ISLAM, MODERNITY AND WESTERN INFLUENCE IN MALAY LITERATURE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE EMPLOYMENT OF NARRATIVE DEVICES IN SHAHNON AHMAD'S *TIVI*

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A key feature of the development of Malay culture has been its exposure to and its assimilation of foreign elements. Malay society was rooted in ancestor worship and animism, before being exposed to the influence of Hinduism-Buddhism. But the hold of this culture waned after the adoption of Islam, the influence of which reached its zenith in the 16th and 17th centuries, as will be discussed later.[2] Subsequently, in the 18th and 19th centuries, Malays had to contend with the arrival of Western colonial powers whose priorities were initially economic in nature. Thus, though the Western powers were successful in monopolizing much of the economy, they could not deter Malays from their faith in Islam. The influence of Islam on Malay society has not only persisted, but has in fact been reinforced with Islamic revivalism, especially since the 1970s.

It should be noted that Malay literature also evolved in tune with the cultural developments outlined above. In other words, the exposure to different cultures has had the impact of instigating change in the function and orientation of Malay literature. However, the advent of Islam is seen as having wrought the most significant changes on Malay literature—from its concentration on myth and folklore (during the period of animism and Hinduism-Buddhism), to its jettisoning of these elements, and its resulting

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focus on matters spiritual and divine. This change is closely linked to the Islamic belief in the Oneness of God (*Tawhid*) and the potential of the human intellect (*Al-Haiwan Al-Natiq*),[3] thus leaving no room for superstitious beliefs.

Parallel to the above context, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (hereafter Al-Attas) maintains that Islam played a pivotal role in the history and culture of the Malays, as it was Islam that nurtured the birth of intellectualism, evident in the literary productions of the 16th and 17th centuries.[4] In this context, the acceptance of Islam is seen as having contributed to the emergence of a 'tradition' in Malay literary activity, which according to V. I. Braginsky (hereafter Braginsky) was characterized by a 'literary self-awareness' (*kesedaran diri sastera*). 'Literary self awareness' here refers to the birth of a concrete, comprehensive and systematic awareness of the meaning, function and features of literature. According to Braginsky, such as awareness did not exist in Malay literature during the pre-Islamic period (animism & Hinduism-Buddhism).[5] Islam was thus considered the bedrock of the establishment termed the 'tradition of Malay letters' (*tradisi persuratan Melayu*),[6] in which literary activities centred on

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[3] For further understanding of the *Tawhid* and *Al-Haiwan Al-Natiq* doctrines, as well as the role of each in changing the world view of the Malays, see Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu*, Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 1972, pp. 30-31. I have also discussed Al-Attas's notion on Islam: see Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani, 'Islam Sebagai *Al-Din*: Beberapa Pengamatan Terhadap Pemikiran Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas', *AFKAR* (Journal of Aqidah and Islamic Thought, the Academy of Islamic Studies, University of Malaya) No. 4, May, 2003, pp. 29-62.

[4] Al-Attas advanced this view in his Inaugural Lecture titled "Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu" (1972). For a discussion of Islam's significance to Malay literature, see Mohd. Zariat Mohd Rani, 'Kesignifikanan Islam dalam Kesusasteraan Melayu', *MANU* (Journal of Centre for Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, University Malaysia Sabah) No. 9: 111-126; & Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani, 'Islam dan Hinduisme: Satu Penelitian Terhadap Sanggahan Syed Muhammad Naquib Al Attas Kepada Pandangan Sarjana Barat', *Jurnal Pengajian Melayu* (Journal of Academy of Malay Studies, University of Malaya) Vol. 11, 2001, pp. 207-266.

[5] V. I. Braginsky agrees with Al-Attas with regard to the significant role Islam has played in the development of Malay literature. He asserts that there was a 'literary self-awareness' in Malay literature only after Islam was adopted. For more details, see Braginsky, *The System of Classical Malay Literature*, KITLV, Leiden, 1993, pp. 29-31; & *Yang Indah, Berfaedah dan Kamal: Sejarah Sastera Melayu dalam Abad 7-19*, INIS, Jakarta, 1998, pp. 15-20.

[6] Al-Attas points to the Malays' creation of their own writing and spelling system, the Jawi script, after their embracement of Islam. With the formation of Jawi, Malay literature during the Islamic period acquired a degree of systematicity, and abandoned Animistic oral tales, and Hindu myths and epics in Sanskrit. As opposed to Hindu myths and epics which used Sanskrit without modifications to the alphabet, Al-Attas finds that Jawi was a more suitable writing medium for the Malays because it introduced new letters

the utilization of the text as a medium for the discussion of spirituality and theology. Al-Attas and Braginsky state that this can be seen clearly in the works of Malay authors in the 16th and 17th centuries, such as Hamzah Fansuri, Shamsuddin Al-Sumaterani, Nurruddin Ar-Raniri, 'Abdul-Rauf Singkel etc. With the consolidation of colonization, however, Malay literature was introduced to 'modern'[7] concepts of literature by the West, through the implementation of a secular education system.[8] The introduction of 'modernist' genres and concepts created an impact on the Malay literary scene, when new genres such as novels, short stories and dramas began to sprout. At this point, it can safely be said that despite the widespread acceptance of Western literary concepts and genres, there still exists a literary inclination towards Islam, such as in the emergence of the 'discourse of Islamic literature' (*Wacana Sastera Islam*), an important development of contemporary Malay literature that has paralleled Islamic revivalism.[9] This begs the question: Is the tradition of Malay letters, that was founded on Islam, still the mainstay of Malay literature, and has the introduction of Western literary concepts failed to create a significant effect on contemporary Malay literature (apart from merely birthing Western literary genres)? This paper attempts to answer the above question, by examining the conflict between the tradition of Malay letters (grounded in Islam), and the concept of 'modern' literature (as introduced by the West).

In line with the above question, my discussion will delve into an essential aspect of literary production—the narrative construction—in contemporary Malay literature. The need to highlight this aspect is necessitated by the fact there is a distinct difference between narrative construction in the tradition of Malay letters, and that of Western literature.

