

## Reading *Daerah Zeni*: Navigating along the Literary Spaces in/of a Malay(sian) Novel

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**Abstract.** How do we read the Malay novel in the postcolonial, postmodern context of Malay/Malaysian literature? *Daerah Zeni*, a 1985 novel written by National Laureate A. Samad Said and an example of Malay historical fiction, tells an embattled story of an author writing about a nationalist fighter during the late period of colonisation, portraying the reality of the literary production of the novel itself. As a historico-literary *mise-en-abyme* of sorts, the novel offers opportunities for infinite readings of national history, literary history within the nation, literary spatiality, and how the authorial figure acts as a reflective link between/of the novel and the nation.

**Keywords and phrases:** literary space, time-space, historical fiction, reading, national novel

### Introduction

*Daerah Zeni*,<sup>1</sup> as a Malay phrase, signifies a geographical space attributed to Zeni, the protagonist-reader of/in A. Samad Said's 1985 novel, which tells the story of the daughters of reputable Malay-Malaysian author Lazri Meon, who risks being swept into obscurity after his last novel, published 20 years before Malaysia's independence. Together with her sister Zedi, Zeni discovers their father's unpublished manuscript about a nationalist fighter undergoing trials and tribulations during the colonisation period. In both novels—the fictional manuscript and *Daerah Zeni*—characters are forced to make difficult choices, and nationalist struggles are juxtaposed with familial conflicts and guilt. Hamdar, the nationalist fighter-hero in Lazri Meon's novel, has to leave his family and live in isolation to dedicate his life to a worthier cause—the fight against the colonisers. This plot reflects the tragedies in Lazri Meon's life: his wife dies, his daughters are caught in hardships of their own (Zeni becomes entangled in a painful divorce and Zedi became a paraplegic), and his writings steadily becoming more obscure in the local literary scene. Samad Said draws a powerful parallel between the story in his novel and the story in the novel within the novel, with some scenes reflecting or hinting at scenes in another.

Based on the title, we may understand the novel not only as merely a story but also as a constructed literary space invented and shaped by the author and his characters, a cognitive space that is a part of the author's cyclical fictional universe. In an interview about the novel, Samad Said described *Daerah Zeni* as "coming from a greater universe" (Abdul Aziz 1991), given that three of his other novels are also about Malaysian postcolonial struggles. As "a domain where struggle is a must to survive" (A. Samad Said 1985), the novel is located both in the later pages of Malaysian colonial history, which serves as a setting for Lazri Meon's novel, and in the current pages of Lazri Meon and his daughters' lives. Of course, there are many issues associated with the title and the structural framework of the novel, such as the multi-tiered intervocality embedded within it, the manner in which Samad Said's universe is intertwined with the worlds of his characters, and how these worlds form a narrative that represents, albeit with some exclusions and limitations, a chapter of Malaysian history. In this essay, the author examines the complexities that this fictional-historical spatiality bring into Malaysian literature, and how Samad Said situates his novel in a Malaysian imaginaire that is rife with complication—marked with overlapping literary spaces.

The author uses the term "literary spaces" to refer to the physical surfaces on which literature, comprising of words, sentences, paragraphs and chapters are inscribed on. They may refer to the pages of books and manuscripts. They may also refer to more abstract cognitive, figurative spaces that manifest and generate themselves in the readers' minds upon the act of reading, and contemplating, and figuring out meaning, making connections between concrete, printed words, and concepts and ideas in the mind. The word *daerah* is a spatial marker, evoking the geographical subdivision of a state in the British provincial system established during the colonial times. The territorial connotation of the word seems to be invested in the notion that colonialism is not only political exploitation but also geographical hegemony and the conceptual hegemony of geography. Geographical hegemony, via the rule of British administrators over pieces and divisions of land, which is directly connected to the sleight-of-hand manner with which the science of geography was applied onto pieces of land that are measured, surveyed, traded, reserved and represented in print. Perhaps this is what is alluded to by the mention of "wild tornado from the west" by Hamdar<sup>2</sup> to himself, a solitary literary gesture towards the oncoming of modernity, imposed by way of colonial rule.

Under the context of colonialism, one of the central themes in the novel (and many other works by the same author) is established—*perjuangan* or "struggle"—against the colonisers, for freedom. This concept is later extended further to Zeni and Zedi, who read their father's manuscript during hard times in their own lives, and find themselves in states of affairs that require them to

soldier on despite the challenges that they face. It is also this concept—*perjuangan*—that justified murders of colonial officers as a form of anti-colonialism, divided the nationalists into factions, each with their own version of the "struggle" to form an independent nation-state and caused families to be separated, such as Hamdar's and Lazri Meon's.

From another angle, the spatiality of the title gives us an impression that the novel is both a product of, or a literary text that is prone to, colonisation, if we consider the fact that the advent of print technology and the genre of the novel that occurred in Europe, brought to Malaysia, Southeast Asia and the rest of the world, mostly by colonial officers who are scholars, writers, merchants and scientists. The spread of the genre of the novel is a kind of transfer involving a subtle framework containing among many other systems, a certain cartographic land-based perspective or worldview. This is not to say that the non-European novel is less superior or less original, instead it encourages us to consider the inescapability of colonial memory, that inspires *Zeni* and *Zedi*, that readers feel when reading *Zeni* and *Zedi*'s readings of their father's novel and that makes *Daerah Zeni* a postcolonial novel.

