

LITERACY THROUGH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: A MALAYSIAN PERSPECTIVE

SITI ROHAINI KASSIM

ABSTRACT

Malaysian children's literature in English is assumed to have had its beginnings with the setting up of the British colonial government in Malaya in the first half of the 20th century. Prior to this, literature for the consumption of the general reading public was mainly written in the vernacular, or in Arabic. Through the education system reorganised by the colonial government, English language and literature became a significant component of Malaysia's colonial heritage. To a certain extent the selection of texts brought in by the British colonial government that were used in schools, formed the beginnings of the shape and nature of language and literature in English in subsequently independent Malaysia. After independence, Malaysia developed and organised its own selection of texts to help in nation building. This paper looks at the extent to which literature for children has developed through the years to provide a rich ground for the enrichment of children's literacy in Malaysia.

Keywords: *children's book, publishing, folk tales, fiction, nonfiction, creative writing*

INTRODUCTION

Being a multicultural society, Malaysia has literary traditions and literature that reflect and originate from each cultural group, in the vernacular. In addition, we also have literature in English, an inherited tradition that came down from our British colonisers. Malaysian Literature in English at this stage is already a known entity, and recognised as a component of Literatures in the various Englishes of the world. Literature for children in Malaysia, however, has had a somewhat vague beginning, and at this point in time, a glimpse into literature for children that are readily available in the market, would reveal the fact that as far as material for improvement of literacy for children, particularly children's books, is concerned, there is no dearth in the supply. However, the books and sundry material at a

glance somehow fall short of showing a definite “Malaysian-ness” in its contents; the literature, in other words, is still quite unable to demonstrate its Malaysian identity. What they do demonstrate, however, is the rationale for choices made by parents and publishers.

How then did Malaysian Literature for children arrive at the present stage? And where is it heading in the light of current trends in literature? Some relevant questions that are common in discussing children’s literature in Malaysia include:

- How did our journey in being literate in English begin?
- What kind of books was used to introduce English into Malaysia?
- Does the history that we went through help shape the literature that we have for our children now?

Looking around us, we observe numerous products that are all very useful in developing various kinds of literacy in our children, whilst having also to contend with issues such as identity development through children’s books, social and moral development, mental development and so on.

This paper is not strictly about tracing how literacy opportunities for Malaysian children have developed through the years since colonial times. Rather, it seeks to share some observations about the kind of literature for children that have had a part in contributing towards the development of literature in English, and indirectly in literacy, for children in Malaysia. In doing this, the paper will briefly consider the development of Literature for children in English in Malaysia, through a glance at the kind of print and other multimedia material that make up Malaysian literature for children, at the same time comment on the direction of Malaysian children’s literature towards developing its own identity.

LITERACY AND LITERATURE

“Literacy” as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) could be summarised as

- the quality or state of being literate, especially the ability to read and write;
- possession of education;
- a person’s knowledge of a particular subject or field.

The reference to literacy in this paper alludes to one’s possession of education, and generally implying the ability to read and write. This sense of literacy assigns a broader meaning to the term and allows for the third to describe “multiple literacy” as the possession of various literacies such as being computer literate as well as being literate in music.

Among the various definitions for “Literature” is the following clear explanation from *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, 2008. It explains “Literature” as

... a body of written works...(a term) traditionally applied to those imaginative works of poetry and prose distinguished by the intentions of their authors and the perceived aesthetic excellence of their execution...(and)

classified according to a variety of systems, including language, national origin, historical period, genre, and subject matter.

Hence "Children's Literature" can generally be described in terms of

... the body of written works produced to entertain or instruct young people. The genre encompasses a wide range of works, including acknowledged classics of world literature, picture books and easy-to-read stories, and fairy tales, lullabies, fables, folk songs, and other, primarily orally transmitted, materials. It emerged as a distinct and independent form only in the second half of the 18th century and blossomed in the 19th century. In the 20th century, with the attainment of near-universal literacy in most developed nations, the diversity in children's books came almost to rival that of adult popular literature. (*Britannica Concise Encyclopaedia*)

For the purpose of this paper, the discussion will consider literacy mainly from the point of the ability to read and write, differentiating between literature (small "l") as referring to general reading material, and Literature with a capital "L" to refer to texts that have been accepted as having strong cultural and literary value.