(besides that from the Arabic) to conform phonetically to spoken Malay, which differs from the Arabic. In this context, he finds that the tradition of Malay letters, which is based on this Jawi writing and spelling system, was only formed after the onset of Islam. See Al-Attas, *Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu*, pp. 40-43.

[7] The term 'modern' in this article is flanked by inverted commas to avoid confusion, including the probable misconception that the tradition of Malay letters is not modern. It needs to be explained that Al-Attas considers the tradition of Malay letters to be 'modern', when 'modern' is taken to imply the literary presence of intellectual and rational values, as opposed to myths and supernatural tales in Malay literature. In this context, 'modern' in general refers to the concept used by the West after the rise of modernism, as will be discussed in the framework analysis section. For a detailed understanding of Al-Attas' views on the modernization of Malay literature, specifically in the context of his refutation of Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munshi's status as the 'Father of Modern Malay Literature', see *Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu*, pp. 45-47.

[8] See A. Wahab Ali, *Tradisi Pembentukan Sastera Melayu Moden*, Sarjana, Petaling Jaya, 1988, pp. 91-92.

[9] See Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, 'Sastera Islam: Malaysia's Literary Phenomenon of the 1970s and 1980s', *The Muslim World*, Vol. LXXIX, Nos.3-4, July-October, 1983, pp. 232-248.

This distinction will then be used as a guideline to understand the two traditions (Islam and the Western), and subsequently the conflict between Islam and the West in Malay literature.

To further explore the above dichotomy, this paper will examine Shahnon Ahmad's (hereafter Shahnon) novel titled *TIVI* (1995) as a case study. The choice of this work is based on certain authorial and textual considerations relevant to the issue at hand. Apart from his prominence as a leading writer in contemporary Malay literature,[10] Shahnon's Islamic commitments and his educational background make the choice of *TIVI* even more relevant: Shahnon (an Emeritus Professor) has been directly involved in the development of the discourse on Islamic literature, whilst his academic training has been of the Western mould.[11] With such a background, it can safely be assumed that his literary activities would be 'sensitive' to both traditions examined here, that of Islam and the West. Furthermore, *TIVI* was published subsequent to his involvement in Islamic literature discourse, making the choice of the novel even more apt. Shahnon has also touted *TIVI* as a '*karya mithali sastera Islam*' (an exemplary work of Islamic literature).[12] This label is relevant to the question raised earlier: How far can traditional Malay letters (grounded in Islam) defend itself after the onslaught of Western literary concepts? On the one hand, the label reflects Shahnon's claim that *TIVI* was indeed created within the framework of traditional Malay letters, which would explain his estimation of the work as a *karya mithali*. On the other hand, the label denotes to an extent that *TIVI* is free from Western literary influence. Commenting on his work, Shahnon says: '*TIVI* should not be viewed as an obscene novelette; to me it serves as a reminder. It is in the divine retribution brought down by Allah that the work integrates elements of education, *jihad* and Sufism.' [*Bagi saya TIVI bukanlah sebuah novelet yang layak dilucahi tapi sepatutnya sangat layak digeruni. Dalam kegerunan azab Allah itulah tersebatinya unsur tarbiyyah, unsur jihad dan unsur sufistik dalam TIVI*].[13] Interestingly, some literary critics have also acknowledged

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[10] Apart from having being the recipient of prestigious literary awards including the National Literary Award 1982 (Anugerah Sastera Negara 1982), Shahnon Ahmad's works have attracted the attention of not only literary critics but the general public as well. The publication of his political novel *Shit* (1999) resulted in great controversy in the history of modern Malay literature.

[11] Shahnon Ahmad was once Director of the Islamic Centre, Universiti Sains Malaysia. In 1999, he contested in the General Election as a candidate for PAS, an Islamic political party in Malaysia. The literary establishment also considers him as one of the pioneers of Islamic literary discourse. As for his exposure to Western education, his primary education was in an English school, and he later went on complete his Bachelor's degree at the Australian National University (ANU), Canberra, Australia.

[12] See Shahnon Ahmad, 'Azab Allah: Juzuk yang Digeruni dalam Sastera Islam', *Dewan Sastera*, October 1997, pp. 36-45.

[13] Ibid. pp. 43.

TIVI as 'an exemplary work of Islamic literature'. Rahimah A. Hamid (2004), for example, states that '[w]hatever the public may feel about *TIVI*, I concur with Shahnon's stand that the novel reflects the spirit of Islam. In fact, this slim novel espouses Islamic mysticism and Sufism' [*Walau bagaimana pun pandangan yang diberikan khalayak terhadap TIVI, saya bersetuju dengan pendapat Shahnon bahawa karyanya ini berjiwa Islam. Malah, karya nipis ini sebenarnya mendukung nilai-nilai mistik dan sufistik Islam yang berjiwa Islam*].[14] Sohaimi Abdul Aziz (hereafter Sohaimi) has also come out in defence of *TIVI*, reiterating Shahnon's contention that the novel is indeed a *karya mithali*, as will be discussed later.[15] This makes *TIVI* an apt choice to embody the conflict central to this discussion, that between Islam and the West.

Before advancing our discussion any further, this paper will look at the ideas of Mohd Affandi Hassan (hereafter Mohd. Affandi) in his notion of 'Persuratan Baru' (or Genuine Literature) (hereafter PB).[16] PB has been

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[14] See Rahimah Abdul Aziz, 'Karya Kreatif Berjiwa Islam', *Dewan Sastera*, September 2004, pp. 23-27.

[15] See Sohaimi Abdul Aziz, '*TIVI* dan Pengarangnya: Antara Tanggungjawab, Sublimasi dan Kontroversi', *Dewan Sastera*, October 1996, pp. 32.

