

***The Price of Dignity* by Azizi Haji Abdullah: Contesting the Judgment on an Award-Winning Novel**

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ABSTRACT

The novel *The Price of Dignity* (the Malay original is *Harga Sebuah Maruah*, henceforth *Tpd*) by Azizi Haji Abdullah came in second place in the Writing Competition in Honour of the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of The Institute of Language and Literature 2006. According to the official competition report, the strength of the novel lies in its storytelling aspects, such as its technique, sequencing of events, seamless flow, the compact nature of its plot, as well as the lack of authorial intrusion in its narrative development. This article uses as its analytical framework a number of key ideas from Persuratan Baru, especially the differentiation between knowledge and the story, and the emphasis on the usage of discourse as the medium for the transmission of knowledge. This article analyses the extent to which the judging panel complied with their own criteria in their evaluation of the novel, and in their justifications for the award of the second prize to *Tpd*. In relation to that, the article also analyses *Tpd* to explore the extent to which the novel itself can be considered as having adhered to the criteria outlined by the panel, and corresponded to their justifications. The article contests the panel's judgment which is seen as debatable because of a confused understanding of the nature of thought and the narrative structure in a creative work.

Keywords: Story, knowledge, Persuratan Baru, thought, narrative structure

INTRODUCTION

In 2006, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (The Institute of Language and Literature, henceforth DBP) held a Writing Competition in Honour of the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of DBP, a landmark literary event in the development of Malaysian

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literature. Given its significance, this article focuses on the outcome of the competition, in terms of Azizi Haji Abdullah's *The Price of Dignity* (the Malay original is *Harga Sebuah Maruah*, henceforth *Tpd*) winning the second prize, with a cash reward of RM40,000.00. Specifically, the article examines the Report of the Writing Competition in Honour of the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of DBP, (henceforth Report), published in the March 2007 issue of *Dewan Sastera*, to see if the panel abided by its own criteria in the evaluation of *Tpd*, as well as in the justifications put forth for the novel being awarded the second prize. In line with that, the article also undertakes an analysis of *Tpd* itself to see if the novel actually corresponds to both the outlined criteria and the justifications provided by DBP for it being awarded the second prize. To that end, the article utilises as its analytical framework Mohd. Affandi Hassan's (henceforth MAH) literary concept of Persuratan Baru (henceforth PB), in particular its ideas on knowledge and the story, as well as the position of the latter in a work of creative fiction.

PERSURATAN BARU AS THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The corpus of PB is now vast and easily accessible, what with the existence of a dedicated blog (www.pbaru.blogspot.com), an up-to-date resource to provide readers with information on the literary concept.¹ For the purposes of this article, however, only a number of its ideas will be discussed below.

MAH divides PB into three major concerns: the nature of man (*hakikat insan*), the nature of knowledge and action (*hakikat ilmu dan amal*) and the nature and function of literature (*hakikat dan fungsi sastera*). With reference to the first, the nature of man, PB posits as the main premise underlying all arguments the concept of *taklif* or man's responsibility and accountability to abide by His commands and to avoid that which He prohibits, that is, the responsibilities and implications arising from man's dual roles as servant of Allah SWT and His vicegerent on Earth, as stated in the Al-Qur'an: "I have only created Jinns and men, that They may serve Me" (Surah Al-Zariyat, 51:56). Where the nature of knowledge is concerned, PB stresses the importance of knowledge and its noble status within Islam. MAH has already debated at length the absolute importance of knowledge in Islam; it will suffice here to recall a *Hadith* (Traditions of Prophet Mohammed, pbuh) which Rahmah Ahmad Othman (2010) quoted: "and truly, the supremacy of an *alim* (learned man) over an *abid* (pious man) is like that of the moon over the stars" (p.29).² 'Knowledge' here refers to *true* knowledge, which enables one to distinguish between the true and the false; only with the ability to do so can one alleviate doubt and suspicion, and arrive at a sense of certainty (Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani, 2010). The sources of this true knowledge are the Qur'an and the Hadith, in that they contain revelations, signs and guidance direct from Allah SWT, which are certain and absolute in nature. This is differentiated from knowledge gleaned from

man's cognitive faculties of thought and experience, which originate from internal mental processes, and are used to learn, interpret and understand. The origin of this cognitive knowledge in itself makes it limited and relative, and thus, it has to be based on absolute revealed knowledge for it to approach true knowledge. It is this understanding that is at the core of PB, in its stress on true knowledge as its point of departure.

Recognising the importance of knowledge and action as a solid entity ensures that knowledge will be given priority in any undertaking, including that of writing both creative and critical pieces (which, of course, includes judging works in competitions). In relation to that, the story of Prophet Yusuf (a.s) can be recalled here, which shows that the very aim of storytelling is the dissemination of messages and advice. The story is presented as a composed and refined parable which has a clear function, i.e. to deliver true knowledge. This is evident in the last verse of Surah Yusuf:

There is, in their stories, Instruction for men endued with understanding. It is not a tale invented, but a confirmation of what went before it - A detailed exposition of all things, and a Guide and a Mercy to any such As believe (Surah Yusuf, 12: 111).

