

## BOOK REVIEW

BUCHANAN, Iain. 2008. *Fatimah's Kampung*. Penang: Consumer Association of Penang, pp. 1–120. ISBN: 978-983-3083-701.

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### The Personal Book

*Fatimah's Kampung* by Iain Buchanan is above all a very personal book. It is a book written by a meticulous person who has an eye for beauty and a heart for a deeply moral message. *Fatimah's Kampung* can also be read as a summary of the experience of its author who has seen more than just the old ways of his native England. As he writes in the Introduction, he recalled memories from his childhood in Southern Africa when he first came to post-independence Malaysia to teach geography for five years. He felt therefore strangely at home when he first smelled the Malaysian scents of roasted peanuts and bruised oil palm kernels, of frangipani and the forest after the rain.

On this personal level, *Fatimah's Kampung* can also be read as a symbol of the author's love to his Malay wife, her family and friends and the entire Malay and Malaysian culture they represent. On a similar level, the book also introduces the story of the author's Malay relatives to his non-Malay friends and relatives in Britain. He is teaching them not only about the life in a traditional Malay *kampung*, but also about the values that he associates with the Malay *kampung* culture.

However, once it was published, the book left the realm of the purely personal and entered the public sphere. As such, a number of other questions can be asked about the book.

### Locating the Book in English literature

In the introduction, *Fatimah's Kampung* is classified as a book written for children and teenagers. In fact, as the text is rather complex, small children would probably find it rather difficult to understand. On the other hand, some adults might find the argumentation structure of the book rather simple, as the message

of "Malay *kampung* culture being threatened by development" is more than clear and bold throughout the entire book.

Moreover, *Fatimah's Kampung* can be localised within the traditional context of British literature that features stories from more or less exotic places within the former Empire. One does not have to go back to Rudyard Kipling's famous *Jungle Book* (1894) to realize that the British encounter with the tropical nature and the various cultures of the former Empire resulted in a stream of exotic literature, often written for children in England. As the stories from the *Jungle Book* which centre on the figure of the Indian boy Mowgli show, in these stories it is often a child figure from one of the colonised cultures that is given the central role. It is Mowgli who experiences things, Mowgli who speaks, and by doing so it is Mowgli who conveys the moral message of the English author. In the case of *Fatimah's Kampung*, it is the girl Fatimah who is given that role. She even encounters the tiger, so well-known from *The Jungle Book* and its various adaptations in films and comics, although not under the Indian name of Shere Khan, as in the *Jungle Book*, but under the Malay name of Pak Belang. Another difference to Kipling's *Jungle Book* from 1894 is that in Buchanan's *Fatimah's Kampung* from 2008, the tiger and the other jungle animals are no longer able to protect the young human being, because now, in 2008, their very habitat is endangered and the forest cut down. In this sense, *Fatimah's Kampung* represents an adjusted employment of the old *topos* of a peaceful and harmonious relationship between human beings and nature in the tropical (former) colonies of England, as presented by the English artist(s).

The comparison with *The Jungle Book* also shows that in both books the main figure has to face evil threats. In the *Jungle Book*, it is the evil python Kaa who tries to eat Mowgli, while in *Fatimah's Kampung* Fatimah and her entire village are eaten up by evil development. This evil transformation of the peaceful and harmonious village life into that of a big city is blamed on a fictional sultan with economic self-interests.

By bringing in such elements from politics, the economy and the social order of the contemporary, post-independence Malay World, the author steps out of the British literary tradition of the assumed close relationship between the innocent "natives" of the colonies and nature. Now, in the post-independence world of *Fatimah's Kampung*, there seem to be powerful local elites who want to destroy the old harmonious ways.

With this message, the book cannot be considered only a children's book for audiences in Britain. It rather also carries messages to an audience in Malaysia, particularly since it is published here.

### **A Message to Malaysia**

Different from the readers in England, the Malaysian audience of *Fatimah's Kampung* is of course rather familiar with the main themes of the book. Certainly, Malay readers who were brought up themselves in tranquil *kampungs* will recall many of their own memories when they browse through the first part of the book. The question is, however, whether the majority of the Malaysian readers will view the effects of development as negative as Ian Buchanan does in his book.

For comparison, a very popular Malay portrayal of the childhood in a small *kampung* is by Mohammad Nor Khalid, popularly known as Lat. In his *Kampung Boy*, all sorts of things happen to the main character. Many readers love the subtle irony and tender renditions that Lat gives of the life in a traditional *kampung*. This aspect of subtle humour is possibly another difference to the *kampung* girl portrayed in Buchanan's *Fatimah's Kampung*. Buchanan has a serious moral message and he conveys it in a serious tone. In comparison, Lat's message might also be rather deep, but it is conveyed in a much lighter way. In addition, Lat does not only glorify childhood memories from the *kampung* world. In his *Town Boy*, we can see how contemporary post-independence Malaysians struggle in the *kampungs* as well as in the jungles of the big city. Lat has a positive message, namely that the Malays and the Malaysians will be able to cope well with the changes and the challenges of the day, particularly if they preserve in their culture this light humorous tone that is visible in every line and every image of *Kampung Boy* and *Town Boy*.

In contrast, Buchanan's story ends in gloom. The village is destroyed, the natural habitat around it cut down and burnt, and the formerly free inhabitants enslaved as factory workers. In the last scenes, the pre-capitalist idyllic village is transformed into a turbo-capitalist brutal theme park with expensive entrance fees, while even the sacred grave close to the village is demolished and replaced by a factory.

In *Fatimah's Kampung*, the author's message is therefore not light. He seems to be afraid of the destruction of everything he loves. His concerns are so great that there is no room for any positive view of the capitalist development in post-independence Malaysia. *Fatimah's Kampung* is a gloomy warning.

### **Final Remarks**

*Fatimah's Kampung* should be seen as a beautifully illustrated story that was written out of love and out of concern for a world that the author sees deeply endangered. This book, along with other texts produced around the themes of sustainable development, weaves into a larger text, a culture of thinking and

talking about the challenges that this world is facing. In this sense, *Fatimah's Kampung* is a very welcome take that will certainly trigger other takes by other people from other backgrounds and experiences. In the end, it might not be seen as the only way of seeing Malaysia and its development, but rather as one relevant contribution among many others.

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