[16] It needs to be explained that the creation of 'Persuratan Baru' initially drew from Mohd. Affandi's aspirations to revive the 'tradition of Malay letters' (*tradisi persuratan Melayu*) which are considered 'genuine' to the Malays. With this understanding, Mohd. Affandi translates 'Persuratan Baru' as 'Genuine Literature', with the term 'genuine' referring to a genuine definition and conception of 'literature' to Malays, that is, literature that is not limited to fictional stories, but that which can be used for the discussion of knowledge as well as spiritual and theological matters, as was practiced during the Islamic period. See Mohd. Affandi Hassan, 'Persuratan Baru dan Cabaran Intelektual: Menilai Kembali Kegiatan Kreatif dan Kritikan', paper read to the Kolokium Membina Teori Sastera Sendiri, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 6-8 December 1999, pp. 40-41. For a comprehensive understanding of 'Persuratan Baru' (Genuine Literature), see Mohd Affandi Hassan, *Pendidikan Estetika daripada Pendekatan Tauhid*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992; *Medan-medan dalam Sistem Persuratan Melayu: Sanggahan Terhadap Syarahan Perdana Prof. Dr. Muhammad Hj. Salleh (Sarjana & Sasterawan)*, Penerbit Tiga Puteri, Kota Bharu, 1994; 'Pemikiran dan Pendekatan dalam Kritikan Sastera Melayu Moden', in *Kesusasteraan Melayu Mitos dan Realiti: Esei/Kritikan Hadiah Sastera Malaysia 1988/89*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1994, pp. 68-122; 'Unsur Jenaka dalam Novel *Kawin-kawin*: Kegagalan Intelektual Seorang Sasterawan', paper read to the Seminar Jenaka Melayu, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 21-23 August 2003; '*Birokrat Tulen*: Satu Analisis Kreatif dari Sudut Persuratan Baru', Appendix A in Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani, *Seksualiti dalam Novel Melayu: Satu Analisis Teks Berdasarkan Persuratan Baru*, Doctoral Thesis, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, 2004; 'Kesusasteraan Melayu di Persimpangan Jalan: Anti-Intelektualisme, Hasad, Pandirisme', Wacana Ilmiah DAMAI, ATMA, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, 21 December 2004; 'Keaiban Intelektual Para Sasterawan: Menghidupkan Kembali Persuratan Melayu', in A. Aziz Deraman (ed.) *Kumpulan Kertas kerja Kolokium Peradaban Melayu Kawasan Timur Laut Ke-3*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 2005, pp. 209-230; and

chosen because it also (partly) evolves around the question of conflict between Islam and the West in Malay literature: it offers a substantive understanding of both the philosophy that forms the basis of traditional Malay letters (grounded in Islam), as well as the concept of 'modern' literature (as introduced by the West). This enables PB to identify and compare the features of literary works produced in accordance with the two systems and finally to critically evaluate the works of Malay literature. It is therefore evident that the breadth of ideas contained in PB offers a framework for the discussion of the conflict between Islam and the West in Malay literature. For a closer understanding of PB, this paper will also refer to the works of other scholars including Al-Attas, V. I. Braginsky, Pitirim A. Sorokin, Rene Welleck and Austin Warren since these writers have had a bearing on the generation of PB.

Traditional Malay Letters vs. Western Literature: A Framework for Analysis Based on Persuratan Baru

It has to be stated from the outset that PB, as a literary concept, aims at nurturing intellectual values in Malay literature. This is deemed necessary, as the current crop of works [in the eyes of PB], are judged as being devoid of features which qualify it to be considered works par excellence.[17] The idea of 'excellence' itself—a quality which PB holds as the mark of literary productions of the Islamic period—is called into question. Thus, one of the central tenets of PB is that Islam has made significant contributions to Malay letters, specifically in the infusion of intellectual values.

According to PB, traditional Malay letters are rich in intellectual values partly because of the understanding of the first verse in the Qur'an, i.e.: Surah Al-Alaq Verse 5, which clearly refers to the predominant position of 'knowledge' as a basis for literary creations, encased within the notion of *Qalam* (Divine Pen). Mohd. Affandi states: 'the use of *Qalam* in the Qur'an is related to knowledge, and the objective of acquiring that knowledge is

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'Hadiah dan Anugerah Sastera Sastera di Malaysia: Satu Penilaian Kritis', Seminar: Impak Anugerah dan Hadiah Sastera Ke Atas Perkembangan Sastera Kebangsaan, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 25 May 2006. Recently, Mohd. Affandi's *Pendidikan Estetika daripada Pendekatan Tauhid* (1992) was selected as a 'key work' in the *Muslim Civilisation Abstract* project organized by the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, The Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom. See http//:www.aku.edu.com and Mohd Affandi Hassan, 'Persuratan Baru Dapat Perhatian', in *Mingguan Malaysia*, 8 January, 2006, p. 31.

[17] Mohd. Affandi Hassan, *Medan-medan dalam Sistem Persuratan Melayu: Sanggahan Terhadap Syarahan Perdana Prof. Dr. Muhammad Hj. Salleh (Sarjana & Sasterawan Negara)*, p. 18.

always shown in its execution, that is to enable man to read *ayat-ayat Allah* (Allah's words), and in doing so, place himself in the right perspective' [*penggunaan Qalam dalam Islam dihubungkan dengan ilmu, dan ini dalam operasinya selalu ditunjukkan dalam tujuan ilmu itu, iaitu untuk membawa manusia pandai membaca ayat-ayat Allah dan dengan itu dapat meletakkan dirinya dalam perspektif yang betul*].[18]

The notion of *Qalam* in PB lends credence to the importance of the human intellect (*Al-Haiwan Al-Natiq*), a faculty which enables the processing of complex and intellectual ideas. This understanding was instrumental in changing the meaning and function of 'literature' amongst the Malays. No longer bound by myth and folklore, literary activity was able to immerse itself in matters of 'knowledge', without the abandonment of beauty and artistry.[19] 'Knowledge' here refers to a spiritual knowledge that enlightens Man on the Reality of the Creator, which will then prompt Man to do good deeds and distance himself from evil.[20] Literature in this context, according to PB, becomes an act of *ibadah* (devotion) that needs to be carried out in accordance with the teachings of Islam.[21] This philosophy formed the basic features of traditional Malay letters; it was didactic, for it would convey the truth as taught in Islam, but was artistic in that conveyance. Mohd. Affandi states: 'such literature [that is based on Islam] would be didactic, teach that which is truthful, beautiful, harmonious and complete, which would make Man realise himself and know Allah' [*Kesusasteraan yang demikian* [yang berasaskan Islam] *sifatnya adalah didaktik, yakni mengajarkan sesuatu yang benar, indah, harmonis, sempurna, yang membuatkan manusia mengenal hakikat dirinya dan mengenal Allah*].[22]

On a practical level, the didactic element in traditional Malay letters is manifested in works of an intellectual nature, including discourses, sermons

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[18] Mohd. Affandi Hassan, *Pendidikan Estetka daripada Pendekatan Tauhid*, p. 23.

