

# Human Rights and National Literature: A Comparative Study of the Experiences in Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines

Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf<sup>1</sup>  
International Islamic University Malaysia

## Abstract

This paper studies the experiences encountered by three Southeast Asian nations in the face of globalisation in which nationalism is often seen as something negative and regressive. The paper analyses how these three nations strengthen the position of national literature in the face of globalisation. It also compares how minority voices attract international attention and expose themselves to two risks. One of the risks is being dominant over national literature which will likely create tension within the nation. The second risk is that of being marginalised and losing their literary importance in their own land.

The objective of this research is to examine the validity of the argument that the “privileged voice” (often protected by national policy on language) is always the “special” one and be given its due at the national level.

## Keywords

National literature, language policy, linguistic imperialism, Malaysian literature, Thai literature, Filipino literature

## Introduction

In order to understand the position of national literature in a country, we cannot escape from dealing with the issue of its national language. We also cannot avoid making comparisons between the national language and other minority languages

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<sup>1</sup> Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf is an Associate Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Malaysia. She was a Fulbright scholar at Cornell University in 2007. A council member of the Southeast Asian Literary Council (MASTERA), she also sits on the editorial board of several literary journals in Malaysia, Pakistan and the Philippines. As a creative writer, she has won many prizes. Her first book of poetry, *The Art of Naming: A Muslim Woman's Journey* was published in 2006. She is also the author of *The Islamic Interpretation of 'Tragic Hero' in Shakespearean Tragedies* (2001, 2004) and co-author of *Colonial to Global: Malaysian Women's Writing in English, 1940s – 1990s* (2001, 2003).

that may give competition to accepting the official language or the national language of a nation. This paper aims to compare the experiences faced by three countries in Southeast Asia with regard to their national literature and examine the acceptance of national literary texts by local communities. If there are resistance to texts written in a national language, the paper aims to understand why this is so and investigate the reasons behind it. It also explores the ways local authorities address the problem to ensure literature functions as a unifying force and a medium of communication among diverse ethnic groups within the country. This paper also gives attention to possible causes which stunt the growth of national literature – a discussion that includes examination of the position of literature in English in developing countries in the world including Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. While the paper does not resist the right of other literatures to exist and co-exist with national literature, it wishes to explore the argument made by Robert Phillipson, in his book entitled *Linguistic Imperialism* (1992), which highlights linguistic rights of not only majority groups of a nation but also minority groups. He writes on the threat posed by the English language as it positions itself as a global language and being packaged and promoted as a language of development, modernity, and advanced science and technology. English as a language then becomes a lucrative industry, but economic dominance is not as critical a matter as cultural dominance in which a nation's identity comes under the threat of being eroded and displaced. When the English language is promoted as a means of developing and modernising a nation, many countries rush (sometimes amidst protests from local people) to revise their language policies. This is happening in Malaysia as it revises its attitude towards English since the 1963/67 (revised in 1971) Language Act in which Malay was made the official and national language. In recent years, attitude change towards English is also seen in countries such as Japan, South Korea, China and Thailand which were known to have been proud of their national language and identity in the past, and happy to celebrate foreign ideas only through translations which were quickly adapted to local moulds.

This paper presents current developments in three selected countries in Asia and compares how far these countries are successful in maintaining the significance of their national literature and making it relevant to a multicultural nation. The paper also looks at the strengths and weaknesses of language policies in these countries and explores the legal position of these policies at the international level.

### **Revisiting “Linguistic Imperialism”**

The term “Linguistic Imperialism” was introduced by Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and her husband, Robert Phillipson. Both scholars have done considerable research on linguistic rights, bilingualism and multilingual education, as well as language and power relations, for over 30 years.

In his book, *Linguistic Imperialism* (1992), Phillipson tries to understand how local languages and literatures are marginalised with the development and

dominance of the English language. He sees the need for developing countries to respond to some important questions regarding their language policy in education. He wants to know who benefits from the existing language policy, especially where English as a language is concerned. Moreover, he asks about the long term effect of educational projects aided and financed by developed countries. He wonders if developing countries have accepted the promotion of English language as a language of development, modernity, and advanced science and technology, uncritically (11). Phillipson believes that favouring any one language will automatically exclude other languages, and this is what happened when English was made the main language in Britain, North America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. It subsequently displaced all the (other) local languages (17). A. Suresh Canagarajah, in his book *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching* (1999), illustrates the dilemma faced by subjects of former British colonies and their post-colonial societies in which they were/are left with binary choices of either accepting Western values or their own tradition; between English as their primary language of communication or retaining their own. Ironically, according to Canagarajah, sooner or later, this dilemma will not be a choice anymore. English language will be in their blood and no longer seen as something “alien” (1). He suggests that learning a language is closely related to a certain form of ideology and because of this, one cannot escape from political issues that come with it. The only rational thing to do is to discuss and negotiate with relevant authorities to ensure language empowerment can be done at the individual level or collectively.

