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# The Politics of Malay Detective Fiction: Hidden Resistance in the 1930s British Malaya

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The detective novel came into existence on the margins of “causes célèbres” literature. (Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebook*, 123).

## Introduction

In the 1920s and the 1930s British Malaya there were several detective series, or more precisely fictional characters, that became popular among the Malay reading public. They were not Malaya’s original detective stories, but were translated from Western languages and Arabic language. They were written in the *Jawi* script.

Fictional detectives and detective fiction as forms of popular literature were a driving force of imperial penetration into the local population and culture. Detective fiction “served and challenged the interests of Empire” (Reitz 2004: xiii). As easily imagined in the realm of the British Empire, Sherlock Holmes was a well known fictional figure (Thompson 1993). In British Malaya English newspapers, when crimes took place, they were reported using “Sherlock Holmes-style headlines such as ‘The Mystery of the Missing Case’ and the ‘Jailed by Clue of the Cigar Wrapper’” (Jackson 2014: 135). At the same time, the detective fiction is an arena in which issues of law and order is disputed. Some of them have an anarchical taste and such taste attracted local people’s attentions.

In the study of Malay nationalism, the significance of detective fiction has not been taken seriously. The exceptional works may be William Roff’s *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (1967), which is considered a standard study of Malay nationalism, and Donna J. Amoroso’s *Traditionalism and the Ascendancy of the Malay Ruling Class in Malaya* (Amoroso 2014). In recent years, however, studies of literature, media, and education have shed a new light on the forgotten popular Malay literature (Abdullah 2012; Ahmed 2007; Emmanuel 2010; Fiah 2011; Merican 2006; Wan Suhana 2006; Warnk 2007; Zaini-Lanjoubert 2001). Such recent

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studies reassess works from the colonial days (Za'ba 1940a; 1940b), as well as earlier studies of Malay popular literature (Roff 1974).

All this existing literature provides significant information about the extent of Malay popular detective fiction and how it came about. Nevertheless, several points are missing from the existing literature. First, it mainly focuses on the 1920s and 1930s British Malay, and does not cover the period when Japan occupied the former British territory and afterwards. During the Japanese occupation most Malay publications were suspended, but underground newspapers were published and survived even during the 12 year long emergency period (1948-1960) (Lent 1974: 603-604). However, it appears that the popularity of Malay detective fiction discontinued in the latter half of the 1940s. Second, existing literature overlooks the politics in which popular fiction is always presumed to engage, even if below the surface. Although some have implied that Malay detective fiction served to encourage the rise of Malay nationalism, it remains unclear what kind of readership popular detective fiction had and how it affected people's consciousness. More importantly, it disregards the politics that authors and publishers might have played.

I argue in this paper that the publishing of Malay popular detective fiction carried some hidden political implications, and therefore the stories had certain limitation in terms of their popularity; they did not go beyond the generations they were intended for. These hidden political implications should be placed in the 1930s colonial context. In order to make my points clear, I will begin by describing the colonial setting of British Malaya, then move on to explain how the Malay print media and its reading public were developed since the late nineteenth century. After depicting the general characters of Malay popular detective fiction, I will explore the kind of political spirit this detective fiction instituted.

## Malay in the Colonial Setting

The term British Malaya loosely describes a set of sultanate states in the Malay Peninsula that were brought under British control since the late eighteenth century. It started to form in 1786 when the British took control of Penang as its first colony in Southeast Asia. Since then it gradually expanded its territory. In 1896 the Federated Malay States comprised the states of Selangor, Perak, Negri Sembilan and Pahang came under the British indirect rule through a series of treaties and permissive letters. Johore and the four northern states – Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Trengganu's suzerainty were transferred to Britain by Siam in 1909. British Malaya thus consisted of three parts, the Straits Settlements, the Federated Malay States and the Unfederated Malay States (Han 2008: 6). The so-called Straits Settlements consisted of the four individual settlements of Malacca, Dinding, Penang (also known as Prince of Wales Island), and Singapore (with Christmas Island and the Cocos Islands), to which was added the island of Labuan in 1912. In the period of 1920s

and 1930s on which this paper focuses, British Malaya referred to the Malay States under indirect British rule (both the Federated Malay States and the Unfederated Malay States) as well as the Straits Settlements and Brunei that were under the sovereignty of the British Crown.