FORMS OF WRITTEN LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN

Written literature for children developed from the very simple, roughly constructed hornbook, invented in 1440, to the book format when the printing press was invented, to the sophisticated electronic books and reading material that are catching up in popularity today. The subject matter of early written literature were intended mainly for the purpose of "instruction", that is, teaching, specifically to teach children the alphabet, numerals, as well as prayers.

As print culture develops, books for children became much more colourful, innovative, and interesting, and varied in both form and subject matter. Development of print culture sees the introduction of board books, picture books, interactive books for young children, and short stories and novels for young adults.

From these print materials, with the introduction and advancement in multimedia production, there now exist various other representations of the stories that previously were available in the past only in print. These include film and other multimedia representations of children's literature, as well as computer and video games that provide alternative literacies for children and young adults. For example, there have been various film versions of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, as have Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, not to mention the numerous games, toys and other paraphernalia that have come into existence with the publication of JK Rowling's Harry Potter series.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE WEST: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Historically, in the western tradition, what we have come to accept as Literature for children did not in fact begin as children's literature as such. Stories and fables were written mainly for the adult reader to read to children. In Europe, for example, as

in many cultures of the world, literature for children began in the oral tradition, in the form of myths and legends created and narrated to explain natural phenomena such as the existence of day and night, the changing seasons, and animal behaviours, and to pass on tales of heroic feats. These tales also include ballads, sagas, and epic tales told by the fireside or in the royal courts where the audience were both adults and children. Many of these tales and were later written down for children today.

As mentioned above, early literature for children developed as a tool for teaching, particularly teaching the alphabet, and prayers of the Christian faith. Stories and fables were purely didactic in nature. In fact, early distinctive children's narratives in England and the United States consisted of what are considered gloomy and pious tales, mostly about deaths of sanctimonious children, for the education of Puritan boys and girls. An example of such work is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). Later works however are less depressing and proved to be much more palatable for children, such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). It should be pointed out, again, that these works, as were some others, were originally written for adults but adapted for children.

It was not until the 19th century romantic period, a period generally recognized as the Golden age of children's literature in the west, that Literature for children came into its own, with a body of works produced that genuinely belonged to children. For the first time children's books contained fantasy and realism, fun and adventure, and many of the books written during this period remained popular until today. Examples of these include prominent works by such writers as Robert Louis Stevenson, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Kenneth Grahame, E. Nesbit, Rudyard Kipling, L.M. Montgomery, and J.M. Barrie to name a few.

Not only did children's Literature come to be accepted as a genre in its own right, developments in the genre also saw the publication of works that were to pave the way for recognition of a broader definition of children's Literature, to include literature for young adults. And taking children's literature into this young adult arena are such works as Louisa May Alcott's realistic depiction of Victorian family life in *Little Women* (1868); the adventure stories of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1880) in all of which characters are fully developed, as is characteristic of works written in the realistic tradition.

Another significant development of the period was the introduction of works translated into English. In this case, colonisation helped take the English language further afield, widening the world of the English-speaking child, particularly in the form of translation of children's tales from other European countries, as well as further abroad. Some of these include J. D. Wyss's *Swiss Family Robinson* (tr. from the German, 1814); Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* (tr. from the Italian, 1892); Felix Salten's *Bambi* (tr. from the German, 1928); as well as some stories taken from the East and Middle East, such as translations of Middle Eastern stories from the *Arabian Nights* collection. Other examples include such noteworthy publications as the translation of German folk tales into English in 1823 by the Grimm Brothers; the publication of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales in England in 1846; the compilation of Joseph Jacobs English folk tales at the end of 19th century; and the folklorist Andrew Lang's series of fairy tales. Works in other sub-genre also came into existence, among which Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense* (1846) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Child's Garden*

of *Verses* (1885) stood out as having set the style for much of the poetry written for children today. In addition, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1872) combine lunacy and fantasy with satire and word games. Equally significant was the publication of children's magazines at the turn of the century, the most important of which was the *St. Nicholas Magazine* (1887–1943).

