

EUROSEAS, 26-28 August 2010

School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Popular Literatures of Southeast Asia

Convenors:

Dr Mulaika Hijjas, British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, the Department of South East Asia, SOAS, London.

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Thursday, 26 August 2010

Session 1: 13-14.30

Histories

Jurilla, May

University of the Philippines

No Light and Frivolous Matter: The Publishing of Popular Literature in the Philippines during the Twentieth Century

Popular literature, as described by Northrop Frye, is 'literature designed only to entertain or amuse, which is out of sight of truth, and should be avoided altogether by serious people.' While the directive here may well apply to readers, if the literary establishment (their 'betters') were to have its way, it might not hold as much for certain authors and publishers. The production of popular literature, after all, is no light and frivolous matter. It involves some very serious knowledge, skill, and money.

This paper will explore the publishing of the most popular forms of Philippine literature in the course of the twentieth century: metrical romances (*awit* and *corrido*) during the 1900s to the 1920s; Tagalog novels, 1920s to 1940s; comic books (*komiks*), 1950s to 1980s; and romance novels, 1985 to

2000. It will identify trends and patterns in the production of these literary forms. Ultimately, this paper seeks to show that the massive popularity of these types of literature in the Philippines had as much to do with their contents and forms as with their publishing and distribution.

Jedamski, Doris.

University of Leiden.

Change and Continuity: Crime and Espionage Novels in (Colonial) Indonesia Before and After 1945

Popular literature is meant to entertain. In Indonesia of the 1940s and 1950s, popular novels in general, and the genre of crime and espionage in particular, also served as a means of socio-political and cultural positioning, sometimes demonstrating almost propagandistic features. More than sixty years later this literature can form a valuable source for scholars when exploring the “structure of feeling” in the decades before and after the formal constitution of the Republic of Indonesia. It will become transparent that this kind of popular literature, when seen in its historical context, could also address pressing issues of the time, such as poverty and social injustice, that it helped define and re-define interethnic relations, that it drafted images of women reflecting hopes and anxieties of their time, and that it gave all kinds of certainties and uncertainties a recognizable face. The culprit, the spy, the detective, the police inspector – they all contributed to the reflection process that stood central to the ongoing decolonisation process. This paper will look at a selection of novel(ette)s by Malay and Sino-Malay writers dating from the late 1930s up to the late 1950s. Some plots incorporate real or fictitious events set in Indonesia under Dutch colonial rule, during the Japanese Occupation or the Dutch intervention. Other texts centre on the young republic’s struggle of the early years of nation building under Soekarno.

Apart from sociohistorical aspects, the paper will also touch upon (dis)continuities in narrative strategies and devices.

Session 2: 15-16.30

Popular fictions: chick, pop, cult.

Abdul Manan, Shakila

Universiti Sains Malaysia

Flirting with Romance: The Production and Consumption of Malay Chick Lit in Majority-Muslim Malaysia

Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982) and Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) are two important publications that provided the impetus for a serious investigation of popular romance or what is popularly termed *chick lit*. Chick lit, a new genre of romance, has hitherto been dismissed as being trivial, hedonistic, and demeaning to women. As regards the latter, both Modleski and Radway have revealed that chick lit challenges prevailing assumptions of women as they are not constructed as passive beings but are shown to be active, assertive and independent. In a later study, Gill and Herdieckerhoff (2006) found contradictions in the portrayal of women in chick lit, as although women may be financially independent, sexually assertive and liberated, at times they are still depicted as damsels in distress who require "rescuing" from men. In addition, women in this genre exhibit an unhealthy obsession with the body, which requires them to constantly monitor and remodel it to ensure its conformity with "normative femininity".

Chick lit has also found a ready audience in Malaysia. Studies have shown that publishing houses and writers have profited from this burgeoning industry through new publications and reprints. Many of the writers and consumers of this genre are young Malay-Muslim women and men. This raises a number of interesting questions as Malaysia is in a conflictual situation: it is caught in the throes of an Islamic resurgence, conservatism and modernity (as encapsulated in Mahathir's Vision 2020 or modernity project) at the same time. How have these writers appropriated this genre of romance in their writing? How have they negotiated the competing discourses of

feminism, anti-feminism, tradition and Islam in their portrayal of women? Why is this genre of writing popular with Malay-Muslim women and men? In order to answer these questions, the study will attempt a three-level analysis: it will conduct semi-structured interviews with popular publishers, committed Malay chick lit readers and perform a textual analysis of the selected popular Malay chick lit novels using tools drawn from feminism. Essentially, the study situates Malay chick lit in its proper socio-cultural and political context in order to understand the forces that help to shape it and its production and consumption processes.

