

**MALAY IDEAS ON DEVELOPMENT, FROM FEUDAL
LORD TO CAPITALIST: A REVIEW ARTICLE***

by

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Shaharuddin Maarof's *Malay Ideas on Development from Feudal Lord to Capitalist* (Singapore: Times Book International, 1988), is a study of the issues and problems of Malay development. In a sense, it presents a new perspective in the writing of Malay ideas and history. Shaharuddin is not, interested in reconstructing the history of Malay society such as done, for instance, by W. R. Roff in his *Origins of Malaya Nationalism* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1967). Shaharuddin is a sociologist. His interest is focussed on the sociological rather than the historical aspects of society. In his study, the author seeks to examine the response of various Malay personalities to the influence of the new economic forces of modernity, particularly those related to capitalism. And to present his case he evaluates the ideas and values found in Malay hikayat especially *Sejarah Melayu*, *Hikayat Hang Tuah* and the writings of Abdullah Bin Abdul Kadir Munshi (1799-1854), Syed Sheikh Alhadi (1862-1935), Za'ba (1895-1973), Abdul Rahim Kajai (1894-1943), Ishak Haji Muhammad (1910-1991), Tunku Abdul Rahman (1903-1991), and Dr Mahathir Muhammad (b. 1925). In a sense, Shaharuddin's effort is quite a rarity in Malaysian studies, for he attempts to link the current values in Malay society to premodern antecedents. Also Shaharuddin's work represents a sequel to his earlier *Concept of a Hero in Malay Society* (Singapore: Eastern University Press, 1984). Besides works by Syed Hussein Alatas¹

*This article was written when the writer was a Research Fellow at Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore in 1989.

¹For example, see Syed Hussein Alatas, *Intellectuals in Developing Societies* (London: Frank Cass, 1977), and *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (London: Frank Cass, 1977). For a full list of Alatas' work, see Shaharuddin Maarof, *Malay Ideas on Development*, 178-179.

and Chandra Muzafar² - products of sociological rather than historical training - Shaharuddin's books are an addition to this genre in Malaysian studies.

In the introduction, the author states that the concern of the book is "to study only dominant ideas of development which have significantly shaped Malay views about it" (p.viii). To him the ideas considered as dominant are those "that are influential and widely discussed in the mass media" (p.viii), and not those that have "intellectual quality" (p.viii). Indeed, Shaharudin himself is very much aware of ideas and values which are of "intellectual quality" such as those of Dato' Onn Bin Jaafar and Dr Burhanuddin Alhelmi, but according to the author, due to a paradox of history, rational ideas "fail to get the support of society due to historical and sociological reasons" (p.ix), instead "misleading ideas may be influential" (p.viii -ix), rather than the "more intellectually stimulating" (p.viii) ones. And due to that, therefore, the latter's ideas were excluded from his study.

The author followed through the themes of Malay feudalism, Islam, nationalism and capitalism and noticed a certain continuity and harmony between them. This is done by providing a cross section of the ideal of Malay development put forward by those "influential" personalities in Malay history. He begins by referring to *Sejarah Melayu* (Chapter One), and notes that the "society was hierarchic and rigid", and its system of values emphasized "wealth, grandeur, power, position and military might or prowess". This is reflected in the "interplay between patronage by superiors and the blind loyalty of subordinates" (p.149). The nature of Islam in the Malay courts was characterized by beliefs in miracles, superstition and rituals, and the "world-view is not integrated with religious social philosophy and values" (p.22).

In Chapter Two he discusses works by Abdullah Munshi, particularly his *Kesah Pelayaran Abdullah* in order to portray a contrasting system of values and ideas outside the feudal court. Abdullah is said to advocate ideas and values based on Islam, viz. "social justice, social equality, respect for individual rights and dignity, the rule of law, security for life and property, order

²Chandra Muzafar, *Protector?* (Penang: Ganesh Printing Works Sdn Bhd., 1979).

and stability, and social education" (p.150). These values and ideas are "more relevant to the aspirations and problems of the Malay masses" (p.vii).

