

## BOOK REVIEW

**Mohamad Saleeh Rahamad 2013.**  
***Memamah Bulan.***  
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### INTRODUCTION

For as long as the short story, as a form of prose, highlights and depicts the lives of people at a certain space in time, characters, periods, situations, issues and characterizations at the time of their conception, it will continue to be used by regional literary figures to present diverse ideas and issues from this part of the world. These are all closely connected to culture, tastes, customs and beliefs. These form the very essence of this anthology of short stories, originally titled *Memamah Bulan*, an anthology of short stories from four countries compiled by the South East Asia Literature Council (MASTERA). The short stories in this collection showcase the diversity of issues expressed by the authors, while highlighting that they originate from the same region—their common ground. All the works provide an authentic portrayal of life in the surroundings of the authors from this region. Their commonality is further accentuated through their use of the Malay language, the medium of communication in all these four countries.

This analysis focuses on the various but similar issues presented in this anthology, such as social problems, ideological differences, differences in status, women's issues, the genres used, and the lingering effect of independence from colonial rule in these countries. These are all influenced by geography, climate and environment, as well as the history of the development of these nations. Having read these stories, it can be observed that there are similarities in how authors use elements from their surrounding worlds as raw materials in their creative process to produce these short stories. This anthology is a compilation of short stories written by 36 authors from the

four South-East Asian nations that make up MASTERA, namely Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and Singapore. This compilation includes 10 contributions each from Malaysia and Brunei, and eight from Singapore and Indonesia.

All of the stories featured in this anthology strive to portray a representation of the indigenous way of life in the authors' countries, encompassing the attitudes, principles, and modes of behaviour of people who share a geographical region, maritime borders (South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca) and climate. Differences in class and status have been an enduring theme which has spanned generations of writers—the social divide between the rich and the poor and between the ruling class and the common folk, for instance. The authors also display an observation of and appreciation for the surrounding environment through the inclusion of characters other than people. The resulting stories can be interpreted in a myriad of ways by scholars. Almost all of the authors featured in this anthology incorporated observations of their surrounding environment in their stories.

### **THE USE OF ELEMENTS FROM THE REGIONAL ENVIRONMENT AND CONTEMPORARY SITUATION**

“Runcing” (Pointed), a short story by A. Mahad from Brunei Darussalam, concerns an exquisite garden under the care of a gardener. The irony in this story is created through by positioning the humble gardener in the ethereal beauty of the garden owned by his wealthy employer. It is apparent that the author effectively employs the imagery of the garden's beauty and the differences in terms of status as the central or guiding theme in the creative process of the story. Another short story from his compatriot, “Manusia, Burung Gagak dan Raja Semut” (The Man, The Crow and the Ant King) by Chong Ah Fok, concentrates on a crow and an ant king, with the two non-human characters being compared to human beings. The story reveals that the author's main intention is to show that people's carelessness and callousness could eventually lead to the destruction of a country. On the other hand, Rahmat Haroun draws upon his extensive scientific knowledge in “Hikayat Genesis Tatakala” (The Tale of the Moment's Genesis—a tale about the beginnings of time and space—which is difficult to grasp and evaluate. This story is unique in its issues compared to the other short stories, and offers a new experience to its readers. It is as if Haroun wants to educate his readers in these sciences and concerning creative methods but it also makes this particular short story is a huge departure from the others here.

“Tercemar” (Polluted) by Mussidi from Brunei is a story woven around the protagonist’s dream. The story revolves around the act of searching for an underground spring, an effort which is ridiculed by the community in the area as it is already connected to piped water supply. This bears similarity to the story of the Prophet Noah p.b.u.h. building his Ark at a time when no flood seemed near. The main character in “Tercemar” faces accusations of insanity, as well as accusations of following a deviant cult led by Tuan Syekh. This is the central issue of the story.

Since the time of Aristotle to this very day, the role and function of short stories remain the same, which is as a record of our surrounding situations, and as a means to present an author’s observations of life. Merely the imagination and the form of its presentation are up to the author. “Ruang Belakang” (The Space at the Back) by the Indonesian author Nendes Lilis portrays the struggle of Indonesians trying to get by as they trade or sell medicines—interspersed with scenes of their everyday lives, conflicts with their neighbours and marital problems. Reading this story is like watching the lives of its people before one’s very eyes, especially for those who have visited that country before. “Penipu Yang Keempat” by Ahmad Tahori also puts forth a similar issue, of those willing to lie repeatedly to the same people for self sustenance. “Menumpang di Tanah Merdeka” by Nurfik portrays a community that is not allowed to act (trade) freely, even in their own land. This is surely from the personal observation of the author. Another issue that the author wishes to express in this short story is the issue of rights in one’s own country, based on his own observations.