The colonial society was governed under the divide and rule policy, and was designed to utilize local authorities. The structure of the colonial society in British Malaya is understood as a plural society with three major ethnic groups — Malays, Chinese and Indians. The fluidity of ethnic identities and classification is well-known among scholars (Nagata 1974; Hirschman 1987), and an American sociologist, Charles Hirschman claims that British colonization created and fixed racial category in British Malaya (Hirschman 1986). Nevertheless, for the sake of the discussion this article utilizes the three major ethnic groupings.

Table 1: The Population of British Malaya in 1931

Communities	Population	Percentage
Malays	1,864,000	49.2
Chinese	1,285,000	33.9
Indians	571,000	15.1
Other	68,000	1.8

[Source: Chander (1975: 13)]

As the 1931 population census shows (Table 1), 49.2 percent of the population was Malay, while the Chinese comprised 33.9 percent and Indians 15.1 percent. Other included Europeans, Eurasians and minority people. The three major groups were understood to follow different religions: Islam, Confucianism, and Hindu. The categorization in the population census was simplified by the Malaysian government's perception of local population in 1974, and therefore does not reflect the actual variety of population in British Malaya. In fact, in the 1931 population census, there were six categories: Europeans, Eurasians, Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Others. The category of Malay consists of Malays, Javanese, Boyanese, Achinese, Batak, Menangkabau, Korinchi, Jambi, Palembang, Other Sumatra, Riau Lingga, Banjarese, Other Dutch Borneo, Bugis, Other N.E.I., Dayak, Sakai, Others; while the category "Others" includes Annamese, Arab, Arermenian, Ceylon Peoples, Filipino, Japanese, Jews, Negro, Persian, Siamese, and Others (Hirschman 1987: 576).

The three major ethnic groups were believed to have their own religions — Islam, Confucianism, and Hindu. In fact, this was the stereotypical image of the society and did not really reflect the actual social configurations. It was simplified in order for the colonizers to grasp the colonial society. A representative example is the

Chinese category, which includes a variety of Chinese communities. The Chinese communities did not form one solid group. The Chinese migrated to British Malaya, but some educated and elite Chinese fit well into the colonial structure and worked for and with the colonial government. They were able to speak English, and in fact for some of them had English as their mother tongue. Relatively newly migrated Chinese kept their languages of origin. Therefore, at the turn of the twentieth century in British Malaya there were English speaking Chinese and Chinese speaking ones, and the latter group consisted of several language groups — Fukienese, Cantonese, and others. Their religions were not the same, either. There were Christians, Confucianists, Buddhists and others.

These are rough characteristics of British Malaya and its society. The Malay population constituted the majority in number, but they were concentrated in rural areas, not in urban centers where the Chinese were dominant. Assuming that British Malaya was a colonial creation, Hirschman describes Malay as the people who are understood to be Muslim and Malay-speaking (Hirschman 1986).

## Malay Print Media and Its Reading Public

Malay Muslims had long historical relations with Southern Arabia and British India. While the initial contact with Muslim teachings was undoubtedly a by-product of Arab trade with China, the Islam adopted by the Malays was of the Indian variety. In the course of the nineteenth century British Malaya, “the assimilation of many Indian Muslims with Malays seems to have progressed” (Hirschman 1986: 338).

With this as the backbone, the so-called Malay journalism arose from the locally-born Indian Muslims in Singapore called the Jawi Peranakan. They were the offspring of marriages between indigenous Malay women and South Indian Muslim traders. In 1876 they formed an association in Singapore called the Jawi Peranakan and initiated a printing office to publish a weekly newspaper called *Jawi Peranakan*. The newspaper set the language and provided some kind of uniformity to the various dialects of Malay (Birch 1879: 51-52). However, most Malay periodicals were modeled after English language newspapers, and later incorporated Egyptian and Arabic news contents. They did not carry any information and news related to the Malay community, although they had literary and social interest contributions.