This understanding of the purpose of a

story is at the foundation of PB.

PB also lays down a number of principles on the treatment of knowledge and the story in a creative or critical work. This includes the principle of *differentiating* knowledge from the story. What this means is that knowledge and story are allocated different *statuses, functions* and *forms* in any given narrative. The *status* of knowledge, according to PB, is higher than that of the story, which in turn makes the delivery of knowledge, ideas, arguments and thoughts as the real concern or core business (*urusan hakiki*) of creative works, as PB conceives it.

This hierarchical relationship entails that the function of knowledge should determine and shape the story, and not vice versa. What this means, in the context of PB, is that the knowledge that the author wishes to impart should determine the choice of narrative components employed to construct the story, such as characters and characterisation, plot, episodes, setting, action, events, language, and so on. The choice of these components is based on their ability and suitability to enable the dissemination of knowledge (in the form of a discourse, which will be discussed below), in as effective and lucid a manner as possible. In short, the choice of narrative components in the construction of a story is based on the 'needs' of the body of knowledge that the author wishes to discuss, and not those of the story to be constructed; this is what PB calls an *epistemic choice*. By making this epistemic choice, the story will then function as a vehicle of that knowledge,

a channel that makes possible for knowledge to develop fully and soundly.

As this channel is provided by the story and its narrative components, it is therefore a uniquely creative channel, as opposed to an academic channel with its own requirements, which do not call for the manipulation of characters, events, episodes, and so on. This explanation invalidates the commonly held assumption that PB either neglects or denies altogether the presence of the story in a creative work. To PB, its understanding of the story is very clear; of course there is a story present in a creative work—it would scarcely be a creative work otherwise!—but its form, function and status are *wrought* in such a way as to prioritise knowledge. This is the shift in the practical aspects of creative writing that PB advocates.

Having established the priority of knowledge, PB then posits discourse as a mechanism by which this priority can be realised. The utilisation of discourse within a creative work is inherently advantageous to the delivery of knowledge because it encompasses a number of practices—such as discussing, revealing, elaborating, explaining, commenting, demonstrating, debating, proving, affirming, disputing, and so on—that facilitate developing ideas, thoughts or knowledge. The very presence of knowledge in the form of discourse is what separates *Persuratan* works or works advocated by PB from common literary works that also claim to impart knowledge. At this juncture, it is crucial to understand fully what PB means by discourse, which MAH (Mohd. Affandi Hassan, 2004, p.54)

defines as follows:

Discourse is thoughts (ideas) that have been distilled from a large body of information which is developed and thought out based on a particular concept of knowledge ... discourse is learned arguments that is used to explain an issue which can then be summarised into a particular conclusion.³

In relation to that, discourse is often mistakenly seen as synonymous with information. In this view, facts—including those that are readily observable by anyone—are considered as knowledge and touted as such when they are added into a story, with the assumption that the very presence of those facts automatically renders a text “scholarly”, or an intellectual work of fiction (Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, 2008, p. 239-270). Discourse, as perceived by PB, is information that has undergone a process of *rumination*, such that it can stand as an idea (or ideas) on its own strength.

It also needs to be understood how this discourse can be presented in a story. PB introduces the concept of the *stylisation of ideas*. This stylisation of ideas does not refer to information that is simply inserted into a story; instead, it encompasses both an emphasis on ideas as well as the need for those ideas to be stylised. This would mean that discourse, as defined by MAH above, is *inscribed in* the story in a smooth, unobtrusive manner such that its presence

is felt not as a deviation from the story, but rather as its natural development that is fully integrated, even if the content of that discourse is saturated with arguments, debates or deep knowledge. Thus, the story plays its role as a vehicle of knowledge when ideas are artistically woven through this concept of inscription.

In the context of Malay literature, the above discussion clearly shows that PB represents a clear shift in the production and comprehension of both creative and critical works. I have elaborated on this matter at length in another instance (see Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, 2009), but suffice it to say here that the commonly held view in the world of Malay literature is that knowledge and the story are synonymous. The implication of this view is that knowledge and the story are of equal status, since the story *is* itself knowledge, meaning that when authors fulfil the demands of the story, they are also fulfilling the demands of knowledge. Moreover, in the context of narrative construction, it is acceptable or even recommended that the story dominates knowledge entirely, which can be seen in the practice of excluding from the story anything bearing knowledge, such as the technique of the sermon. This view is taken to its extreme when S. Othman Kelantan (2002) categorically pronounces that creative works should exclude knowledge altogether: “The literary researchers who themselves do not produce creative works often declare that creative writers should produce scholarly texts. As a researcher and a creative writer myself, I find that if writers want to be

intellectual, then they should produce scholarly texts, and not literary works.”⁷⁴ And the fact that S. Othman Kelantan was anointed as the country’s National Laureate (Sasterawan Negara) shows that this view has been institutionalised in the Malay literature. It is in this context that I made the argument that the main principle organising the Malay literary works is story-making, in the sense that the *real concern* or core business of these works is to initiate, develop, sustain, stretch out and conclude the story—a story which is also taken to be equivalent to knowledge. I summarise this in my statement that “the story is the comfort zone of Malay literature,”⁷⁵ referring to the ease of merely telling a story, as well as the easy resort to the acceptance of the story as knowledge (Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, 2007, p. 58).

