

## Evolution of a Borrowed Genre in Malay Literature (1922-1941): The Case of Crime Fiction in Malaysia

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### Abstract

Malaysian crime fiction in Malay is still under researched, with the main stages of its development yet to be identified. This article aims to partially close this gap by addressing the period before World War II. The study uses the comparative method, applied synchronically to determine the extent of Western influence on Malay crime fiction at a particular time; and diachronically, to outline the historical evolution of the genre. The analysis demonstrates that in the 1920s, the influence of Western crime fiction resulted in borrowings and imitations of foreign plots. Action took place predominantly abroad and the riddle formed the core of the narrative. In the 1930s, the genre had evolved to depict local realities, and the stories became politically engaged and coloured by Malay nationalism. The focus in the narratives shifted from the riddle to the socio-political message of the author. Consequently, by the 1940s, Malay crime fiction rapidly lost its generic features, and this brought about the subsequent decline of the genre in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Malay literature, crime fiction, history of genre, Western influence, nationalism

Early crime fiction in the Malay language has received some scholarly attention, but this has largely been directed at works produced in the Netherland East Indies.<sup>1</sup> Writings in this genre produced in British Malaya have received scant attention. So far there have been no comprehensive studies on the subject. The article by William Roff (“The Mystery”) on the beginnings of Malay crime fiction still remains the most substantial contribution to the field, recently joined by that of Nobuto Yamamoto. Certain details on crime prose can be obtained from studies on the history of Malay Malaysian literature, the most comprehensive of which is the collective work published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Hussain). Publications by Hashim Awang on pre-World War II Malay short stories (“Cerpen-cerpen”) and novels (“Novel”) are also relevant in this respect. Important conclusions can be made based on the works dealing with translations into Malay from foreign languages that discuss or mention crime genres, including the work by Elizabeth Chandra, Doris Jedamski (“Translation”), and Holger Warnk.

Nevertheless, this information is insufficient to trace the line of development of crime fiction in British Malaya, which is the aim of the present article. To fulfil this task, it is necessary to analyse the accessible published texts, Awang (“Cerpen Malaysia”) being the most inclusive source at our disposal.

Most probably the reason for the lack of academic interest in the genre of crime fiction lies in its modest role within Malay literature. Though this literary category is very broad, comprising “those texts that demonstrate the occurrence of a crime and which detail the efforts of an amateur or a professional sleuth to

solve that crime” (Cole, cited by Franks, 141), such writings are not too numerous or very noticeable. At first sight it might look as if a study of this genre in Malay literature will not yield meaningful results. Its historical development, however, is of interest because it illustrates a particular perspective to Western influence by the local literati. The topic of foreign impact upon Malay literature has not yet been investigated comprehensively, especially when it comes to the first half of the twentieth century. This paper aims to show that the contacts with foreign literature not just took place, but that their results were processed by a local mindset in accordance with the appropriate historical and ideological contexts. Interestingly, this process appears especially perceptible in crime fiction.

In multiethnic Malaysia, it is mostly the English-speaking non-Malay authors who work in this genre now. Some of them, like Shamini Flint, enjoy considerable international success, while several other crime novelists are praised by critics and well received by readers (Pikri).

There are very few Malay crime novelists, though. The ratio of Malays to non-Malays who write crime stories is represented in the four-volume *KL Noir* (2013-2014). Malays make up only a third of its contributors. Most importantly, all these stories are written in English.<sup>2</sup> Malaysian noir prose is exclusively represented by English-language literature (Trisnawati 60). The same goes for other crime subgenres. One of the most acknowledged Malay writers of crime novels today is Rozlan Mohamed Noor, who was shortlisted in 2010 for the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for Best First Book. His book was commended as “a good read: a fast-paced story rooted in contemporary Malaysian reality, and thus creating something of a recognisable Malaysian voice” (Philip, “Rozlan” 198). He, too, prefers to write in English:

“Most Malaysians of my age group ... were educated in the Queen’s English. Because of that, English was our spoken and written medium all through our adult working days. I’m ashamed to admit that... my thought process is in English.”  
(qtd. by Picker)

What about Malay-language crime fiction then? Judging by major works on modern Malay literature, it remains somewhere in the periphery of the literary realm. Among established authors, Faisal Tehrani produced investigation novels for teenagers (Mohd. Ali, Ja’afar); but in his case, his other writings are definitely more representative of his prose. Crime fiction in Malay currently occupies a modest position at best, in contrast to its promising beginning. The earlier novels and stories in this genre appeared together with the first modern prose in Malay, but it looks like crime fiction has not lived up to its potential in Malay literature. To find out why and how it happened, it is necessary to explore the specific features of the perception and transformation of the crime genre in Malay at the early stages of its existence. This period covers approximately two decades and is crucial for determining the subsequent developments of the genre.