### **Reading into an Abyss: The Malay Novel as a *Mise-en-abyme***

In the beginning of *The Order of Things* (1966), Michel Foucault brings forth a very detailed description and analysis of a 1656 painting by Diego Velazquez, that is, a *mise-en-abyme*. The facade of the painting shows a group of maids of honour and the painter looking at a painting on an easel in a room with walls decorated with many paintings. The painter faces outwards towards the spectator of the painting. Hidden from plain view is the place of the spectator and the painting that the painter is working on. In the distant background, there is a mirror, faintly reflecting the painting the painter is working on. Slanted to the left, the painting of the painter in the painting gives way for the painter's gaze to be directed almost directly at the spectator, presenting the infinite nature of the gaze: from the spectator to the painting and the painter, from the painter to the spectator and from the painter to the painting in the painting. A similar infiniteness is present in *Daerah Zeni* and also in the unpublished manuscript, which is called *pelukisan* or "painting" (A. Samad Said 1985, 106). In *Daerah Zeni*, the present-day reader reads about another reader—*Zeni*, in the novel, who is reading another work by her father that is hidden from the fictional public as it is unpublished. Then, of course, there is the realist question that any spectator or reader would be tempted to think about, as with *Las Meninas* and *Daerah Zeni*—is the figure of the creator (the painter in *Las Meninas*, and the author in *Daerah Zeni*) a self-portrait of sorts, that reflects both themselves upon the act of creating and the reader/spectator upon the act of reading/seeing? The multiple, overlapping literary spaces of reading experienced by the reader could be

formulated as such: 1) the literary space of the novel that includes Zeni's perspective and her description of her father's manuscript, illustrious Malay authors of early modern Malay canon such as Syed Syeikh al-Hadi, Shamsuddin Salleh, Abdullah Sidek, Harun Aminurrashid<sup>3</sup> and staple texts of early modern Malay canon such as *Melur Kuala Lumpur*, *Chanai Bachaan* and *Kamus Wilkinson*;<sup>4</sup> 2) the literary space of Lazri Meon's novel that to a certain extent documented an alternate narrative of Perak's colonial history, including Birch's murder in morbid detail and the passionate rebelliousness of a gang of anti-colonialists in their quest to fight for independence.

Then, it is necessary to also consider the liminal space between the spaces—between the canonical works of Malay modern literature mentioned in *Daerah Zeni* and *Daerah Zeni*, between *Daerah Zeni* and Lazri Meon's manuscript, and between the manuscript and the canonical works mentioned in *Daerah Zeni*. The infinite, ephemeral meaning of the word "abyss" comes to surface, if we were first to consider the act of reading as a set of transformational, and transitorial processes involving movements and vessels of meanings, and movements of vessels of meaning (a novel would be one example of an embodiment of meaning, a paragraph, a sentence, a word, linguistically a morpheme would be the smallest unit of language that contains meaning) or to view all these supposedly vacant spaces as worthy of some recognition and influential in the process of reading. And, with the coming of print technology and writings in the Roman alphabet (instead of the Jawi *abjad*), stories in Malay have taken on a new form, inching away from the oral traditions, solidified and easily categorisable in codices, magazines, digests and novels.

It is impossible to name the first Malay novel, although some scholars (Hashim Awang 1989; Roff 1974) have attempted to devise concepts and labels to systematize Malay literature and canonise it, using theories and standards based on European and American tradition of literary theory (Hashim Awang 1989). This type of scholarly endeavour has been described as both "necessary" and "dangerous":

No matter how cautiously they are worded, generalizations—efforts to find similarities in differences—are as dangerous as they are necessary: necessary, because human life is inconceivable without some kind of order no matter how shaky, without some rules no matter how temporary; dangerous, because generalizations resist heterogeneity, disregard the powers-that-be, and ignore particularities (Maier 2004, 203).

From the early stages of literary criticism in the world of Malay writing to the present, there is a tendency to compare the novel to earlier genres of literature,

such as *hikayat* and *syair*, more popularly known under the umbrella term "oral literature", which is more primordial and native to the land. Some scholars also look for elements of one in the other, or vice versa, which has resulted in many premature categorisations and generalisations, often due to oversimplifications of the literary works. Perhaps the fluid nature of early Malay literary orality has had something to do with the fact that the first Malay novels were translated, reconfigured adaptations of stories from distant lands (and distant languages at the time, such as Arabic and French) that, in the present context, are irrelevant and elusive, neither known nor read by the reading public:

In the course of seeking to uncover the background of the first Malay novel, however, other matters turn out to arise involving connections between Muhammad bin Muhammad Said, the displaced Sayyid Shaykh Al-Hadi, and detective fiction. If one assumes *Kechurian* to have been the first Malay novel, it would seem certainly also to have been the first example in Malay literature or detective or "mystery" fiction (Roff 1974).

Such is the complexity of historicising literature in the Malay world and Malaysia. Despite this problem, most scholars agree that the novel started to become popular in Malaysia in the latter half of the nineteenth century with the growth and widespread dissemination of print technology during British rule. The novel then became a literary genre and a nationalist tool that was utilised by famous Malay writers during colonial times, by Lazri Meon in *Daerah Zeni* and by Samad Said himself to tell stories about the plight of the Malays under colonial rule.

The postcolonial novel, a literary genre-space under which *Daerah Zeni* could be classified, entails another dimension to the story because it not only tells a story set during the British period in Malaya but also informs us how the colonial past is recalled, imagined and reimagined through the multi-chronotopic construction of the novel (Bakhtin 1981, 84). Here, postcoloniality may be defined as a state of being temporally set after the colonial period, as suggested by the word "post", which means after. However, this phenomenon of temporality may be complicated by considering the methods by which temporality has been conceived and represented, that is, through timelines and texts, etchings upon physical spaces that lead to the understanding of an abstract notion. Other meanings of the word stem "post"—a physical structure in the shape of a pole marking a place or a point; the act of putting up something to be viewed by many people; the physical act of pasting something on a surface—may also inform us of the nature of the postcolonial text as a sign of the times informed by a colonial past.

Therefore, to say or label something or read a piece of literature as postcolonial, would be to acknowledge its being influenced by the colonial encounter and the many experiences that have been textually documented by historians, writers, anthropologists and many others from many perspectives, in accordance with their disciplinary backgrounds and their lives. Why is this acknowledgement important? It is important especially because the civilised lifestyles of a large group of people who populate a nation-state marked by the colonial experience are overtly and covertly affected and influenced by such an encounter. Furthermore, many of these experiences are preserved as historical, and therefore factual, narratives that are reproduced in textbooks in the official national education systems of nations that have had colonial pasts and whose present(s) are coloured by these pasts.

These abstract surfaces, which are generated and represented by language, create a certain context for events and characters. In some instances, the usage of language is concrete and literal, such as the explicit mention of dates, years, historical events and characters, and specific places. In other instances, figurative hints—such as linguistic expressions, descriptions of delicacies, buildings, modes of transportation, clothing, historical events—are left here and there, naturally relating the text read to a certain era or ethos that stabilises the text for meaning generation.