Plomp, Marije

**Netherlands Institute for War Documentation / Royal Netherlands
Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies**

**Sex in the City: A Re-evaluation of Pulp Fiction Written in Medan, North
Sumatra, in the 1950s**

A study of the cultural life of Medan yields a different view on the common perception of Indonesian culture in the 1950s. Available studies on this period focus on the national, highbrow culture, but in Medan – and likely in other large Indonesian cities as well – the cultural scene was dominated by popular culture, produced for and consumed by the masses.

In the 1950s Medan was known as ‘the capital of pulp fiction’. Private printing and publishing in Indonesia had started in Medan in the first quarter of the twentieth century and from the start, the Medan printing houses catered to the market. About half of all publications found throughout Indonesia in the 1950s was printed in Medan (Barus Siregar 1953).

In my paper I want to show how this notion of *sastra Medan* as low quality literature is rooted both in Dutch colonial perceptions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ forms of literature and in the heated debate of the late 1940s and 1950s on the formation of a *kebudayaan nasional*, an Indonesian national culture. In the latter discourse, the competition between the self-proclaimed cultural capital of the nation, Jakarta, and the regional capital Medan turns out to have played an important role.

Moreover, I wish to argue that this kind of writings constitutes a fertile ground for research. Western-centric notions of artistic value and the subsequent dichotomy between high and low forms of cultural expression excluded the popular domain as an area for investigation. As most researchers who have dealt with Indonesian literature in the 1950s focused on the creation of a national identity through the politics of culture, they turned to the discourse of the cultural elite in Jakarta. But as scholars such as Harper (1999) and Kahn (2006) have convincingly demonstrated in the case of Malayan cities, popular culture, pulp fiction included, formed the breeding grounds of counter narratives of identity and, as such, merit further study.

Recent Indonesian pleas for a re-evaluation of pulp fiction from Medan are based on the argument that these texts have greatly contributed to the development of Bahasa Indonesia as the national language. They were written in a form of Malay very close to the later national language, Bahasa Indonesia, instead of Chinese-Malay or a regional language and were sold throughout the Archipelago. The cultural pages of national newspapers and national cultural magazines frequently featured negative appraisals by cultural critics and authors from Java of literature written in Medan. But there were also local journalists and writers of so-called highbrow literature who openly voiced their disdain for the pulp fiction that flooded the market in their city. One of the latter, Sori Siregar, even made the dilemma of choosing between writing pulp fiction for money or literary texts that could contribute to the creation of a national literature into the theme of his short story 'Selamat pagi, tuan'(1962).

Lastly, I want to track the development of the national debate on 'indecent' writings, *tulisan cabul*, that started in the mid-fifties, as it seemed to be primarily aimed at writings from Medan. This can perhaps shed more light on the socio-political forces that propelled the debate.

Abdul Aziz, Sohaimi

Universiti Sains Malaysia

Cult Fiction in Malaysia: Ramlee Awang Murshid the Cult Writer

Cult fiction has attracted a large following of loyal fans and supporters.

Cult authors have attracted and held fans who eagerly await their new publications. This phenomenon has had an impact on the growth of the popular novel in Malaysia. Despite the popularity of cult fiction, the cult writer is often overlooked by literary critiques because cult fiction is considered to have no literary quality. Malaysia has a number of cult writers who have contributed to the development of popular novels in this country. This paper will discuss one of the most popular cult writers in Malaysia today, Ramlee Awang Murshid. He writes in a variety of popular genres such as action-adventure, crime, detective, fantasy, horror, mystery, romance and science fiction. His ability to combine and deploy several genres within a novel is one of the factors which make him a popular cult writer today. The development of digital literacy among young readers has also contributed to this phenomenon. This paper will also explore his works based on generic criticism, an appropriate analytical tool to study his cult novels.

Saturday, 28 August 2010

Session 3: 10.30-12

Changing Traditions

Hijjas, Mulaika

SOAS

Sugar-Coating a Bitter Pill? *Hikayat Derma Ta'siah* and other Popular Malay Didactic Texts for Women.

