

## Re-Visioning Selected Malaysian Plays: Negotiating Writer, Reader and Texts

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**Abstract:** The thoughts and experiences which lie within the imagination of the researcher along with relevant artistic techniques help to create a work of art. How does a playwright differ in his representation of his fiction? What re-visioning concerns does he bring to the table in his attempt to discuss his concerns in his plays? These issues will foreground the discussion of three published English plays written by Malaysians; *We could\*\*\*you Mr. Birch* by Kee Thuan Chye, *Son of Zen* by Lee Joo For and *In the Name of Love* by Ibrahim.

**Key words:** Re-visioning, Malaysian plays, reader, writer, texts, Malaysia

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### INTRODUCTION

The thoughts and experiences which lie within the imagination of the author along with relevant artistic techniques help to create a work of art. As Virginia Woolf illustrated (Tidwell, 2008). The proper stuff of fiction does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction every feeling every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon no perception comes amiss. One of the important tasks of the author is to capture and captivate the readers' attention and imagination using the necessary techniques. Further than that do authors hold any other responsibilities in society? As discussed elsewhere in a multicultural context like Malaysia, the author holds responsibility to the nation at large specifically to concerns of social heterogeneity including issues of ethnicity, culture, gender and language (Raihanah, 2009).

How does a playwright differ in his representation of his fiction? What re-visioning concerns does he bring to the table in his attempt to discuss his concerns in his plays? These issues will foreground the discussion of three published English plays written by Malaysians; *We could\*\*\*you Mr. Birch* by Kee Thuan Chye, *Son of Zen* by Lee Joo For and *In the Name of Love* by Ibrahim. By re-visioning, researchers consider the playwrights' socio-cultural, political and ideological concerns from an alternative perspective (Raihanah *et al.*, 2011) as the way of interpreting their roles as creative writers. Their creations do not emerge out of a vacuum. Events, real or imagined are re-visioned for a purpose.

Story telling is a medium that allows individuals to express their hopes and concerns in turn revealing what anthropologist calls the nature of the world as they see it (Haviland *et al.*, 2010). The source of these writings can be from the tabula rasa albeit an impossible zero (Hayden and Thompson, 2001). Conversely, the family, society and the educational exposures (Maniam, 1987) the individual experiences as a child may well be the source of inspiration for his creative years. However, some authors feel that the reality as we see it on paper is partly the product of the collective unconscious (Maniam, 1987). Through, the projection of this given (Levis-Strauss, 1978) inspiration writers reveal to us contents of the world not just as they see it but as they are meant to be viewed. Malaysia's Poet Salleh (1994) voices the didactic nature of literature by stating that literature is nothing if it cannot teach directly or indirectly through examples of heroes and heroines. It brings the lessons of humans and the teaching of the divine (Salleh, 1994). The poet-critic further adds that the act of literary composition is the idea of stringing episodes taken essentially from nature but rearranged in a story or on study for a certain desired effect or meaning (Salleh, 1994). What this statement may suggest is that a literary piece has both the elements of natural and construction towards achieving a final mould.

In order to achieve that desired effect, the author, first and foremost has to be aware and informed of his/her ideas. This constitutes having the sensibility to respond to the world with balance and insight (and) the talent for language and style [...] however, rigid the society he lives

in may be (Salleh, 1977). The person becomes his own master in a world beyond the rules of his society or the desires of his superiors, (ibid.) with the individualized nature. Through, this achieved isolation, the individual recreated and formulated his thoughts and experiences as a literary creation in an act of solitude (Salleh, 1977).

However, the simplicity of the creative process can be shattered when the individual becomes impaired by external forces. Wa Thiongo (1994), the renowned Kenyan novelist cum critic, views imagination as the process of making images, physical images with our eyes or mental images with our mind as a simple physiological act. Yet when an individual is prohibited to conduct the process-physically, mentally, economically or politically, the capacity to visualize the world is handicapped by the very conditions under which he is living in society (Wa Thiongo, 1994). Therefore, the economical and political freedom to the individual's imaginative environment is as crucial as the ability to imagine (Wa Thiongo, 1994).

Another view of literary creation is towards realizing an individual self. The self as stated by Jung is the conscious and unconscious parts of the human psyche. A person will understand his/her complete self only through the realization of both parts. However, the unconscious does not reveal itself to the conscious mind all the time. It only happens in dreams or in a state of semi-consciousness as he stated, dream is so, to speak, a pure product of the unconscious (Miller, 2004). Some Malaysian authors like the prolific KS Maniam appear to subscribe to this stand. Maniam (1987)'s positionality vis-a-vis a story: The emergence of [a] story reveals [...] the conversion of a literary event into a commonly felt truth about the individual and society [...] and finally, an awareness in the individual that transcends both which I call a mystical experience of the larger personality that resides within us. A writer's responsibility thus is to realize his complete self and produce a literary work that reflects it regardless of the content.

