

POST-MODERN PERSPECTIVES ON MALAY BIOGRAPHY*

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Should Malaysian biography be grounded in the standpoint of modernity to view all the inner details of the private man, or should it be viewed in other ways, preferably in what the author calls "the Malay poetics of biography", that is, the tradition of representing individuals as immersed in a community. To define reputations, to structure lives as portions and perhaps as encapsulations of Malay nationalism or Islamic ethos requires skills which should also attract the interest of biographers outside Malaysia.

Perluah riwayat hidup Malaysia berdasarkan suatu sudut pandangan masyarakat moden yang menghendaki segala butir-butir rahsia tentang kehidupan seseorang individu, atau ia perlu difikirkan dengan cara-cara lain, terutamanya yang dianggap oleh pengarang sebagai "poetik riwayat hidup Melayu", iaitu menulis riwayat hidup dengan memperlihatkan individu-individu semata-mata sebagai anggota masyarakat sahaja. Untuk menerangkan nama baik seseorang atau menceritakan semula kehidupan seseorang itu hanya sebagai sebahagian atau sebetuk pergerakan nasionalisma Melayu atau pemikiran Islam memerlukan kemahiran-kemahiran yang patut juga menarik perhatian penulis-penulis riwayat hidup di luar Malaysia juga.

The establishing of a Dictionary of Malaysian Biography, based at the University of Malaya, provokes consideration of the way biographies have been written in that country. In what ways will the Dictionary of Malaysian Biography be distinctively Malaysian? Will the project produce only a formidable body of data, a valuable reference for anyone interested in Malaysia - and this is itself no small achievement - or is it possible that work on this dictionary will have a comparative or theoretical significance for the study of biography in general?

One characteristic of Malaysian biographical writing has often been stressed in papers written by advisers to the Dictionary project. This is the relative absence - in contrast, for instance, to the case of British biography - of the exploration of interiority, of the investigation of the psychological, individual self. It is an absence, however, which tends to draw attention to certain positive features of Malaysian biography. In this article I suggest that, in what is increasingly being described as the post-modern era, these features (as encountered in specifically Malaya writing) possess a theoretical significance for the writing of biography in general.

Among the essays on the writing of biography presented at the April 1986 seminar on "Biografi Malaysia" we find Khoo Kay Kim, for instance, remarking that traditional Malay writings do not "analyse the character and psychology" of the subject.¹ He expresses the hope that in the future, writers of biography will be brave enough to present "not just the public man, but more important, the private man also."² In a similar vein, Krishen Jit and Lee Kam Hing in their joint seminar paper refer to an essay on Asian biography written by Wang Gungwu in 1975. (It appeared in a much quoted volume on *Self and Biography* which Wang Gungwu edited in that year). Krishen Jit and Lee agree with Wang that "the individuality of the subject - his thoughts, his private life, his psychological make-up, all that which makes him an individual - were not the subject of biography" in the Asian region.³ This type of comment, of course, has often been made about portrayals of the individual in Malay literature. Thus, when the poet and critic Muhammad Haji Salleh discusses the semibiographical writing of Harun Aminurrashid--in this case in Harun's study of Panglima Awang, Magellan's Malay navigator--the critic notes that the characters "tend to have very thin internal life or none at all."⁴ They are "generally flat."⁵

Back in 1972, William Roff--in a paper called "Autobiography and Biography in Malay Historical Studies"⁶ which actually called for a 'Dictionary of Malaysian National Biography'--quoted with approval some even earlier comments by the historian, John Bastin. Writing on the "Problems of Personality in reinterpreting Malay history", Bastin had observed that Malay traditional chronicles provide "no real idea of what (the individuals they describe), thought as distinct human beings." The chronicles, he suggested, lack a "personality base."⁷ When Roff later proceeded to survey modern Malay biographical writings, he complained that "what biography there is in Malay (or of Malays) is not of very high quality."⁸ Although the reasons for this judgement are not spelled out it may be significant that he ended the paper with a consideration of the possibility of writing Malay "psychoanalytical biography" of the type attempted by Erik Erikson. (Roff made here the suggestive comment that "family relationships and childhood upbringing, the web of kinship generally, are by common acceptance of prime importance in the kin-centric societies of Southern Asia, as determinants of personality, character, and action.")⁹