In many Asian countries, English language is promoted as a second language or the most important language in comparison to other foreign languages. As a result, literature in English is sometimes more known internationally than any work written in the national language. This is the general position of national literature in Malaysia and is perhaps echoed by those in the Philippines and Thailand, where works in English are also better known outside their borders than works written in their respective national language. This phenomenon will be discussed later in the paper. Generally, linguistic human rights scholars do not reject the use of English as a language totally but they are concerned with its continuous dominance as a language at the expense of local, indigenous languages, which causes threat that these local languages may lose their importance or relevance. Hence they affirm what Phillipson terms as “linguistic imperialism.” In an attempt to understand this issue further, one needs to examine the position of language, especially minority languages, in the international law. This matter needs to be dealt with before one could look at issues relating to “national literature” in depth.

### **The Position of Language in International Law**

In an article entitled “The Existing Rights of Minorities in International Law,” Fernand de Varennes highlights the rights of minority languages in the international law. He states that no international law promotes the right to use minority languages,

unless it is done in the spirit of morality and political concerns, often out of respect for human rights. But this noble gesture is not supported by any international law (117). However, any effort by the state to curb or control the use of any language in private or public spaces, is seen as breaching international law documented in the bilateral and multilateral agreements as well as those listed in other documents such as International Law Article 27 on political and civil rights (118). This includes curbing the usage of a minority language in public areas because it is seen as suppressing the freedom of expression. Other examples of breaching international law include barring or prohibiting the use of any minority language in performance and singing in private or public areas because these are seen as oppressing human rights. Furthermore, it includes the prohibition of using indigenous or traditional names which have direct reference to one's culture, e.g. the experience of Turks being banned from using Turkish names in Bulgaria at one point in Bulgaria's history.

If language has its specific position in international law, one should review the position of one's own language in the country's language policy, and it is the interest of this paper to explore language policies in three Southeast Asian countries listed earlier. Are the language policies in Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines in line with the international law or is there any necessity for these countries to review the position of languages in order to assert the relevance of "national literature" and make it function more effectively in a nation that is becoming increasingly plural and hybrid in its cultural makeup?

### **Language Policy in Malaysia**

Among the three countries listed in this study, Malaysia has the most organised language policy. However, it probably has the most complicated language policy as well, which in turn triggers much controversy and debate, especially with regard to the position of Malay language as the national language, and this will continue to be discussed as long as minority groups in Malaysia feel that their languages and literatures are being marginalised and not given equal recognition as Malay or *Bahasa Melayu*.

From the historical perspective, the position of Malay as a language for education in the newly independent country was first mentioned in the 1956 Razak Report. It was also suggested then that the Malay language be made the national language (Rappa and Wee 38). However, this did not happen until the 1961 Education Act was in place and gave the government the authority to make the Malay language a compulsory language in the national school system, both primary and secondary, as well as in all government organisations, including the security forces. This policy could not be contested owing to the constraints placed by the 1948 Sedition Act, first introduced by the British during the Emergency period in Malaya (1946-60). Since the issue of language was a sensitive one, the Sedition Act was used to curb any untoward racial chaos from happening. The Constitution was

revised in 1971 to strengthen the position of Malay as the official language but this did mean that other minority languages were to be neglected, even though there are claims by some that this is what has happened and continues to happen in Malaysia.

However, in 2002, English was re-introduced as an important language for education, especially in the learning of science and mathematics, and despite resistance from certain quarters in the country, English continues to be promoted as a language for knowledge and is becoming more and more important at the tertiary level, especially in courses related to science and technology. To date, there is no specific research on the extent of English used in universities and colleges. It is however suspected that the percentage is higher than what is stated since Malaysia aspires to become a centre of excellence in education. Nonetheless, the Malaysian government assures that the position of Malay is secure as it is protected by a constitutional clause and that literature in Malay as National Literature is also secure as “national literature” is defined as literature written in the Malay language.

