

# CRITICS AS GUIDANCE: PARENTHOOD IN THE FIRST MALAY AUTOBIOGRAPHY HIKAYAT ABDULLAH

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**Abstract** - This paper aims to identify parenting guides in the first Malay autobiography of Hikayat Abdullah and then analyse them in the context of the traditional Malay society in the 19th century AD. The conquest of Abdullah Munshi as Father of Modern Malay Literature has provoked various reactions from scholars. Some consider Abdullah Munshi to bring renewal in Malay literature through criticisms of custom and culture that have been practiced since his birth. There are other scholars who disagree with the coronation and consider Abdullah Munshi's criticisms have deviated far from previous writing conventions. However, none of these studies have highlighted the criticism as a guided talk that he firmly emphasized. Thus, using the textual analysis method of Hikayat Abdullah and supported by the perspective of Swettenham (1895) on the minds and cultures of the Malay community which was objectively assessed by him, this study was able to improve the image of Abdullah Munshi, which was considered pro-British. What's more, the criticism is a guide focused on family institution especially to parents. Indirectly, this study proves that Abdullah Munshi views parenting guidance as something serious in order to produce a dignified and civilized generation. In conclusion, the autobiography of Hikayat Abdullah is not merely a new writing deviating from traditional Malay conventions, but is beneficial to the authors' audience.

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**Keywords** - Guide, parents, autobiography, Abdullah Munshi, Hikayat Abdullah

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## I. INTRODUCTION

'The deed of the reed pen' refers to the activities of Malay authors who are deep-rooted after the arrival of Islam to the region (Braginsky 1989; 1993: 1). From here on, the Malay community began to be aware of the importance of literature in their life, termed by Braginsky (1993; 2001) as 'literary self-awareness'. Now the birth process of the work needs to meet some of the criteria for completing the 'literary awareness' such as goals, essence, fact and kind to make the modus operandi of literary works creation clearer. This opinion was first mentioned by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1972:49) who argues that Islam is the religion responsible for sparking a 'spiritual revolution' that transforms the views of life and the value of the Malays from old to new, fairy-tale to reality, to rationalism, individualism and internationalism that started since the 14th century AD. In order to fulfil the 'literary awareness' in the authorship of Malay authors, elements aimed at educating or teaching are incorporated by the author in his work. However, seeing the development of Dutch and British colonialization into the Malay World in the 17th century until the 19th century which, led to a clash of cultures and thoughts between the Eastern and Western worlds. From this point on, literary outcomes are collected and examined by the colonialists to make it easier for them to understand the thinking of the colonies. Eventually these colonial scholars concluded that Malay literary works were only filled with imaginary elements and instantly did not benefit the audience (Wilkinson 1907). A need to introduce new genres such as the growing autobiography of the West, to mark the importance of

their colonization in benefiting the colonies (Wilkinson 1907; Winstedt 1940). This is how the name of Abdullah Munshi introduced until he was crowned as 'Father of Modern Malay Literature' for the courageous challenge of heinous conventions inherited for a long time.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The emergence of Abdullah Munshi, who was originally a Malay teacher to the British, gave a new phenomenon to the Malay world of literature. His familiarity with the colonialists led him to be influenced by the realism that fought a manifestation of the realities of human life without mixing it with the elements of myth and supernatural or transcendent (Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani 2006: 343). This change has given a 'cultural shock' to the conventions covered by the Malay author (Skinner 1978). Abdullah Munshi's courage to introduced a new style of authorship in Malay-based reality-based literature and escaped from the inherited letter of convention resulting in a travelogue of *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah* in 1838 and the first Malay autobiography of *Hikayat Abdullah* in 1842. Accordingly, some colonial and local scholars also acknowledged the courage of Abdullah Munshi to challenge the correspondence conventions such as Wilkinson (1907), Winstedt (1940), Za'ba (1940), Skinner (1959), A.Bakar Hamid (1979), Johns (1979) and Yahya Ismail (1987), Kassim Ahmad (1981), Mohd. Taib Osman (1988), Muhammad Hj.Salleh (1988) and several others. From here on, a 'modern' element was introduced which eventually gives a new phenomenon to Malay literature. However, the conquest of Abdullah Munshi as 'Father of Modern