The judgement that Malay writing lacks a concern for interiority has not been entirely unanimous. Kassim Ahmad set out in the 1950s to investigate "characterization" in the traditional epic, the *Ilkayat Hang Tuah*¹⁰ but he seemed to some (and I would have been among them) to have been engaged in a futile search. The type of comment made by A.H. Johns on another traditional text, the *Sejarah Melayu*, was (and is) more convincing. The *Sejarah Melayu* "does not achieve," Johns observed, "an integration of character, anecdote and

moral judgement." Its anecdotes "make no pretense of illustrating a relationship between individual, personality and action."¹¹

These comments by Johns might indeed apply equally well to more modern Malay writings. Works as different from one another as Haji Mohd. Said's *Hikayat Johor* (1908)¹² (which relates the life of Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor), Abdullah Al-Qari's study of the Kelantan religious teacher, To Kenali,¹³ or even Abdul Latiff, Abu Bakar's account of the journalist and nationalist, Abdul Rahim Kajai,¹⁴ provide little sense of the "private man" lying within each of their biographical subjects. The contrast with British biography - as Wang Gungwu noted in his 1975 *Self and Biography* essay is particularly telling. In the British tradition biography "seeks to reveal all and expose as much of the private self as possible to public gaze." The British "led the way," suggested Wang, in the "process of transforming biography without Self to that which is almost all Self."¹⁵ Wang even contemplated the possibility that the progress of biography writing in different parts of Asia might be related to the degree of penetration of British imperialism in those different areas. That is, where the British presence had been strongest one tends to encounter a more fully-developed form of biography.

What needs to be stressed about the Wang Gungwu essay is that it presents a survey of Asian biography which is grounded in the standpoint of the discourse of modernity. Thus, when Wang gives consideration to modern Chinese biography he is "disappointed" to find so little writing which focusses on "the man and his individuality." The unique in human lives, Wang comments, seems to have been considered "frivolous" by the biographers both of Communist China and Taiwan.¹⁶ In India, by contrast, he finds more reason for optimism that there would occur a growth of biography based on an "intimate and sensitive concern for an individual's achievements and failures." Finally, in Southeast Asia, as of 1975, the biographical output was still "thin and of poor quality." New ideas about "the Self in Biography" had not yet taken root and stimulated "local practitioners."¹⁷

The possibility of a radical change in certain areas of Southeast Asia is anticipated by A.H. Johns in another essay in the same *Self and Biography* volume. Johns, whose 1975 perspective was also that of modernity, traces the "evolution" of "changing perceptions of character in the Malay world." Having noticed the absence in the *Sejarah Melayu* of significant relationships between "individual, personality and action" he observes in the nineteenth-century writer, Munshi Abdullah - who was much influenced by Europeans operating in Singapore and Malacca - what Johns called the "first manifestation of an individualism." Abdullah's autobiography - although "more an arrangement of notes and jottings than an integrated piece of work" - reflects the "personality of the author, and reveals something of his inner attitudes in a way that had never been done in Malay before."¹⁸ As

scholars of Malay literature know, several other autobiographical writings followed those of Abdullah. They include a travel account by his son, Ibrahim Munshi,¹⁹ and the memoirs of the Dato Bentara Luar of Johor.²⁰ (As Amin Sweeney has noted, however, neither of these works is as ego-centered as Abdullah's writings).²¹

In his survey article, Johns moves directly from Abdullah to Kartini of Jepara, in Java; then he discusses Muhd. Radjab of West Sumatra and, finally Chairil Anwar, the young poet of the Indonesian "*Angkatan 45*". Johns argues that in Chairil Anwar's intensely personal poetry we encounter a "new sense of the self-new for (Chairil's) environment, and new for the linguistic medium in which he expressed it."²² The observation, at least in an indirect manner, is of the greatest importance for the development of biography in Indonesia and Malaysia. Such a concern for interiority, of course, is precisely the type of literary emphasis which bodes well for the development of biographical skills which are necessary to the investigation of the "private man". Indeed the poetry of Chairil Anwar would seem to foreshadow the establishing of the discourse of modernity in numerous fields of Malaysian and Indonesian life. It is a development, of course, which would have been a vital concern not only to the people of those countries but also to the authors of *Self and Biography*.