The close co-operation between the traditional elite and colonial capitalism is expounded in Chapter Three. Both parties are said to find it "necessary and desirable to keep the Malay peasants on the land in the traditional rural economy", and the Malay and the colonial elite were "aloof, elitist and not sympathetic to the problems and interests of the masses" (p.151). The works of Syed Sheikh Alhadi *Agama Islam dan Akal* (Kelantan: Pustaka Dian, n.d.) and Za'ba "Kemiskinan Orang Melayu" in Ungku Abdul Aziz, *Jejak-jejak Di Pantai Zaman* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 1975) and *Perangai Bergantung Kepada Diri Sendiri* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1982), two individuals who have been associated with Islamic reform and Malay nationalism respectively, are analysed in Chapter Four. They were said to champion capitalism and emphasized values like individualism and discipline. However, there is a significant difference between both of them: Alhadi advocates "a healthy and positive kind of capitalism" while Za'ba is not free "from the elitism of Malay capitalism and the Malay middle class" (p.154)

Literary works of Abdul Rahim Kajai "Cherita Awang Putat" in *Koleksi Cerpen-cerpen Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 1977) and Ishak Haji Muhammad *Putera Gunung Tahan* (Petaling Jaya: Pustaka Budaya Agency, 1973) and *Anak Mat Lela Gila* (Kuala Lumpur: Federal Publication, 1975) are examined in Chapter Five. According to the author, both of them advanced yet a "different capitalistic thinking" in which they "evoke traditionalism only to feed a particular form of Malay communalism in the interests of the capitalistic aspirations of a crystallizing Malay middle class" (p.152). Za'ba, Kajai and Ishak thus share a common ground, viz. "capitalistic nationalism".

Chapter Six evaluates ideas and values advocated by Tunku Abdul Rahman and Dr Mahathir Muhammad. Tunku is said to represent "a trend of thought more closely associated with Malay feudal heritage than capitalism". Tunku's idea is described as "traditionalistic nationalism" and differs significantly from the three personalities mentioned earlier. Tunku's type of nationalism is not concerned with championing Malay capitalism, rather

he believes in "a clear demarcation between a noncapitalistic Malay world and non-Malay capitalism" (p.153), similar to the dualistic approach of British colonialism. This dualism is rejected by Dr Mahathir in his *Malay Dilemma* (Singapore: Times Book International, 1981). Dr Mahathir is said to "argue for a new social arrangement in which the government openly intervenes in order to patronise Malay capitalism" and this to Shaharuddin is "the culmination and synthesis of the ideas of Za'ba, Kajai and Ishak". It is because *Malay Dilemma* is said to remind us of the ideas of Kajai and Ishak which contain "bitterness and sense of rivalry with non-Malay capitalism" and that of Za'ba's as it echoes "condescending attitude towards the rural Malays" (p.153).

On the whole, the author concludes that the values and ideas advocated by those "influential" personalities and writers which become operative in development planning do not suggest a "serious intellectual effort or reflection on Malay problems", and instead "prejudice, sectarian or class interests, emotionalism and irrationalism seem to play an influential role" (p.155) in Malay development even to this day. As such, with the exception of Abdullah Munshi and Alhadi, and to a certain extent, Tunku, the other personalities are found guilty of promoting "backward vulgar" capitalism because they do not promote the right values and ideas that would generate the right kind of development which, to Shaharuddin, is a "modern rational" (p.156) capitalism.

In this review article, I propose to consider some general issues on method and use of sources pertaining to Shaharuddin's work and also to comment on his conclusions.

It is evident that Shaharuddin employs a framework which enables him to clarify and control a mass of historical detail that he is confronted with. But in being selective and in not seeing the evidence exhaustively as done for instance by the historian in W. R. Roff's *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1967) and R. Emerson's *Malaysia: A Study in Direct and Indirect Rule* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1964), Shaharuddin misses the essential point. He sees only what he wants to see and not the society as it was or is. Besides that it is also evident that Shaharuddin's writing is polemical. However, I must hasten to add that, although I gladly welcome the author's attempt to reach into history,

and I recognize the author's skill in writing it, the way he tackles the problems is unconvincing.