With the analytical framework of PB thus established, the article will move onto an analysis of *Tpd* as a work that was deemed worthy of receiving the second prize in the DBP competition, based on the criteria outlined in the panel’s Report, as well as the reasons proffered to justify their decision.

A BRIEF NOTE ON THE COMPETITION

Tpd was produced in a specific context: a competition that had clearly outlined its own regulations, both from the aspect of the creative requirements of the submissions, and that of the evaluation of said submissions. An advertisement in the March 2005 issue of *Dewan Sastera* stated that the competition was aimed at “encouraging local writers

to produce novels framing the issue of a Malaysian community that is developing, competitive, liberal, progressive, peaceful and was, is and will be held in high regard by others” (p.37).⁶ Undoubtedly, the purpose of the competition held in line with DBP’s anniversary is overwhelmingly positive. In relation to that, the regulations did not set a singular theme that the entries should work around; however, they stated that the works “should be able to depict a community that is rich in the culture and customs of Malaysia, with high moral values and ethics, as meeting one of the challenges of Vision 2020” (p.37).⁷

With reference to the report written by Zalila Sharif (2007) and published in the March 2007 issue of *Dewan Sastera* (p.19-22), each submission should fulfil the three criteria:

Thought, ethics and a positive vision of life, displayed in positive and dynamic characters, and the ability of the writer to use new and creative writing techniques with interesting style and linguistic ability (p.20, emphasis added).⁸

By using the word “and” instead of “or,” it is important to note that the criterion of “thought” is clearly emphasised, along with “ethics” and “a positive vision of life.”

Moving to the judgment which specifically discusses the reasons behind awarding *Tpd* the second prize, the Report states:

The author successfully utilised

a natural storytelling technique, allowing his characters to develop in line with the design of the plot. The author does not intrude upon his own narrative. The smooth flow of events and the tightness of the plot provides added value to the storytelling style (p.21).⁹

And with reference to what is considered to be the “message” of the novel, the Report states:

There is a clear message on the [implications] of forced exploitative development, which readily strips away the tradition and dignity of the Malay people...The writer elegantly connotes that certain instances of physical development undermine the welfare of Malays in the long run (p.21).¹⁰

It is in the context of these excerpts that *Tpd* was produced and judged.

Based on PB and the Report excerpted above, the article will now shift onto the analysis of *Tpd* to examine the extent to which the outlined criteria and the justifications provided for this award were tenable. In turn, the analysis also examines if the novel does adhere to these criteria, and does correspond to the justifications put forth by the judging panel.

THE PRICE OF DIGNITY AS A COMPETITION WINNER: AN

ANALYSIS

In treating *Tpd* as the first runner-up in the competition, two things will be explored: firstly, the storytelling technique it employs as a work of creative fiction, and secondly, the concept of “thought” as understood in the novel and in the Report of the competition. Before the analysis can begin, however, a brief synopsis of the novel is provided here for ease of comprehension.

Tpd is the story of the struggles of Kampung Kertau’s farming community, after they learn that their paddy fields, which have provided them with sustenance for generations, will be taken over by a development corporation to make way for an aquaculture farming project. Although the farmers will receive monetary compensation for their lands, the majority of them begin to resist the corporation, led by an old widow named Cah, and her son Hijrah. Their resistance notwithstanding, the corporation begins to deploy tractors to uproot the paddy fields in preparation for the takeover. When Hijrah attempts to stop the tractors, he is arrested, placed in a lockup, and released after a few days. Although Cah, Habibah and Saad then manage to obtain legal aid and get an injunction to stop the tractors temporarily, they are also eventually arrested and placed in police custody. As the harvesting season approaches, the tractors resume their work, and begin tearing up the paddy field of an old farmer, Pak Kassim. Shocked by the event, he has a heart attack and dies a few days later. The day of his death also coincides with the wedding of his granddaughter, Habibah, and Hijrah.

Later, when all the residents of Kampung Kertau are in a village meeting—except Cah and Habibah—the tractors return to finish uprooting Pak Kassim’s fields, and also those of Cah. Enraged, and armed with a *parang* (machete), Cah tries to stop the tractors by rolling in the mud and clutching at the paddy stalks in desperation. In doing so, she inadvertently stabs herself in the neck with her own *parang*, and is rushed to the hospital. While recovering, she is told that her land will indeed be taken over because the corporation is acting within its legal boundaries, as determined by a constitutional Act. Cah’s eldest son, Sulaiman, who has all the while been urging his mother to accept the compensation, is thrilled by the news. When he excitedly tells his mother that they are about to receive RM200,000.00 in compensation, she spits on her own son. In Cah’s mind, her decision to stop fighting is down to abiding the law, not selling out for cash.