### The first crime novels in the Malay language

The prospects for Malay crime fiction looked promising in the beginning. The genre found its place alongside the first novels, for the most part very serious and inspired by Islamic reformist thought, like the famous *Faridah Hanum* (1925)<sup>3</sup> by Syed Shaikh bin Ahmad al-Hady (1867-1934). At present it is considered to be the first novel in Malay, though a few other serious works may lay claim to this title (Hussain 136-141, 191). But the fact is, another possible contender for the title of the earliest Malay novel is a crime novel.

In 1974 Roff published an article claiming that one of the earliest Malay novels was written by Muhammad bin Muhammad Said (1888-1939). His detective story *Cheritera Kechurian Lima Million Ringgit* (*Tale of the Theft of Five Million Ringgit*) was printed three years before Syed Shaikh's novel.<sup>4</sup> Roff argues that *Cheritera* had been explicitly inspired by one of the American stories about the private detective Nick Carter published from 1886 to 1915-1916. He could not establish which story in particular became the basis of the Malay novel, since there were hundreds of them (Roff "The Mystery" 457-459). Subsequently Yamamoto has argued that a prototype for Muhammad's hero was a European fictional character called Arthur J. Raffles, also known as Lord Lister. This noble criminal first appeared in a German pulp magazine published in 1908 (Yamamoto 12).

Nevertheless, further works of Muhammad bin Muhammad Said were inspired by Nick Carter. Two detective stories published as one book in 1923 also preceded *Faridah Hanum* (Roff "The Mystery" 456-457; Yamamoto 12-13). The mere fact of the presence of the detective story in the first wave of modern Malay literary works looks significant. No less important is the fact of Western influence on Malay literature of the twentieth century – an issue that has not been adequately researched.

Another important factor is that this pioneer of crime fiction in Malay literature was a high-profile official. Muhammad held top-ranking positions in the religious and state hierarchies of his native Kelantan state (Roff "The Mystery" 452-454). Furthermore, he was not the only author interested in this genre. Syed Shaikh al-Hady himself also contributed to the genre, though his fame rests on his reformist essays and novels. The main character of Syed Shaikh's crime stories was the descendant of an earlier creation than Arthur Raffles or Nick Carter. From 1928 to 1934, he published a series of novels (7 or 8) retelling the adventures of Rocambole, a character created by French author Pierre Alexis Ponson du Terrail (1829-1871) (Roff "The Mystery" 460-461; Yamamoto 13-14). As a result, in spite of the fact that Syed Shaikh was not the pioneer of Malay crime fiction, he is usually considered as such: "Thanks to his efforts, Malay society discovered the means for creating crime stories... albeit in a form of adaptation or translation" (Samat 56).

Where did the authors of *Cheritera Kechurian Lima Million Ringgit* and the Malay Rocambole discover their characters? Muhammad was actively involved in translation from English and Arabic for Malay periodicals. Thus, he familiarized himself with foreign works and could borrow some episodes (Roff "The Mystery" 454). Syed Shaikh, due to his ancestry and interests, read mostly in Arabic.<sup>5</sup> It is probable that he

learned about Rocambole from the Arabic translations of Ponson du Terrail. Another intriguing probability is that the Nick Carter stories could have partially originated from Rocambole or his literary descendant detective, Lecocq. In this case, both Muhammad and Syed Shaikh could have borrowed their characters from the same source (460-462).

Finally, there might be a link between Rocambole and the Dutch East Indies. Between 1910 and 1915, the *peranakan* writer Lie Kim Hok, based in Java, translated 53 Rocambole episodes by Ponson du Terrail (Jedamski “Translation” 228; Chandra 41-42). It is highly possible that the Rocambole stories found their way into British Malaya from the neighbouring country of Indonesia. Still, the differences in writing systems could have hampered this exchange.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it is difficult to come to a definitive conclusion about the route by which the Rocambole series found its way to Malaya.

In any case, there were plenty of ways for crime fiction to seep into Malay literature. What could have attracted writers to this genre? Ostensibly, there was financial interest. Syed Shaikh published the adventures of Rocambole on the pages of his *Al-Ikhwān* magazine along with the translated works of reformist ideologists such as Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida, together with his own writings on religious issues. The presence of crime and adventure stories was a selling point for readers (Tan Linda 120-121). Muhammad bin Muhammad Said was also engaged in a private publishing business, which evidently required financing (Roff “The Mystery” 452-453).

The more fundamental reasons for the emergence of Malay crime fiction were of a literary nature. Although new to the indigenous literature, this Western genre provided a certain continuity with the legacy of the past. Both old Malay belles-lettres and plots in crime fiction contained an adventure element.<sup>7</sup> Discussing early Indonesian crime stories, Jedamski justifiably stressed the difference between crime and adventure fiction on the level of worldview and psyche (“Genres” 172-177). However, on a level of plot they share the presence of some extraordinary experience or test which the main character has to pass. Interestingly, out of the all foreign crime fiction translated into Malay in British Malaya before World War II, Warnk mentions only Sherlock Holmes and the Sexton Blake stories (Warnk 107), and these two figures are most adventurous, indeed.