A few important points should be noted here. Firstly, despite the availability of various historical sources about those "influential" individuals, the author is very selective in using them. He is satisfied in using one or two works by each of them, as indicated earlier, as if an article or a book (or two novels) can make a man, so to speak. And secondly, he is selective too in his choice of individuals he undertakes to study. He justifies himself by saying that he does not pretend "to cover all ideas, values or significant personalities in Malay history" simply because such a study "is not possible in a single volume such as this". (p.viii).

Besides that if one were to investigate further into his work, one is bound to see that his emphasis is more on building a strong conceptual framework rather than studying the historical data and allow the data to speak for itself: why did those individuals believe, think or hold ideas that they subscribed to? Instead of delving deeply into these personalities he circumvents the problems by extensively utilizing works by Karl Manheim, Max Weber, Erich From, Syed Hussain Alatas and other social scientists. It is also interesting to note that there are nineteen works by Syed Hussain Alatas alone.

The preoccupations, style and language of those theorists cited in Shaharuddin's work are, of course, familiar to a student of that discipline - he himself explains that he "utilizes some insight from the sociology of knowledge" (p.vi), - but they are not just valuable sources of reference or tools for social enquiry *per se*; they can actually dictate the agenda of the social scientist. It is not difficult to see that tendency in Shaharuddin's book; it is flavoured with references to their works. With their assistance, he confronts the selected works of those "influential" personalities which he undertakes to study about the influence of capitalism on them.

The most important thing to observe is the way he utilizes the historical sources. In other words, his purpose of examining the text before him is to understand the text only, not its author, the age, the culture, the spirit of which he partook. He does not give freedom to the individual to act as a man; he treats them as dead. The irony is that the author is aware of the fact that

Malay society underwent great changes, but the same process is not shown to have also affected those individuals as far as his analysis indicates; they remain static. What is worse Za'ba, Kajai and Ishak, who had nothing whatsoever to do with the development planning done by the political elites after independence, are blamed for the latter's shortcomings.

Besides that, Shaharuddin insists on perceiving those "influential" individuals as *homo economicus*, and this is most disturbing. Nothing seems to escape from the "iron cage"² that he built around them. All that Za'ba wants is to "dream of having Malay capitalists" (p.84); Kajai "champions Malay capitalism in opposition and conflict to non-Malay capitalism" (p.99); Ishak portrays the hero, Mat Lela Gila, in his satire as "an early prophet of Malay capitalism" (p.110); Mahathir represents "the thinking of Malay capitalism which had tasted political power" (p.138).

With regard to the selective use of historical sources pertaining to those individuals mentioned earlier, I am not suggesting that Shaharuddin should plunder the archives to collect all the primary and secondary sources available. This is impossible to do, but it does not mean that he should be too selective in choosing his data. A process of selection is always necessary, as any historian or social scientist knows. But there is a proper method of doing so in the interest of fairness and objectivity.

The more pertinent question to ask is: what are the sources pertaining to those personalities that are available today? One can answer this by saying that there are hundreds if not thousands of them in the form of articles in newspapers or journals and private collections in the National Archives of Malaysia about Alhadi and Za'ba. Besides, there are also secondary studies about them done by historians. Shaharuddin himself is conscious of the fact that the individuals he undertakes to study were influential personalities during their time, and knows that they, directly or indirectly, were involved in the literary and newspaper world, but he makes no effort to investigate their writings in such sources in order to understand the development of their thoughts.

²This phrase is taken from Max Weber when he refers to the effect of modern capitalistic system (in Western countries) in "limiting freedom and individualism" particularly in the bureaucratic aspect, but I am using it in a different sense. It refers to the method of enquiry applied by the author in his work. See Andreas Buss, "Max Weber's Heritage and Modern Southeast Asian Thinking on Development", *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1984): 6.

A few important points should also be noted about the author's selection of the individuals. Take for instance, Dato' Onn and Dr Burhanuddin. Shaharuddin recognises that they were influential individuals. But, unfortunately, he considers their ideas and values as only "intellectually stimulating" (p.viii) but not influential to come within the conceptual framework that he has built. They are considered as dominant personalities as far as Malay ideas and values on development are concerned. The irony is he has not dwelt on the most elementary questions about Dato' Onn and Dr Burhanudin. Readers are at a loss as to what he means by "dominant" and "not dominant".