In July 1906 the mood of Malay journalism began to change with the appearance of *Al Imam*. It is a religious journal published in Singapore by Sayyid Shaykh Al-Hadi and edited by Mohd. Tahir bin Jalaluddin. It pushed for social and religious reforms in British Malaya, and set the tone of Islamic reform journalism.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Malay journalism gradually moved out of Singapore and to Penang (Wan Suhana 2006: 179). It increased in number considerably and offered a diversified field of daily and weekly newspapers, religious periodicals, and publications of teacher’s associations, literary magazines,

periodicals of progress societies and journals of entertainment (Lent 1974: 601). The period overlapped with when translated detective fiction was introduced and gained popularity among Malay readers. The overlapping phenomena was not surprising because journalists, writers, translators, and publishers were not clearly distinguished in those days. As a contemporary researcher observed in the 1930s, Malay newspapers and magazines had “a strong influence in shaping public opinion among their Malay readers, in spreading general knowledge of the world, and in awakening and shaking off the apathy of the Malays towards progress” (Za’ba 1940b: 249). Thus popular detective fiction became a medium, bridging intellectuals and the people. And “[n]ewspaper journalism [...] came to play a leading role in shaping the Malay intelligentsia, training their leaders, and disseminating their influence” (Roff 1967: 157).

The Islamic reform movement started in the early twentieth century, and its rise coincided with the period when all the states of Malaya in the Peninsula came under the British rule by 1909. In the field of education, the need to assert the Muslim identity was emphasized in the wake of increasing British control since the late nineteenth century. In 1871, Islamic reformists started to use the teaching of the rudiments of the Muslim holy book, the Quran, using the language of the holy book, Arabic. It was believed that for the Malays to progress, the way the Malay schools were run needed to be changed. Instruction in Malay also needed to be separated from the teaching of the Quran. Although this was planned for the benefit of the Malays, it indirectly meant that education for the Malays gradually came under the influence of Western secularism. This fact provided the basis for the generational conflict and competition between “old” religious leaders and “new” Islamic reformists (Roff 1967).

Many Islamic scholars associated with the reform movement and introduced a new trend in translation in British Malaya. They were educated in Egypt, and as a result, many of the translations were made from Egyptian sources. Some were made from Arabic texts which had been translated from other languages such as English and French. The most prominent of the scholars was Syed Sheikh bin Ahmad Al-Hadi, better known as Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi (1867-1934).

Many of the scholars of the Islamic reform movement used their writings as a way of expressing their views regarding the Islamic faith and the fate of the Malays. Their aim was to create awareness among the Malays, to reform their way of thinking where religion was concerned. Translation activities were in part motivated by the fight against orthodox Islamic teaching and instead to strive for progress in British Malaya. Translations from Egyptian sources were undertaken as a means of influencing the public. The most well-known translation from French through Arabic was the story of the French adventure hero, Rocambole, known as Rokambul in Malay. The stories of Rocambole created by Ponson du Travail (1829-1871) were popular in France in the 1850s.

In the 1920s the circumstances of translation activities changed and were concentrated for the first time in British Malaya. In 1922 the Sultan Idris Training College was established in Tanjung Malim, Perak, in order to train and produce well educated Malay teachers. It was a result of the merger between a teachers' college in Matang, Taiping, established in 1898, and the one in Malacca established in 1900. The college served as a conducive site of Malay nationalism, because it presented a sharp contrast to the urban, elite Malays of colonial bureaucratic English education. Under the leadership of the its first principal, O. T. Dussek, the Translation Bureau was set up at the Sultan Idris Training College in 1925 (Abdullah 2012). Dussek had a great interest in the Malay language, and with Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad or Za'ba who was a teacher there, the college established the Translation Bureau. Being a teacher as well as a Malay literary activist, Za'ba was then appointed the Chief Translator.