The Russian expert in the literatures of Southeast Asia, Yuri Osipov, pointed out that the uniformity of the basic plot elements in the European adventure novel (including crime fiction) was quickly appreciated by local writers. These texts provided Southeast Asian authors with “the most accessible material” for borrowing plots, episodes, motives, patterns and stylistic techniques, serving as “the first bridge that connected the areas of two distant verbal cultures”—East and West. Authors and readers were attracted by “the engaging plot and its comprehensibility” (Osipov 180-181).

There was yet another circumstance that made crime fiction speak to Malay writers and readers. Reformist ideology urged Malays to improve their well-being, thinking not only about retribution in the afterlife, but also about the recompense for good deeds and sins in this life. Syed Shaikh “emphasized Islam’s

demand that as man has been endowed with the faculty of making effort, he should put it to full use throughout his lifetime” (Tan Linda 156). The authors of reformist novels could appreciate crime plots, since wrongdoers immediately faced their deserved punishment.

Besides, the fight against law-breakers contributed to social progress, and this also had great significance in the eyes of Islamic reformists. “When the detective in a police romance stands alone... fearless amid the knives and fists of a thief’s kitchen, it does certainly serve to make us remember that it is the agent of social justice who is the original and poetic figure” (G. K. Chesterton, cited by Ahlquist xiii). While Malay writers were getting familiar with crime fiction, “the global desire for truth and justice,” typical of the genre (Phillips 6) might have appealed to them strongly. The idea of struggling against vice for the sake of public well-being resonated with the ideological context of British Malaya in the 1920s and 1930s.

Therefore, crime fiction contributed to the formation of modern Malay prose, fitting into the country’s patterns of cultural and historical development.

### **Malay crime fiction: the stage of borrowing and imitation in the short story**

Crime stories by Syed Shaikh Ahmad al-Hady and Muhammad bin Muhammad Said set the example for some other writings in Malay, but not in the genre of the novel. In his study of 165 novels published before World War II, Hashim Awang did not single out a separate segment for crime fiction. In his opinion, the influence of translated adventure and detective fiction on the bulk of Malay literature was not strong (Awang “Novel” 7-8). At the same time, however, Awang had also identified plots based on a crime riddle in the Malay short story.

Similar to the novel, the Malay short story at that time was mainly devoted to social and political subjects, like education, rising nationalism, economic prosperity and female emancipation. Such themes being prevalent in fiction, it was periodicals that published other works, including detective stories (Awang “Cerpencerpen” 30-31). They were not numerous, though. Hashim Awang, who collected 734 stories from pre-war newspapers and magazines (out of approximately 1,500 stories published in total), defines only seven of them as detective fiction (*cerita detektif*) (100-101). In contrast, he refers to dozens of texts each time he discusses the works related to social, political, and economic issues. In a later edition,<sup>8</sup> there were more samples of crime fiction, but this genre was still far outnumbered by others.

Early works were most likely translations, adaptations or imitations of English/American prototypes. These texts do not contain any reference to the original work. The concept of authorship developed in the Malay world quite late, and up to the mid-twentieth century the copyright laws were often respected only nominally, especially when it came to translations or adaptations (Jedamski “Translations” 211-213).

The following are a few storylines published in Malay periodicals.

“Mystery of a Night Call” (“Rahsia Panggilan Malam”, 1933), by Za’ba Ahmad, depicts its main character as a doctor in London. He is worried about his troublemaker son, whom he kicks out of the home

on suspicion of theft. The son disappears for years. At some point, the doctor is forced into a criminal gang's hide-out to perform a surgery on one of its wounded members. The unconscious patient turns out to be the doctor's son. Torn between love for his son and a sense of civic duty, the doctor still reports the incident to Scotland Yard. There he receives surprisingly positive news: the gang has just been arrested thanks to his brave son, who infiltrated it as an undercover agent (Ahmad Z.).

The author of the short story "Woman's Nature" ("Tabiat Perempuan", 1936) is known only under his pseudonym of Penulis Khas Terengganu (*Special Correspondent from Terengganu*). He also narrates events that clearly do not take place in Malaya. The plot develops in the form of a conversation between a married couple after they both learn from the newspapers about the murder of a young baroness. As they speak to each other, the wife becomes certain that the crime was committed by her husband, and lets him know that. However, in the denouement of the story, she answers a phone call and assures the police that on the tragic night her husband was at home (Penulis "Tabiat").

The same Special Correspondent came up with another story titled "A Blessed Son" ("Anak Berbahagia", 1936). The events take place in Paris. A rich widower John Wilson marries a pretty woman who mistreats his teenage son Robert behind her husband's back. Having won the trust of the spouse, she sets out to appropriate his property, cheating on him with a young rake. Together they plot to murder John Wilson. Robert happens to overhear their conversation and informs his father about their plan. Before the father arrives with two detectives, Robert shoots the lovers. John thanks Robert for saving him from disgrace, Robert is acquitted in court, awarded with a medal for bravery and offered a position at Scotland Yard (Penulis "Anak").