Storytelling technique

From the synopsis above, it is clear that *Tpd* employs a straightforward plot development. The plot structure is linear, in that its events are deployed in sequential order, in accordance with the principle of cause-and-effect. This plot structure, wherein events are chronologically arranged to lead towards a definite resolution, is very commonly used, since it is, on the part of the author, easy to write, and on the part of the reader, easy to digest—hence its popular name, the conventional plot. In the context of *Tpd*, it is clear that Azizi employs this

structure to the letter, not only in his use of chronological sequencing, but also the characters, events, issues, and indeed, the whole story is geared towards reaching a definite ending, namely the resolution of the conflict faced by the villagers of Kampung Kertau—whether their paddy fields will be taken over by the development corporation or stay in their own hands. Although there are a few flashback sequences in the novel, their presence does not disrupt the chronological flow of the story. Moreover, these flashbacks still address the singular, overarching issue at stake in the novel, namely, the farmers' struggle to keep hold of their paddy fields. For instance, Cah has a flashback of herself and her husband working together on the paddy field—which only reinforces the understanding of why Cah's continued possession of paddy fields matters so much to her. This is also true of the sequence in which Cah remembers the disaster that befell her husband—his father selling off the family fields—which only serves to reinforce Cah's willingness to lay blood on the line in the fight against the development corporation. What this shows is that the presence of flashback sequences does not contradict the observation that the plot structure of *Tpd* is indeed linear. Nonetheless, the usage of such a conventional plot structure draws attention back to one of the entry criteria of the competition listed above, i.e., “the ability of the writer to use new and creative writing techniques.” Clearly, the writing technique on display here is not new, and is a very faithful adoption of the old narrative

structure with hardly any innovations that can be considered creative. Thus, when viewed from this perspective, *Tpd* does *not* actually fulfil the criterion of a new writing technique.

Besides this usage of a linear plot, the development of the plot also shows the usage of a commonly used formula, which is also considered conventional and passé, that of the introduction-complication-climax-resolution. The development of *Tpd* along the lines of the formula can be summarised as follows: *Introduction*: laying the groundwork of the story, namely, Cah's love for her paddy fields, which is reinforced by means of flashbacks, as described above. *Complication*: the development project and its implication, namely, the destruction and takeover of the farmers' paddy fields. This section not only allows the story to be fleshed out, but also drawn out across the length of the novel. It is executed through lengthy descriptions of a number of events, namely, the separate occasions of resistance to the project by Cah, Hijrah and the rest of the villagers. This is usually referred to as the *rising action*. *Climax*: Cah stabs herself with the blade of her *parang* when attempting to stop the tractors. *Resolution*: the paddy fields are taken over by deed. From this, it can be seen that the plot of *Tpd* is clearly in complete accordance with the formula. Strictly speaking, this is *not* a new writing technique—even if the Report would seem to claim otherwise.

Following that, another important issue is the very understanding of the basis of the novel form, as shown by *Tpd* itself

on the one hand, and the Report on the other. This understanding is significant, since it determines not only the storytelling technique employed in the novel, but also the shape it assumes in its construction. Elsewhere, I have discussed E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1968), which was a major reference for Malaysian literary critics in the 1970s. In Forster's view, "the basis of a novel is a story, and a story is a narrative of events arranged in time sequence" (p.37-38). As observed above in the analysis of its plot and the formula of its development, *Tpd* is a perfect manifestation of Forster's definition. *Tpd* is told in chronological order, which is from the time the news of the development project is first announced that puts the villagers in Kampung Kertau in a bind, until the resolution, when it becomes certain that the paddy fields will indeed fall into the hands of the development corporation.

This clear sequence is paralleled with a chain of events—for instance, Hijrah being arrested, the villagers having a meeting, Cah and Habibah being arrested, etc.—that occur one after another. This is the *story* which is at the basis of *Tpd*. It needs to be recalled here that the earliest publication of Forster's book was in 1927 (by Harcourt, Brace & Co.), which makes his definition about 80 years old. It is indeed impossible to label a storytelling technique that has been around for at least eight decades—indeed, this understanding of the basis of a novel has been in use long before that — as something 'new'. This datedness is even more stark given that post-modernism, with

its concepts of fragmentation and non-linear plots (which has also been employed by Malaysian writers), is available, in addition to local theories, such as PB, which offer different and 'newer' understandings of the writing process, as described above. Put simply, in the context of a competition that clearly outlined a "new writing technique" as one of its evaluation criteria, the analysis of *Tpd* shows that it employs arguably the most conventional writing technique there is—one that is not just impossible to label 'new', but is also generally considered to be ordinary, outdated and not innovative. This would mean that *Tpd* does not fulfil the criteria of a "new writing technique", which then calls into question the judgment made by the panel and their subsequent justifications in the Report. Given that it is virtually impossible to say that *Tpd* did indeed fulfil the "new writing technique" requirement, then its victory should be read instead as the failure of the Report to apply its very own criteria. How did this happen? It would be hard to say that the judges are not well-versed in literary concepts, given that the plot structure and the formula used in *Tpd* is one of the most basic concepts of literature, and that the competition counted as its judges renowned literary figures and scholars. Or, was it a case of the outlined criteria being nothing more than lip service—a necessary formality, but a non-binding one which can be ignored? Whatever the explanation, the analysis clearly shows that the judges did not apply the criterion of a "new writing technique", as much as it was not applied

in the creation of *Tpd*. This means that calling into question the judgment of the Report, and the reasons provided to justify its decision, is not an inappropriate and disrespectful act carried out for its own sake, but rather a necessary measure to ensure the integrity of the judgment, besides preserving the quality of works that have received similar institutional recognition.