The postmodern reader becomes a participant in the cyclical readings of Lazri Meon's novel, set in the colonial era, through Zeni's and Zedi's respective imaginings and contexts, presenting a type of stereochronic tango with *Daerah Zeni*—the main novel set in the fictional present—which becomes the vehicle for everything noted above. The novel starts with a glimpse of Zeni's "domain" as she reads about Hamdar (as the reader learns a few pages later), the tragic nationalist hero in her father's unpublished novel who is waking up from a nightmare:

"Dreams always rationalise and teach you about things." He had heard that from a teacher. The last time he had a dream like that was when he dreamed about the murder of Birch. This dream shook him like that dream. At a glance, it even seemed like he actually saw Mardi killed at the same spot where Birch was killed, only that Birch fell on the floor, while Mardi fell into a river that seemed to flow furiously.

...After he calmed himself down, he remembered to perform the early morning prayers. Outside, the dark and the fog embraced each other.<sup>5</sup>

In the novel, a more suitable metaphor for literary spatiality is a figment of Zeni's husband Ebran's imagination, "an imagined lake at the bottom of a building".<sup>6</sup> If we were to take into consideration one of the Malay words for "country," *tanah air*,<sup>7</sup> then it is as though the aquatic metaphor is a perfect complement to the word *daerah*, which is strictly land-based. A work of historical fiction would be as fragile as a paper boat swayed by the ripples of the imagination on the surface of the ephemeral lake, with only its dim shadow projected into the invisible, illusory bottom beyond the abysmal depths of the narrative(s).

As Zeni reads her father's novel, the reader joins her in an incursion into Hamdar's psyche—both fictional and historical—as he tries to relieve his traumatised mind from the disturbing scenes of Birch's murder,<sup>8</sup> a key event in the Malays' struggle against the British. Here, fiction gives way to history to establish the chronotope in Lazri Meon's novel, a time and space in which anti-colonial heroes such as Hamdar remain shaken by the consequences of such events, which haunt their own fates. Malaysia was then Malaya, ruled by puppet sultanates and chiefs who were subject to British resident officers, who had their say in all administrative matters that did not concern the traditions of the Malays and their religion, Islam. In Samad Said's colonial Malaya, there seems to be a strong connection between the Malay nationalist movements and Islam, as exemplified in the short story *Dosa Pejuang*, in which the mosque becomes a meeting point and a hiding place for the anti-colonialists plotting against the Japanese. Similarly, in the scene above, Hamdar seeks solace in the performance of prayers, signifying the depth of the relationship between religion and nation and establishing him as a traditional Malay-Muslim hero. If there were Malay authors who missed historical details such as the details noted above, then it would be very unlikely that Lazri Meon is one of them, or so thinks Zeni:

Maybe it is true that the name Lazri Meon is not as reputable as Syed Syeikh Al-Hadi, Shamsuddin Salleh, Abdullah Sidek or Harun Aminurrashid, but as a descriptive writer, he cannot be challenged, thought Zeni.<sup>9</sup>

Zeni's thoughts paint a portrait of Lazri Meon as a writer who is part of a great tradition of Malay writers who are admired and renowned for their fine, exquisitely written Malay. With his brand of realism, Lazri Meon breaks from tradition by maximising the utilisation of historical facts in his writings. The chronotope of Lazri Meon's novel is coloured with rife internal conflicts within different anti-colonial movements and familial disputes. In *Daerah Zeni*, Lazri Meon is a member of a Malay political party, which shapes his novel and the story he tells:

And Lazri had not guessed that Jamdir still had time to repeat the same old question: Why was Pulau Pinang, together with Seberang Perai, sold to the East India Company for so cheap? And as usual, he would not get to answer because Jamdir would reminisce about how they had to split a while back—he, with the PKMM, had seceded from the UMNO because they stood by the motto "Independence!" while Lazri remained in the UMNO with its "Long Live the Malays."<sup>10</sup>

Here, Samad Said captures the fracture at the very centre of the Malay struggle against the British. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO) values and champions Malay rights above all, even when doing so means negotiating with the British and remaining as another one of Britain's colonies. However, the Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM) or the Malay Nationalist Party places independence from the British as its main objective. Once, the two parties were briefly united in opposition to the British-drafted proposal of Malayan Union, which allowed citizenship for immigrants and the exploitation of Malay sultans. During this time, Malaya had already become a home to people from various ethnic backgrounds other than Malay, mainly Chinese and Indian communities, whose existence became more prominent during British rule due to the intensive immigration labour policies adopted by the British. Labourers, traders, miners, rubber tappers, businessmen and their families moved (voluntarily and involuntarily) from China, Southern India and Sri Lanka to the increasingly cosmopolitan Malaya, famous for its resources and business opportunities. UMNO sees the influx of immigrants as a need for the Malays to assert their special rights as the native inhabitants of the land. Eventually, this led to an irreconcilable split with PKMM and the formation of the right and left wings of Malayan politics. On the right there was UMNO, taking side with the Malay aristocrats and on the left there was PKMM, championing the voice of the people in their fight for independence.

Jamdir, Lazri Meon's friend and a member of the PKMM, questions the purchase of Pulau Pinang—a northern island of Malaysia, and Seberang Perai,<sup>11</sup> the coast facing it on the peninsula—by the British in 1786. The sale of the island by the sultan of Kedah was viewed by the PKMM as a display of weakness and carelessness that allowed the British to establish their first Straits Settlement, which transformed the Malay states into British settlements. Meanwhile, Lazri Meon is the object of the PKMM's distrust because he is personally invested in the UMNO version of the struggle, the version that later proved fruitful in gaining independence for Malaysia. However, the birth of Malaysia was not without its growing pains. The last ten years before Malaysia's independence proved to be a trying time for the people of Malaya, who, by that time, had been inspired by the fiery rhetoric of Indonesia's anti-colonialists:



"Experience!" Exclaimed Dorjono, who definitely has a lot of experience (one of his brothers died in Brantas River after the Gestapo, and he himself accidentally witnessed the murders of Parman and Sutojo at Lubang Buaya). "Other than living in the land of Diponegoro and Tjokroaminoto, what else are you hoping for? Certainly, you're hoping for the warrior spirit and the will to struggle, right?" Ebran did not have that kind of readiness and willingness. At most, he only knows the reporter Onn bin Ja'afar, who started *Warta Malaya*, Daud Mohd Shah, who launched the Malay movement of Singapore, and Za'ba, who dared to criticise the Malays for their laziness some time ago. But all this he only heard from his father's conversation with his comrades, who never wore themselves out discussing and studying the Sufi movement in Aceh.<sup>12</sup>

In one of the more descriptive moments, the postcolonial novel is interrupted by an intense colonial flashback in a conversation between Ebran, Zeni's friend, and his Javanese Indonesian colleague Dorjono who has a lot of experience. No other scene would deliver the metaphor better—about the differences between nationalists in Malaysia and Indonesia, and how Indonesia's struggle for independence inspired and shaped similar movements in Malaysia. Samad Said evokes bloody episodes from Indonesia's struggle: the Gestapo, also known as Thirtieth of September Movement,<sup>13</sup> which triggered reactionary mass killings from 1965 to 1966 of government opposers who were accused of being communists. Marking the inception of New Order Indonesia under anti-communist<sup>14</sup> Suharto, and the political (and literal) death of PKI (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*, translated Indonesian Communist Party) which housed some of the most inspiring and influential nationalists such as Semaun and Tan Malaka earlier in the decade. The mentions of Diponegoro, Tjokroaminoto and the sufi movement in Aceh reminds readers of the spiritual Islamic side of the resistance in turbulent pre-independence Indonesia.

On the other side of the Strait of Melaka, the Malay Peninsula was beginning to witness sparks of anti-colonial sentiments. However, in the description in the excerpt above, we get the impression that the fight in Malaysia was not as action-packed. The nationalist Malays in Malaya did not face death because of their political stance. It is the Indonesian character above that possesses the "experience", the "readiness" and the "willingness" to fight, qualities that are absent in the Malaysian character. Reading the novel, one might be under the impression that Malaysia's independence came about more conveniently and with less bloodshed than its neighbour's.

Obscured from the reader's view are the myriad political unions and trade unions formed throughout the Malay Peninsula and Singapore that ignited the awareness of the people to form a coalition against the British, especially after the proposed constitution for the Federation of Malaya, or the Anglo-Malay proposal, was advanced. After the failure of the Malayan Union, the British became eager to reset their footing in Malaya and thus urged the Malay sultans to agree to the formation of a Federation that would include the Federated Malay States, the Unfederated Malay States and the Straits Settlements (excluding Singapore, which would become a Crown Colony). In staunch opposition, multiple left-wing political organisations and trade unions joined forces to form more centralised coalitions—the All-Malaya Council for Joint Action (AMCJA) and the Pusat Tenaga Rakyat (translated as the People Power Coalition, abbreviated as PUTERA), which, in 1947, came together as PUTERA-AMCJA. They launched a *hartal*,<sup>15</sup> or a Malaya-wide strike, on the day the revised constitutional proposals were supposed to be tabled by the British Parliament, and they presented their own proposal that stated that the people of Malaya should be able to exercise their rights to elect their own government, without British intervention, one key point that was missing from the Anglo-Malay proposal. In 1948, the youths of the left took up arms to rally against the British, causing the British to announce a state of emergency and spread propaganda that there was a communist insurgency, justifying their use of military power. Until the release of Fahmi Reza's activist documentary *10 Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* (10 Years Before Independence) in 2008, most of the left-wing's contributions and history were left in the dark and went unacknowledged or, in most cases, were misunderstood.

In the characterisations of Samad Said's *Daerah Zeni* and Lazri Meon's novel, this obscurity is extended, enveloping the non-Malay communities in Malaysia at that time. His narratives about colonialism and Malay nationalism, such as *Daerah Zeni* and *Dosa Pejuang*, show no dynamic or active non-Malay characters. In his universe, Malaysian nationalism has always concerned and been about the Malays, with vague sketches of a few non-Malays in the background, exemplified by the old Indian man Chenniah in *Daerah Zeni* and the Chinese family in *Dosa Pejuang*. In critically analysing the imagined communities in the novel's colonial and postcolonial worlds, the term/concept "ethnoscape" could be useful as a pragmatic guide to formulate and understand the complexity of the communities:

By *ethnoscape*, I mean the landscape of persons the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and *appear to affect*

*the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree* (Appadurai 1996, 33).

Although Samad Said does an excellent job in capturing the subtlety of the conflicts within the Malay communities and the movements of people across the Strait of Melaka, it is somewhat striking to the author that a postcolonial novel about nationalism in Malaysia does not have any noteworthy non-Malay characters, be it a British colonial officer or a Chinese shop owner. There seems to be a disjunct between the population of Daerah Zeni and the multi-ethnic, multiracial reality of Malaysia's ethnoscape from the colonial periods to Zeni's present. To be fair, due attention should be paid to the fact that Samad Said might have chosen to focus on the Malays, thus limiting his case of characters to Malays, most likely in the same manner in which KS Maniam peoples his masterpiece *The Return* (1981) with mostly Indian-Malaysian characters. Far from blaming the novelist, the author considers this delimitation to be a side effect of the marriage between strict censorship laws and the canonisation of a standard version—the UMNO's version—of Malaysian history in textbooks, literature and popular folklore. The same reasons can be cited for the erasure of the more radical chapters of the Malaysian nationalist struggle, which peaked in the last ten years before independence (1947–1957), from the collective postcolonial national consciousness and the extreme demonisation of the "communists" (who were part of the left-wing coalition), a label that was infamously used to justify the arrests of government opponents. In the UMNO's version of history, Malaysia won its independence solely through negotiation with the British, in stark contrast with Indonesia's mud-and-blood struggle. The roles of non-Malays in it have been reduced to merely immigrant diasporic communities with representation in the Alliance right-wing coalition led by the UMNO. Hence, the novel is more specifically about Malay nationalism, not necessarily Malaysian nationalism.

