

Mohamad Rashidi Pakri, *The Fiction of Colonial Malaya*. Foreword by Simon Peter Hull. Pulau Pinang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2014. vii + 102 pp. ISBN 978-983-861-845-8.

The Fiction of Colonial Malaya is a study of selected fictional narratives by Hugh Clifford, Frank Swettenham, George Maxwell and Anthony Burgess. The author, Mohamad Rashidi Pakri, is Senior Lecturer of English at the School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), whose areas of specialisation include colonial and postcolonial literature. In his Introduction, Rashidi (as he prefers to be addressed) notes that, for reasons that may have more to do with nationalistic sentiments than with literary scholarship, the literary works of British colonial officers are generally excluded from courses and discourses on Malaysian literature in English. This is a situation he hopes to change with his book.

In making his case for the relevance of his featured writers, Rashidi argues that while better known colonial writers like Conrad and Maugham were travellers passing through, Clifford, Swettenham, Maxwell and Burgess were colonial officers who lived and worked in Malaya. That being the case, their reality-based fictional narratives, written about and during the colonial era, reflect the colonising experience not as a *fait accompli* but as a work in progress. A study of their fiction would provide valuable insights into the process of “the maturation of the imperial idea” (7) and “at the very least” some understanding of important cultural notions such as “ambivalence, marginalisation and the metropolitan centre” (12). More significantly, it would help identify the provenance of colonialist elements that persist, and have become contentious issues, in Malaysian socio-political discourse today, among them the perception that “the Malay always fails” (36), the “son of the soil” notion underpinning the official policy of preferential treatment (87) and the presumed (Malay) resistance to change and modernity (89).

The Fiction of Colonial Malaya is a welcome addition to the critical literature on Malayan/Malaysian literature in English, not simply because it is long overdue or politically timely, but more because in terms of intent, approach and methodology, Rashidi brings some refreshing, original and significant changes to the study of Malayan colonial fiction. For one thing, his readings of the selected narratives are not an excuse to launch a diatribe against colonialism and its legacy of problematic policies. They are, rather, attempts to understand how such policies came about, by investigating the thought processes of the men who shaped them and guided their development – thought processes that are, arguably, more readily detected in the men’s literary writings than in their official despatches. In other words, while Rashidi does not deny that the writers, particularly Clifford and Swettenham, were ideologised products of a Britain

acutely aware of its world power status and that there are elements of propaganda in their narratives, he does allow that they were, first and foremost, human beings who, in the execution of their administrative duties, would have had to negotiate “between any personal attachment they may have formed for the natives, and the political agenda with which they were charged” (11). It seems reasonable to assume that their feelings of ambivalence, if any, about the imperial ideology would have found expression in their fictional works and in the shape, direction and implementation of subsequent colonial policies in Malaya.

Rashidi does not base his readings of the selected texts on assumptions, however. He uses as his analytical tool the narrative formula for justifying the imperial agenda in colonial adventure stories popular with the British reading public in the 19th century and later. The three main elements of the formula are: the assertion of the colonising adventurer’s authoritative status; the representation of the natives as lawless and backward; and the portrayal of the colonising adventurer as the hero who accomplishes the Empire’s civilising mission by imposing law and order. Rashidi then examines the texts to determine whether, to what extent and how they conform to or diverge from this formula. This approach is a refreshing change from the usual critical practice of using some established literary theory or other to analyse a narrative. Nonetheless, Rashidi makes pragmatic use of a variety of poststructuralist, postcolonial and discourse-analysis theories to enable alternative, sometimes oppositional, readings for the purpose of uncovering the internal dialectic between those aspects of the texts that can be read as colonial propaganda and those that reveal the writers’ doubts and anxieties about imposing imperialist ideas on the natives. By this method, he finds that “the whole process of production, dissemination and modification of the imperial idea in Malaya took place through an interrogative or problematic engagement with the three elements of the [popular] colonial fiction mentioned earlier” (9).

Perhaps the most significant of Rashidi’s findings is the presence of a “discourse of modernity” running counter to the hegemonic discourse in all the selected texts; significant because it has implications for how Malaysians see themselves in relation to their colonial past, implications that will (or should) ramify into most areas of local knowledge in the human sciences, beginning with history, sociology and literary studies. If nothing else, it must cause literature students to question whether postcolonial theories based on the colonial experiences of other countries and in other times can be applied wholesale to the study of Malaysian literature.

In Rashidi’s view, modernity has its roots in the European Enlightenment (which arguably came to full flower in 19th-century Britain) and is defined by its faith in the inevitability of human perfectibility through science, technology and, above all, the inculcation of values such as individual autonomy, rationality,

mutual trust and justice. From this standpoint, Rashidi concludes that his selected texts represent “the product of a great creative and intellectual effort by the authors to describe nothing less than the emergence of modernity during the hegemonic phase in Malaya” (10). The analytical process by which he arrives at this original finding is what he shares with his readers in his book.

Apart from the Foreword, the book has six chapters: the Introduction, four chapters (Two to Five), each devoted to one of his featured writers, and the Conclusion. The chapters on Clifford and Swettenham have been published elsewhere as either journal articles or chapters in book collections of essays (vii). So *The Fiction of Colonial Malaya* is more a collection of essays on a theme rather than a historical survey of Malayan fiction by colonial officers. Nevertheless, a consistent argumentative pattern emerges not only from the textual analyses in the individual chapters, but also from the way the book as a whole is structured. This pattern reflects the “process of maturation” of the kind of colonialism that prevailed in Malaya.

The Foreword by Simon Peter Hull, also Senior Lecturer at USM, is a fitting “opener” because it provides a glimpse of a pre-colonial Englishman’s (imagined) encounter with the Orient. In discussing how the Malay and other Asians are perceived and portrayed in Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, Hull brings into focus the radical change in European attitudes towards Asians – from fear to condescension – in the 74 years between the publications of De Quincey’s book (1821) and Swettenham’s *Malay Sketches* (1895). The order of the chapters on the featured writers – Clifford, Swettenham, Maxwell and Burgess – is not strictly chronological; Clifford was younger than Swettenham, and the first of his novels discussed, *Since the Beginning* (1898), came out three years after *Malay Sketches*, from which Rashidi draws several short stories for analysis. However, this particular order suits Rashidi’s purpose in terms of the texts’ fictional themes and treatment of coloniser-native encounters; it demonstrates the writers’ progressively widening divergence from the conventions of popular tales of colonial adventures between the publications of the first Malayan colonial novel (Clifford’s *Since the Beginning* in 1898) and the last (Burgess’ *Beds in the East* in 1959).

It is inevitable that in compressing such a weighty discussion in a thin volume of 102 pages, Rashidi makes demands on his reader, who may be forced at numerous points, while reading the Introduction, to resort to the Internet to look up many of the philosophical concepts and literary theories mentioned. It also raises questions in the reader’s mind. Did other colonial officers not write any fiction in the 50 years between the publications of Maxwell’s *In Malay Forests* in 1907 and Burgess’ *Time for a Tiger* in 1956? Did changing public attitudes towards colonialism in Britain and elsewhere influence the colonial officers’ sentiments regarding the imperial project? Or, the other way around, did their

fiction influence public attitudes towards the colonial enterprise? Indeed, Rashidi himself raises some questions for consideration in his Conclusion.

Yet, it is in the very evoking and provoking of such questions that the book may be said to have achieved Rashidi's main purpose; namely, to arouse his readers' interest in and awareness of the continuing relevance of colonial fiction in the nation's literary heritage.

Chuah Guat Eng, Malaysia