The ground-breaking works found in the 19th continued into 20th century, with many more fascinating publications that succeeded in placing children's books in a distinct position within the genre of Literature for children, at the same time generating innumerable subgenres of children's literature. Notable examples of C20th fantasy include L. Frank Baum's *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1927), P. L. Travers's *Mary Poppins* (1934), J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937), C. S. Lewis's "Narnia" series, E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952) and *The Trumpet of the Swan* (1970), and of course J. K. Rowling's best-selling *Harry Potter* books of wizardry and magic (1997–).

A point also worthy of note is the fact that novels for children include many of the literary, psychological, and social elements found in its adult counterpart. Remarkable books with sophisticated emphasis on plot, mood, characterization, or setting include among others, Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows* (1908), Esther Forbes's *Johnny Tremain* (1944), Joseph Krumgold's *And Now Miguel* (1953), and Scott O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (1961), whilst a more mature treatment of the emotions of growing up could be interpreted from Irene Hunt's *Up a Road Slowly* (1966). By the time children's literature enters the 21st century, children's literature is well into being a significant genre in itself, with academic institutions the world over running courses in Literature for Children and Young Adults, some with a full-fledged department of its own; and children's literature being presented in various forms, from print, to film and electronic multimedia.

The brief overview above is of central significance in that it highlights the fact that through a long tradition of children's literature, the West specifically, has had all the opportunities to fully develop children's literacy to the position that it is today.

A MALAYSIAN TRADITION IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

If Western children's literature is recognised today as being a genre in its own right, what can be said about literature for children and young adults in Malaysia? Malaysia being a multiracial, multicultural nation, and each racial component having its own cultural traditions, how do we even begin to recognise a Malaysian tradition in children's literature? What elements go onto the palette in order that a true representation could be painted of the Malaysian literature for children? Specifically, how far has literature for children in English been part of the Malaysian children's literary tradition? These are some very pertinent issues that remain to be explored if at all a single identity in literature in English for Malaysian children and young adults were to be posited.

Children's Literature in Malay

As mentioned elsewhere in this paper, literature for children in the Malay language began as an oral tradition—narratives related to children for purposes of teaching

moral and religious values¹. Stories such *Angan Mat Jenin*, *Pak Pandir*, *Sang Kancil*, for example, all contain lessons to be learnt. On another level, a brief survey of the literature seems to point to the fact that in Malaysia, children's books in the Malay language have had a much earlier beginning compared to those in English. Similar to the tradition in the west, these early books were written for the specific purpose of developing literacy, specifically the skills of reading and writing. Many of these books were written by Christian missionaries, who came to Malaya to spread the faith, and realising that before this could be done, the problem of illiteracy among the locals had first to be resolved. Hence, the existence of such titles as *Menolong Segala Anak* (1818), *Buku Pelajaran Bahasa Melayu* (1838, 1847), and *Budak Hampir Tenggelam* (1844) alongside books that directly or indirectly propagate Christian religious teachings such as *Henry* (1840), *Kisah-kisah Kitab Injil* (1844) and *Harry Belajar* (1846) (cited in Md Sidin Ishak, 2005). At the end of 19th century, with the direct involvement of the English colonial government in the education of the local people, school texts and readers flooded the market through formal publishing houses that took on the responsibility of supplying schools with recommended texts and readers. The contents of these books were in the main translations and adaptations of English classics. However, there were also contents the sources of which were well-known Malay *hikayat* and *syair* such as *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* and *Syair Siti Zubaidah*.