The writing technique used in *Tpd*, as well as its understanding of the basis of the novel form, both of which have been proven to not be ‘new’, have deep implications on the construction of the novel itself in particular, and in the practice of Malay literature in general. Where *Tpd* itself is concerned—especially in the context of Forster’s definition of the novel form and its faithful adaptation in *Tpd* — it is worthwhile to note that Forster (1968, p. 34) also claimed that, “The novel tells a story. That is the fundamental aspect without which it could not exist”. This excerpt reinforces the position of the story as the “fundamental aspect” of the novel, and renders story-making the main principle to be considered in the construction of a novel. In this light, it would not be remiss to assume that narrative components will be utilised to their fullest extent in *Tpd* to adhere to the principle of story-making. And, this is exactly what Azizi does. For reasons of brevity, only three narrative components will be discussed below: event, suspense and detailing.

The exploitation and manipulation of events are very clearly employed in *Tpd*. Firstly, Azizi presents a myriad of events

in the novel, ranging from the trivial, such as spitting, to the dramatic, such as rolling desperately in a muddy paddy field and being stabbed by one’s own *parang*. Secondly, and more importantly, is that these varied events are linked together in a chain — the tractors destroying the fields, Hijrah being compelled to use his *parang* to stop them, Hijrah being sent to jail, Hijrah getting released from jail, the newly-released Hijrah continuing his protest, and so on—and in this way, the story is driven forward consistently until the novel reaches its ending, which then completes the construction of the story. The role of events here can be thought of as bricks, arranged one by one, so as to erect a structure, namely, the story. Clearly, the events presented in *Tpd*, as well as their manipulation, are an explicit acknowledgement that the story and the process of story-making are at the forefront of the novel’s construction.

Detailing is used heavily in *Tpd*, whether for the purposes of describing a situation, action or even a backdrop. In line with the emphasis placed on the story, the detailing in the novel functions to flesh out the story, to add content to a structure that is essentially no more complex than the protestations of Kampung Kertau’s farmers on the one hand, and the unmovable developing corporation on the other. Through the heavy usage of detailing, this essential struggle is padded with descriptions of the paddy fields that are up for grabs—from the sowing of the paddy plants to their harvesting—which are nestled alongside descriptions of life-and-death or unexpected actions. The manipulation of

detailing fills up the empty spaces around the basic premise of the struggle, and bestows upon it a dose of realism. An example of this detailing can be seen in the following excerpt:

It is a beautiful thing when they are done in the evening. The waters of the paddy field are still, with the mud being streaked with the tyre tracks of the tractors, like vegetable beds that are well-looked after. Hovering over the surface of that muddy water are winged termites and other insects. Spiders creep along the stalks. And in that moment, a flock of swifts darts overhead. A young kingfish survives its own dizzying about-turns to catch whatever it can, rippling the otherwise calm waters. The sour scent of the mud in the evening is alluring (Azizi Haji Abdullah, 2007, p.32).¹¹

It needs to be stressed that the focus here is on the story and its development and expansion; and with that, the principle of story-making is realised fully in *Tpd*.

In addition, the very act of locating the struggle as the basis of the story in *Tpd* invites suspense—thereby, making the manipulation of suspense absolutely vital to the storytelling technique. This is because the struggle in *Tpd* is presented as a zero-sum game, which will produce a clear winner and a clear loser, and until this zero-sum game is concluded, suspense can be continually manipulated so that its

operation never ceases in the story. And, this manipulation of suspense is very evident in *Tpd*: it can safely be said that the suspense in the 379-page novel carries the story from the first page until page 376, namely, the point at which the conclusion is finalised, and the suspense is no longer relevant to the construction of the story. Strictly speaking, therefore, the function of suspense in *Tpd* is to postpone the ending, and with that, extend the life of the story. This fits into the very form of the novel, which allows it to be manipulated easily and according to need; suspense works to expand the story alongside the numerous events, the swaths of vivid detail, and the manipulation of a whole host of other narrative components not touched upon here.

In addition, suspense also has another function that is of no less importance, especially in the context of the manner of the reader's involvement. As seen above, by manipulating suspense to delay the conclusion, *Tpd* is able to fill its narrative space with a number of events. It can be readily observed that the sequencing of these events in the narrative space inhabit oppositional poles, characterised by tension and release in turns. For instance, Hijrah is put in jail and the situation becomes tense; he is released and the tension is dissipated; the tractors start destroying the paddy fields and the situation becomes tense again; Cah, Habibah and Saad manage to get an injunction, providing release; the machines continue to destroy the fields and the situation becomes tense yet again; the village folk appoint lawyers and the tension

is released again, and this is repeated over and over to preserve the rhythm of tension-release. By manipulating tension-release, the story consciously chooses to elicit the involvement of the readers' emotions, namely feelings of anxiety and relief in turn—as opposed to what PB would prescribe, that is the involvement of their intellect. The accuracy of this observation will be shown below in the discussion on the aspect of 'thought'; but suffice to say at this stage that on the whole, *Tpd* places a much greater emphasis on the story as opposed to knowledge—the very opposite of what a PB-influenced work would do.