Surveying Asia in the early 1970s, the individualism of Chairil Anwar might indeed have seemed exciting just as the absences in Asian biography would have been perceived by many as both striking and disappointing. In that period, history, particularly Third World history, was still commonly being written in the Development mode. It was a Whig style of history which traced the linear evolution of national societies toward a modern, "developed" model. Historians writing in that tradition tended to search enthusiastically for indications of the emergence of such modern phenomena as national formations, capitalist economies and rational scientific thought. They attempted to identify, too, the first appearances of the modern doctrines of the self and such associated genres of literature as the novel and the biography. In the sixties and seventies we were prone to listing the expressions and emblems of modernity, sometimes ticking them off, one by one, as they appeared in a particular region. Where they failed to emerge it was difficult to avoid a sense of disappointment. Looking back today on that period, development history seems to have achieved the role of a "master narrative" which was imposed at the expense of what have recently been referred to as "others' stories."²³

In more recent years there has been a pluralization of history and we are inclined today to assemble a wide range of narratives which might concern regional, ethnic or subaltern themes, as well as issues of gender or labour. The multiplicity is formidable. What is more, we now see with increasing clarity that development history is itself the product of a particular cultural formation,

and one which in recent times is being persistently subverted in both intellectual and other ways. Perhaps the most effective form of subversion has consisted merely of tracking the emergence and influence of this manner of constructing the past. That is, in tracking the progress of that development mode of thinking we reveal its conditional character. From the perspective of biography, of course, it is the concept of "individualism" which is the most significant aspect of that mode.

Providing a genealogy of the concept of individualism, like that of any other aspect of development history, offers a "critical retrospection"²⁴ which problematizes the concept and, thus as a result, tends to reduce its potency. It is of great importance, therefore, that in the post-modern era we no longer see the category of "self" as a "primordial innate idea, clearly inscribed since Adam in the deepest part of our being..." Rather, to quote the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, we increasingly take the view that it is a concept which has been "slowly erected, clarified, specified and identified with self-knowledge, with the psychological consciousness, almost into our own times."²⁵

Such changing perceptions of the individual inevitably shape conceptions about biography and other literary expressions. For this reason, whatever the triumphs of British biography as an art in the last century or two, many Englishmen writing in the seventeenth and even the early eighteenth centuries are unlikely to have been disappointed, as later commentators were, by the absence of concern for interiority in Malay writing. Scholars have suggested that it was the rise of Protestantism and of industrial capitalism which promoted a new concept of self, an individualism which entailed an "ideology primarily based not on the tradition of the past but on the autonomy of the individual, irrespective of his particular social status or personal capacity."²⁶ Descartes, Locke and other philosophers are said to have laid the conceptual framework; Calvin had established a label of systematic spiritual introspection. In general the Puritan Christians, who shifted responsibility for person spiritual direction from the church to the individual person, appear to have had a profound impact on the development of the category of 'self'.²⁷ The eighteenth-century authors, Defoe and Richardson - pioneers of the genre of the novel - assisted also both to stimulate a popular fascination with the investigation of personal experience and to contribute to the constitution of the actual concept. Richardson ought to be of particular interest to students of Malay literature. Like the Malay novelist of the 1920s, Saiyyid Shaykh al-Hadi, he employed the device of incessant letter-writing as a principal form of communication between his protagonists. In so doing he allowed his protagonists to reveal private feelings with an openness never previously encountered in English literature.²⁸ Richardson's novels stand at the beginning of a trajectory in English literature which leads to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a book devoted not in part but entirely to the exposing of an individual consciousness.