The Translation Bureau followed the example from the Netherlands Indies (colonial Indonesia) which established the Bureau of Literature (or Balai Poestaka in Malay), whose purpose was to publish reading materials for the increasingly literate indigenous population. The Translation Bureau had five sections to do translation work as well as to produce books for school libraries — they include (1) preparation of new books, (2) revision of books, (3) reprints which need no revision, (4) translation, and (5) training translators (Han 2008: 9).

The aim of the Translation Bureau was to publish Malay school textbooks and lightweight literature which mostly were adapted from classical Malay literature or translated from foreign languages. The Translation Bureau set up two book series. One was the Malay School Series, which as the name suggest was intended for school, using the Latin script known as *Rumi*, while the other was the Malay Home Library Series which published literature in the *Jawi* script. The *Jawi* script was widely used and understood by the local Malay people. Translations into Malay from the Malay Home Library Series include 4 Shakespeare's Tragedies from Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, 4 Shakespeare's Comedies from Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels to Lilliput*, A. W. Hamilton's Reynard the Fox, R. L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days*, Edgar Wallace's *A Thief in the Night*, from the Legend of Robin Hood, and from the stories of Sherlock Holmes (Za'ba 1940a: 1-20). All translations were popular works intended for a wide readership (Warnk 2007: 107).

Table 2: Percentage of Malay Male Population 5-14 years old at Malay School in 1931

Straits Settlements	Total Malay Boys' Schools	Total Enrollment	Malay Boys in the Age Group 5-14	Percentage
Singapore	19	2,583	7,352	35%
Penang	76	8,835	15,290	58%
Malacca	79	8,846	12,254	72%
Average Percentage				55%

[Source: Han (2008: 7)]

Table 3: Percentage of Malay Female Population 5-14 years old at Malay School in 1931

Straits Settlements	Total Malay Girls' Schools	Total Enrollment	Malay Girls in the Age Group 5-14	Percentage
Singapore	6	404	7,406	5.5%
Penang	26	1,847	14,912	12.4%
Malacca	8	326	13,036	2.5%
Average Percentage				6.8%

[Source: Han (2008: 7)]

Since the 1920s onwards, the Malay reading public had grown fairly rapidly. The assumed Malay reading public was mainly male because the societal attitude and therefore the educational infrastructure was more favorable to men. Tables 2 and 3 show the young Malay population in the Straits Settlements in 1931. While the total number of age group 5-14 were almost the same between male and female population, the number of Malay boys' schools and their total enrollment outnumbered that of Malay girls' schools and their total enrollment. The two tables tell the significant difference between Singapore and Penang. There were only 25 Malay schools in total in Singapore, whereas Penang had 102. The total number of enrollment in Penang was 10,682, while in Singapore it was only 2,987 – less than one third of Penang. These schools educated and produced Malay youth who were able to read the *Jawi* script as well as the *Rumi*. They were the potential Malay



(*Jawi*) readers in the 1930s and onwards. Therefore, it is easy to understand why the Malay publishing center shifted from Singapore to Penang in the 1930s.

As described above, new trends became mixed in the 1930s British Malaya. There were growing awareness and discontent with the position of Malays in the colonial society, literacy in Malay increased, and a boom in newspaper publication and circulation. These were the context in which popular detective fiction emerged and was consumed.

## Popular Detective Fiction

Since the 1920s, three popular fictional characters have become familiar to the Malay reading public – Raffles, Nick Carter, and Rocambole. These characters respectively are a gentleman thief, an adventurous detective, and an adventurer and lawbreaker. They were particularly popular among Malay readers. In popular literature, “the heroes are more important than their authors” (Holub 1992: 107), and as a common practice, readers would remember the hero’s name and their idiosyncrasies.