Local publishing houses, most notable of which was Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), also played and continues to play a crucial part in developing literature for children and young adults in the Malay language, through publication facilities made more easily accessible to the writers. A survey of books for children and young adults published by DBP shows clear evidence of the support it gave and still gives to local writers, which directly helps build an enriched collection of quality works by writers, to the point that Malay literature for children and young adults perhaps has now developed into a local canonical tradition.

Children's Literature in English

Early books in English for children in Malaysia were published mainly as an effort to introduce the English language into Malaya, as part of the British colonial government's colonising programme. In fact, records indicate that one of the British colonial government's agenda was to introduce English into the existing education system without disrupting the existing local system of education particularly since vernacular schools were already in existence then, seeking to eventually make English the medium of instruction in government-aided schools.

The syllabus introduced was the English school syllabus, bringing in poetry, drama, short stories or novels, the teaching of which were geared towards preparing students for the English assessment system—the Junior or Senior Cambridge examinations. Books were initially brought in from England. The contents of these, although presented in simple English, were however naturally Eurocentric in essence. The present writer recalls an early English lesson that she had, in which she was introduced, with appropriate illustrations, to the following short simple

¹ For an overview of Literature for children in the Malay language, refer to Md Sidin Ahmad Ishak. *Perkembangan Sastera Kanak-kanak di Malaysia: Buku Melayu Mencari Nafas Baru*. Shah Alam: Cerdik Publications, 2005.

sentences and phrases: 'This is a pan; this is a man; a man and a pan; a pan and a man'. Meaning is made clear by the illustrations, which included an oversized pan being held by a diminutive man. However, being kampong-born and raised, the writer could not figure out what a pan really was as it looked so much different from the "periok", "belanga", or "kuali" that her mum had at home.

Literature in English was introduced as part of the material for teaching the English language. So a typical English lesson may involve reading excerpts from or prose versions of Shakespeare, random poems such as Wordsworth's "The Daffodils", "The Highwayman" by Alfred Noyes, or Stevenson's "The Land of Counterpane". Again, these were so much out of the cultural context of Malaysian students that many found the lessons difficult, simply because they could not really visualise what a daffodil looked like, much less imagine who or what a highwayman was. Nevertheless, these problems notwithstanding, this move by the British colonial government paved the way for the development of literacy through a system of education in which English was an important element that has now developed into not only an important second language for interethnic communication for Malaysians in general but also a valuable language for international and global communication.

After Independence, there were concerted efforts at making texts in English more accessible to local children. Malaysian writers were and are encouraged to produce works that portray a consciously Malaysian cultural background. Hence as far as books and other print material were concerned, these have provided a rich ground for literacy development in general.

As Malaysia approaches its more than five decades of independence, there is also now a stronger and more definite sense of awareness of the importance of literacy development, in all its various forms including that of English as a strong language of international communication. As part of the endeavour to create and develop a unified Malaysia, amidst its characteristically multicultural attributes, children's literature in English has its role to play in the nurturing processes of young Malaysians. There is now the steady and ready availability of children's literature in various forms, print and multimedia. What is more important in this case is the fact that there is also an increasingly stronger support from the general public as well as the government.

Reading material in English that have been available for Malaysian children may roughly be categorised into two broad categories as follows:

- Traditional imports

These include works for very young and preadolescent children that are directly brought in or local reprints or re-presentations of traditional European and British folk and fairy tales, most popular among which are those by Hans Christian Andersen, the Grimm Brothers, Beatrix Porter to name a few for preadolescents. From the moment they learn to recognise the alphabet, Malaysian children have had their fair share of nursery rhymes and stories, bedtime and otherwise, told to them by doting and determined parents who want to have an early start on their children's literacy in English. Hence the early introduction to *Baa, baa black sheep*, *Mary had a little lamb*, *Jack and the beanstalk*, *Cinderella*, *Snow White* and so on. Stories and novels