[19] Mohd. Affandi Hassan, *Medan-medan dalam Sistem Persuratan Melayu: Sanggahan Terhadap Syarahan Perdana Prof. Dr. Muhammad Haji Salleh (Sarjana dan Sasterawan Negara)*, p. 19.

[20] This is based on Qur'an Surah Al-Araf, Verse 172, which according to Mohd. Affandi is evidence of the 'primordial covenant' between Man and his Creator. See *Pendidikan Estetika daripada Pendekatan Tauhid*, pp. 15-18.

[21] According to Al-Attas, 'ibadah' (Piety/Devotion to God) in Islam is not restricted to prayers, fasting, hajj etc. It encompasses every facet of human existence and should be practiced with the right intention and manner as prescribed in Islam. See Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), Kuala Lumpur, 1978, p. 57. For discussion on Al-Attas' views of 'ibadah', see See Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani, 'Islam Sebagai *Al-Din*: Beberapa Pengamatan Terhadap Pemikiran Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas', pp. 29-62.

[22] *Pendidikan Estetika daripada Pendekatan Tauhid*, p. 14.

and critical commentaries in prose form.[23] These forms are considered intellectual, for they allow matters related to ideas and thoughts to be expounded upon and debated, as Hamzah Fansuri, a leading author of the Islamic period who forwarded the Sufi doctrine of '*Wahdathul Wujud*' (Unity of Existence) in his literary works, had done.[24] Whilst it is true that Hamzah also made use of *syair* (a verse form) to convey his ideas, Al-Attas notes that commentary was also a basic component of *syair* during the Islamic period. As he states:

> In poetry, perhaps it is only the *syair* that remains as a heritage of the Arab-Islamic poetic form . . .; but even in this field we see that prosal commentary on the *syair* is generally the most integral component of the *syair* concept— reaffirming the importance of the explanation element in the Malay language of the Islamic period.
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> [*Dalam bidang puisi, mungkin bentuk sya'ir sajalah yang kekal sebagai warisan persajakan Arab-Islam . . .; tetapi dalam bidang ini pun kita lihat bahawa komentar prosa atas syair itu lazimnya merupakan suatu bahagian integral yang paling penting dalam konsep syair—dan kenyataan ini sekali lagi menitikberatkan pentingnya unsur "penjelasan" itu dalam sifat bahasa Melayu-Islam*].[25]

The precedence given to intellectual works has had an important bearing on the function and position of the narrative in traditional Malay letters. It is amply clear that since the primacy of knowledge forms the foundation of the philosophy of Malay letters, then the function of a narrative would be to convey 'knowledge' (to reiterate, 'knowledge' refers to spiritual knowledge that enlightens Man on the Reality of the Creator). This means that the utilization of narrative devices, such as characters and characteristics, events, conflicts, plots, and the like, are only relevant in the context of conveying ideas and thoughts, and not for the mere purpose of developing a story, implying a subordination of the narrative to knowledge in traditional Malay letters. Mohd. Affandi, in explaining the subordinate role of the narrative, states:

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[23] The position of poetry as the most popular genre of Arabic literature in the pre-Islamic period declined with the introduction of Islam. With the coming of Islam, new prose forms like the *al-rasa'il* and *al-munazarat* gained prominence. See Osman Haji Khalid, *Kesusasteraan Arab Zaman Abbasiah, Andulas dan Zaman Moden*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1997, pp. 381-386.

[24] For further details, see Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri*, Universiti Malaya Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1970.

[25] See Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu*, p. 40.

A 'literary work' [*karya persuratan*] does not merely narrate, it needs to propound an idea or thought . . .. I am not interested in merely telling a story, since my study shows that the Qur'an does not merely tell a story for its own sake. Stories are employed to convey an idea or thought, to remind or warn.

[[Karya persuratan] *tidak lagi bercerita, tetapi untuk menyatakan gagasan dan pemikiran . . .. Saya tidak berminat untuk hanya bercerita, kerana dalam kajian saya, Al-Qur'an tidak pernah bercerita sekadar bercerita. Cerita digunakan untuk menyatakan sesuatu gagasan atau pemikiran, untuk memberi peringatan atau amaran*].[26]

We now turn our attention to the concept of 'modern' literature as introduced by the West. As stated earlier, the introduction of the Western concept of literature was the direct result of colonization, and the channel for this was the colonial [British] education system and the resultant exposure to Western literary works. At this juncture it is necessary to take a cursory look at the development of Western culture to understand some of the main concepts of 'modern' literature. With full awareness of the complexity of the topic, my discussion will only draw from the relevant points needed for the analysis. The birth of 'modern' literary concepts was the manifestation of the rise of modernism in the West, and this in turn is linked to historical developments in the West approaching the 15th century. At the time, the West was freeing itself from the Dark Ages which was marked by the paucity of intellectualism. It was the Renaissance movement, which strove to revive the glory of the Greek intellectual tradition, that ignited intellectual growth.[27]

The West then identified some of the sources of its backwardness, one of which was traditional values. Subsequently, some of the institutions which were the custodians of these values were challenged.[28] One of the institutions that came under scrutiny was the Catholic Church. This opposition to the Catholic Church—the Christian Reformation—was

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[26] See Mohd. Affandi Hassan, 'Mengapa Saya Menulis *Aligupit*', *Dewan Masyarakat*, September 1994, p. 30.

[27] See Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1972, p. 71; & Peter Childs, *Modernism*, Routledge, London, 2000, pp. 1-18.