In the field of autobiography, the "Confessions" of Jean Jacques Rousseau form a landmark in the intimate representation of what the author described as a unique life. "I am," said Rousseau, "like no one else in the whole world."²⁹ In his Confessions "the truth--the ground of the autobiographer's true being and the basis of his kinship with others--is totally subjective."³⁰ As to the genre of biography itself, Boswell hoped that in his famous study, "The character of Samuel Johnson", would be "so developed" that readers might consider themselves "well-acquainted" with the subject.³¹ Boswell desired through his writing to preserve the great man "almost entirely."³²

By the 1900s 'Biography' was discussed persistently in terms of the ability to convey 'personality'.³³ Lytton Strachey reminded readers that "human beings are too important to be treated as mere symptoms of the past;" they have a "value which is independent of any temporal process - which is eternal and must be felt for its own sake."³⁴ Not surprisingly, some biographers sought inspiration and methodology from other types of specialist of 'self'. Psychology entered the craft of biography. It is explicit in the case of Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther* and Gandhi's *Truth*. Other writers are less methodologically transparent. The debt to psychology, for instance, in the elegant biographical studies in Gavan Daws's *Dream of Islands*³⁵ is never revealed in the use of jargon or the presence of laboured theoretical discussion.

The "introspective individualism upon which biography thrives"³⁶ is cited time and again in discussions of this genre. It requires no further amplification here. What must be stressed is the way that philosophers and critics, in reflecting in recent years on individualism are beginning to reveal its contingent nature. Instead of individualism being perceived as a reality -- a phenomenon which has always existed despite being stifled or submerged for centuries beneath oppressive social doctrines - it is gradually becoming understood as a component in an epistemological approach which may be soon coming to a close. The work of some scholars - Jacques Derrida is one of them - even encourages us to believe that we are entering a post-modern age, a period when we will try to "pass beyond man and humanism..."³⁷ We now no longer stand so securely upon a modern vantage point when we survey the development of biographical writing or indeed the 'development' of any other modern aspect of society. Biographers and historians are becoming increasingly uncomfortable about emplotting history in terms of the linear emergence of rationality and of nation. We are intrigued by the plurality of possible versions of the past, by the reversals, fissures and counter-plots which 'development' history often concealed. We are now less confident than we were a decade ago about writing of inadequacies in the different cultural forms of such societies as Malaysia. Wang Gungwu himself has commented on this changing perspective. At a conference in January 1989, when comparing current scholarship in Asia with writing from the "1950s, 60s or

even 70s," he observed a "growing sense of irony," a new degree of "self-consciousness or of self-awareness..."³⁸

In the last decade of the twentieth century, then, historians and others have begun to falter; we are questioning and often rejecting both subjects of analysis and the forms of analysis attempted in the past. We are 'deconstructing' and, in the process of this ideological and epistemological subversion, it is possible to identify not only conceptual naivete but also opportunities, some of which are in the field of biography.

Displaced now from the summit of modernity, the biographer concerned with Malay society is likely, first of all, to be less single-minded in searching for the "private man." Thus, it would be more productive today to examine exactly how the individual is represented in Malay writing rather than to regret the different ways in which he or she is not represented. In the same spirit we might now be inclined not merely to trace the evolution of the concept of individualism in Malay society - as Johns had done - but also to examine in greater detail the actual Malay reactions to individualism. What reaction, for instance, did Chairil Anwar's introspective poetry provoke among the ASAS 50 School of Writers who became so influential in the years leading up to Malayan *Merdeka*? Many of them, as Malay specialists know well, criticized the 'aku' (or 'I') perspective, saying that it could not "give a true picture of what is felt by the people". Thus, Asraf bin Haji Wahab directed Malay authors to "go down into society and immerse themselves in the very being of the suffering people."³⁹ This notion of "immersion" (*menyelam*) is worth noting with care as it provides a possible clue as to the type of biographical style which might actually be encouraged in Malay society. Just as the individual novelist or short story writer ought to be 'immersed' in 'the people', so might the subjects of biography be treated not as unique egos or *aku* but rather "immersed" in certain forms of community or ethos.

Examine, for instance, the 'biography' of To' Kenali or the recently published studies of *Tokoh Ulama* (Eminent Religious Scholars), published by the Religious Council (the Majlis Ugama) of Kelantan.⁴⁰ Rather than representing their internal experiences these studies usually portray the different *ulama* as links in a chain of Islamic scholars. The teachers as well as the students of a particular *ulama* are listed; the doctrines he followed are detailed and so are the books he wrote. In this sense the *ulama* is submerged in the Islamic ummat or community.