In the Malaysian context, authors express their concerns through various genres and languages. In the case of Malaysian women authors, their concerns relate to the everyday realities of Malaysian women as they balance family work and personal desires (Hashim *et al.*, 2011). In contrast, the three literary works used for this study are plays written in English. Each carries a very specific theme of its own allowing the reader a glimpse of the probable concerns of the Malaysian playwrights and the characters that inhabit their plays. Kee Thuan Chye's researchers can you Mr. Birch in 1995 uses a historical framework to raise issues pertaining to the present. The most fundamental which underlines the entire play is the

freedom to re-vision history as he sees fit but he is also constrained by sensitivities of his environment. Thus, the missing verb in the title symbolizes two important concerns of a playwright in any society. The first being freedom and the other being censorship.

The playwright spoke of it as an opportunity for readers to decide and complete the title, based on their own understanding of the play. Having read the play, the suggestion is also that the writer feels the lack of freedom to express the truth as he sees it (Samad, 2002). This inability caused him to inflict self-imposed censorship and construct a partial true picture of the thoughts he had originally intended. As illustrated in the following lines from the play:

What happens [...] in this play was supposed to have been something else originally but the playwright decided to take it out for fear that it might offend some people and result in severe repercussions. It could be that he realised that society is not yet ready to take itself less seriously but that's probably an excuse. It's more likely that he got scared and chickened out. And so, like all good Malaysians, he censored himself

In discussing the idea of truth, the play begins by questioning the concept of history. As one of the actor states: History what history? We are creating fiction. [...] This is fiction. History is fiction (Kee, 1995). Kee (1995) was engaged in re-visioning which is seen as undertaking past events to be re-viewed from local or different perspectives (Md Yusof and Hashim, 2010). By considering history as potentially a work of art, the play undermines the credibility of all involved both of the past as well as the present. As it states historical truth depends on:

who is telling the history and what he is trying to get across who his audience are. History can even be manipulated to convey opposing truths. You can screw around with history laa

In undermining the validity of historical information, the play provides some important suggestions of history. The events of the past that has had a hand in the way one views the present as well as the future are not easily decided. As Md Yusof and Hashim (2010) have argued, old stories can be changed or more importantly, corrected; stereotypes can be challenged and corrected too. The validity of those happenings will depend on the validity of the one who conveys the facts. Yet as the play goes on to suggest, the validity of the conveyor is also at stake as he has a hidden motif in his choice of material and manner

of conveyance. Therefore where would the line be drawn between the fact and the fiction? And how far are writers themselves in recreating historical facts not rewriting the facts for their own self-interest? The answer to all these concerns is well summed up in the words of the protagonist of the play, no one can be trusted. This cuts across all matters both the work of art which relies on historical events as its setting and plot as well as the work of fact as conveyed in history books. It is as captured through the missing word in the title, the responsibility of the reader to decide the truth after viewing the available information while constantly questioning its validity.

The task of the reader does not stop at the reading of historical facts. The play uses the argument of fact and fiction, to question the information delivered to us every day through the mass media. The media has a responsibility to provide the viewers the facts. However as the play suggests, the freedom to express these facts are not completely available. The implication is as much as there exist governing bodies in the society that monitor the conveyance of information to the public, the author of those information has a similar responsibility to monitor the truth of his work. If he is able to ensure the validity of his work which no one is certain of then and only then can the full weight of the task be shifted to the author. Until then the public needs such a monitoring body to protect them from falsity in writings. The best solution as provided by the play is for the public to create and nurture such a monitoring institution within themselves. However, as the play itself questions is the public able to take itself less seriously and view the facts pertaining to them in all honesty? Or are they in fact happy with the manner in which the truth is informed so as, to be one of the many good Malaysians?

As a playwright, Kee questions the task of the writer as well as that of the reader in bringing to life the work of art. As much as it is the task of the former to produce the work, it is the latter who gives it due credit. Without readers as famously stated by Shakespeare in Sonnet 18, the writing will remain on the shelf, gathering dust and ending its existence: So long as men can breathe or eyes can see/so long lives this and this gives life to thee. The complexity of the reader-writer relationship is further heightened as the question of validity arises. In a work of fiction that uses historical data as its foundation, this need becomes even more crucial. As the historical information is retold some questions will constantly have to be asked. They include which parts are factual and which are fictitious? why has the writer chosen to relay these information in such a manner? what are his motif hidden or otherwise? and how far should the readers go along with the given narration before triggering the inbuilt monitor mechanism?