To illustrate the implicative extent of this Malay/Malaysian complication in Malay (and Malaysian) literature, let us consider Amir Muhammad's amusing critique of Malay publications:

Not all Malaysians are Malay. This fact should be startlingly obvious. Blab it out to someone, and you won't exactly get into a quarrel. It's one of those so-what-else-is-new observations—a bit like saying "The sky seems kinda blue today, doesn't it?"...

... But no matter how obvious said fact may be, there are Certain Quarters that still don't know how to play properly and seem to insist that the two words are synonymous. I sometimes feel like

picking up these people and spanking them— in an affectionate way, mind you—while saying: "Whassamatterwityou?"

This urge to pick up and spank gets increasingly urgent whenever I read our Malay-language publications, most of which seem to automatically assume that their readers are Malay. It's doubly ironic when we consider that these ethnocentric publications presume to speak for the whole nation but sneer at English-language publications for being somehow unpatriotic (Amir Muhammad 1997, 103).

The irony at the heart of Amir Muhammad's critique is that writings in Malay often imagine a Malaysia of Malays, with some Chinese and Indians who are occasionally accused of being immigrants and taking over Malay lands, properties and opportunities. The postcolonial world of the Malays has been mythologised to such an extent that it alienates, and sometimes irritates, Malaysians who are not Malays and Malays who are more aware of the culturally and ethnically plural state of the nation, such as Amir Muhammad. On the other side of the spectrum, there is also a group of ultra-conservatives, and Malay racialisists, most likely those referred to by the term "Certain Quarters" above, who lack a proactive awareness of the diversity in the country. Criticising a Malay-language magazine, he lists the Malay-centric titles of articles in an issue, including "No More Malay Voice", "The Alienation of the Poorest Malay Family in the City", and "Nostalgia for 'New Malays'" (Amir Muhammad 1997, 104).<sup>16</sup> This trend of deliberate and extensive focus on the Malays in Malay literature and publications must have been inherited from the British because, before that, Malay literature had always been assimilative in incorporating elements from new cultural contacts. The assimilative trait, however, has no place in the right-wing official history-writing project.

The problem here is that the Malay language is the official language of Malaysia and thus is supposed to represent all the ethnic groups living in the country; however, it does not actually fill in that linguistic space. Publications in Chinese and Indian languages would not face the same problem even if they concentrated only on Chinese and Indian issues because they make no promise to represent any other groups. In the postcolonial Malay literary imaginary, such as that in *Daerah Zeni*, it almost seems as though there are no Malaysians but only Malays, invisible Chinese and Indians, and "others".

But it is a matter of some despair that, time and again, this publication<sup>17</sup> and others like it continue to assume that I am Malay, and thus feed me Malay-centric stories. This is not right;

Malay may be the official language but there should be no such thing as an official ethnic group (Amir Muhammad 1997, 103).

How do we reconcile the prominent role of the Malays in the region's history and the fact that Malaysia's ethnoscape is becoming increasingly more diverse and fluid? Some have found the answer in Malaysian Literature in English (MLE), given that English is everyone's second language and it allows more room for all the ethnic groups of Malaysia. As Malay becomes increasingly Malay-focused and knowledge of it becomes a mere requirement to pass exams, authors and readers find it more convenient to write and read in English. In the Malaysian context, English seems to be the most neutral language choice there is for literature and a medium for national discourse. It has no inherent bias to the culture of any ethnic group in Malaysia and offers more space for a more inclusive representation of the Malaysian ideoscape:

Ideoscapes are also concatenations of images, but they are often directly political and frequently have to do with the ideologies of states and the counterideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it. These ideoscapes are composed of elements of the Enlightenment worldview, which consists of a chain of ideas, terms and images, including freedom, welfare, rights, sovereignty, representation, and the master term democracy (Appadurai 1996, 36).

What we have observed in *Daerah Zeni*, as in many other Malay writings, is that the novel captures the Malay ideoscape in Malaysia but not the Malaysian ideoscape (assuming it exists). In doing so, it estranges non-Malay readers (even if the readers are proficient in Malay, the partial and the specific nature of the perspectives in a Malay publication might not be relevant to them). At this stage, the problem has turned into a paradox, in which Malay literary works are being swept aside in favour of English works by the estranged non-Malay readers, with the result that the works become more Malay-centric in addressing (only) their audience. In other words, Malaysian non-Malay readers and Malay literary works alienate each other, with the increasing mutual disenfranchisement of one in the other and vice versa. Furthermore, the gap is steadily widening.

Malaysia's right-wing government, which has remained in power since independence, has wrestled with this problem for a long period of time; and this struggle can be observed in the whimsical switching back and forth in the implementation of language policies, especially in education. In recent years, the on-and-off implementation of "English in Teaching Science and Mathematics"<sup>18</sup> by the government has caused further complexities to surface. The proponents of this policy specify the inadequacy of scientific terms in the Malay language as

the main reason English should be used instead. On the other side of the fence, the champions of the Malay language see English as the death of the Malay language in Malaysia's education system. What most fail to see is that, at the root of the problem, is the disjunct between Malay works and non-Malay readers, and even some Malay readers; between generations who grew up with English-language education and Malay-language education (and now Malay-language education for science and mathematics); and also between generations with and without (English and/or Malay) literature in the curriculum.

*Daerah Zeni*, and the postcolonial and colonial chronotopes embedded within it encapsulate a Malay ethnoscape, ideoscape and linguascope—the landscape of languages—that are detached from Malaysia today. In writing it, Samad Said uses a variant of the Standard Malay that is hardly being spoken colloquially, more or less the same variant propagated and to some extent constructed by *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* or DBP (translated as The Institute of Language and Literature), Malaysia's premier language institution. As readership of Malay works dwindles, DBP is also becoming more obsolete outside educational system, merely publishing new edition after new edition of *Kamus Dewan* (the official Malay dictionary in Malaysia), without any hint of the sociolinguistic conditions that are increasing the distance between the standard and colloquial registers of the Malay language. DBP seeks to preserve the "purity" of the Malay language, and in its attempt to do that resist transformational change of the language. Borrowings from other languages, especially English, are seen as pollutants should be avoided. In the seemingly noble attempt of language (and therefore culture) preservation, DBP has also become a retardation agent of the language, molding it into the high and lofty register accessible to only a select few and relevant to even fewer.