for older age group include traditional fairy and folk tales including stories such as Baum's *The wonderful wizard of Oz*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Heidi*, *Little women*, to name a few; adventure stories ranging from Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* to Stevenson's *Kidnapped*; animal stories such as *Black Beauty*, *Call of the wild*, *Bambi* etc. These reading material are all European in origin and essence. What give them the overtly Malaysian touch and identity are mainly the illustrations, if these are re-presented by Malaysian publishers. Various versions of these fairy tales are readily available in the market. One good point in having this category of children's books is that they provide excellent models of idiomatic use of English are therefore particularly very popular among parents who want to develop good English in their children.

- Local publications—adaptations and original
 Having pointed out the above however, in the local scene there now exist alongside 'imported' children's literature, a proliferation of local works written and published by local writers and publishers. These materials are clearly Malaysian based, and in as many a variety of formats of children's literature as are found in western literature—picture books, board books, novels, nursery rhymes and so on. Many do still show influences from western traditions, as is common in most postcolonial works, but there is a clear sense of works developing a Malaysian identity. Works such as Daphne Lee's *Red Flower*, and *Sweet Pink Posies*, or collections of local folk tales and other types of works as those found in *Timeless Tales of Malaysia* and other more current works.

CONCLUSION

Literature is very strongly linked to literacy. When we investigate beginning literacy for children, we assume it begins with exploring the ability to read and write, and from among the many different approaches to developing literacy, the use of children's literature—stories, songs and rhymes—stands out as being a very efficient and the most commonly used tool. In Malaysia, children's literature in English has been enriched by its historical and cultural background, both being relevant influences that have helped shape and influence its growth both as a genre as well as support material for the improvement of literacy among children and young adults in Malaysia. As a result of influences from Malaysia's colonial past, children's literature in English, cannot escape from being Eurocentric in character to some extent. However, there is growing awareness as well concerted efforts from various quarters—publishers, government ministries, parent-teachers associations etc—in inculcating a Malaysian identity in literacy material for the consumption of children and young adults in general. In addition, recent developments in publishing, information and communication technology, (ICT) as well as multimedia production have broadened the scope for improvement of children's literacy through Literature.

Various interpretations and re-presentations of traditional children's literature have all helped to enhance literacy opportunities. These include film representations and interpretations that provide fresh approaches to literary works in film versions such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* from the Narnia

series, *Lord of the Ring* by JRR Tolkein, and derivatives and re-presentations such as *Toy Story*, *Shrek*, *The Frog Princess*, to name a few. Other forms of derivatives include varieties of computer games and board games, comic books and *manga* representations of literary texts, including a multitude of other products that are derived from children's literature that have their roles to play in developing multiple literacies in children. In short, in considering the development of literacy through children's Literature in Malaysia, there is no shortage of facilities, opportunities and material. What needs to be done now is to further investigate how far we have moved towards developing a Malaysian identity in children's literature in English, to ensure that children's literature in both Bahasa Melayu and English run on par, which would have a far-reaching implication for a future for Malaysian children to survive in a world that is figuratively becoming smaller through globalisation.

REFERENCES

- Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 2008. Online at <http://www.britannica.com>
- Glazer, Joan I. c1997. *Introduction to Children's Literature*. Columbus: C. E. Merrill Pub. Co.,
- Grenby, M.O. 2008. *Children's Literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Hunt, Peter. 1994. *An Introduction to Children's Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hunt, Peter. 2001. *Children's Literature*. Malden, Mass: Blackwell.
- Lesnik-Oberstein, Karin, ed. 2004. *Children's Literature: New Approaches*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Md Sidin Ahmad Ishak. 2005. *Perkembangan Sastera Kanak-kanak di Malaysia: Buku Melayu Mencari Nafas Baru*. Shah Alam: Cerdik Publications.
- Oxford English Dictionary*. 1976. Oxford: Oxford University Press, .