“Sang Politikus” (The Politician) by Johan Jaaffar, effectively sums up the author’s observation that what is said or promised is not necessarily easy to fulfil. “Pencarian” (The Search) by Zakaria Ali, tells the story of a wealthy corporate figure who comes to terms with his roots, and eventually wants to give away his wealth to his children. “Tepuk-Tepuk di Bawah Daun” (Patting Under the Leaves) by Muslim Burmat clearly deals with the author’s opinion on issue of injustice in the world, where punishment comes before trial. Johar Buang’s “Rumah Tercantik” (The Most Beautiful House) was most likely written because the author intended to express the idea that nothing is ever the most beautiful or lasts forever. “Terdakwa” (Accused) by Rohman Munasip reminds readers that their worldly possessions will not last forever and could be lost at any time in any manner, thus the importance of paying the *zakat*, or tithe which is one of the pillars of Islam. These are examples of short stories that draw upon the authors’ observations of everyday life.

The creativity and imagination of the authors have made their short stories interesting to read as they portray the realities of life. The works featured in this anthology show a unity in the thinking of the authors that is evident from the stories that deal with the behavior of a group, together with the attitudes, values, self esteem and mode of behaviour of a certain community, as well as the differences of status amongst individuals, linking one generation to another in the same geographic area.

There are also authors that employ extensive use of symbolism to represent reality as demonstrated in “Dunia Simulacra” (The World of Simulacra) by S.M. Zakir. “Tanjung” (Cape) by Awangku Merali Pengiran Mohamed is a story about Westerners who have a condescending view towards locals, most likely set in Sarawak as the author repeatedly mentions Raffles and Brooke. This anthology also features short stories that leave it to the readers to draw their own conclusions and interpretations, such as “Memanah Bulan” (Shooting Arrows at the Moon), the story from which the metaphor that was chosen to be the title of this anthology is taken. At a glance, this short story is just a story without meaning; however, its main issue is that anything can be attained with effort and confidence. This short story also calls upon children to be respectful towards their elders, as parents only want what is best for their children. “Menanti Buraq” (Waiting for the Buraq) by Marsli No leaves the reader with questions on the Kitab Tamsil Iklim studied by the protagonist, which disappears without trace. The Buraq is a creature from Paradise on which Prophet Muhammad SAW rode on his ascent to the Heavens during Isra’ Mi’raj (the night journey). Readers are left confused in the end as the protagonist eventually takes flight on his own without riding the Buraq. Stories such as this require the reader to come decipher their meaning on their own, and give the reader the opportunity to derive their own conclusions.

Women and their situation dominate almost all of the Indonesian short stories featured in this anthology, although there are also Malaysian, Singaporean and Bruneian authors who also touch on the same issue.

However, their stories are still built upon the premise of nature and the surrounding world in the same geographic area. “Cinta dalam 99 Nama-Mu” (Love in Your 99 Names) by Asma Nadia, “Umairah” (Umairah) by Yanusa Nigroho, “Ibu Peri Selalu Datang” (The Fairy Godmother Always Comes) by Isbedy Stiawan ZS, “Drupadi Seda” (The Death of Drupadi) by Seno Gumira Ajidarma, “Ruang Belakang” (The Space at the Back) by Nendes Lilis, “Permainan Kematian” (The Game of Death) by Azmah Nordin, “Ke

Puncak Pun Tidak” (Can’t Even Reach the Summit) by Saeda Buang, “Seha” (Seha) by Shahnnon Ahmad, “Anugerah Bulan Buat Bonda” (The Moon as a Gift for Mother) by Muhammad Salihin Sulaiman, put emphasis on women and their issues against a backdrop of similar geographic locations.

Characters or models derived from traditional stories are also used by authors featured in this anthology. For instance, “Drupadi Seda” (The Death of Drupadi) by Seno Gumira is based on the legend of Pendawa and Kurawa. “Aduhai Si Luncai” (Oh, Luncai!) by Fatimah Busu is based on the folk tale character Si Luncai, and “Dia” (She) by Suratman Markasan derives its inspiration from *the Malay Annals*.

## CONCLUSION

The stories in this anthology present a socio-cultural portrait of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. The many socio-cultural similarities between these four countries give a sense of combined ownership to readers from those respective countries as the stories highlight similarities issues. The events, conflicts and thinking of the authors can be appreciated through the use of the same language. However, there are certain expressions and terminology that require a glossary as they are not understood by speakers in all four countries. Generally, the authors present similar issues, that is, they tend to depict events from their surroundings and use the short story as a medium to get their social criticisms across. However, there are exceptions terms of presentation, with some authors employing satire and parody, as well as presenting stereotyped characters to convey their message. In addition, there are also stories that revolve around the dreams of the protagonist which are then linked to situations that the author wishes to criticize. The short stories featured in this anthology are balanced in the sense that it showcases the strength of each of the authors. The stories can be appreciated and enjoyed by readers who may be from four different countries but still stand on the same earth.

(Translated by Ezzad Abdullah)