In a lengthy lament about the Americanisation of Malaysian culture, Yusuf Martin notes the significance of linguistic change by way of Muhammad Haji Salleh's poem:

The power of words as such is that they re-create culture. Muhammad (Haji Salleh), in another poem, *A Heap of Words*, reminds his readers that "language constructs the world, arranging itself and giving hints of experience". We use language and identify ourselves through our use of language. We form sub-groups, cults, sects, and with them, fresh nuances of language, different metaphors and meanings for simple terms. We identify through language and recognize through language, create slang and, with it, identity. Language assists us in drawing others close or separating ourselves from them. We use language to form elites, legal language, technical language and the semi-

mystical language of critical theory. Change the language, and you start to change how we think, what we accept (Martin 2009, 200).

In a democracy that remains in the early stages of national identity formation, language plays a vital role in shaping the imagined Malaysian society in the minds of citizens. As we see in *Daerah Zeni*, language creates not only time and space but also cultural time and space, cultural chronotopes. If a Malaysian identity is to be established—as attempted by many Malaysian Prime Ministers with varying levels of success, the latest effort being the "1Malaysia" concept—then there needs to be more interaction between the Malay and Malaysian chronotopes in literature. Malays need to understand that they are one voice coexisting with other voices and other ethnic groups, not the superior voice that commands, represents and looms over them. A greater awareness concerning the sociolinguistic situation in Malaysia through the study of literature and linguistic research is also imperative. Linguists need to reconfigure their focus to include topics beyond those concerning Standard Malay—topics on spoken, colloquial Malay and other languages in Malaysia's amazingly diverse linguascape. Writers, translators, academics, linguists, the DBP, readers and the Malaysian government and citizens in general would all benefit immensely from being more informed about the language(s) and how they are used in different contexts, be it everyday conversations or epic poetry. The blind, unproductive conservation and language policing, on the other hand, benefit only, if the author may use Amir Muhammad's phrase, "Certain Quarters". There needs to be a change in Malay writing in Malaysia that affects the way that Malaysians think about Malay literature, and Malays, in a positive manner.

### **Author, Novel, Nation and Novel-in-the-novel**

Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic, necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society* (Jameson 1986, 69).

...there are two kinds of writers. One is a writer who looks for a story, creates one and tells it. And there is the writer who turns his life into a story. So for me, as seen in the past, everything that I write about is actually what I experienced and went through. I take certain parts to be delivered and recorded in my novel (Abdul Aziz 1991, 44–45).<sup>19</sup>

The quotes above, from Fredric Jameson and Samad Said, respectively, illustrate the intricate connections among the novelist, the novel and the nation. If we agree with Jameson that the third-world novel is a national allegory, then the novelist's own life, by way of the novel, is an intrinsic part of the allegory. This network of relationships becomes more complex when we consider the fact that the novelist shares his embodiment of the nation when he writes. *Daerah Zeni* takes the complexity level up another notch because it is a novel about a nationalist novelist whose manuscript about a nationalist hero becomes part of the novel.

The parallels between the lives of Samad Said and his character Lazri Meon are not difficult to observe. Both are seasoned and experienced writers who have a knack for writing descriptive novels about the nation's history but are forgotten by and estranged from society. In both authors' contexts, we see history telling them something about something in the present. Lazri Meon retreats to his solitude after being crushed by the loss of his wife, exactly paralleling how Hamdar loses his wife and goes to live alone on an abandoned train track. In a symbiotic move, Samad Said navigates us through colonial and postcolonial contexts to make sense of events in his present.

My purpose is to understand the meaning of history in the events that happened in the society and my inability to let the events pass unacknowledged. Those events have to be studied for their significance...

... That is why, in my writings, I record decades. Because I believe that certain decades must be explained, must be felt (Abdul Aziz 1991, 9).<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the postcolonial context in *Daerah Zeni* can be better explained by examining the decade preceding its publication, the 1970s. This decade was a turbulent period in Malaysia's politics of identity, marked by the bloody 13 May racial incident.<sup>21</sup> Almost similar to a delayed knee-jerk reaction to the incident, in 1971, the Razak administration implemented the National Culture Policy (NCP), which stated that the national culture should be based on Malayness and Islam, with undefined "suitable elements from other cultures", reminiscent of the pre-independence proposal by the left for a "Melayu" nationality for everyone who considered Malaysia home. One of the key differences between the proposal and the policy is that the latter was drafted with a consensus by all ethnic groups in the left-wing because it was seen as the best way to build a nation. The NCP, on the other hand, was a unilateral attempt by the government to fix the violent racial quagmire, producing an aura of suspicion and discomfort between different ethnic groups and causing them to be slightly distant from each other. Such a



Malaysia would explain why there are only Malay main characters in Samad Said's works, given that Malays and other ethnic groups kept to themselves during that time. Mahathir, the fourth Malaysian Prime Minister after Razak and Hussein Onn, saw the disunity and inefficiency of the policy and in 1991 replaced it with the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia*, highlighting a multi-ethnic coexistence instead of top-down assimilation, in a continuous trial-and-error effort to suture the deep cuts between ethnic groups. This effort led to the Malay language being renamed *Bahasa Malaysia* (Malaysian language) and many other changes, especially in education. The young generation then was taught that Malaysia is a country for all ethnic groups and everyone should speak Malaysian. Nonetheless, this move seems to only gloss the surface of the problem, a disguised form of Malay supremacy. The author would like to recall a song he learned in a primary school music class during the *Bangsa Malaysia* period entitled *Tiga Sekawan* (The Three Friends):

I have a friend, his name is Ah Meng,  
He is also friends with Muthu,  
We are good friends and share the same classroom,  
We learn together and play together,  
Hey, hey, hey, the three friends,  
Hey, hey, hey, the three friends.<sup>22</sup>

The song above is about three friends from the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia—Malay, Chinese (Ah Meng) and Indian (Muthu). However, only the Chinese and Indian are named in a song, originally written in Malay. The song assumes the agent (or singer) to be Malay, and subsumes the Chinese and Indian in the Malay's discursive context, resulting in an absorption that continues to alienate. Although given some space in the Malay context, they remain labelled foreigners to the unnamed Malay friend, allegorical to the Malaysian society at the time, in which they are seemingly accepted but not given equal rights by the government.