### **Language Policy in the Philippines**

Rappa and Wee see the Philippines as the most inconsistent nation in terms of forming language policies. They highlight how the Philippines seems to have spent much time on administering land quarrels and distributions. Due to the political structure based on what is called the politics of “clientelism,” in which relationship between the “patron” and the “client” has much influence on decision making, the personality of a leader surpasses his or her leadership qualities. As such, focus on real issues is frequently diluted, and issues relating to language have not often been prioritised, except during the periods of Ferdinand Marcos (1972-86) and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001- ) (61).

The Philippines has 8 groups of major languages which are: Bikol, Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Ilokano, Pampangan, Pangasinan, Tagalog and Warray. These groups form more than 86% of the total population in the Philippines, but Filipino (based on Tagalog, a language commonly used in Manila) and English are the official languages (Rappa and Wee 64-65). English is the compulsory medium in the teaching and learning of science, mathematics and technology subjects, and it enjoys this status in the country’s bilingual education policy which was introduced in 1974.

Filipino, on the other hand, is used in subjects related to social sciences, music, arts, physical education, domestic science and human development. Due to the many advantages offered by proficiency in English, most of the ethnic groups prefer to learn English to Filipino which they believe will open more doors where job opportunities and social advancements are concerned. Given this scenario, it is feared that whatever attempts are made to promote Filipino in the country will become futile. This might affirm what Fishman (1991, 2001) warned in his illustration of the devolution of indigenous language at the face of a dominant foreign language. The process has been further modified by Rappa and Wee (131) into the following stages:

Level 1: The usage of indigenous language in prestigious domains (e.g. higher education, career, government and media).

Level 2: The usage of indigenous language in less prestigious domains (e.g. lower education, career, government, and media).

Level 3: The usage of indigenous language at the workplace for informal interaction.

Level 4: The usage of indigenous language as a medium of instruction for educational purposes.

Level 5: The usage of indigenous language in informal situations at home, school and community.

Level 6: The usage of indigenous language in family intra-generational transmission.

Level 7: Indigenous language is still in use but the usage is not by people of procreative age.

Level 8: The users of indigenous language are old and getting extinct.

Rappa and Wee argue that indigenous languages face great challenges, and over time they will become extinct and will be replaced by more dynamic languages (in the current political context, the dynamic language being English). However, this paper will demonstrate later in its discussion how the Philippines tries to save the fate of its national literature and, in so doing, tries to save the life expectancy of the Filipino language itself.

### **Language Policy in Thailand**

Thailand is always seen as a homogenous or monocultural/monolingual society. This perception is clearly wrong since Thailand has numerous ethnic groups, and in its total population of 65 million, 3 million are of the Chinese ethnic group, 1 million of Malay ethnic group, and the rest are formed by the Cambodian, Vietnamese and aboriginal groups such as Karen, Lahus, and Lissus (Rappa and Wee 106).

Standard Thai language is the national and official language of Thailand. Thailand has not been physically colonised by any power, and hence the preservation of Thai language and culture has been possible, especially since gatekeepers of the country's culture are those who belong to the Thai monarchy. Till this day, the Thai Royal Institute is responsible for the development of Thai language (Rappa and Wee 111). Thai language is closely related to Thai court and the use of the language is highly prestigious and nationalistic, affirming and strengthening Thai identity among

its users. Thai language policy places much value on the usage of Thai language among its people, and the importance of this language cannot be shared with other languages which are seen as foreign languages, even though the users are Thai citizens. For example, both Chinese and Malay languages are seen as foreign languages despite the 3 million Thai users of Chinese descent and 1 million Thai users of Malay descent. Up till 1978, Thailand saw language largely in a black and white binary: Thai being classified as the sole indigenous language and all other languages as foreign language. However, in 1978, the Council of Thai National Education classified language into four different categories which are: national language (Standard Thai), foreign language, regional language and language of minority (Rappa and Wee 112). There are five principles in Thai language policy for education, and Rappa and Wee (113) list them as follows:

1. Education: Psychological exposure in learning a foreign language; to ensure that the mother tongue is used as a springboard in learning a foreign language; to increase motivation to learn but this has to be balanced by learning Thai language.
2. National security: The teaching of Thai language is compulsory and should start early.
3. Ethnic integration: The learning of Thai language gives the space to enhance ethnic integration and it should be implemented at all levels.
4. Information dissemination: English language is the most used language for the purpose of education and career development.
5. International relations: Recognition of language from other countries that have good relations with Thailand.