In Abdul Halim's "Mystery of a Dark Room" ("Rahsia Bilik Gelap", 1936), the main character is a Malay – a rich Mr. Adnan. One night he is home alone when he suddenly hears the footsteps of a burglar. Not losing his presence of mind, he takes a gun and waits for the criminal to enter his room. Pointing the gun at the thief, Adnan forces him to call the police himself. When the police appear, the detained criminal realizes that he was tricked: the gun is not loaded, and the owner of the house, who apprehended him, is actually blind (Abdul Halim).

Although the original foreign models for these stories have yet to be traced, their plots do feel derived and imitative. Firstly, the authors frequently seem to face difficulties in designating things or notions that were unusual for the life of Malays back then. They frequently have to use descriptive language, sometimes inserting English words in parenthesis for clarity. A switch can be described as "a device for turning electric light on" (*pesawat menerangkan lampu elektrik (switch)*), a receipt as a "letter of receipt" (*surat penerimaan (resit)*), a handset as "a hearing aid" (*pembantu pendengaran*), a criminal record as "a memo" (*peringat*), a ball simply as a "gathering" (*keramaian*), and a newspaper article as a *hikayat* (Malay traditional prose genre).

Before World War II Malay short stories mainly depicted the reality of British Malaya (Hussain 123). The aforementioned texts, with their action set elsewhere, stand out of the general pattern. In one of the stories discussed, the place is specified (Paris); in other cases, the scenes and situations described are obviously

typical of a foreign culture. If the main character is a Malay, like Mr. Adnan, then he belongs to the anglicized elite: his house is spacious and well furnished, he has a personal driver and at night sits in a comfortable armchair wearing pajamas. Not many Malay writers and readers of the time were familiar with this way of life.

The urban atmosphere normally invoked in crime fiction was not familiar to the pre-war Malay writers either. Ethnic Malays mostly lived in villages and graduated from rural schools with a basic education. Only the children of the nobility had an opportunity to study at elite institutions or abroad. This anglicized aristocracy did not take an interest in their own culture. The foundation of modern Malay literature had to be laid by those, who by no will of their own, mostly possessed only a basic education<sup>9</sup> and could not obtain a direct knowledge of the daily life and habits of Western countries as well as the customs of the local Europeanized elite.

Consequently, the image of a rich urban life in distant countries or in Malaya in the stories discussed is based on a number of stereotypes. These included a house “equipped with a telephone and radio,” and “a home security equipment in the form of a gun and rifle” (Abdul Halim 575). The latter was considered a requirement for a wealthy person: “A rich man... should definitely have a gun” (Penulis “Anak”). A married couple from “The Woman’s Nature” attends court balls. Any true gentleman is a club member—that notion in particular was hard to convey. Some writers used the borrowed word *kelab* that eventually stayed in the language, while others tried to interpret it as “an evening assembly” (*persekutuan malam*).

In an effort to master the laws of a new genre these writers were forced to closely follow the borrowed plots or to create a “foreign” atmosphere based on their limited knowledge and imagination. In doing so, they inevitably encountered difficulties, making mistakes or coming up with unlikely plot twists.

As a result, the young lady who falls victim to murder in “Woman’s Nature” is called a “baronet” (the author, who didn’t know much about European titles, presumably meant a “baroness”). The characters have strange names: the London doctor from “Mystery of a Night Call” is, somewhat exotically, named “Brimakumab”, which is probably a misspelling of the English “Brimacombe”. His son Ralap was most likely originally called Ralph, while a police officer Karstiaras was originally Carstairs.<sup>10</sup> The plot would often also include some irrelevant details. For instance, in “A Blessed Son,” young Robert’s stepmother sneaks into his room right before a date with her lover and uses his perfume, which he received as a prize for winning a sports competition.

There are other features of these stories that give away their significant external influence. In the 1930s, the Malay short story was still in its infancy and yet to acquire the clear characteristics of the genre. Among other things, its length was variable: many texts habitually classified as short stories could compete with novels, being far too long (Awang “Cerpen-cerpen” 4-5; Hussain 102). Their plot also developed gradually, covering a long period with many changes of location. The characters, too, were quite numerous. However, the crime stories discussed above are written in a different style.

They are short, consisting of only a few pages. The characters are few, and their movement in space is limited. The authors of “Woman’s Nature” and “Mystery of a Dark Room” observe the unity of place and time: the action takes less than an hour and develops within the same setting. In the other two stories, the narrative spans several years, but the main events unfold in a tight time frame. All of this was untypical of the evolving Malay short story, making these pieces of crime fiction quite singular.