[28] For a discussion on the Christian Reformation and the decline of Roman Catholic Churches, see Mohd. Zariat Mohd Rani, 'Gerakan Reformasi Gereja di Europah dan Kesannya Terhadap Pegangan Seksualiti Masyarakat Barat', *Journal of Usuludin* (Journal of Academy of Islamic Studies, University of Malaya), No.14, December, 2001, pp. 33-54.

significant as it signalled the decline of religious values in Western society.[29] It was at this juncture that modernism surfaced to free Western society of traditional values, and this included the belief in matters of a metaphysical and transcendental nature. The new emphasis was on the function of the human intellect.[30] The recognition of this function, the need for rationality, and the abandonment of the metaphysical and transcendental, gave birth to a modern Western culture that was more worldly, in that there was now a separation between worldly and religious matters. Pitirim A. Sorokin (hereafter Sorokin) who describes Renaissance and Reformation culture as 'sensate', states:

> Beginning roughly with the sixteenth century, the new principle [modernism] became dominant; and with it the new form of culture [modern culture] that was based upon it. In this way the modern form of our [Western] culture emerged—the sensory, empirical, secular, and this 'worldly' culture. It may be called sensate [culture]. [31]

Modernism, as described above, subsequently gave birth to the concept of 'modern' literature with its own unique features. It is in this context that PB argues that concepts such as naturalism, romanticism and realism came to the fore, and that all these centre on the concept of mimesis, known to us since the ancient Greek age. According to PB, under this umbrella of mimesis, 'modern' literary works have become a tool to record the 'reality' of human existence;[32] and 'reality', after the abandonment of the metaphysical and transcendental, mostly focused on events seen as empirical that could be experienced by the five human senses.[33]

      We can examine one Greek concept of literature that is prominent in 'modern' literature—the concept of 'entertaining whilst teaching' (referred to

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[29] For details, see Al-Attas' discussion in the chapter 'The Contemporary Christian Background', in *Islam and Secularism*, pp. 1- 46.

[30] See Astradur Eysteinsson, *The Concept of Modernism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1990, pp. 1- 49.

[31] See Pitirim A. Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age*, E. P. Dutton & Co. Inc., New York, 1941, p. 20.

[32] Mohd. Affandi, *Pendidikan Estetika daripada Pendekatan Tauhid*, p. 24.

[33] Most Western writers, in promoting Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munshi as the 'Father of Modern Malay Literature', have argued that his elevation to that acclaim was based on the fact Abdullah's writings were 'grounded in reality' (*berpijak di bumi nyata*). See Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, 'The Construction and Institutionalisation of Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munshi as Father of Modern Malay Literature: The Role of Westerners', in *Readings in Modern Malay Literature*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 2003, pp. 30-53.

as *dulce et utile* by Horace).[34] This concept demands that a literary work should emphasize two elements, namely 'pleasure' and 'utility'. According to PB, 'pleasurable is defined as something that is not boring, not burdensome, and is its own reward. Useful is defined as something that is not a waste of time, not a form of passing the time, but one that deserves serious attention' [*seronok bermaksud tidak membosankan, bukan satu beban, tetapi sesuatu yang berfaedah sendirinya. Berguna bererti tidak membuang masa, bukan sesuatu yang dikerjakan untuk memenuhi masa lapang, tetapi sesuatu yang layak diberikan perhatian yang serius*].[35] And these two elements, according to Rene Welleck and Austin Warren, had not only to coexist, but more importantly, to coalesce.[36] This means that any form of teaching (*utile*) had to be sprinkled with elements of entertainment (*dulce*) so that the reader is not bored, or does not feel as if he is being lectured to. Thus, works that are intellectual in nature, such as discourses, sermons and critical commentaries (which are basic to a tradition Malay letters) are now deemed irrelevant, since they appear overtly didactic with moralistic tones, and this would run counter to the objective of 'entertaining whilst teaching' (*dulce et utile*). In PB, it is based on these considerations that 'modern' fiction places emphasis on the narrative for it is this component that is able to entertain the reader. To realize this objective, narrative devices are manipulated so as to make the story as realistic as possible, and this manipulation then has the effect of making the element of 'teaching' more subtle.[37] The 'modern' emphasis of the narrative, and the aversion of preachy and moralistic tones, is summed up in Richard M. Eastman's definition of the novelist's role in accordance with 'modern' literary conventions:

> A novelist, however, is **not a preacher, nor a systematic philosopher**. He cannot develop his life's wisdom primarily through direct exhortation or reasoned essays. His first business is **to show the lives of imaginary people**, through which his wisdom must appear dramatically, in the vital terms by which his characters discover or lose their own worth.[38] [Emphasis added]

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[34] For further details, see Rene Wellek & Austin Warren's discussion in the chapter 'The Function of Literature', in *Theory of Literature*, Penguin Books Ltd., Middlesex, 1973, pp. 29-37.

[35] Mohd. Affandi, *Pendidikan Estetika daripada Pendekatan Tauhid*, p. 24.

[36] Rene Wellek & Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, pp. 30-31.

[37] For further details on the manipulation of the narrative devices in modern literature, see Ungku Maimunah's discussion in 'Sastera Menjana Fikiran Masyarakat', paper presented to the Seminar Kebangsaan Teks Komponen Kesusasteraan Melayu dalam Mata Pelajaran Bahasa Melayu, Institut Bahasa Melayu Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 12-14 July, pp. 13-15.

[38] See Richard M. Eastman, *A Guide to the Novel*, Chandler, San Francisco, 1965, p. 58.