In addition to this paradoxical treatment of Dato Onn and Dr. Burhanudin he surely must be aware of other individuals who were equally influential such as Abdul Majid Zainuddin, Ahmad Boestamam and to a lesser extent, Muhammad Yusof Ahmad. Abdul Majid Zainuddin in particular was a very prolific writer who commented a great deal on the Malays. See for instance his *The Malays In Malaya: By One of Them* (Singapore: Malaya Publishing House Ltd., 1928). This shows how problematic Shaharuddin's work is. One wonders if the ideas and values of Dato' Onn and Abdul Majid Zainuddin are included, Shahruddin may well have come to a different conclusion in his work.

But, one must also not forget that, as far as Kajai and Ishak are concerned, Shaharuddin's interpretations of them are based only on their works of fiction - one short story (*cerpen*) by the former and two novels by the latter. The author qualifies himself in studying their ideas and values just because Kajai is considered by many as "the father of Malay journalism" and both he and Ishak are regarded as pioneers of radical Malay nationalism" (p.viii). These qualifications actually are irrelevant and insignificant, unless one were to take it in a pejorative sense.

The important question to ask here is whether works of fiction can be utilized to reconstruct certain historical events. Taufik Abdullah thinks a novel is a work of fiction and it makes a poor source of historical reconstruction.⁴

⁴Taufik Abdullah, "Historical Reflections on Three Novels of Pre-War Indonesia", in *Papers of the Fourth Indonesia-Dutch History Conference 24-29 July 1983*, Vol. II, edited by Taufik Abdullah (Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1986), 218

On the basis of this interpretation he goes on to say that though a novel might not "define specific doctrine or even philosophy of life, but it does express attitudes and opinions and particularly moods, sentiments and feelings. In other words, novels are indispensable sources of intellectual history".⁵ Even that too, he insists, must be looked at from the historical perspective, that is to say, it is only a source of historical understanding in "how to be alive in the historical and sociological setting",⁶ and not to forget the symbolic nature of the work of fiction.⁷ Commenting on the same problem in A C Milner's work, J M Gullick, an anthropologist says: "Literature may give us a picture, faithfully drawn, of a world of experience... . But one has to relate such writing, a work of creative imagination, to 'hard facts' ... to determine how far it reflects 'experience' which is facts and ideas interacting".⁸

What actually emerges in Shaharuddin's work is his treatment of "a work of creative imagination" as a historical source. Awang (the hero in Kajai's short story) and Mat Lela Gila (in one of Ishak's novels) who are actually fictional characters, have been mistaken as real historical personalities in Malay history by Shaharuddin. By using those fictional characters Shaharuddin attempts to construct a continuity or fill in the missing links in the themes of his work, that is, the bridge between "Fuedal Lord" and "Capitalist". Actually there are more than enough articles or writings which are non-fictional in nature by these two personalities in the local newspapers or journals that should be given first priority in studying their ideas and values. If fictions are to be used they should be limited to help enliven the historical understanding, not only of the sociological setting of the time, but also in understanding the psyche of those individuals.

Studies which are based on literary works are not new in Malaysian academic writings. One has only to refer to works done by a sociologist from the Department of Malay Studies, Singapore, in order to prove this point. He utilizes almost all

⁵Ibid., 233.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., 218.

⁸J.M. Gullick, "The Condition of Having a Raja: A Rewiew of Kerajaan", by A.C. Miller, *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs (RIMA)* Vol. 16, No.2 (1982): 121.

the literary works from the classical times to the pre-war and post-war periods when he studied certain cultural and political aspects of the Malays.⁹

Shaharuddin is, of course, not writing history as has been noted earlier. He says his "overriding interest is to attempt a synthesis and documentation of certain neglected aspects of Malay history" (p.viii). And this might explain why the author strictly followed through the themes of Malay feudalism, Islam, nationalism and capitalism. His adherence to these themes is understandable, but one must also not miss another important aspect in his work. He seems to act as a great defender of the Malay masses because he believes that they have been the victims of oppression and stereotyping, not only by the feudal lord and the colonial masters, but also by their own modern elite. To illustrate this, let us refer to his earlier work. According to the author, the invocation of the concept of shame is important in one's life, but this is absent from some of those influential Malay individuals. He says:

The sense of shame has been impaired among members of the Malay elite in general. They seem to take pride in wrong things as judged within the context of the progress of the Malays. The right values and achievements are not displayed and advocated vehemently. They are not ashamed of the presence of proverty, social injustice, ignorance, social greed and opportunism, servility, bad leadership, superstition and irrationality, as well as the narrow view of nationalism, and the backward state of science and technology.¹⁰

It is indeed a very noble cause but there is an element of prejudice in it, particularly towards certain personalities. Historians and sociologists are human and they are as liable as anyone else to become ardent advocates of a particular cause. It is important, however, not to follow one's own bias to affect his or her interpretation of sources.¹¹

⁹See For example, Tham Seong Chee, "Literary Response and the Social Process: An Analysis of Cultural and Political Beliefs Among Malay Writers", *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1975): 85-06, and *Malays and Modernization* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983), particularly Chapter Six, 211-249.

¹⁰Shaharuddin Maarof, *Concept of a Hero* (Singapore: Eastern University Press Sdn., 1984), 4-5.

¹¹This is not only evident in his two works, *Concept of a Hero* and *Malay Ideas on Development*, but also in his latest article on the same subject, "Renungan Keatas Sejarah Massa", in *Di Sebulik Jendela Utusan* (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Melayu (M) Bhd., 1989), 118-128.

We should also take note of the way he arrives at certain conclusions in his work. And one should at first congratulate him because he was able to give some kind of shape and 'life', and does not wonder aimlessly through the 'factual jungle' of his sources. But there are elements of over-simplification when he establishes a certain theme and labours it as his all-consuming basis of explanation of Malay society. Machin, in his specific reference to this problem, says:

... after a rather sketchy study of a certain period we may seize on the statement that a certain nation is declining. If we do not know much about the period, this conclusion that the nation concerned was in consistent decline. But to accept such a broad assumption uncritically is dangerous. For if the period is studied in greater detail it will perhaps be found that the explanation is too wide that there are important exception to it, in fact, that the nation concerned was not in consistent decline at all. Another danger comes from trying to push trend too far back into history. Take once again the example of a declining nations: if the historian knows that a nation was declining in one century, he may ante-date its decline to the previous century, when such an interpretation may be quite unjustified. Indeed, knowledge of what happened afterwards is always liable to distort one's interpretation of historical events.¹²

There are some grains of truth in what Machin says in Shaharuddin's method of interpretation.

What the author has succeeded in portraying is a jaundiced picture. The question which is asked may indeed be thrown back at him on his own methodology here: is it a "modern rational" analysis or just another "backward vulgar"¹³ work? In the light of what is written about those influential individuals, it would be pertinent to consider, for example, Za'ba's contributions in detail towards the progress of the Malays in the socio-historical context of the time. Take for example Za'ba's advocacy

¹²G.I.T. Machin, "The Historian's Task", *The Historical Journal*, University of Singapore (Session 1963-1964): 4

¹³Both these phrases are taken from Shaharuddin's *Malay Ideas on Development* (p. 156) and he used them to refer to the kind of capitalism that is said to be propagated by those individuals that he studied. But I am referring them to the methodology that the author employs in his work..

for the establishment of university education for the Malays as far back in 1917 when nobody has had even an inkling of higher education in the Malay states. To quote him in his own words:

Maka pelajaran ini [Bahasa Melayu] tidaklah dapat dicapai perjalanan dan perhinggaan yang sempurna melainkan dengan dibangunkan di negeri ini satu atau dua Madrasah Besar yang layak dipanggil Universiti yang padanya boleh dihimpunkan segala jenis pelajaran dunia dan akhirat yang telah melintasi di hati manusia. Maka madrasah yang seumpamanya itu jikalau dapat hendaklah kesemuannya dikhaskan bagi anak-anak bangsa kita sahaja seperti yang diperbuat dalam negeri-negeri India, China dan Jepun bukan seperti yang kebanyakan sekolah-sekolah kita masa ini dalam sepuluh murid-murid payah dapat satu muka anak Melayu.¹⁴

A good biographical study located in a proper historical context is more meaningful than a general study which lacks historical understanding.

¹⁴See *Utusan Melayu* 10.5.1917