Malay Literature' was criticized by some other scholars. Names such as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1969; 1971), Sweeney and Phillip (1975), Hassan Ahmad (1976), Sweeney (1980), Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir (2001) Abdullah Munshi only continued the tradition of authorship in the magnum opus of Sejarah Melayu. What's more, he is said to have not produced a 'literary' work (Ungku Maimunah 2001) because 'literature' is a good set of essays, beautiful language and good content (Darus Ahmad 1965; Abdul Rahman al-Ahmadi 1966). The question is, is it true that Abdullah Munshi produced a 'no literary' work through his Hikayat Abdullah? Examining the literature review above, it was found that no one had interpreted Abdullah Munshi's criticism as something capable of educating or being a guide. In the end, this study will examine criticisms by Abdullah Munshi in Hikayat Abdullah by focusing on family institution. Hence, the objective of this study is to identify parenting guidance in the first Malay autobiography of Hikayat Abdullah and to analyse the parenting guidance in the context of traditional Malay society in the 19th century AD.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study will use the text analysis methodology of Hikayat Abdullah (2004) to achieve the objective (1) which is, to identify parenting guidance in this first Malay autobiographical work. Three categories of parenting guidance are found that are not taken seriously by the community: (i) Parents need to show the best examples, (ii) Parents need to understand the concept of knowledge and (iii) Parents need to understand the concept of teachers in learning. In order to achieve the objective (2), the parenting guide will be analysed in the context of traditional Malay societies in the 19th century AD according to the perspective of colonial scholars. Names like Raffles (1835), Swettenham (1895), Wilkinson (1907), and Winstedt (1940) are among the colonial scholars who wrote a lot about the thinking and values held by the colonies. But this study chose perspectives by Swettenham (1895) entitled Malay Sketches as this work was one of the first comprehensive colonial reactions. Although Swettenham had a great deal of negative attitude towards the Malay community (Cohn 1996), it was a colonial perspective parallel to critics by Abdullah Munshi.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Children are born into this world in a pure nature. Their attitudes and behaviours are much influenced by the environment that plays a major role in the formation of personality when they are adults. The Malay community appears to be very serious about the concept of 'parenting' so it is also triggered in the form of proverbs such as, 'As is the father so is the son' and 'The apple never falls far from the tree'. As

the definition of 'parenting procedure or guidance', "[...] a constellation of attitudes toward a child that are communicated to the child and that, taken together, create an emotional climate in which parent's behaviours are expressed. These behaviours include both the specific, goal-directed behaviours through which parents perform their parental duties" (Darling and Steinberg 1993: 488), shows how every parent's behaviour is an early model of stimulating cognitive and emotional development of children. Hikayat Abdullah outlined three parenting guides of the combined criticisms expressed by Abdullah Munshi as follows:

#### (i) Parents Need to Show the Best Example

Abdullah Munshi's earliest criticism in Hikayat Abdullah (2004) is about the role of the indigenous Malay parents who are often uninformed in every action against their children (2004: 1-2). This attitude will have a negative impact on children's psychology and emotions. So, the parenting guide that can be found based on Abdullah Munshi's criticism is the 'open attitude' that every parent needs. This is reinforced by their position as the best model for their children. This uninformed attitude ultimately leads to 'amuk' in the Malay community to the point of sacrificing life as Swettenham's (1895:3) opinion that, "A Malay is intolerant of insult or slight; it is something that to him should be wiped out in blood ". Hikayat Abdullah also criticized the weak religious beliefs of the Malay community. For example, parenting guidance of shall not give up hope with Allah SWT (Hikayat Abdullah 2004: 9). As an author who is always responsible for his society, Abdullah Munshi can feel the burden of parents in raising children. That was why he criticized the parents who abstained from religious beliefs instead of placing hopes and prayers on supernatural beings who would mislead them in life. Swettenham's opinion (1895: 3) below on the Malay individual proves the above statement, "He is a Muhammadan and a fatalist, but he also very superstitious". Abdullah Munshi also criticized the attitude of most Malay societies who strongly believed in the elements of superstition. For example, parent's belief that the main cause of a sick child is of the name he carried (Hikayat Abdullah 2004:12). Abdullah thought that this belief is what makes the Malay community unprepared and influences the quality of parenting, especially to the family institution built. Not to mention the use of charms and amulet that are still strongly revolve among the community (Hikayat Abdullah 2004:51). In fact, the belief of selling children to families with many children if the child is always sick indicates that the parents are not compatible with it (Hikayat Abdullah 2004:11), Abdullah Munshi criticized this practice, as if the people did not believe in Qada and Qadar of Allah SWT (Hikayat Abdullah 2004:11). The parenting guidance that Abdullah Munshi tries to convey is the importance of parents to stick to the