Another of the assertions of PB is that a story, as a tool for entertainment, has to accentuate 'differences' or the unusual to avoid boredom. Most stories, therefore, tend to portray characters not normally encountered in our daily lives. The characters tend to be sub-social types, often evil and immoral. By portraying these characters, one is able to bring in elements of sensationalism, eroticism and concupiscence, all of which are able to excite the reader. The employment of these narrative devices is strengthened by the use of other techniques, such as caricature, satire and comedy.[39] The ultimate aim of the full manipulation of narrative devices is thus to create a story that is more interesting and pleasurable to read. The following quote from Sorokin explains this sensate element in 'modern' literature:

> Sensate art lives and moves entirely in the empirical world of the senses . . .. At its overripe stage, prostitutes, criminals, street urchins, the insane, hypocrites, rogues and other sub-social types are its favourite 'heroes'. **Its aim is to afford a redefined sensual enjoyment:** relaxation, excitation of tired nerves, amusement, pleasure, entertainment. For this reason it must be sensational, passionate, pathetic, sensual, and incessantly new. It is marked by voluptuous nudity and concupiscence . . .. Since it must amuse and entertain, it makes wide use of caricature, comedy, farce, debunking, ridiculing and similar means.[40] [Emphasis added]

The above discussion clearly demonstrates the dissimilarity between the two literary traditions: the tradition of Malay letters, and Western literature. Although both traditions recognize the role of literature in 'teaching', their priorities certainly differ. The tradition of Malay letters places a high premium on didacticism, thus subordinating the element of having to amuse the reader. On the other hand, Western literature gives priority to the narrative aspect so that the 'teaching' element is projected in a more subtle form.

Premised on the above discussion, this paper analyses *TIVI* to identify its main function: to teach or narrate; and to evaluate its claim to be considered as a *karya mithali*.

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[39] For further details, see Mohd. Affandi's criticism of Malay novels in 'Persuratan Baru dan Cabaran Intelektual: Menilai Kembali Kegiatan Kreatif dan Kritikan'; & 'Unsur Jenaka dalam Novel *Kawin-kawin*: Kegagalan Intelektual Seorang Sasterawan'.

[40] Pitirim A. Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age*, pp. 32-33.

Between Didacticism and the Narrative: The Position of Shahnon Ahmad's *TIVI* as 'An Exemplary Work of Islamic Literature'

Since Shahnon has positioned his novel as a *karya mithali*, it is necessary to review his ideas on Islamic literature, and more so, his criteria of *karya mithali*. To this end, this paper will examine his *Azab Allah: Juzuk yang Digeruni dalam Sastera Islam* (1997), which was written with the objective of clarifying his position on the novel.[41] In the work, Shahnon raises the idea of *juzuk azab* (scene of divine retribution), which he considers an essential criterion of a *karya mithali*. Shahnon states that a story must explicitly depict punishment from Allah for evil deeds committed, so as to instil fear, and in doing so, to serve as a lesson to readers. *Juzuk azab*, explains Shahnon, must represent two elements: portrayal of extreme suffering, and the arrival of this suffering without any forewarning.[42] Shahnon further elaborates that this idea originates from his reading of the Qur'an, in which Allah punishes wrongdoers for their misdeeds. He states: 'the stories in the Qur'an which depict frightening pain, unbearable torture, as well as calamities from the land, sea, and sky, are numerous and we are expected to ponder upon and learn from it' [*Kisah-kisah yang memperlihatkan azab yang menggerunkan, seksaan yang pedih dan penuh dengan bala bencana dari daratan, lautan, angkasa, dan jeritan seumpama inilah yang memenuhi sebahagian besar halaman Al-Qur'an dan diminta kita merenungi dan mengambil ikhtibar daripadanya*].[43] The fact that Shahnon admits that his ideas on *juzuk azab* are of Quranic origin demonstrates his approval of traditional Malay letters; as he states: 'This depiction of divine retribution in Islam [*juzuk azab*] should become an important source for the production of Malay literary works' [*juzuk kegerunan* [*juzuk azab*] *dalam Islam yang seharusnya juga menjadi antara sumber utama dalam kegiatan penghasilan karya-karya persuratan* [Melayu]].[44]

Shahnon's ideas on *juzuk azab* need to be understood in relation to the narrative devices used in *TIVI*. As a novel claiming to be a *karya mithali*, readers can expect *juzuk azab* to be an important component in the novel. A cursory reading indicates that the novel does indeed include a chapter depicting *juzuk azab*. The presence of *juzuk azab* is significant, for it does reflect Shahnon's cognisance of the need to convey moral teaching through his novel. Next, we need to examine how Shahnon imparts his teaching: whether it adheres to the traditions of Malay letters that gives precedence to didacticism, thus subordinating the narrative, or whether he imparts his teaching in an 'amusing' fashion as prescribed by 'modern' literary concepts.

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[41] Shahnon Ahmad, 'Azab Allah: Juzuk yang Digeruni dalam Sastera Islam', pp. 36-45.

[42] Ibid., pp. 36-41.

[43] Ibid., p. 37.

[44] Ibid., p. 36.

TIVI is about the evil committed by a Muslim family, which then results in the frightful occurrence of *juzuk azab* (divine retribution). It is important to note that in the context of constructing the narrative of *TIVI*, there is a coalescence of evil and divine retribution (*juzuk azab*). In other words, the novel has to include the scene of human evil, for which the scene of *juzuk azab* is meted out. In accordance to this principle, Shahnon introduces incest into the fictive world of the novel, which irrefutably necessitates *juzuk azab*, since it is a most heinous deed, and is against both the teachings of Islam as well as human nature. Incest and *juzuk azab* have a predominant role in the narrative construction of *TIVI,* and to display these elements, the author exploits a number of narrative devices, such as the introduction of the character and characteristics. Thus, the character of Chah is introduced in the fictive world of the novel, and assumes the character role of an innocent village girl who moves to the town to be employed in a factory. Chah is rendered as a very impressionable girl who is easily influenced, and allows for her transformation from innocent village lass into immoral urban worker plausible. To evoke incest and *juzuk azab*, the new Chah is represented as bold and capable of not only influencing other family members, but also exhibiting offensive behaviour. Obviously, Chah has been introduced into the fictive world of *TIVI* as an 'agent of change' who transforms the god-fearing family into one that betrays the teachings of Islam. Chah executes this role effectively, as can be seen in her act of sending a nude calendar to her home, persuading her sister to appear in revealing outfits, as well as openly hugging her male companion in the presence of other family members. These drastic changes in Chah and other members of the family are vital to the further development of the plot, which culminates in incest and *juzuk azab*. It is also significant to note that Chah, who works in the city, only makes periodic visits to her village home, and in her absence there is a vacuum in her role as 'an agent of change'. Logically, her absence should prevent the plot from developing into a tragedy that ends in incest, and subsequently retribution. But this does not happen, for her role in bringing evil influences from the city is taken over by television, which exposes the rural family to hitherto unseen sexual conduct. The novel thus skilfully brings in the television to ensure that the progression towards incest is not disrupted.