Thus, in all of these stories the authors were likely following a foreign original, whatever it was. At the time of the publication of these works, one could expect that over time Malay crime fiction would acquire more localised features and become an independent phenomenon within the recipient literature. But the genre evolved in a paradoxical way. On the one hand, it became more adapted to the local reality. On the other hand, its development resulted in a gradual blurring of the boundaries of the genre.

### **Malay crime fiction: the stage of adaptation and transformation into engaged nationalistic writing**

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, crime stories in Malay were becoming more and more adjusted to the local culture and worldview. The main characters were now residents of British Malaya who committed and solved crimes typical of the country’s reality. A number of key political issues were on the agenda. The dominant ideological thrust of that period was the rise of Malay nationalism. It was ignited not yet by anti-colonial feelings, but by the concern about the disadvantaged position of the Malays in comparison with the Chinese and Indian communities. The prosperity gap between the ethnic groups was becoming more apparent to the Malays.<sup>11</sup> These sentiments were particularly acute in the run-up to World War II, and were reflected in literature. The short story with a criminal mystery was no exception.

One of the sensitive issues in Malaya was related to Chinese secret societies. In the nineteenth century they had a great influence on the country in general by participating in the tough competition in tin mining and generating proceeds from the sale of opium. When in 1890 the colonial authorities officially banned these brotherhoods, the latter went underground and continued to commit a considerable part of the crimes in the country. By the 1930s, the criminal aspect of their activities began to carry political connotations. A feud broke out inside the Chinese community between the followers of the Kuomintang party and the Malayan communist party founded in 1930, almost entirely Chinese in composition. These clashes further destabilized the colony (Comer).

The air of mystery surrounding these societies and the lawless character of their activities made for a perfect crime plot. The following are two very similar pre-war short stories with storylines based on this subject.

The detective Mat Kidam in Mohammad Dahlan Mas’ud’s “Princess of Ipoh” (“Puteri Ipoh”, 1936) handles the case of a local communist party cell. Its leader is disguised as a cabaret prima donna of Russian-Chinese lineage nicknamed Puteri Ipoh. Mat Kidam, who speaks fluent Chinese, introduces himself to the diva as a member of the Sultan’s family, has an affair with her and wins her confidence, all the while engaging



in anti-government conversations. Finally, all members of the party cell fall into the hands of the police. Mat Kidam enjoys fame and praise for his commitment to a cause for which he sacrificed his love (Mas'ud).

The same outline of events unfolds in Muhammad Yasin Makmur's "Policeman and Detective" ("Polis dan Mata-Mata Gelap", 1940), though in a more detailed way. Young Malik is fascinated by his teacher's stories about the Chinese triads and trains to become a detective. He learns Chinese dialects, follows the crime news, and masters religious and secret practices. He becomes a special secret agent who resolves a number of serious cases related to national security. Alert as he is, Malik finally gets trapped. A certain Chinese lady invites him to a rendezvous at the hotel, and then steals his knife which is immediately used to kill Malik's colleague who is waiting in the next room. Malik is arrested, but escapes from jail using a secret shamanist technique. He then fights his enemy incognito. Disguised as a member of a friendly society he infiltrates the gang to which the wily woman belongs, and draws her and the criminal lords into an ambush. The gang is caught, Malik regains his good name and is rewarded. The story ends happily. Malik waits for the repentant Ah Moi to serve her sentence and then marries her (Makmur).

Despite their racial stereotyping, these writings attest to a significant progress in the crime fiction genre in Malay. The plot is incorporated into the context of British Malaya. The stories are full of colorful details, both realistic and fictional. For example, that of the young Mat Kidam tapping rubber with his parents. Before joining the police, he dreams about becoming a clerk (almost a career ceiling for a Malay in the colonial period). He meets Puteri Ipoh in a cabaret, so popular at the time. In accordance with Malay folk beliefs, detective Malik is immune to bullets and is able to pull apart the grill bars, each with the thickness of an arm, to escape from jail.<sup>12</sup>

While there is no doubt that by the early 1940s the genre had evolved considerably, one significant detail must be stressed: both stories have a common characteristic typical of traditional Malay literature. They are instructive. Crime fiction is expected to be focused on a successful investigation. However, in these two stories the focus has shifted to political and social issues.

Mohammad Dahlan Mas'ud's character does not do much to solve the crime. He simply wakes up at night to overhear the conversation between his lover and her accomplices. After Mat Kidam gains the confidence of the woman, all we find out is that the gang gets apprehended. The most important thing is not the riddle, but the message: Chinese communists jeopardize national security and must be prosecuted. In addition to this central idea comes another one, appearing perfectly in line with traditional Malay morality: "It was only then when people realized all the bad things the cabaret brings..." (Mas'ud 566).