Such questions, unfortunately will always remain as part of the reading sub-skills in approaching any text. More so if the text in question deals with issues, values and thoughts connected to individual's cultural, social, political and historical heritage. The writer in demanding freedom of speech to produce his creative pieces should realize those concerns not as a second party but as potential reader himself. Remembering that a loss of freedom might result anarchy and not dictatorship, Kee's play has problematised freedom and restraint.

The re-visioning of the writer's responsibility takes on a different stance in Lee Joo For's *Son of Zen*. The task of a writer, according to the play is to remain true to the subject matter regardless of the individual's personal interests and motifs. True artists should be able to pick up all kinds of vibrations and callings of nature and use them as the direction to conduct their life. This concept is dealt through the protagonist, Kenzo.

Kenzo's ability to feel for others provides him the direction of his life. He leaves his female companion, Bebee, to comfort a woman, one who he says is about to take her own life. He simply says, I-I do not know why. But I feel I must leave you and be with her. The explanation of the need and the manner in which it is revealed to him is uncertain. However as it unfolds, his sense guided him well:

Kenzo: Madam, do not do it.

Maria: Go away. Leave me alone.

Kenzo: Madam, do not do it, please.

Maria: What do you mean? Do not do what?

Kenzo: Do not do what you are going to do?

Maria: How do you know?

Kenzo: I know. The way you sit. The way your body slumps over itself. Utter dejection and defeat. It's Sanpaku-the death-appearance. It's too clear

Yet, the clarity of such an appearance was not so, to Bebee. She sees him as a distracted individual who is just being imaginative, fantastic that's all. The point being made here is that the focus in each of us is as varied as life itself. Some will pick up on certain issues which correspond with their given nature while others might consider the same issue irrelevant.

The process taken by Kenzo to convince a total stranger not to commit suicide is similar to a writer's task of telling a story. He would need to use any means in style and technique to capture the attention and imagination of the reader long enough to convey his thoughts and ideas. After which the reader should then

be left at his own devices to either accept those thoughts or dispute with them. The reading should not be to understand the purpose of the task but to decipher the hidden thoughts imbued in them. The writer as the play implies needs to be able to respond to these silent cries around him and make them real and loud enough for the rest of us. That is the cross as the play positions it, they have to carry.

In addition, the play also re-vision an important recurring theme in literary works the need to possess right thinking and living to release a person from the vicious cycle of reincarnated sorrow. The sorrow in question is caused by the repetition of errors in one's lifetime due to the inability to break away from the unhelpful ways of living. Maria's inability to accept the death of the dog leaves her crippled to see life in its proper perspective. She insists upon it being restored to life through some means. She will be able to proceed with life only when she accepts this reality:

Maria: ...How can you hope to restore a dead dog to life if you do not have spiritual powers?

Kenzo: Excellent, excellent! It's good and refreshing to hear you speak of Roger as a dead dog for change. That puts things in their proper perspective, don't you think so?

Lee's task as the writer then is to re-view the social situation at hand and to provide the readers with these proper perspective and clarity of life as he see it whether or not it gets the approval of those around him. In doing so, he will indirectly allow us another glimpse of our otherwise vicious cycled life.

In the third Malaysian play, the theme of re-vision takes a more overt place. In Ibrahim (1993)'s, the main theme of the first thrust is the re-visioning of an artist. Even though, the play does not deal with world of the writer per se, it can still be used as a probable discursive work for this study as writers fall into the category of artists. For this purpose, the product by these artists will be called the work of art regardless of its medium of the projection-dance, painting or even writing.

The title underlines the motif of any work of art that is done in the name of love. The implication being regardless of the content and technique used and the readership or audience or even the monitoring bodies set up to ensure the level of sensitivity is kept as seen in Kee's play earlier at the core of any work of art is the artist's love and interest for it.

The first thrust which will be the focus of this discussion narrates the story of an aged dancer in the Malay society, Mak Su. Her art which as she says has become (Ibrahim, 1993) herself is now a mere topic for an article. The journalist sent to interview her, Li, attempts at dispelling any hidden truth about her art as a focus for his own work of art. However as he learns through the interview, art cannot be produced through secondary experience.