If we turn to court literature of the twentieth century - for instance, to the *Hikayat Johor* of Haji Mohd. Said or more recent biographical texts from the royal ideologues of such states as Pahang, Kelantan and Perak - the individuals are again described both in terms of their achievements and their place in another type of lineage, the royal genealogy. Personal comments are usually

made in phrases which to a reader of British biography, seem formulaic and unrevealing. Thus the primary concern of the *Hikayat Johor* seems to be to situate (and praise) Sultan Abu Bakar within the context not merely of the Johor Kerajaan but also of the wider community of the British Empire. The ruler is skillfully displayed as participating fully in the ceremonial structure, the festive occasions and the title-giving of the mega-*kerajaan* which was focussed upon the Empress-Queen Victoria.⁴¹

A slightly later and rather different type of text was written by one of the Johor Sultan's subjects, the Dato Bentara Luar. On the face of it this is an autobiographical writing of the innovative Munshi Abdullah discussed by Johns. But again we obtain little intimate insight into the author's personal life. He represents himself - in his words - as "a plant" living upon the "great tree" of Johor, "spreading myself over it and winding myself around every branch and fork."⁴² The 'tree', it should be stressed, does not represent the Raja, as it might have done in earlier and more conventional statements about royalty. In the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, for example, the emphasis had been on "working diligently" for (or more literally "under") the Raja.⁴³ By contrast, in the early twentieth century autobiography from Johor the author is "winding himself around" the territorially-defined state of Johor. One further feature of the Dato Bentara Luar's account is the author's declaration that "reputations, good or bad, live on forever in the world."⁴⁴ Again, this is a point of view often enunciated in traditional Malay writings.⁴⁵ It is tempting to see the composition of the Johor autobiography and perhaps many early writing as arising at least in part from a desire to determine such reputations. The same desire, as I will suggest, may well be a primary consideration in the writing of recent Malay biography and autobiography.

In an apparently very different area of study, Abdul Latiff Abu Bakar's book on Abdul Rahim Kajai ⁴⁶ is also concerned about both reputation and immersion. The subject is elegantly presented as being immersed in *Kebangsaan Melayu* or Malay nationalism. The author situates Abdul Rahim Kajai within the community of journalists and nationalists. Those who are said to be his disciples are listed and Latiff Abu Bakar also examines carefully the opinions offered about Kajai. The thought and the reputation of Kajai seem to be delineated not so much to bring out their idiosyncratic character--to stress the *aku* - but rather to define him as what might be termed a portion, a constituent part of Malay nationalism. The sophistication of the treatment appears to lie not in the investigation of the subject's interiority but in the definition of his position within, and contribution to, Malay nationalism. It is the *Kebangsaan*, we might say, not the individual that is foregrounded in the study. It maybe the case that the skill in writing biographies of ulama or Rajas also lies in the finesse with which they are located (or immersed) within such different types of community (or ethos) as the ummat Islam (the community of Islam) or the Sultanate. There are

indications that it was one of the traditional functions of the Malay *hikayat* (epic or chronicle) to define the reputation - their status and contribution to the Sultanate - of people incorporated or represented in the text. The presence in many court texts of large numbers of individuals, many of whom seem to be included only to record their status and relatively peripheral role in events, would be difficult to explain in terms other than reasons of reputation.⁴⁷

In a certain sense, then, the definition of the "public man" (to use Richard Sennett's phrase)⁴⁸ is a traditional art, but the increasing plurality of Malay society in the last century or so must add to the complexity of the task. Ideological fissures are growing in Malay society and, as a result, there are competing forms of community with which a Malay might be identified. To integrate human lives, to define a reputation, to capture a life within a community and a text, becomes increasingly difficult when religious, ethnic, class, regional and feudal claims are in intense competition. The elements of a life are more diffusely distributed than they are likely to have been in the traditional Malay polity.