The paper will now examine another narrative device in play, namely episodes and events. As mentioned earlier, Shahnon, introduces *juzuk azab* to impart moral teaching, but that only occurs at the end of the novel: Chah, her father, mother, younger sister and brother are all struck by lightning, and the television is swallowed by the earth. This retribution is an embodiment of the cause-and-effect element, a commonly used narrative device in plot development, and its appearance at the end is sound, since evil deeds have to be portrayed prior to the punishment. Thus, the narrative structure of *TIVI*

begins with Chah moving to the city, which provides the backdrop for her to evolve into an immoral person. And this change is necessary to expose Chah's evil, as well as her influence on other members of the family, which ultimately results in incest. Her father, Mat Isa, commits incest with two of his daughters, Chah and Hasanah. This series of developments makes it imperative that the novel be filled with heinous acts to necessitate retribution.

The excessive representation of evil turns the novel into a text soaked in sex and eroticism. This can, for example, be seen in the vivid descriptions of Chah's and Hasanah's physique, Chah's sexual display with her male companion, and the even more blatant depiction of sex in a pornographic video. Added to that is the element of suspense that originates from the father's sexual fantasies, which leads readers to await the probable conclusion of the father committing incest with his daughters. In this way, the author is able to create suspense and deliberately delay the actual occurrence of incest.[45] Furthermore, the text is generously littered with suggestive and salacious language, all with the single purpose of creating an atmosphere of heightened sexual anticipation.[46] Yet another device is the use of caricature and lewd humour, as in the scene when Chah's parents first get the television.[47] Hence it is evident that Shahnon has manipulated the narrative devices purely with the intention of spicing the story with eroticism.

What further contributes to thickening the sexual atmosphere of the text are the two scenes of incest: one between the father and Chah, and the other between him and Hasanah, despite one act being sufficient to qualify for divine retribution. It is clear that the excessive portrayal of sex serves only to intensify the erotic element, as Shahnon himself admits: '*TIVI* does contain episodes that are obscene and erotic, that sometimes even slips into the pornographic' [*TIVI dicambahi dengan babak-babak lucah, erotika dan kadang-kadang terlajak ke pornografi*].[48] This admission by the author certainly raises questions about the function of the sex episodes, especially if one is to evaluate it as a *karya mithali*. In this context, it is necessary to examine Shahnon's rationale. Firstly, he states that the episodes are necessary as they reflect the 'reality' in society. As he writes:

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[45] Shahnon Ahmad, *TIVI*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1995, pp. 102-103.

[46] On the manipulation of language to create generate sexual excitement and eroticism in *TIVI*, see Mohd Zariat Abdul Rani, 'Seksualiti dalam Novel Melayu: Satu Analisis Teks Berdasarkan Persuratan Baru', Doctoral Thesis, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2004, pp. 518-519 & 523-561.

[47] Shahnon Ahmad, *TIVI*, pp. 54-57. The use of caricature and humor in *TIVI* has been commented upon by Monique Zaini-Lajoubert in 'Litterature Islam dans la Malaise Contemporaine', *ARCHIPEL*, Vol. 56, Paris, 1998, pp. 369-392.

[48] Shahnon Ahmad, 'Azab Allah: Juzuk yang Digeruni dalam Sastera Islam', p. 42.

Those obscene elements had to be presented for that is the reality . . .. Don't be enraged if you find [the novel] obscene, erotic, or pornographic, for I am only acting in accordance with the demands of the reality of society. I cannot lie and turn readers away from the realities of society. Obscenity, eroticism and pornography are real.

[*Unsur-unsur lucah itu perlu wujud kerana itulah realiti pun . . .. Jangan marahkan saya kalau terasa kelucuannya, terasa erotikanya, terasa pornografinya kerana saya hanya mematuhi tuntutan realiti masyarakat dalam berkarya. Saya tidak boleh berbohong dan cuba mengajak pembaca dari realiti masyarakat. Kelucahan, erotika dan pornografi itu adalah real*].[49]

Shahnon also claims that these portrayals serve to convey his moral message of divine retribution for sin. He argues:

It is true that the author [Shahnon] has explicit representations of sex before the occurrence of *juzuk azab*, but then the objective is not to excite [the readers] . . . contemporary life, which is certainly is full of obscenity, is 'bait' for the retribution and torture that Allah would inflict [upon sinners].

[*Mungkin benarlah bahawa babak-babak lucah sebelum terwujudnya juzuk-juzuk azab yang mengerunkan itu diperincikan oleh pengarang tapi bukan babak-babak yang menggiurkan itu yang menjadi matlamat . . .* [ia] *hanya dijadikan semacam umpan dalam babak-babak kehidupan kini yang sememangnya serba lucah untuk kelak memperolehi azab yang lebih utama iaitu azab dan seksaan yang menggerunkan yang diturunkan oleh Allah*].[50]

The two quotations are closely related to Shahnon's philosophy and concept of literature as applied in the construction of *TIVI*. His defence of sex on the grounds that it reflects social 'reality' indicates his sensitivity to the function of literature as a vehicle for recording human behaviour that is empirical, and that which is experienced only by the five human senses, as affirmed by the concept of 'modern' literature (often referred to as 'grounded in reality' by Western scholars). Shahnon's second explanation that sex is 'bait' reflects his inclination towards the concept of 'amusing while teaching' (*dulce et utile*). And in the context of *TIVI*, the explicit portrayal of sex serves to amuse or excite the reader, which then neutralizes the moral message that the novel wishes to impart. Thus it is clear that Shahnon is more attuned to the Western concept of literature, and not to the tradition of Malay letters which

