

Ulasan Buku/*Book Review*

Our Ways by Ismail Husin. 2004. Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications & Distributors. 243 pages. Review by Ratna Roshida Abd Razak

The modern history of Malaya (Malaysia) has always been a center of attention for many researchers and ordinary people who are interested in colonial studies and the situation of former colonies after obtaining independence. What makes Malaysia's case more special is a successful transition from a colonial country to a fast developing nation. Undoubtedly, one of the undisputable sources of studying the history of a nation is to refer to its written literature.

Written literature such as novels, short stories and poems can open a more realistic window towards the society's social interactions, customs, ways of thinking and traditions compared to reports or books that are purely research based. This would probably be the main reason for everyone to start reading books such as *Our Ways* by Ismail Husin. As the author himself explains in the preface, this book is a story about life from a day before Malaysia's independence in 1957 to year 2003. Launching the book with such explanation should make everyone eager to read it as it is an exciting book which can familiarize the readers with the Malaysian society in this important period of time. However, this expectation grows fainter after reading a few chapters and till the end of it.

The main story of the book is about the life of Ahmad bin Ali (Mat) who is the only son of a poor paddy farmer in Sanglang, Kedah. The whole story of the book can be divided in three main sections. The first section is about Mat's life in a small village (kampung) and his interaction with other members of the village. The second part of the story focuses on his life after graduating from a university and moving to Kuala Lumpur and how his life changed till the death of his father. The third and the last section of the book demonstrates the transition period Mat has undergone in his social life after the death of his father.

To support my argument on how the written literature could mirror a unique image of social interactions of a particular society, I have to admit that only the first section of *Our Ways* can fulfill such agenda. The first few chapters of the book on Mat's life in the kampung are the only parts of the book from which the reader can get a clearer view of how life was like in a Malay kampung during late 50s and early 60s. This first section of the book provides a detailed description of the environment where Mat lived. Here we get to know more about his family, friends and other people around him. This is something that is clearly lacking throughout the story in the second and the third parts of the book. Instead the reader would be completely blinded by Mat's inability to adapt to a new environment. That is why we can get into the psyche of the villagers in Mat's kampung but we cannot repeat the same experience with the people around him in the second and the third sections.

Thanks to the quite detailed imagery of the kampung and its inhabitants in the first section of the book, we can clearly see some interesting issues regarding the Malay society and culture. An interesting concept that had been emphasized in the first few pages of the book is the superiority of the colonial institution (Britain) in the Malay psyche. For example on page 2, a statement like “It was English made, therefore it was superior”, gives us a unique opportunity to understand the depth of colonial power and its influence on the psyche of the colonized people. This also clearly demonstrates the view of the colonizer (occident) from a superior position towards the colonized nations (orient) and how the colonized people strongly believed in the idea of supremacy of the colonizer. In other words, the Malays have been mentally colonized by the colonial paradigm.

Another attention-grabbing yet important issue which has been demonstrated noticeably in the first section of the book is the role of women in the Islamic male dominated Malay society. On page 6, it has been clearly pointed out that: “The girls were accorded less freedom (compared with the boys).” The main role of women and young girls as had been mentioned in page 3 was to help mothers in the kitchens and take care of the internal issues of the household. The passiveness of women in social and political activities of the traditional Malay society can be seen in page 11 as well where “... the crowd applauded us loudly from the male side of the field. The women, as expected, remained silent.”

Another interesting issue which has been addressed in the first section of the book is the issue of the racial and religious interactions in the Malay society. Although Mat lives in a kampung where almost every resident is Malay, but towards the end of this section and close to the time when he wanted to leave his kampung to study in a secondary school in Alor Setar, we witness the first signs of racial and religious tensions in the Malay society. On page 34, Mat’s mother directly warned her husband that: “... the presence of church (near Mat’s secondary school in Alor Setar) was too threatening.” This would open the eyes of the reader to a larger image of the Malay society than just Mat’s Malay dominated kampung ideology that the church would threaten his Islamic beliefs. We can see the same scenario with the village Imam when he warned Mat on page 38 about the existence of the church near his secondary school (even though the church does not have anything to do with the school) and advises him not to have anything to do with that church).