Examine, for instance, Anwar Abdullah's biography of the nationalist leader Dato Onn.⁴⁹ Anwar recognizes the significance of the Johor Sultanate in the life of its subject - and indeed Dato Onn's significance to the Sultanate - by devoting a separate chapter to "Onn and Raja." To a large extent the matter of this chapter is presented as independent of that in the chapters on Onn's involvement in national politics and his contribution to the Malay race. An analysis of this biography might profitably explore the way in which the author relates these different spheres of Onn's life and service to one another. The author himself seems to invite such an analysis. In the very first sentence of the preface, he makes clear that his book (like that of Latiff Abu Bakar discussed above) is concerned about an individual only as a way of discussing a larger topic. "The Story of Dato Onn," Anwar Abdullah explains, "is the story of the Malay race and the history of Malaya."

A degree of literary agility in the differentiation and integration of different types of "service" is also displayed in some of the biographies of *ulama* (religious scholars) which I have mentioned. Thus, in the recent Kelantan volume,⁵⁰ Tuan Hussain Kedah is described as having offered devoted service (*jasa*) to both his "religion and homeland"; Maulana Abdullah Nuh is said to have been involved in the nationalist movement but hoped to establish an 'Islamic State' in Malaya; Haji Mohd. bin Haji Mohd. Said Khatib is renowned for his service to the royal family of Kelantan and for having received several distinguished royal titles. There is a strong suggestion here of competing claims, of overlapping identities. In a rather different way Sultan Abu Bakar's participation in two *Kerajaan* - that of Johor and of the British Empire - also demanded an assessment of competing claims. As readers and students

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of biography we need to consider carefully the types of rhetorical device employed in elucidating or reconciling overlap of this type, and in doing so we are likely to ask questions about the expectations of the audiences for which such biographies are written.

A second type of complexity involved in the defining of Malay lives today arises from the fact that Malay biographers are often quite conscious of their own participation in a modern era. They are not ignorant of the ego-oriented biographical style - in some cases they reject it deliberately and with skill. In his biography of Harun Aminurrashid, for instance, Abdullah Hussein declares that the "Harun whom I introduce in this book is not my Harun, but the Harun narrated to me by others. He is a genuine patriot of the Malay race, a real nationalist, as often asserted by his former students..."⁵¹ In writing the book-subtitled "promoter of the spirit of *Kebangsaan*" - Abdullah Hussain (in his words) tries "not to make comments or evaluations about (Harun)...I try to keep outside the fence and act only as a catalyst between Harun and the people."⁵² Here clearly is the desire for authorial "immersion."

Abdullah Hussein's introductory comments also alert us again to the need to consider first, the aims of Malay biography before judging its achievement. Until we appreciate the possible strategies and rhetorics employed in defining the biographical subject - in exposing or reconciling countervailing claims, in executing the task of catalyst - it may be impossible to assess authorial virtuosity. We need a Malay poetics of biography.

The point I am making is by now obvious. Successful representation of individuals might be judged in terms other than the depth of character analysis and the degree to which interior lives are investigated. Individuals may be represented in a range of different ways. Instead of complaining about the "flatness" of Malay character portrayal we might question our own expectations and then consider what qualities and talents that type of portrayal does in fact require and display. The tradition of representing individuals as immersed in a community, to quote Asraf, demands writing of a different category of sophistication. To define reputations, to structure lives as portions and perhaps encapsulations of Malay nationalism or Islamic ethos requires skills which should also attract the interest of biographers outside Malaysia.

They are skills which may, in fact, be of growing importance in Western writing as the focus or emphasis shifts away from what has been called the "abstract and ghostly character"⁵³ of the individual, emotive, self. The issue is raised with considerable effectiveness in Alasdair MacIntyre's influential work, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. The author not only communicates the problematic character of the notion of self, but represents his own perception of the individual in terms not far distant from

those which he employs to convey the pre-modern perception. Of himself, MacIntyre writes:

"I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations...I am born with a past...to try to cut myself off from the past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships. The possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide."⁵⁴

In pre-modern societies, as MacIntyre puts it:

"I am brother, cousin and grandson, member of this household, that village, this tribe. These are not characteristics that belong to human beings accidentally, to be stripped away in order to discover 'the real me'. They are part of my substance... Individuals inherit a particular space within an interlocking set of such relationships."⁵⁵