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[49] Ibid., p. 40 & 43.
[50] Ibid., p. 39 & 40.

places a premium on didacticism, not amusement. Shahnon himself has admitted that he has avoided 'preaching' in *TIVI*, as he says: 'Perhaps my way of presenting Islamic values is rather different, and society, that is accustomed to being educated through sermons, will not accept my ways... In *TIVI,* for example, I [Shahnon] have presented too much sex; perhaps I have overindulged' [*Mungkin kaedahnya atau cara menghidangkan nilai-nilai Islam itu lain dari yang lain, sehinggakan masyarakat yang biasa dengan tarbiyyah secara khutbah tidak dapat menerima kaedah cikgu . . .. Dalam TIVI umpamanya, cikgu [Shahnon] sengaja menghidangkan . . . seks yang melampau, malah terlalu melampaui batas*].[51] The fact that Shahnon deliberately waters down the instructional element by avoiding 'sermons', which are a basic element of traditional Malay letters based on Islam, renders his claim that *TIVI* is *karya mithali* untenable. But again, Shahnon's reluctance to resort to preaching is not entirely surprising, for he has described being overly didactic as a 'sickness' to be avoided. In another instance, Shahnon states that '[some] writers are too eager to instruct their readers; the works are so didactic that art is sacrificed. Such a sickness should be strictly avoided' [*Pengarang terlalu ingin mengajar pembacanya, terlalu didaktik lagaknya sehingga sanggup mengorbankan keseniannya. Penyakit ini perlu dikikis jauh-jauh*].[52]

The presence of eroticism and obscenity in a work that professes to be a '*karya mithali sastera Islam*' or an exemplary work of Islamic literature, ignited considerable controversy both among critics and readers.[53] Sohaimi, a literary critic, attempted to explain the presence of sex in such an 'exemplary' work by invoking Sigmund Freud's theory on sexuality, which he says places sexual instinct as most important element in the development of human psychology. Based on Freud, Sohaimi claims that the presence of excessive sex in *TIVI* is 'normal', as he writes: 'Based on Freudian theory, when Shahnon portrays sexual elements in his works, his actions are normal for he channels sexual instincts through the creative process' [*Berasaskan kepada pandangan Freud ini, apabila Shahnon berkarya dan dalam berkarya itu dibawanya bersama unsur-unsur seks ke dalamnya, maka tindakan Shahnon itu adalah satu tindakan yang normal kerana Shahnon menyalurkan naluri seks melalui proses kreatif*].[54] The question to be raised here is the

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[51] See Rahimah A. Hamid's interview with Shahnon Ahmad in article titled 'Shahnon Ahmad dan *TIVI*', *Dewan Sastera*, October 1997, p. 31.

[52] See Shahnon Ahmad, *Sastera: Pengalaman llmu, Imaginasi dan Kitarannya*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1994, p. 56.

[53] For reviews on *TIVI,* see Ihsan Noorzali, '*TIVI* Bukan Karya Islam', *Berita Harian*, September 1997, p. 25, dan Siti Rohayah Atan, '*TIVI* Terlajak ke Pornografi", *Mingguan Malaysia*, 21 September, 1997, p. 26.

[54] Sohaimi Abdul Aziz, '*TIVI* dan Pengarangnya: Antara Tanggungjawab, Sublimasi dan Kontroversi', *Dewan Sastera*, October 1996, p. 32.

suitability of Freudian theory as implemented by Sohaimi, for Shahnon has asserted, in his own words, that *TIVI* was written 'in accordance with what is demanded in Islam' (*ukurtara seperti yang dituntut oleh Islam*). Such being the case, the yardstick of measurement has to be an Islamic framework. In this context, Mohd. Affandi's evaluation should be looked upon as more valid, as his is based on an Islamic framework (*Tawhid*). In an article titled 'Persuratan Baru dan Cabaran Intelektual: Menilai Kembali Kegiatan Kreatif dan Kritikan', he challenges *TIVI's* claim to be 'an exemplary work of Islamic literature'.[55] Unlike Sohaimi's 'process of sublimation', which permits the presence of eroticism as a manifestation of the writer's psychology, Mohd. Affandi, whose views are based on *Tawhid*, claims that the sexual depiction is merely aimed at providing pleasure, and not aimed at instructing man to the right path of Islam. Mohd. Affandi also states that what is presented as *juzuk azab* by Shahnon contradicts the spirit of the Qur'an, for Islam primarily focuses on education (*tarbiyah*), and not retribution and punishment, which he says stresses only the anger of God (*ammarah*). In Mohd. Affandi's judgement, the writer's bold depiction of man's most despicable conduct—incest—makes *TIVI* a worthless novel, and not a *karya mithali*, as proposed by Shahnon. Writes Mohd. Affandi: 'It is most inappropriate for the writer to stake the claim that his work [*TIVI*] is an exemplary work in Islam, for the Islamic elements are non-existent, and its content centres on human desire at its lowest level, and the storytelling too is crude' [*Amatlah tidak wajar untuk pengarang mendakwa bahawa karyanya ini [TIVI] adalah sebuah "karya mithali sastera Islam", padahal ciri-ciri Islamnya tidak ada, dan isinya hanya menyentuh hawa nafsu manusia di peringkat paling bawah, dengan gaya bercerita yang kasar pula*].[56]

Conclusion

This paper shown that in contemporary Malay literature, there is an ongoing conflict between the tradition of Malay letters and Western concepts of literature. While not in denial of the fact that there is still a tendency to appreciate Islam, the fact remains that literary productions do not fully subscribe to the genuine Islamic values. While colonisation did little to shake the faith of Malays towards Islam, Malay literature, however, is not completely free from the influence of Western concepts and philosophy. And even novels that label themselves as 'Islamic', such as in the case of *TIVI*, are genuinely closer to Western concepts of literature.

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[55] Mohd. Affandi Hassan, 'Persuratan Baru dan Cabaran Intelektual: Menilai Kembali Kegiatan Kreatif dan Kritikan', pp. 45-51.
[56] Ibid.