Hikayat Derma Ta'siah was one of the ten most frequently reprinted titles of the boom years of Malay lithographic printing in the late nineteenth century. A cautionary tale instructing women about the proper behaviour of wives, that it was intended for a female audience places it in the company of the other 'bestsellers' of its time, the romantic adventure *syair* featuring heroines disguised as men. However, *Hikayat Derma Ta'siah* is set apart from these texts by its overt didacticism and the fact that, unlike the *syair*

which at least covertly argue for women's agency, it preaches a radical subjugation of wives to the authority of their husbands. This line of thought, though not new in the Malay world, seems to have been gaining stridency at this time, as southeast Asian Islam became more closely influenced by reformist developments in the Middle East. This paper seeks to investigate why a text bearing a message its readers might have found rather difficult to swallow was apparently so widely consumed (or, perhaps more accurately, so widely purchased). The plethora of marriage manuals, some taking a strikingly similar line to *Hikayat Derma Ta'siah*, now available for women readers in contemporary Malaysia form a point of comparison in seeking to explain why the unpalatable may be so readily consumed.

Khur-Yearn, Jotika

SOAS

A Study of Shan Folk Tales in 19th-20th-century Shan Poetic Literature

Leslie Milne, a British anthropologist who spent three years recording social conditions in the early nineteenth hundreds in Northern Shan State, Burma/Myanmar, said, "Many Shans read their scriptures with manifest sincerity and delight. In their homes, in rest-houses, in monasteries, or gathered around an open fire, Shans may be seen listening with reverence to the rising and falling cadence, as their reader chants a birth story of their Lord Gautama, or of the beauty and bliss of Nirvana, pictured as the 'Home of Happiness', the 'city of Gems and Gold', or smiling over semi-religious love songs, when the lovers meet in the sky – when their star places come in conjunction – to renew their love in perpetual youth" (Milne 1910, *Shans at Home*).

What interests me in Milne's description is that there has been so much change in Shan communities within living memory. Some of the traditions described by Milne, such as reading scriptures around an open fire in the family home, have disappeared. What remains today in relation to the

traditions of folk music and culture are some popular texts. Though in old Shan scripts, these are printed in modern book form. There are also a few professional Shan folk music singers, who keep the traditions alive.

In this paper, I would like to examine the nature and characteristics of the 19th-20th-century Shan poetic literature, with a focus on the Shan folk tales, which are no doubt among the popular texts of Shan poetic literature. Such folk literatures are known in Shan as *abum* and *along* or *alongaya*. *Abum* refers to folk tales and *along* refers to the stories of Buddha-to-be (*bodhisattva*). The majority of the Shan people share a belief in Buddhism in common with their neighbours of Southeast Asia, such as the Burman, the Chinese, the Thai, the Laotian, the Mon and the Khmer. I shall also attempt to analyze how these literatures have influenced Shan traditions and customs.

Jatuthasri, Thaneerat

Chulalongkorn University

Thai and Lao *Panji* stories: Connection and Identity

Panji stories are very popular in Southeast Asia. The tales originated in Java and became extensively popular in the Malay-speaking areas and were also transmitted to Thailand, Lao, Burma, and Cambodia. This paper studies two popular versions of the *Panji* stories composed in the different contexts, a well-known Thai *Panji* story, *Inao* of King Rama II, and a Lao *Panji* story, *Innao*. The Thai *Panji* story was intended to be read and performed as a Thai court drama dance, while the Lao *Panji* story was intended to be read and sung. Comparative analysis finds that while the Lao *Panji* story is derived from the Thai *Panji* story, they present the story in the different ways which reflect their identity. The Thai *Panji* story is composed in the form of “*Klon Bot Lakhon Nai*”, while the Lao *Panji* story is in the form of “*Klong Lao*”. There are many distinctive characteristics between these two texts such as the theme, setting, local colour, literary techniques and the interpretation of the character. The distinctions between these two texts do not only result from the differences of their purposes but also from cultural tastes. The Thai and Lao

Panji stories are still used and remain popular among audiences even up to this day. The Thai *Panji* story is not only still read and performed but is also represented in various forms of literature and performance. As for the Lao *Panji* story, it is still republished for reading. The connection and the distinction between the Thai and Lao *Panji* stories reflect the tastes of the two societies as well as the interaction between text and context that clearly reveals the wisdom of the local poets in transforming the popular foreign tales into their own literary works.

Session 4: 13.00-14.30

Texts and Society

Feangfu, Janit

SOAS

Through the Eyes of the Tourists: The Semi-Documentary Short Story and the Negotiation of Thai Identities in the 1970s.