By arguing against an understanding of creative works wherein the story is prioritised, PB is actually *rejecting* the claim that it is narrow and rigid in its scope; what PB does, in fact, is *widen* the understanding of creative works by differentiating between knowledge and the story, because this very differentiation allows both aspects to be explored in much greater depth, and with a much more refined sense of beauty. On the one hand, by emphasising discourse, PB allows for an expansive space for knowledge to be framed. When knowledge is no longer conflated with the story, creative works that have hitherto been 'prohibited' from intellectual discourse are now free to explore realms of knowledge with as much depth as they so choose, without being bound by the confines placed by the demands of the story. On the other hand, based on the concept of the stylisation of ideas, the story no longer has to adhere to rigid and established forms and techniques, but is free to assume any

form that would best render it a vehicle of knowledge. With these shackles being undone, inflexible forms or formulas—such as the introduction-complication-resolution formula, chronological sequencing of events, detailing for the sake of realism, suspense to delay the conclusion, or 'newer' techniques, such as non-linear plots, fragmentation, and so on—become irrelevant. And so too, for instance, the prohibition of *syair* (traditional Malay verse), as a form associated with classical literature from being inserted into 'modern' creative works, and other similar restrictions. This is true creative freedom. Because the stylisation of ideas does not designate a definitive and rigid form, every literary work becomes unique, in that they no longer need to be produced from fixed and prohibitive blueprints,¹² forms, structures, or formulas. Nevertheless, despite displaying a myriad of styles and forms, every creative work subscribes to the one conviction, namely, the celebration of true knowledge. In the context of Malay literature, this truly represents a great paradigm shift.

Thought

With regard to the issue of 'thought', *Tpd* refers to the idea of "development." The Report concurs in seeing it as the 'message' of the novel, even if it narrows down 'development' into "exploitative development" or "damaging physical development" (p.21).¹³ But is 'development' really the 'message' of *Tpd*? The analysis shows that 'development' is made present in the novel only to initiate conflict, and not as an issue in itself that is addressed

by the novel. The conflict arises when the residents of Kampung Kertau become anxious and despondent when they learn of the impending takeover of their paddy fields by a corporation intent on turning those fields into an aquaculture farming project, in the name of ‘development’. However, there are no traces of a debate on this issue of ‘development’, as would be expected of a work that claims to be “presenting thought.”¹⁴ Instead, the issue of ‘development’ emerges as mere tokenism, only made to sound more impressive with references to the scientific names of the toxic waste materials from the aquaculture project that will damage the ecosystem. This serves to reinforce the claim that the issue as such is absent, and is not addressed directly; instead, it only functions to trigger conflict, a narrative tool to drive the story towards its conclusion.

This function is evident in that ‘development’ is made to instigate conflict—the villagers of Kampung Kertau become angry and despondent, and decide to collectively resist the aquaculture project—but then disappears from the story when its function has already been carried out. ‘Development’ only reappears, again as a tokenism, when the story needs to be driven forward, that is when the villagers act upon their anger. And with the conflict having been sparked, their subsequent actions can then be linked to the chronological chain of events that make up the story (see again Forster’s definition above). What emerges here is that the novel is primarily focused on the villagers’ resistance, especially that of

Cah and her son, which are veritable bricks in the structure of the novel. But ‘development’ as an issue in itself is not addressed, let alone foregrounded as an idea or thought to be explored in a creative fashion within *Tpd*.

The position of this ‘development’ also needs to be understood in the context of the Report, which, as noted above, outlines as its first criterion that all competition entries must contain “thought, ethics and a positive vision of life.” And given that *Tpd* is the first-runner up in the competition, surely it is not too much to assume that the novel has indeed fulfilled the criteria of containing ‘thought’? In the section of the Report on *Tpd*, it is clear that there is no reference to ‘thought’, but there is instead a reference to a ‘message’—with the only ‘message’ being that of ‘development’. Does this then mean that in the context of its usage in the Report, the terms ‘message’ and ‘thought’ are considered synonymous? If the answer is ‘no’, it then begs another question: what actually constitutes the ‘thought’ component in *Tpd*, which must have been present in the novel for it to win the second prize in the competition? Clearly, if the two terms are not synonymous, then the Report truly has failed to do its job of explaining to the literary public that *Tpd* has indeed fulfilled the first criteria, and detailing how Azizi was able to achieve this in a creative manner.