Muhammad Yasin Makmur's story also reveals the growing tension in interethnic relations during the period under discussion, outwardly urging Malays to counter the expanding influence of immigrant groups: a piece of advice given to Malik by his mentor in the police force. Apart from the main theme, a further didacticism is articulated at the end of the story: "Malik realized that his father, who raised him to be a man

with a character, was right”; “It was now clear to him that one should prepare an umbrella before it starts raining,”<sup>13</sup> that is to train oneself in advance (Makmur 451-452).<sup>14</sup>

The stories by Mohammad Dahlan Mas’ud and Muhammad Yasin Makmur contain ideologically and politically saturated plots, built upon Malay discourse of the time. This discourse is highly nationalistic, having as its background the developments of the 1930s, when the Chinese in British Malaya outnumbered the Malay population, while the Depression “exacerbated economic competition among the ethnic communities” producing a strong “undercurrent of ethnic distrust” (Andaya and Andaya 244). Quite some time was to pass since then, before a Malay investigator like Inspector Mislan created by Rozlan Mohd. Noor could appear cooperating with a Chinese forensic team leader and an Indian Detective Superintendent, bantering but forming together a “smoothly-functioning, efficient team” (Philip “Crime” 157).

“The Princess of Ipoh” and “Policeman and Detective” present a striking contrast to the previously discussed politically voided translations, adaptations and imitations. Along with the replacement of borrowed Western storylines and characters with localised ones, there is also a shift of focus from the criminal mystery to ideological narrative and moral lessons. This suggests that the main genre-forming feature of crime fiction now had to share its central position with socio-political issues. But the process did not stop there. In another group of stories, mystery solving became just one of many narrative elements and not the main one.

This is evidenced in particular in “From a Trap to Prison and then to Heaven” (“Dari Perangkap ke Penjara, Kemudian ke Syorga”, 1940) by the renowned nationalistic writer and politician, Ishak Haji Muhammad (1909-1991). In this story, a young Malay named Mahmud leaves his village to heal his broken heart (his fiancée was married off to someone else). In Singapore, he joins a Malay organization named *Redeeming Our Homeland and Property* (*Menebus Tanahair dan Harta Benda* or MATAHAB). The organization unites more than fifty thousand people from all over Malaya, among them “agitators, investigators, secret agents, and others”, its goal being to return to Malays all the wealth that has been “taken away from them by other nations” (Muhammad 145).

Mahmud’s story unfolds around his political struggle, joined by his best friend and his ex-fiancée who has broken up with the husband she never loved. Mahmud becomes one of MATAHAB’s leaders and instructs his friends back in the village on how to outcompete the local Chinese shopkeeper in trade. He carries out underground activities, gets arrested, successfully avoids trial, and eventually returns home to marry his beloved (134-175).

At a certain point the plot includes a detective element, where “investigators” and “secret agents” take the stage. They rescue the friends when an immigrant Muslim Indian gains their trust while harbouring evil intentions. He accompanies Mahmud’s friend and his fiancée to Singapore as if to help them, secretly planning to report them to the police and win the girl over. At a critical moment, when he gets hold of a document that exposes them, the secret agents of MATAHAB break into the room and capture the traitor. It turns out that they have been tracking him down for a long time. The author explains that MATAHAB investigators collect

discreditable information on government officials who are hostile to Malays, and on betrayers of their interests within the Malay community. There is even a female double secret agent who first assists in arresting Mahmud, and later helps him get away.

These episodes and characters lend the story the distinct air of a detective story and an adventurous tone. Still, the main idea is purely nationalistic. Crimes, pursuits and arrests do not figure as essential components of the main plot. Moreover, the all-knowing detectives are used to serve an “anti-detective” function: the author turns to them not to solve a riddle but to create one. For example, it is not clear how exactly the traitor was exposed or why the dangerous lady had to provoke Mahmud and give him away. Ishak Haji Muhammad only states that she “deceived the authorities in the interests of the organization” (174).

Ibrahim Mustaffa, the author of “A Woman’s Experience” (“Pengalaman Seorang Perempuan”, 1941), also introduces a detective element into the narrative (Mustaffa). Pretty Tun is turned out of the house by her husband and falls victim to prostitution. One day she is taken for a ride by one of her suitors, brought to an unknown place, robbed and left by herself. Young Rahimi finds her and takes her to his family. He tells Tun that he has agents all around the neighborhood, who will find and seize the miscreants. But the crime remains unsolved, because the author instantly loses interest in the riddle. It turns out Rahimi is not a police officer but a member of a certain National Association. He needs agents to find out how nationalistic each villager is to assist his struggle.

The story proceeds to describe the relationship between the characters and their social work in the National Association. Soon Rahimi and Tun get married. Only at the very end of the story does the author return to the crime. But there is no element of crime fiction any longer. It is vaguely indicated that some justice was meted out to the wrongdoers, but not by the law: “...finally, the secret behind the robbery was revealed. However, ... the robbers disappeared. No one knows whether they are still alive or dead. They say, they were cursed and died of cholera” (188).

