds that this inclination towards the sensate is a ‘waste’, because it has completely subverted the conception of literature during the Islamic period that held knowledge at its core. The ‘modern’ conception of literature, he states, only refer to fictional literary ventures that are built upon mimesis. Therefore, according to Affandi, ‘modern’ Malay works also strive to entertain the reader, and are infused with virtually unlimited freedom to say anything licensed by fictionality, and the Western concepts of dulce et utile, freedom of expression and art for art’s sake. He finds that these concepts deviate from the Islamic core of traditional Malay literature, which functioned to spread the truth according to Islam. He also posits that ‘modern’ Western literary theories and methodologies, which in his view are favoured by the majority of contemporary Malay literary critics, can neither be true to traditional Malay letters, nor be accurate in its interpretation, as he states:

These ['modern' Western] theories and methodologies cannot apprehend the nature of traditional Malay letters, because the latter is inexorably linked to the religious understanding and cosmogony that accompany it; these theories and methodologies also cannot interpret the works with greater accuracy...

[Teori dan metodologi yang sedemikian tidak dapat memahami hakikat sastera Melayu lama yang sangat erat hubungannya dengan kosmogoni dan faham agama yang mengiringinya; teori dan metodologi itu juga tidak berupaya mentafsirkan karya-karya yang dihasilkan dengan lebih tepat...]

Thus, Affandi’s proclamations of the ‘waste’ in ‘modern’ Malay literature in some way refutes the views of Western scholars, like North and Wilkinson, who emphasise the role of the West in developing Malay literature. Because of this ‘waste’, he believes there is a crucial need to revive to the traditional spirit of Malay literature in the Islamic

53 Ibid. p. 29.
period through his notion of *Persuratan Baru* (Genuine Literature), which implements *awhid* in its framework in the definition and conceptualisation of literature. The placement of *Tawhid* at the axis of literary efforts represents the arduous challenge to resurrect the glory of Malay literature, which disappeared as a consequence of colonialism.

**Conclusion**

The discussion of the works of Al-Attas, Braginsky and Affandi illustrate a few important conceptualisations of the contribution of Islam to Malay literature. One such conceptualisation is the large-scale intellectual and rational evolution of the Malays after the adoption of Islam. This evolution transcends the Malay literary field, evident in changes to the orientation of Malay literature. Malay literature, which had previously centred on the supernatural and mythical forces during the Animistic period, and the glorification of kings during the Hinduistic period, metamorphosised into an intellectual enterprise, which had intellectualism and rationality at its base. Al-Attas, Braginsky and Affandi indicate that this development is the clearest manifestation of the changes wrought by Islam upon Malay culture and literature – a significance noticeably not reflected in the works of Western scholars, such as Vlekke, Krom, Van Leur, North and Wilkinson, as has been discussed earlier. It is within this context, that this article hopes to offer a perspective of discussion that is more partial in the valuation of the role and contribution of Islam in Malay history and civilisation.

Bibliography


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