Through reference to selected Thai literary works produced in the 1970s, this paper explores the touristic semi-documentary short story style popular among urban readers, its context and its capacity to represent Thai-Western encounters that reveal themselves dynamically and intensely in various ways. The two selected short stories 'Pai talat nam' ('Going to the Floating Market') and 'Talui ke khlap' ('Venturing into a Gay Club') are selected from the collection entitled *Talui ke khlap: Kai Bangkok chut 7* (*Venturing into a Gay Club: Bangkok Guide Collection 7*) (1975) by Ta Tha-it (a pseudonym). They will be examined against the backdrop of Thailand in the flux of rapid socio-economic and cultural changes brought about by the dual rubrics of 'modernisation' (*kan-tham-hai-than-samaï*) and 'development' (*kan-phatthana*), implemented into the country's policy-making by the military regime since the 1950s with strong support from the American government.

The cooperation between the Thai and American governments during the Cold War era led to the unprecedented degree of American presence in

Thailand and the interaction between Thais and Americans in both the formal and informal levels. The period became what Benedict Anderson (1977) defines as the 'American era' in Thailand (1950s-1970s). Such an interaction crucially informs how each perceives and defines oneself in relation to the other. I follow Mary Louise Pratt's (1991) concept of 'contact zone' in my discussion of American tourism in Thailand portrayed in the two short stories.

The whole series of *Kai phi Bangkok/Kai Bangkok* (eleven collections) comprises stories published weekly in a popular magazine over several years (under the military dictatorship after the peak of the 'American Era' in Thailand), from 1971 until after the bloody coup of October 1976. The author 'Ta Tha-it', the pseudonym of Chusak Rasijan, is one of the most prolific and popular writers the 1970s-1980s. He was the first to use the touristic semi-documentary short story style, wherein the story functions as a tourist guide and authenticates itself as a real experience thus serving as some kind of documentary. However, each chapter in the series is also self-contained and qualifies as a short story, having a main character(s), a plot, certain complications and a resolution at the close. This style enables the narrator/character to orchestrate both factual and fictional elements in order to create a story palatable to a mass readership.

The popularity of *Kai phi Bangkok/Kai Bangkok* is crucially due to the populace's interest in the experiences of *farang* (caucasian foreigners) in Thailand and the intertwining of different narratives such as English lesson titbits, background stories about *farang* clients, and Thai historical anecdotes. As the guide/narrator takes his Thai reader on a sightseeing trip in Thailand through *farang* eyes and experiences, he simultaneously (re)introduces Thailand's tourist attractions, tells stories of *farang*'s faux pas due to cultural difference, and teaches English to the reader. Thailand thus becomes exotic for the Thai as seen through the eyes of the *farang* tourists. These characteristics are colourfully engendered in 'Pai talad nam' and 'Talui ke khlap'. I will investigate in the two short stories the issues of 'urban and rural' and 'sexuality and gender', respectively, and illustrate that as the narrator represents Thailand and Thainess to both his *farang* clients and the Thai reader, he is at once defining them, himself and his fellow Thai.

Suryadi

Leiden University

The Passion of Mechanical Sounds and the Confusion of Modernity:

The Image of Radio Technology in Two 1940s Indonesian *Roman*

From the end of the nineteenth century, Netherlands East Indies colonial society began to be flooded by “mechanical sounds”, produced, among other means, by radio. As an urban cultural symbol, radio is represented as a matter of course in some early modern Indonesian literary works, both in novels published by Balai Pustaka (*Commissie voor Volklectuur*) and in pulp fiction published by indigenous publishers. Even though radio and other modern media technologies is an obvious element in and adds flavour to early modern Indonesian literary texts, this element does not seem to have attracted the attention of many researchers of Indonesian literature. This paper looks at the literary images of radio technology in two Indonesian *romans* (dime novels) published in the nineteen forties. The works are Muhammad Dimiyati’s *Dibalik Tabir Gelombang Radio* (‘*Behind the Curtain of Radio Waves*’) and A. Damhoeri’s *Zender Nirom* (‘*Station Nirom*’). Both were published by two indigenous publishers situated in Sumatra in 1940.

As the title of Dimiyati’s and Damhuri’s works suggest, the radio is one of the important symbols in the narrative of some works of early modern Indonesian literature. I argue that if the radio was so important as to be mentioned in a literary text, we can assume that there are important ideas attached to the literary imagery of this product of technology. I also argue that the pulp fiction brightly symbolizes the social realities. In various degrees, representation of radio in Indonesian fictional texts such as *Dibalik Tabir Gelombang Radio* and *Zender Nirom* can be considered a reflection of the intrusion of technology on its society. As cultural texts, these pulp fictions mirror various views and perceptions prevailing in Indonesian society about

radio technology, which may have been coloured by certain religious, ethnic, or educational levels, or by ideology. It can be said that the image of radio technology in early modern Indonesian literature may sociologically reflect the acceptance of the technology and its psychological effects on the soul of the contemporary society.