Just as misleading is the denouement of Mahamud Ahmad’s “The Missing Child” (“Hilang Anak”, 1938). During the celebration of the Birth of the Prophet, a young schoolboy disappears in Singapore. The family turns to the police. Inspector Osman opens the investigation, but the criminal aspect of the story is quickly abandoned. Osman soon finds out that little Kasim has accidentally joined a group of children from another school. The boy reunites with his family. After that, the story focuses on Kasim’s older sister and her relationship with Osman. The plot is no longer centered around the investigation. Instead, the central issues of the story are now the freedom in choosing a spouse and the danger of Christianization so feared by Malays. To avoid a forced marriage, the girl converts to Christianity, only to marry for love and return to the fold of Islam (Ahmad M.). The crime storyline is again only episodic. Unfolding in the beginning, it soon dissolves in the main line of the narrative.

## Conclusion

During the first decades of its existence, Malay crime fiction displayed a certain evolution. Although it would be overbold to divide such a short period into stages, it appears that the development of the Malay stories discussed above demonstrates two types of plot that emerged one after another.

The first four texts (“Mystery of a Night Call”, “Woman’s Nature”, “Mystery of a Dark Room” and “A Blessed Son”) possess all the essential motifs of the genre: there is a committed crime, a wrongdoer, and a character who exposes or captures the criminal(s). The authors stick to the patterns of Western models, trying to reproduce them. Just like the crime novels by Muhammad Said Muhammad and Syed Shaikh al-Hady, the first examples of Malay crime short stories look like translations or imitations of borrowed material, most probably English or American. These writings were published between 1933 and 1936.

The remaining six stories represent a new or different phase in its development. They appeared in print between 1938 and 1941 and seem to be more self-contained. Their plots are based on local realities. However, the influence of the Malay literary tradition and historical context made crime fiction more functional, loading it with ideological and didactic contents. Didacticism and politics started to supersede the criminal riddle.

Two stories from this group (“Princess of Ipoh” and “Policeman and Detective”) retain the line of investigation up to the end, though strongly colouring it with politics and ideology. Another three stories (“From a Trap to Prison and Then to Heaven”, “A Woman’s Experience,” and “A Missing Child”) combine the crime along with other story lines. The riddle tends to shift to the periphery of the plot and merely complements the dominant message. Moreover, the crime storyline might not even be maintained and properly developed.

The first decades of Malay crime fiction appear to have determined the history of its subsequent development. Initially the impact from foreign literatures led to the emergence of a new genre. But as soon as the recipient literature started to accommodate the product of Western influence, it began to lose its distinctive features. The mystery stopped forming the core of the plot, giving way to the discussion of issues viewed by the authors as more important, namely the economic and political challenges faced by the Malay community. As a result, the new genre failed to carve a distinctive place for itself in Malay literature.

Not surprisingly, the development of crime fiction in Malay literature stopped in the 1940s (Yamamoto 6). Partially this was due to economic problems and strict censorship during the Japanese Occupation of Malaya from 1942 to 1945. But it was also a natural continuation of the process that took place earlier.

It is not surprising then, that the genre failed to make a noticeable presence in post-war Malay prose. The first impact that brought it to life in the 1920s – 1930s had faded away and restoration of the genre required a fresh start.

Studying the history of translations in the Malay world, D. Jedamski noted: “Within the indigenous context, a translation was apparently seen only as a first step, necessary to make the foreign source accessible, assessable, and if deemed sufficiently relevant to be incorporated into the indigenous culture—adaptable” (Jedamski “Translation” 209). Crime fiction proved to be not relevant enough to stay as an independent genre

in the epoch of major ideological clashes, interethnic tensions and the rise of Malay nationalism. The position of the Malays did not encourage them to develop literature that was politically and socially unengaged. At this time in Europe and the US, as its main realms, crime fiction had the distinct task of providing “a familiar and reliable escape into a dream world which did not challenge its readers [...], nor inform them of the troubles and injustices prevalent in the society of the day” (Phillips 7). It appears that both Malay writers and readers in the time between the two World Wars needed something else.

Other historical and cultural factors were at work as well. A great number of Malays were village dwellers and were unlikely to appreciate the predominantly urban nature of the genre. Furthermore, only a few Malay writers could read foreign texts and get inspired by crime writings from other parts of the world.

Nevertheless, these first attempts at creating crime fiction in Malay deserve further attention. They contributed to establishing two main modern literary forms in Malay – the novel and the short story. Moreover, their emergence proves that notwithstanding the social and educational limitations that hampered contacts between Malay literature and the outside world, these contacts did take place.