In the golden day as the character Mak Su calls it art was part of the life of the community. This being so, the artists themselves held a special reputation in the eyes of the public. An individual who proved herself in her art, gets due recognition from the public. She is seen as prima donna (Ibrahim, 1993) of the medium and consequently becomes known throughout the community. Her reputation precedes her everywhere she goes. Through Mak Su's character, Ramli appears to re-vision an important aspect in the writer-reader relation that of recognition. It appears that the play suggests the importance of acknowledgement of the community for a work to receive its due credit as art. Malaysian writers in English have over the years championed for greater public recognition of their work despite the fact that English is not an official language (Raihanah, 2009). This theme is re-visioned in Ramli's first thrust through Mak Su's cry: Now-a-days people do not really care about us anymore (Ibrahim, 1993).

Connected to public recognition, especially for the traditional performance artist is the space to continuously perform. As Mak Su states: Any artist needs to perform always (Ibrahim, 1993). With proper experience as experience is the teacher (Ibrahim, 1993), the work will see its full maturity and eventually, its due recognition. At this juncture, Ramli, through the character Mak Su appears to review the need for continuous support of traditional arts in order for the artist to develop their work of art. This again reiterates the importance of recognition as stated earlier. Another important criterion of an artist is talent. The play implies that one is born with God's gift a genuine interest (Ibrahim, 1993) in the art and a given nature for it. With these qualities, the individual can then proceed to practise and polish the skill. The perfected work will radiate magic (Ibrahim, 1993) and captivate the imagination of the audience as illustrated by Mak Su's own capacity to perform. This theme appears to re-vision the discussion earlier about the writer's role in society and the place of talents and inspiration in any work of art. As Mak Su tells her singular audience the journalist who is interviewing her, the *rasa* is what drives her to perfect her art:

Something always happens when the plot calls for sorrowful feelings. A sad mood takes over. I need only to remember the language, the suffering, the sorrow in fact even now as I speak... off I can go... I'd give in to the sadness ... Inside me my liver feels itself being shredded into pieces. Can not control the tears trickling down my face. Like little streams. I'd cry pitifully. The audience would also feel the same *rasa*. They will always be some who will also cry with me (Ibrahim, 1993)

Through Mak Su, Ramli appears to reiterate the place of the artist in the society. Like Mak Su, the playwright brings to the fore the importance of the performance and the continued importance of maintaining a performance attitude towards accomplishing one's art.

### CONCLUSION

This study focuses on the world of the playwright as seen by critics, researchers and readers and how the playwrights re-vision certain issues and premises in order to create a work of art. Certain crucial realizations appear as the discussion unfolds. Each of the playwrights makes conscious effort how to present his re-creation of events within the constraints allowed in his environment. In the case of Kee, the issue of English colonization and its usurping power is contrasted with the colonization of modern-day Malaysians and pockets of corrupted power amongst some of its leaders. What separates the past and the present? By bringing the past into the present with the deliberate act of deleting certain words, he makes obvious how we can easily descend to neo-colonialism. Lee however, re-visions the spectre of heroism in dealing with one's personal tragedy. The hero resides in all of us and the way we handle our own predicaments and others is fodder for the Malaysian writer. It is no wonder then the Lee once stated as his mission as an artist:

The true artist is an intellectual, finely attuned to all the influence of the arts around him. He draws from the worthwhile of music, poetry, literature and the philosophical sciences. He is not brashly and emptily modern. He admires the best of history and customs and traditions and invokes the images and patterns of the past to empearl them in fresh light and look in the modern symbolic context of today ([http://www.penang-artists.com/Lee% 20Joo% 20 For.htm](http://www.penang-artists.com/Lee%20Joo%20For.htm))

The question of influence in the realization of a work of art cannot be disregarded. Talents and interest in

carrying out the task require tenacity and a high degree of talent because the product that appears is a gem, beautiful in its content and message. When they are understood and appreciated by the individual, he should then stay true to those qualities within him in order for it to fully materialize in some form or other. Ibrahim in his play re-visions the role of the playwright as a medium that maintains traditions. By focusing on an aging dancer who ruminates her lost youth and forgotten art, he arouses our sympathy for neglecting a rich form of traditional art. Thus, the role of the playwright is to remind us of the past and how we should keep our heritage alive and not be too consumed with present materialistic situation.

These are abstract thoughts. Yet, the point to consider is that as much as logical thinking can be used to discuss issues pertaining to the world of art, the aspect of the unknown has to be given proper recognition. The task at hand is for the writer (the self) to remain true to his profession and produce what is real and known to him. The reader in turn should constantly be engaged in the act of critical reading, unveiling the hidden thoughts in the writings even those that are unbeknownst to the writer. Only when the partnership between these two becomes successful can the essence of the human mind and eventually that of man or woman, be understood. As Levis-Strauss (1978) well stated each writing provides us with another window into the human psyche and with each opening, we move closer into understanding our own existence.

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