religion to always have the blessings and blessings of Allah SWT in the home built. Driven by this phenomenon, Swettenham (1895: 4-5) argued that although the majority of the Malay societies embraced Islam until it was difficult to penetrate Christian preaching by European missionaries, the reality was that they lacked understanding of the religion which was, "[...] he believes that the absence of hypocrisy is the beginning of the religion". The Malay community is also described by Abdullah Munshi as who believes in all illnesses caused by ghosts and demons. That is why many parents visit a traditional witch-doctor or traditional medicine practitioner if the family is affected by any illness. Swettenham (1895: 228) proved this condition with, "[...] people whose ancestors had for generations belonged to the place and who were saturated with ancient customs. Prejudices and superstitions that had to be learned, and with many of which it was difficult to sympathise".

### **(ii) Parents Need to Understand the Knowledge Concept**

Abdullah Munshi criticized parents who did not care about their children. Indirectly, Abdullah Munshi provides a parenting guidance that educates young children to love knowledge, especially the Qur'anic knowledge (Hikayat Abdullah 2004:13). Abdullah Munshi continued to provide other guides such as parents need to force children to write or copy the Qur'an. This will result in beautiful writing if it is trained accordingly (Hikayat Abdullah 2004: 25). In fact, parents need to train their children to recite the Quran in the mosque. This is because the mosque is the centre of the ulama' and fuqaha gatherings which will surely help correct the readings of every mistake by the mosque pilgrims (Hikayat Abdullah 2004: 24). Interesting thing is that Abdullah Munshi called on his community especially parents to make sure they understand the translation of the Qur'an and not just read it. The practice of the Malay community needs to be changed because the interpretation of the Quranic translation will be the one to help them enhance the religion they have embraced. This situation is expressed by Swettenham (1895:6) as, "He is often studious even, and duly learns to read the Koran in a language he does not understand". He also gave guidance to parents to encourage their children to master a multilingual language even from non-Muslim communities (Hikayat Abdullah 2004: 101). Through the learning of foreign languages only the Malay community can go forward and be able to master foreign knowledge that can benefit its homeland (Hikayat Abdullah 2004:42-43). The Swettenham statement (1895:218) below clearly demonstrates how a colonialist has belittled the Malay cultural heritage of the king's and the people's affairs which should be corrected by his own people. There is nothing else to do but to master their language (English) as well as the knowledge they

introduce so that this confusion can be explained with a clear and rational argument. For example, Swettenham's misunderstanding (1895: 218) towards 'royalties' language, "In this feudal and conservative country when the people eat, they 'makan', but the Raja does not 'makan', with him it is 'santap'. When the 'masses' bathe they 'mandi', but the same operation in the case of a Raja is called 'siram' [...]".

### **(iii) Parents Need to Understand The Concept of Teachers in Learning**

The most important thing in learning is to respect the teachers. In this regard, Abdullah Munshi advised parents to understand the concept of 'teacher' and 'learning' in gaining the knowledge (Hikayat Abdullah 2004: 16). He stressed that a teacher punished his pupils for teaching, educating and disciplining students. Hikayat Abdullah (2004:20) states it as, "Do as you wished, as long as don't break their hands and feet". Hikayat Abdullah (2004:23-24) also lists some physical forms of punishment are aimed to teach them for the offenses committed and hoping that the child will not repeat it again. This is the concept of education that parents should embrace to educate their children to be useful people in the future. Some punishments such as rattan, 'apit cina', 'kayu palat', 'singgang', are the punishments intended to teach pupils of committing offenses and parents should accept them with an open heart. Swettenham (1895: 3-4) thought it is saddening that in the average Malay illiterate society, the importance of knowledge is set aside. Even the concept of 'teacher' or 'tutoring' is not taken seriously by the whole society, "[...] he is fond of gambling, cock-fighting and kindred sports".

## **CONCLUSION**

The re-study of Abdullah Munshi's criticisms in his work, Hikayat Abdullah, found that it deserves to be 'reassessed' so that his bad 'image' as labelled by pro-British could be cleared. The findings found that despite the criticism, the reality is a guide was meant to be spread so that positive changes can occur to the Malay community. In conclusion, Abdullah Munshi's works should be continuously reviewed so that the negative perceptions of him can be cleared. Furthermore, as the closest individual to the British colonialist, Abdullah Munshi had realized the colonial trick on colonies. However, 'like pulling hair in the flour', he needs to deal with it patiently and wisely so that both parties benefit from his criticism. Indirectly, the community will come to realize that his actions are not pro-British but a point of change to his nation.

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