However, if the terms ‘message’ and ‘thought’ are considered synonymous, then it would be appropriate to ask: how can the Report acknowledge that *Tpd* did fulfil the criterion of “presenting thought,” if the analysis above proves that ‘development’ is

only presented as an instigator of conflict, and not as ‘thought’ per se? Put simply, *Tpd* shows no evidence of ‘thought’, and therefore, logically, it does not fulfil the first criterion outlined in the Report.

Moreover, in relation to that, it also needs to be recalled that the Report states: “The writer elegantly connotes that certain instances of physical development undermine the welfare of Malays in the long run” (see above). *Tpd* ends with the villagers of Kampung Kertau parting with their paddy fields, represented in the meeting between Cah and her eldest son, Sulaiman, on page 376 in the 379-page novel. It is clear that the Report sees the villagers’ loss of their paddy fields as part of a larger ‘message’, that of ‘undermining the welfare of Malays.’ But on that note, it is worthwhile to take cognizance of the fact that this ‘message’ can only be fully discerned in the final episode of the novel; in other words, if the reader were to stop reading the novel at any point before the conclusion, this ‘message’ would not be visible. This effectively lifts the story to a very significant level in *Tpd*, in that it now functions as the ‘articulator’ of the novel’s message. In other words, the story of Cah itself then becomes the message—meaning that the story and the ‘message’ (or ‘thought’, as understood by the Report) are synonymous. This synonymy is in sharp contrast to PB’s understanding of the story and thought/knowledge being differentiated in terms of status, function and the form of its presence in a creative work.

The above analysis clearly shows a

confusion in the Report’s understanding of the terms ‘thought’ and ‘message’; moreover, the term ‘thought’ is used arbitrarily, without a clear explanation. This is regrettable, seeing as ‘thought’ was underlined by the panel itself as a criterion for the process of evaluation. This would beg a further question: given that the public has evidence of works that *do not* contain ‘thought’ being evaluated, acknowledged and showcased by the Writing Competition in Honour of the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of DBP as works that *do* contain ‘thought’, would this then not perpetuate the confusion over the exact meaning of ‘thought’ when these novels, as well as others like them, are held as quality examples to be followed?

In this context, it needs to be reiterated that ‘thought’ as conceptualised by PB takes on an entirely different meaning, which will simultaneously alleviate this confusion. As noted above, PB posits the use of discourse as a mechanism to uncover, discuss, refine, dispute, reinforce (and so on) clear and concrete ‘thought’. And in accordance with its very terminology, ‘thought’ should not involve readers’ emotive capacity, as seen in *Tpd*, but rather their intellectual faculties, the rigour of which will be forged from the processes of uncovering, discussing, refining, disputing, reinforcing, and so on. In addition, ‘thought’ must be neatly woven into a story, to preclude the possibility of its being confused as an ‘instigator of conflict’, or any other similarly functioning narrative component. This is reinforced by PB’s differentiation between the story and knowledge in terms of status, function and

form. Clearly, 'thought' as defined by PB is far more sophisticated, and is a celebration of knowledge. It also represents a shift in the understanding of the process behind the production of creative and critical works, and it truly is something 'new' in the context of Malay literature—a literary world that has for too long nestled in a comfort zone, wherein it is just easier for the author to tell a story, and expedient for the reader to make the easy association of this story with 'thought' (Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, 2009).

The analysis here clearly reveals just how debatable the judgment of the Report is in its recognition of *Tpd*. In the two aspects explored, that is storytelling technique and thought, *Tpd* is found to have not fulfilled the stated criteria; it also does not correspond to the justifications put forth by the Report to explain its award of the second prize. It is thus essential to ask: is this the kind of judgment that will increase the quality of Malay literature, or impede its progress? And in relation to that, will this example of selecting and judging literary works at the highest level increase the quality of literary criticism, or otherwise? This analysis cannot, unfortunately, provide positive answers to these questions.

Aside from the judgment of the Report, and the implication of its fallacy, *Tpd* emerges as a rather ordinary literary work, which wholly inhabits the level of the story without offering any inspiring arguments. The structuring and technique of storytelling displayed in the novel are generally bound to understandings and practices of old, and

do not show any creativity or innovation in this regard. This is also true of its 'thought' component, which is conflated with the story; it considers this to be sufficient and appropriate. Where then are the strengths of *Tpd* that the judges saw, and which they believed to merit the second prize? Based on the analysis above, it can be concluded that the 'strength' of *Tpd* actually lies in the fact that it was created in a context of literature that is fully at ease with these old understandings and practices.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The analysis above shows that the evaluation and recognition of *Tpd* by the judging panel was debatable. The expertise in the field of literature, which one would expect to be the most basic prerequisite of a panel selected to evaluate and award recognition to literary works, seems to be absent. What do seem to be present are a sense of confusion and a lack of depth of understanding, which are now institutionally legitimised as a guide to similar evaluations in the future. The critical analysis quite simply reveals that claims of the novel's strengths or special nature are in fact untenable, in terms of being able to be justified intellectually. In many respects, the claims made in the Report are openly at odds with the evidence (i.e., the novel itself). Given this unfortunate situation, would it not be reasonable and responsible to ask for genuine expertise and in-depth knowledge to serve as prerequisites for purposes of evaluation? And should not a report that stems from such an evaluation be more intellectually rigorous and responsible,

so as to steer clear from general and unsubstantiated claims and arguments?