Owing to the arrival of globalisation, Thailand which has always been cautious of foreign languages is now opening up to the usage and development of English. Even though the Thai language is still used widely, younger generation and those keen to have a promising career are embracing English as an important language. In 1996, the English language became a compulsory subject for Grade 1 and above in order to ensure that Thai students get full exposure to the language from primary and secondary levels (Rappa and Wee 120). Therefore, the argument put forward by Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas is proven valid. They had warned that the promotion of English as a language of economic advancement would end in many authorities and institutions changing their language policies in order to gain material development.

In the rest of this paper I wish to examine the impact of language policy on national literature in the three selected countries.

### **National Literature in Malaysia**

The development and position of a national literature is subjective. It depends on perceptions of those who evaluate it. If it is the minority groups who were assessing it, certainly a lot of claims of imbalance of treatment would be made. On the other hand, if the evaluation was made by Malay intellectuals, they would offer a lot of critical views on the achievements of national literature. In a study I did with a fellow researcher on this subject, we found that Malaysian national literature still has a long way to go in comparison to neighbouring countries, such as Indonesia and the Philippines. Some of the weaknesses evident in Malaysian writers are the inconsistency in their creative production as well as their failure to speak truth to power. Such inconsistency and lack of courage will not prolong a writer's creative lifespan. The Malaysian public would soon lose interest in his/her work. If one were to compare the experience of writers such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer or Jose Rizal, one would ask where is Malaysia's equivalent of such dedicated writers, who would be taken seriously by all, across age and culture. This points to the need to penetrate different markets of the Malaysian population. Very often, readership or audience is limited to a single race, e.g. Malay writers appealing only to Malay audience or Chinese writers addressing only Chinese audience. If this persists and if the notion of national literature as a unifying force is rejected, literature will fail to be relevant to a nation in dire need of unity and cultural understanding. On the other hand, the hope is still there with the presence of young writers who are consistent and brave, such as Faisal Tehrani and Amir Muhammad. Due to stiff competitions between the conventional literary forms and other media forms (e.g. film or computer animation), a new approach is needed to ensure that literature as a genre is still relevant and fulfils the needs of contemporary audience. If not, what was warned by language scholars would take place: the indigenous language will witness its own death because it is no longer functional.

One of the reforms needed to ensure wide acceptance of national literature is through media integration. This can be done by producing audio novels or digital poems. In a paperless world that we live in today, a writer will need to have other creative skills in addition to his or her skill of writing.

If we were to compare literary achievements made by minority groups in Malaysia, we would find that writings in Chinese, Tamil or English are more flexible in their presentation and forms. Many written works by these groups are often staged or filmed. When this happens, a wider audience, especially at the international level, will have access to the works.

### **National Literature in the Philippines**

Resil Mojares, in his article on Filipino modern literature, highlights the diversity of literature in the Philippines. This is not only because of the existence of written literary texts in eight major languages, or oral literature in 55 languages and 142 other dialects – in addition to two colonial languages, i.e. English and Spanish – in

the country, but also because of other reasons – historical, geographical or otherwise – which have shaped the psyche of the people, resulting in Filipino literature being so diverse and colourful.

Mojares acknowledges the difficulties in developing and promoting national literature in the face of globalisation but believes that efforts to educate the youth to value their cultural and literary heritages must be seriously planned and implemented. In addition to this, he also believes that continuous translations and publications must be done to ensure that more people read (77). He observes that many writers do not make use of the richness of local literary traditions and if Filipino writers are serious about having their own identity, then the incorporation of traditional and modern elements in their writings would be an advantage. Mojares also criticises the lack of exposure of works by other minority groups, especially those by Moro writers in the South Philippines. Except for Ibrahim Jubaira (1920-), no other Filipino Muslim writers are known.

However, the Philippines is successful in ensuring that every student finishing school in the country would at least know one of their great writers and a national hero, Jose Rizal. Rizal's texts are made compulsory reading, and there are numerous efforts to integrate cultural differences in the various ethnic groups especially when his texts are staged, filmed or sung. If there was any one Southeast Asian country which is so forward looking and cross-culturally conscious in its presentation of its literary productions, it would be the Philippines. There is much to learn from this culturally vibrant nation.