This incident clearly uncovers the hidden tensions between the holders of the different faiths in Malay society during that period of time. The issue of disloyal believers in the different religions has been a very vital in Malaysia since the beginning of its formation. In the book, the incident of “church” is an example of such an important issue. It seems that the author intentionally or accidentally makes serious attempt to avoid exploring this matter in detail.

The best example of “self-censorship” about racial clashes is found on page 65 where the whole racial riot of 1969 has been summarized in one paragraph. This simplified version is a disappointment to readers who wanted to have an in-depth understanding of the reasons for the riot and the overall condition of the country during the 1969 clashes. Although the author intentionally tries to avoid any kind of dispute among the different ethnic groups in Malaysia of 1969 by saying; ... “They (villagers) could not understand why the racial clash occurred when we had all been living together peacefully thus far” ... however, the author fails to hide the existing disputes among the Malays and Chinese in a few sentences. Later in the same page he admits that; ... “For one thing the relationship between the Malay and Chinese undergraduates was *colder and more distant*.” Using comparative adjectives such as “colder” and “more distant” show that the relationship between the Malays and Chinese was already cold and distant (against the view of the author in few sentences before where he denied the existence of any dispute) and the riot of 1969 made everything more worse. The first question which would come to every reader’s mind after reading this part of the book is why did the author intentionally try to hide such dispute? And why is the most important period of the Malaysian history (riot of 1969) dealt with in just two paragraphs of the whole book!

As the matter of fact, the first section of the book (which in my opinion is the best part) contains several interesting information about the Malay life style during 60’s. The issue of politics is one of them. The author introduces UMNO (the United Malay National Organization) as the only local group involved in the issue of Malaya’s independence. There are few places in the first section of book where UMNO have been indirectly praised by the author through the speeches of UMNO leaders. However, here lies an amusing ironic point that the word UMNO itself is an abbreviation of an English (colonizer) phrase and not Malay (colonized)!

On the other hand, reading Mat’s story while studying at University of Malaya (UM) allow the reader to make comparison between the situations of Malaysian universities during that period and the present time. It seems that the level of freedom for university students to express their political views in 60s and 70s was much higher than the present time. During Mat’s studies at UM, he actively participated in political movements and demonstrations and based on what the author explains in page 65, UM had a speaker’s corner like the one in Hyde Park, London, where each student was able to freely express his/her political views. Comparatively, in Malaysian universities of today students are unable to freely voice out their political views and even if they do, they would have to pay a heavy price for it. Does this mean then that the level of democracy and the freedom of speech in Malaysian society or universities has been tremendously decreased?

After Mat’s graduation from UM, the book enters its second section which is less interesting than the first section. The descriptive language of the book in

the first section suddenly changes to a very personal and superficial language in the second and third sections. In the first section, the reader could obtain a fairly informative depiction of Mat's personality and his social interactions with the environment he lived in. The reader also gets to be familiar with some other characters. However, in the other sections, the book has nothing much but an annual economic report of Mat's company. This makes the book extremely boring and does not encourage the reader to continue reading it.

The middle of the book, around page 100, is full of numbers and details of the Matana Company's (Mat's company) contracts that do not attract readers at all. The main reason of a reader to purchase such novel is not to know how prosperous Matana Company is, but to understand more about the Malaysian history and society. If a reader is interested in the details of Matana Company's contracts, the reader could have read the annual report of this company. The failure of the author to maintain the interesting style of the book in sections two and three has negatively affected the overall literal value of the book.

Although as has been mentioned above, the descriptive language of the book fades in the second and third sections, the reader could still get some (although not that much) information about the psyche of the Malay "upper class" members. In the first section of the book, Mat had been introduced as a person with strong religious beliefs for whom the "satisfaction" of Allah (God) is the most important issue in his life. However, on page 109, the reader suddenly finds out that Mat gambled and consumed alcohol (both prohibited in Islam) with his friends. The reasons for this important change in his lifestyle remain unanswered just like many other unanswered questions in this book. The author does not give any explanation how a religious person like Mat could have changed tremendously after entering the lifestyle of a metropolitan city such as Kuala Lumpur? Were all Mat's religious behaviors during his childhood and teenage years something superficial? Did he ever had any deep or strong belief in religious activities or was what he did then because of pressure of his religious family and society? Is it necessary to give up our religious beliefs in order to be accepted in a metropolitan lifestyle of big city such as Kuala Lumpur? What made Mat decide to abandon his religious beliefs? All these basic yet very important questions remain unrequited in the book.