Some of Samad Said's works, such as *Daerah Zeni*, were also included in the reading list for the literary component of the Malaysian curriculum, until, in an alienating move a few years ago, the Education Ministry removed them because they were found to be too difficult to understand. Deeply disappointed by this, the National Laureate spoke out:

If you start saying the works of *Sasterawan Negara*<sup>23</sup> are difficult at the school level, then don't expect them to touch these books when they leave school. You are sending out a clear message—do not read the works of *Sasterawan Negara*. Everything should start in school. We are not creating a situation

where people will read good literature. In America, the students are studying *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and in England, they go for *The Lord of the Flies*, all of which are difficult books. If you want simple books, then just read ABC all the time.<sup>24</sup>

In the sarcastic response above, we can see how Samad Said became the estranged writer in *Daerah Zeni*. Ironically, this event occurred more than 20 years after *Daerah Zeni* was first published, and it is only one in a series of consecutive events that further contributed to the divide between Malay and Malaysian literature and the divide between Malaysian literature and Malaysia. In light of the affair, when he turned to the DBP for support, the institution remained silent. Samad Said took this silence to be a sign of support of the government's alienating action.<sup>25</sup> Coupled with the tear gas from the Federal Reserve Unit during a protest against the PPSMI, the events justified Samad Said's dismay over the state of literature and education in Malay. To date, he remains (understandably) very pessimistic about Malay literature.

"I also faced the same thing, despite living in a metropolitan city, I am still, all the time, trapped within the world of my own race. I have two or three Chinese and Indian friends, but they are all mere acquaintances whose souls I cannot delve into. In another meeting in Singapore, I was asked why my writings were not more populated by the Chinese. In *Salina*, for example, it's the Tamils who come alive. My response—the limited encounters in my own life, which are few and far between, make it impossible for me to get into the hearts and souls of those from other races. Without a doubt, therein lies my weakness—or the weakness of most of Malay writers of my time. It's like we just met on the road, despite living in the same country. Just look around, even now the divisiveness is still being championed.

Definitely the new (literary) climate will produce writers who are more Malaysian. Even now, we are still divided in little circles. However, there are always voices for racial unity, especially in the political domain.

I am actually content with *Daerah Zeni*, which can serve as a mirror (for the Malays) to look at ourselves as a race that is constantly maturing".<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

As a nationalistic, fictional *mise-en-abyme* (Koster 1997, 85),<sup>27</sup> *Daerah Zeni* tells us a story about Malaysia, not only its colonial and postcolonial histories, but also the multiple silences and disjunctures in and between its "-scapes" and chronotopes (or time-spaces) brought by historical, linguistic and literary factors that intersect at certain points in the readerly imagination and separated at others. Samad Said's intended historical narrative about an underappreciated nationalist author has become a reality in his present context in an inverted form of a Jamesonian national allegory where the political forces of the nation end up fulfilling the novel's premise. It affects a nation of readers as it signifies a great disjoint between Malay and Malaysian literature, both slowly being pried away from the national consciousness, as relentless attempts to sew back the stitches of the racial fabric of Malaysia are constantly revising how Malays and Malaysians read, write and understand themselves in the literary world.<sup>28</sup>

## Notes

1. Literal translation—Zeni's Domain or Zeni's District. Alternately, in another work on the novel, the title is translated as *The World of Zeni*, pointing to the natural microcosmic potential of the novel (Koster 1997). In Wilkinson's *Malay-English Dictionary*, which is noted in the novel, the definition given for the word, spelled *dairah*, is district; the outlying or country tracts in a state. *Negeri Singapura serta dairah telok rantau jajahannya*: the town of Singapore with its outlying country tracts, its shores and its dependencies, *Hikayat Abdullah*, 224 (289). Other possible translations of the word are: district, region, province, village, ville, locality, realm. It comes from the Arabic word "circle".
2. "Ribut liar dari barat", kata Hamdar sendirian (A. Samad Said 1985, 3).
3. *Ibid*, 37.
4. *Ibid*, 73.
5. Koster (1997), an exemplary postmodern scholarly reader of *Daerah Zeni*, compares it to William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* (1936) and other Western novels, via Brian McHale (1987), *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Routledge), by reading into the novel "features [that] are typical of modernism, such as textual indefiniteness, incompleteness, epistemological doubt, metalingual skepticism and respect for the idiosyncrasies of the reader".
6. "Pilih mahu mati atas bangunan atau bawah bangunan? Aku? Aku pilih bawah". Tapi, Eهران lebih yakin bahawa di situlah tasik khayalan (A. Samad Said 1985, 59).
7. *T. ayer*: territories; districts; the whole extent of land and water forming a geographical unit (Wilkinson *Malay-English Dictionary* 154).
8. James W. W. Birch was assassinated by Dato' Maharajalela and his assistant Siputum on 2 November 1875. Dato' Maharajalela is generally celebrated by Malaysians, especially Malays, as a national hero.
9. "Barangkali benar bahawa nama Lazri Meon tidak sehebat nama Syed Syekh Al-Hadi, Shamsuddin Salleh, Abdullah Sidek atau Harun Aminurrashid, tapi sebagai perakam sastera deskriptif sukar ia ditandingi, fikir Zeni lagi" (A. Samad Said 1985, 37).
10. "Dan Lazri tidak menduga bahawa Jamdir masih sempat mengulangi pertanyaan lamanya: Mengapa Pulau Pinang beserta Seberang Perai dijual kepada Syarikat Hindia

Timur begitu murah? Dan seperti biasa juga, dia tidak sempat menjawab, kerana Jamdir akan mengingatkan bagaimana mereka berdua terpaksa berpisah dulu—dia dalam PKMM keluar UMNO kerana cecak mengekalkan cogan kata 'Merdeka!', sementara Lazri tetap kekal dengan 'Hidup Melayu'nya" (ibid, 122).