The debatable judgment as shown above calls attention to the important question of favouring as a criterion in narrative-writing competitions the prioritisation of story and story-making. The crucial question is, are these evaluative criteria the best we can hope for, in terms of ensuring the quality of works that will one day be canonised as national treasures? If the core of any successful civilisation is its knowledge, surely then a cold shoulder towards knowledge would not be a smart choice—all the more so when there *is* an alternative option available, one which is rooted in noble conviction and a solid understanding of the primacy of knowledge, as well as its relevance in creative writing.

In short, PB makes it clear that knowledge needs to be prioritised, at the same time that it takes into account the status, function and form of the story. This will ensure that creative works are produced and judged with authority, in that they will be free from confusion and uncertainties, at the same time they are sensitive to aesthetic demands. This truly is a dynamic shift, which allows for the flourishing of creative and critical works of high intellectual content and refined aesthetic quality. In the context of Malay literature today, this is the very shift that is needed.

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- ⁴My translation from the Malay: “*Pengkaji sastera yang tidak menghasilkan karya kreatif kerap menggembar-gemburkan penulis kreatif perlu menghasilkan karya ilmu. Saya sebagai pengkaji dan penulis kreatif berpendapat sekiranya pengarang mahu menulis ilmu, maka mereka sepatutnya menulis buku ilmu dan bukannya karya sastera.*”
- ⁵My translation from the Malay: “*...cerita adalah medan keselesaan sastera Melayu.*”
- ⁶My translation from the Malay: “*...menggalakkan golongan sasterawan tanah air mengarang novel yang menggarap persoalan masyarakat Malaysia yang membangun dan berdaya saing, liberal, progresif, aman damai dan dipandang tinggi oleh negara luar dari dahulu, sekarang dan pada masa hadapan.*”
- ⁷My translation from the Malay: “*...haruslah berupaya menggambarkan sebuah masyarakat yang kaya dengan budaya dan adat resam masyarakat Malaysia yang mempunyai nilai-nilai moral dan etika yang tinggi sebagai memenuhi satu daripada cabaran Wawasan 2020.*”
- ⁸My translation from the Malay: “*...pemikiran, etika dan visi hidup positif dalam persoalan, penampilan perwatakan positif serta dinamik, dan kemampuan pengarang menggunakan teknik penulisan baharu yang berdaya kreatif dengan gaya dan kebahasaan yang menarik.*”
- ⁹My translation from the Malay: “*Pengarangnya berhasil memanfaatkan teknik bercerita bersahaja, memberikan kebebasan watak-wataknya berkembang mengikut acuan plot. Pengarang tidak mencampuri naratifnya yang mengongkong. Kelancaran peralihan peristiwa dan kekejapan plot memberikan nilai tambah yang tinggi terhadap gaya penceritaannya.*”
- ¹⁰My translation from the Malay: “*Mesejnya jelas tentang paksaan pembangunan bersifat eksploitatif yang secara mudah menghakis tradisi warisan dan maruah orang Melayu... Pengarang secara halus, memberikan konotasi bahawa ada pembangunan fizikal yang*

ENDNOTES

¹See Mohd. Affandi Hassan 1992, 1994, 1997, 2008, 2010; Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir 2007, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; and Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani 2004, 2010.

²My translation from the Malay: “*Dan sesungguhnya keutamaan darjat seorang alim ke atas seorang abid seperti keutamaan bulan purnama berbanding bintang-bintang.*”

³My translation from the Malay: “*Wacana adalah pemikiran berasaskan maklumat yang disaring daripada sejumlah maklumat yang telah dimatangkan oleh pemikiran berasaskan konsep ilmu tertentu...wacana adalah hujah-hujah ilmiah yang digunakan untuk menjelaskan sesuatu persoalan sehingga dapat dirumuskan ke dalam kesimpulan tertentu.*”

memudaratkan kesejahteraan orang Melayu pada jangka waktu panjang.”

¹¹My translation from the Malay: “*Maka apabila selesai, kalau waktu petang, sangat indah nampaknya. Air sawah tenang dan nampak selut berjalur-jalur bekas traktor seperti batas-batas sayur yang terjaga. Di permukaan air selut yang tenang itu nampak kelekatu, serangga lain berterbangan. Lelabah merangkak-rangkak. Ketika itulah layang-layang melayah menyambar pantas. Sesekali anak haruan yang terselamat daripada pening dan mabuk putaran, menangkap apa-apa*

menjadikan air sawah yang diam itu berkocak kecil. Bau masam selut waktu petang pun, sedap.”

¹²Compare this to the insistence of the Report on the “mould of the plot” (*acuan plot*) which is considered to be among the strengths of *Tpd*: it “allow[s] his characters to develop in line with the mould of the plot.”

¹³My translation from the Malay: “*pembangunan bersifat eksploitatif*” and “*pembangunan fizikal yang memudaratkan...*”

¹⁴My translation from the Malay: “*mengadakan pemikiran.*”