Though, among the genres of contemporary Malay literature, crime fiction cannot be called a popular one, the far-reaching processes of cultural globalization in the last several decades might change this one day.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Besides Chandra and Jedamski (“Genres”), there are a number of works published in the 2010s, some of them included in a special issue of *International Journal of Indonesian Studies* on Southeast Asian noir (2013): Downes, M. “Translating a Tiger: Indonesian ‘Crime Fiction’ in International Literary Circuite”. Pp. 66-75; Horton W.B. “A Fictional Detective’s Exploration of the Swirling Maelstrom of Indonesia in the Early 1940s: *Patjar Koenig* and the Mysterious Death of Moh. Hoesni Thamrin”. Pp. 93-108; Wilson E. “Crime, Magic and Politics *DO* Mix: In Defence of Eka Kurniawan and Southeast Asian Noir”. Pp. 1-17; Wilson E. “Twixt Night and Dark: Colonialism, Trauma and *Noir*’s Hidden Transcript”. Pp. 18-49. Some of these researchers also published their works elsewhere: Downes, M. “Found in Translation. Eka Kurniawan and the Politics of Genre”. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- and Volkenkunde. (Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia)*. 2019, Vol. 175, Issue 2-3. Pp. 177-195. Wilson E. “‘You’ll Learn, Tough Guy’: on the Relevance of American Crime Fiction and the Femme Fatale to Indonesian Literature”. *Indonesian Feminist Journal*. March 2016, Vol. 4, Number 1. Pp. 64-78. There are also M.A. theses completed by Mirandi, Riwoe. “Fragrance of Night and the Hybridisation of Indonesian Crime Fiction”. Queensland University of Technology, 2012; Tarupay, Heri Kusuma. “Imajinasi (Detektif) Gagaklodra Tentang Masyarakat Cina, 1930-1953”. Universiti Sanata Dharma, Yogyakarta, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> *KL Noir: Red* (ed. Amir Muhammad). Kuala Lumpur, FIXI Novo, 2013; *KL Noir: White* (ed. Amir Hafizi). Kuala Lumpur, FIXI Novo, 2013; *KL Noir: Blue* (ed. Eeleen Lee). Kuala Lumpur, FIXI Novo, 2014; *KL Noir: Yellow* (ed. Kris Williamson). Kuala Lumpur, FIXI Novo, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> The full title of the novel is *A Tale of the Fidelity of the Enamoured to His Beloved or Syafiq Affandi and Faridah Hanum (Hikayat Setia Asyik kepada Maksyuknya atau Syafiq Affandi dengan Faridah Hanum)*.

<sup>4</sup> It took almost a century for the novel to be published again: Syed Osman Syed Omar, Hamzah Hamdani (ed.). *Hikayat Panglima Nikosa dan Kecurian 5 Million Ringgit*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Biographical information on Syed Shaikh al-Hady is obtained from: Tan, Linda. "Syed Shaykh: His Life and Times". Alijah Gordon (ed.). *The Real Cry of Syed Shaykh al-Hady*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1999. Pp. 109-121

<sup>6</sup> While the Roman alphabet was widely used in the Dutch East Indies at that time, in British Malaya it had replaced the Arabic alphabet (*jawi*) only in the 1960s. Before World War II, Peninsular Malays generally could not read the Latin alphabet and viewed it negatively seeing in it the danger of Christianization.

<sup>7</sup> Heroes in Malay folk tales and medieval stories were bound to face challenges of a magical and adventurous nature. In these stories (*hikayats*), descriptions of these challenges formed the standard blocks of plot, repeating with slight variations throughout the narration. For a detailed analysis of the *hikayat* as a genre, see Braginsky (385-415).

<sup>8</sup> Hashim Awang. *Cerpen Malaysia Sebelum Perang Dunia Ke-2*. Kuala Lumpur, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1988.

<sup>9</sup> On the colonial educational policy in British Malaya, see, for example, Andaya and Andaya. *A History of Malaysia*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2001 (2d edition). Pp. 231-241; Roff, W.R. *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*. 2d ed. Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1994. Pp. 24-26; on its influence upon literature, see: Tan Chin Kwang. "The 'Missing Link' in Modern Malay Literary History: A Study of the Influence of Social and Educational Backgrounds on Literary Development". *Archipel*, 1986, Vol.31, N1. Pp.97-115.

<sup>10</sup> The strange names might have also resulted from wrong romanisation of the *jawi* script of the original editions.

<sup>11</sup> The process of the birth and rise of Malay nationalism is analysed in detail in: Roff W.R. *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*. 2nd ed. Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1994.

<sup>12</sup> The topic of folk beliefs is distinctly present in pre-War Malay prose. Its appearance in the story undoubtedly suggests the indigenisation of crime fiction, turning the sleuth into a kind of Malay superhero with supernatural powers inherent in the character of traditional belles-lettres. This subject deserves a separate analysis, involving a comparison with old Malay literature and discussion of different connotations acquired by shamanistic practices in early modern writing of the twentieth century.

<sup>13</sup> "Sediakan payung sebelum hujan" – a Malay proverb analogous to the English "Mend your sails while the weather is fine."

<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that the earlier mentioned first Malay detective novel *Tale of the Theft of Five Million Ringgit* also has a moral in it. The criminals disinherit an American playboy and decide to use the money to benefit the poor, working women and orphans in New York (Roff "The Mystery" 455). Though the nature of edification in the novel is very different from the crime stories discussed here, its presence is typical.

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