### **National Literature in Thailand**

The earliest record of Thai literature was found in the thirteenth century. Most of the Thai literary texts are in poetry. Narrative poems were much influenced by Indian epics such as the *Ramayana* and tales from *jataka*<sup>2</sup>, which later influenced Thai prose and fiction as well (Kintanar 34). Before the existence of scripted Thai literature in the thirteenth century, traditional Thai literature came from three important sources: court tradition, religious tradition and oral tradition. According to Srisurang Poolthupya, traditional literature is always didactic and humorous in order to appeal to Thai masses. According to him, chronologically, oral literature existed long before religious literature came into being at about the same time with court literature (Poolthupya 220). The development of Thai literature is closely related to the history of Thailand itself. Generally, all the states in Thailand have the same religious beliefs; therefore, the literary products are not much different from one another. However, some political differences as well as geographical barriers may be reasons why every province is seen to have a distinctive culture and identity. The fact is, Thailand has not only one of the oldest literary heritages in Southeast Asia but that it also overlaps with and influences other literatures in the region.

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<sup>2</sup> *Jataka* tales refer to folklore-like literature relating to the previous births (*jāti*) of Buddha.

The writing system in Thailand originated from the old Pallavan script in South India, which was later influenced by the writing system of Khmer (Anderson and Mendiones 5). Due to the fact that Thailand was never physically colonised by any external power, the development of its literature continued without any outside influence or interruption, until the foreign policy and attitude towards foreign ideas were reviewed by the Thai monarchy. The royal rulers believed that one of the ways to ensure that the nation kept abreast with scientific development was to accept modernisation. Modern Thai literature began with the introduction of printing services first introduced by American Protestant missionaries in 1835 (Mattani 138). Until the 1932 Revolution, Thai literature was dominated by court literary tradition or literature produced by members of the royal family and aristocrats. In the 1932 Revolution, university students as well as leftist journalists demanded that literature and Thai classic art which supported aristocracy and capitalism, be replaced by literature of the people, for the people (Mattani 149). This revolution was also seen as another indicator of the beginning of Thai modern literature. However, in 1957, Thai Prime Minister Marshal Sarit Tharanat, who was often seen as a dictator (despite his pro-America and anti-communist policies), began to introduce censorship laws which filtered and censored all writings. He did this with the pretext of eradicating corruption among Thai police as well as to eradicate organised crimes and drug syndicates. As a result, many leftist writers were arrested and jailed. They were released only after Sarit Tharanat's death in 1963. Among the victims of this authoritarian law were Chit Phumisak and Suwat Woradilok, both of whom remain sources of inspiration for young and radical activists till today. Chit died mysteriously and he was later declared as Thai's "People's Poet" (Mattani 138).

The Thai monarchy had played a vital role in developing the nation not only from political and economical aspects, but also its social and literary infrastructures. King Rama V was one of those responsible for the modernisation of Thailand. He is seen by many political observers as the ruler responsible for introducing Western thought and culture in the country, to the extent that he is now considered the "Father of Modern Siam." During his reign, Thai literary products developed in various forms, genres and structures. However, this view is rejected by some scholars who believe that the process of modernisation in Thailand was introduced by King Rama IV (King Mongkut), as Western education had influenced Thai education system much earlier. As stated previously, the printing technology, advancement of publishing as an industry, and a flourishing journalism in the country had also contributed to the modernisation and development of Thailand as a nation.

It is evident from these findings that the position and acceptance of a national literature depends much on the political support given to it by the ruling elites. In Thailand, this has been achieved due to the support from the court. The form and development of Thai literature is closely related to its political history as a nation. The power and influence of the royal rulers had strengthened the position and acceptance of traditional Thai literature and this, therefore, confirms the argument

put forth by many scholars on the relationship between power and language (Phillipson 2000; Fairclough 2001). However, this has not happened in the Philippines because language and literature are not primary concerns of many of the leading rulers in the country as argued earlier.

The position is almost similar in Malaysia where literature is not seen as a field of knowledge which can bring good economic returns compared to the sciences and technology. However, due to on-going pressure from the people (majority Malays), the Malaysian government is committed to giving financial support to ensure that Malaysian national literature continues to survive.

### **Conclusion**

This article has highlighted some key issues relating to the position of national language in the face of globalisation. It has also discussed the position of national language and studied the strengths and weaknesses of language policies in three Southeast Asian countries. The experiences of Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines are all different from one another but it is also evident that all the three countries are faced by some common challenges: globalisation and the aggressive presence of English as a language as well as literature which may dominate local literatures.

As sovereign countries which have a long tradition and history of rich cultures and heritages, it is important that a conscious effort is made to safeguard these cultural heritages. Other than preserving what is old and traditional, it may be attractive to the young to integrate modern and traditional elements in their creative productions. They must be allowed to participate and be responsible in such creations. Their skills in other areas such as computer animation, film making, theatre or video production can be used to create a new blend of literature and other media. It is time to bring art back to the community and give ownership of a country's culture and heritage to the people.

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