One other interesting issue in the second section of the book is Mat's view (Malay men) of his wife (Malay women). On page 111, he directly addressed Rohana (his wife) as a model wife because she was a good Muslim, very obedient and she took excellent care of him. Also, at the bottom of the same page he mentioned that ... "After all, she had a very comfortable life and enough money to buy nearly any thing that took her fancy." This portrayal of a model wife shows that many of the educated Malay men still look down on their wives and their definition of a model wife is so materialistic and secular. In Mat's definition, to be a good wife she has to be submissive to her husband and to take good care of him. To be a housewife means you become subservient to your husband.

However, what about the woman's rights? Why does not he talk about the rights of a wife as well? Is it not just degrading and disgracing women by defining/ measuring their needs from some materialistic point of view? Is money the only element necessary to satisfy a woman's needs? On the same page, Mat says ... "With the exception of our childless state ...she was a perfect wife." Does he blame his wife for being childless? Who knows, maybe the problem is his not hers? The issue of women's rights has been interestingly questioned in this page and the reader can get more information on the position and role of women in the Malay "upper class".

Another mysterious point in the book is the identity of a group of Pakistani immigrants that Mat met in a mosque. This group seemed to be like Islamic missionaries and they advocated Islamic teaching by traveling to different countries. But what remains unresolved is who are they really? Unfortunately, the author's failure to offer a concrete sequence of events could confuse the reader about the exact period of time when Mat met them. Reading the chapters before and after, we can guess that this happened in the early 80s when the waves of Islamic radicalism originated from the Islamic revolution of Iran in 1979 reached the Malaysian shores in the shape of Islamic missionaries. The ideas that these missionaries were advocating seem quite radical as they were spending most of their time on religious matters and not paying attention to anything else. At the same time, this part of the book reveals another very important aspect of the Malay psyche which is looking up to the Arabs and Middle-Easterners in religious matters. Malays mostly believe that whatever comes from the Middle-East on the issue of religion (Islam) is the true thing without paying attention to the fundamental matters that many of the Middle-Eastern traditions originated from the Middle-Eastern culture and not Islam. Therefore, Malays should not blindly copy what the Middle-Easterners (especially Arabs) practice. This matter has been well demonstrated on page 144 where Mat says ... "They (the missionaries) are better than most of us." However, why does he think so? Is it just because they spend most of their time reciting Quran? Does true Islam advise its followers to forget about life and devote their whole life to religion? Islam is the religion of balance and the behaviors of a small religious fundamental group cannot be considered as the true Islamic teachings.

One more interesting issue which dominates the main theme of the second and the third sections of the book is the Malay culture of showing off. There are countless examples all the way through these sections in which Mat tried to show off his financial prosperity by giving details of his materialistic life. On page 126 he mentions ... "I had obtained RM10000 in cash with my gold credit card." What is the need of explaining it in detail? Does he want to show the reader that he has a gold credit card which enables him to withdraw RM10000? Perhaps the way he describes his contracts in detail with big numbers and even his shopping power, the airline he flies with and the models of his car? From

the literary point of view, describing such issues in detail extremely reduce the literary value of the book. The whole sections two and three of the book have been heavily overshadowed by secular and material values that have negatively affected the overall view of the reader on the book.

In conclusion, the book starts with quite strong and informative texture of materials about the Malay lifestyle and social interactions in kampungs, but it loses this solid texture towards the middle and the end of it by getting too much into economical details which make the readers bored and not interested easily. Overall, the reader can get some more information about the Malays and the way they think and live, but as it has been mentioned before, the output of the book could be much improve and more effective if the author continued the same style of narrating his story in sections two and three as it was in section one.

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