11. Previously known as Province Wellesley.
12. "Pengalaman, deh!" Jelas Dorjono yang memang banyak pengalaman (seorang abangnya mati di Sungai Berantas selepas Gestapo dan dia sendiri pun secara tak sengaja ternampak Parman dan Sutojo dibunuh di Lubang Buaya). 'Sesudah hidup di bumi Diponegoro dan Tjokroaminoto, apakah lain yang kau harapkan? Tentu saja semangat perwira dan berjuang, bukan?' Kesediaan dan kelengkapan begitulah yang tiada padanya. Sejauh yang dikenalnya ialah wartawan Onn bin Ja'afar yang memulakan Warta Malaya, Daud Mohd. Shah yang melandaskan kesatuan Melayu Singapura dan Za'ba yang berani mengkritik orang Melayu kerana malasnya dulu. Tapi semua ini pun sebenarnya lebih banyak didengarnya saja dari bualan ayahnya bersama teman-teman sealiran yang tidak jenuh berbincang dan menelaah tentang gerakan sufi di Aceh" (A. Samad Said 1985, 63–64).
13. Also G30S, an abbreviation of Gerakan 30 September, in which six Indonesian Army generals (including one named Parman and one named Sutojo) were killed in a coup d'etat allegedly committed by the Indonesian Communist Party (or Partai Komunis Indonesia [PKI]). Lubang Buaya was one of the murder sites.
14. His predecessor and ex-commander, Sukarno, had close ties with the communists, as exemplified by his national philosophy – NASAKOM (abbreviation of NASionalisme, Agama, KOMunisme, translated as Nationalism, Religion, Communism).
15. Tamil, English "strike action", popularised during the Indian Independence Movement.
16. "Tiada lagi suara Melayu, keluarga Melayu termiskin di Bandar, kenangan untuk 'Melayu Baru'".
17. Referring to *Dewan Masyarakat*, a monthly Malay-language publication that contained the Malay-centric articles noted above.
18. Abbreviated as ETEMS or PPSMI (*Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik dalam Inggeris*) in Malay.
19. "...ada dua jenis penulis. Satu penulis yang mencari cerita, mencipta cerita dan bercerita. Dan ada pula penulis yang penghidupannya menjadi cerita. Jadi untuk saya, nyatanya yang sudah-sudah, segala apa yang saya ceritakan sebenarnya itu adalah apa yang telah saya alami dan lalui. Saya ambil bahagian-bahagian tertentu untuk dihantar dan dirakamkan di dalam novel saya".
20. "Tujuan saya untuk memahami erti sejarah dalam events yang berlaku dan ketidakupayaan saya untuk melepaskan events itu berlalu begitu saja. Events itu mesti dikaji, mesti dicari maknanya... Itu sebab dalam tulisan-tulisan saya, saya merakamkan dekad. Sebab saya mempercayai dekad tertentu itu harus diperjelaskan" (ibid, 9).
21. The 13 May 1969, Sino-Malay race riots, which led to a declaration of a state of national emergency and suspension of Parliament.
22. Ada seorang kawan, namanya Ah Meng,  
Dia juga berkawan, namanya Muthu,  
Kami berkawan baik, sama sedarjah,  
Belajar bersama, main bersama,  
Hey, hey, hey, tiga sekawan,  
Hey, hey, hey, tiga sekawan.
23. Malay, translated as "National Laureate".
24. "Malay lit under threat" (6 March 2008). Online interview by Bissme S. Retrieved on 3 January 2010, from <http://www.sun2surf.com/article.cfm?id=20962>.
25. "They have no tongue. [Writers association] Gapena (Gabungan Penulis Nasional) has no tongue now. They have not shown any reaction to this school situation. Their silence

shows that they agree with what the ministry is doing". In "Malay lit under threat" (6 March 2008). Online interview by Bissme S. Retrieved on 3 January 2010, from <http://www.sun2surf.com/article.cfm?id=20962>.

26. In an email exchange between the author and the National Laureate, he acknowledges the difficulties of portraying a thoroughly racially inclusive understanding in his writings, in line with a similar opinion by Han Suyin, the Malaysian-Eurasian author who wrote *The Rain My Drink* (1956): "Saya juga menghadapi hal yang sama, walaupun tinggal di kota metropolitan, tapi masih duduk sepanjang waktu dalam dunia bangsa sendiri. Ada dua tiga orang teman Cina dan India, tapi kenalan biasa saja tidak sampai mampu menyelam hati nurani mereka. Begitu juga, dalam satu pertemuan saya di Singapura saya pernah ditanya mengapa dalam karya saya tidak 'ramai' orang China. Dalam *Salina* mithalnya orang Tamil yang hidup. Jawapan saya kerana lingkungan kehidupan saya sendiri, dan pergaulan yang singkat dan jarang itu tidak memungkinkin saya menyeluk lebih dalam ke lubuk hati kaum lain. Tidak syak lagi di situlah kelemahan saya—atau kelemahan kebanyakan penulis Melayu di zaman saya. Kami terlalu baru berkenalan—ketemu di jalan walaupun dalam sebuah negara. Lihatlah hingga sekarang inipun keterasingan begitu masih dijeritkan. Tentunya iklim baru akan memunculkan penulis yang lebih Malaysian. Setakat ini, kita sebenarnya masih berkelompok-kelompok juga—tapi selalunya saja-saja menjeritkan kesatuan itu, khususnya bagi orang politik. Saya juga sebenarnya senang dengan *Daerah Zeni* yang tampaknya sempat menjadi cermin untuk meneliti diri kita sendiri sebagai bangsa yang sedang menjadi".
27. A narratological label used to further dissect and analyse the layers and dimensions of the novel. Beyond being merely a nationalistic novel, *Daerah Zeni*, with its complex, prism-like characters, settings and narrative, mirrors not only Malaysia's history but also its present and future. Its author reflects or is reflected by the author of the manuscript within it, providing opportunities for an infinite interpretation into the abyss of reading, as suggested by the French term.
28. More optimistically, the surge in new, prolific publishing houses such as Lejen Press and Fixi Press in Malaysia promises a new, more dynamic and diverse era in (pop) Malay literature, offering readers alternatives that veer further away from the bildungsroman archetype.

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