In the light of such perceptions of individuality as that presented by MacIntyre it is not surprising to find new approaches to biography emerging even in Southeast Asian Studies. When an historian such as Craig Reynolds (whose recent writing is much influenced by post-modern modes of theoretical analysis) turns his attention to the writing of Thai biography, he considers the difficulties and opportunities in a manner which is in some ways reminiscent of the approach of Malay biographers. In Reynolds's examination of the Thai author and radical Jit Poumisak⁵⁶ he is not concerned above all about the "inner man." According to Reynolds, Jit's life "textualises much about post-World War Two Thai history..." Reynolds wants to include in his study (and I recall here Abdullah Hussein's comments) "the Thai language construction of (Jit's) life with all its lapses, disclosures, and polyphony..." In the "splintered life" of Jit, says Reynolds, may be read the "splintered life of the nation."

Setting himself a biographical task in these terms, one might conclude, Reynolds may have something to learn from the techniques and rhetoric of Malay writers who have for a long period attempted to represent and define *Tokoh Melayu*. That is to say, the critique of modernity in Western culture stimulates a sensitivity and receptiveness toward a wide range of methodologies in biography and I expect many other areas.

For this reason, in particular, one hopes that the Dictionary of Malaysian Biography project, as it collects new materials and debates the criteria upon which biographical entries will be based, will also pay attention to theoretical issues. What are the traditions, the characteristics, the poetics, of biography in Malay society, both pre-modern and twentieth century? How can established

Malay skills be employed in the national project, making it less derivative and more distinctly Malaysian? Is it not possible to bring Malay and Malaysian biographical writing into a two-way dialogue with biographers elsewhere in the world? In what ways can contemporary post-modern theory be exploited in the practical business of executing a new and prestigious national project?

NOTA KAKI

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- 1 Khoo Kay Kim. "Penulisan Biografi di Malaysia: Satu Tinjauan". Unpublished paper given at the *Seminar Biografi Malaysia*, April 1986.
- 2 *Ibid*, p. 8: "Bukan hanya the public man tetapi, lebih penting lagi, the private man juga..."
- 3 Wang Gungwu, *Self and Biography* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1976). See Krishen Jit and Lee Kam Hing, "The Dictionary of Malaysian Biography Project", (*Seminar Biografi Malaysia papers*), p. 9.
- 4 Muhammad Haji Salleh, appendix in Abdullah Hussain, *Harun Aminurrashid Pembangkit Semangat Kebangsaan*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1982.
- 5 *Ibid*.
- 6 W.R. Roff. *Autobiography and Biography in Malay Historical Studies*. Occasional Paper No. 13, Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1972, p. 1.
- 7 J. Bastin. "Problems of Personality in the Reinterpretation of Modern Malaysian History". In J. Bastin and R. Roolvink, (eds.). *Malayan and Indonesian Studies*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1964, p. 152.
- 8 Roff, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
- 9 *Ibid*, p. 17.

- 10 Kassim Ahmad, *Perwatakan Dalam Hikayat Hang Tuah*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1964.
- 11 A.H. Johns. "From Caricature and Vignette to Ambivalence and Angst," in Wang Gungwu, *Self*, p. 35.
- 12 First published in 1911. The edition I possess is Singapore: Malaya Publishing House, 1940.
- 13 Abdullah Al-Qari B. Haji Salleh. *Sejarah Hidup To' Kenali'*, Kota Bharu: Pustaka Aman Press, 1967. See also his "To' Kenali": His life and Influence" in W.R. Roff, *Kelantan: Religion, Society and Politics in a Malay State*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1974, pp. 87-100.
- 14 Abdul Latiff Abu Bakar. *Abdul Rahim Kajai: Wartawan Dan Sasterawan Melayu*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1984.
- 15 *Self and Biography*, 'Introduction'.
- 16 *Ibid*, pp. 203-6 and 'Introduction'.
- 17 *Ibid*, 'Introduction'.
- 18 Johns, 'Caricature'.
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- 20 A. Sweeney (ed.). *Reputations Live On: An Early Malay Autobiography*, Berkeley: Center for South and Southeast Studies, 1980.
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