The three popular characters are Westerners, white, and masculine. Raffles is a Victorian era gentleman thief and a born member of the nobility. He first appeared in a German pulp fiction series (Larance 2014). Nick Carter is described as the world’s greatest detective living in an apartment on Madison Avenue in New York City. His cases frequently have him hopping all over the world. In the fictional world, he made his debut a year before Sherlock Holmes (Roff 1974; Bedore 2013). Rocambole is a French master criminal who operates outside the law. He was created by Pierre Alexis Ponson du Terrail as the main character of a series published in newspapers between 1857 and 1870. He is regarded as the literary descendants of Raffles, Arsène Lupin and The Saint (Roff 1974).

The first translated Malay detective fiction was *Kecurian Lima Million Ringgit* (Tale of the Theft of Five Million Dollars) by Muhammad bin Muhammad Said’s (1888-1939) published in Kota Bharu, Kelantan in 1922. It is a story of Raffles, also known as Lord Lister, the gentleman thief. It is an original German series, first published in 1908. The series became very popular and was translated in a number of countries, and achieved such a popularity that Raffles was used in an Italian series as an opponent for Nick Carter, as Carter’s European equivalent. Raffles has been described as Europe’s greatest pulp hero.

Carter himself was a fictional character who in 1886 began as a pulp fiction private detective. He first appeared in the *New York Weekly* (Vol. 41 No. 46, September 18, 1886) in a 13-week serial, “The Old Detective’s Pupil; or, The Mysterious Crime of Madison Square” by Ormond G. Smith. The character proved popular enough to headline his own magazine, *Nick Carter Weekly* (Roff 1074: 457). The Malay translation of Nick Carter stories followed the series’ development.

Muhammad bin Muhammad Said translated the series, which was serialized in journal *Al-Hedayah* from June 1923 to January 1924 under the title of “Nicholas Carter,” and then in March, and from June to December 1924 as “Nicholas Carter dengan Wakil Sulit Kerajaan Brazil” (Roff 1974: 456).

Probably the most popular series was Rocambole. The Rocambole stories were mostly rendered by Syed Syekh bin Syed Ahmad al-Hadi. Syed Sheikh was a prolific writer and was known as “Bapa Novel Melayu” (Father of Malay Novels). Besides the Rocambole series, his works included *Hikayat Faridah Hanoum* (Penggal 1, 1925; Penggal II, 1926), *Hikajat Setia Asyik Kepada Maksuk* (Jelutong Press, Penang), *Hikayat Taman Chinta Berahi/Mahir Afandi dengan Iqbal Hanoum*, *Hikayat Anak Dara Ghassan* (Jilid 1-2, 1949, Harny, Singapore), *Hendon dengan Hammad*, *Hikayat Chermin Kehidupan*, *Hikayat Puteri Nurul Ain*, and *Hikayat Pembelaan dalam Rahsia/Kasih Saudara kepada Saudaranya*. In 1927 he opened a printing house, Percetakan Jelutong (Jelutong Press) in Penang and published materials in the *Jawi* script along the lines of the Islamic reform (Bakar 1994).

Accounts around the Malay rendering of the Rocambole series are inconsistent. According to some studies (Za’ba 1940; Roff 1974) there were 7 or 8 volumes of Rocambole books published between 1928 and 1934 by the Jelutong Press in Penang. The titles are 1. *Cherita Rokambul dalam Jel dan di-Paris* (398 pages); 2. *Cherita Rokambol dalam Siberia* (400 pages); 3. *Cherita Rokambol dengan Puteri Russian yang 'Asyik* (498 pages); 4. *Cherita Rokambol dengan Korban Hindi* (502 pages); 5. *Cerita Rokambol dengan Malium Kaum Nor* (508 pages); 6. *Cherita Rokambol dengan Taman Penglipur Lara* (396 pages); 7. *Cherita Rokambol dengan Perbendaharaan Hindi* (509 pages); 8. *Cerita Rukumbul dengan anak laki2 Ireland*.

The first Rocambole stories were published in 1928. “Rokambul dalam Jel dan di-Paris” (Rocambole in Jail in Paris) first appeared in Sayyid Shaykh’s monthly journal *Al-Ikhwān*, and then subsequently in his weekly paper *Saudara* (Roff 1974: 460; Wan Suhana 2006). It is assumed that Syed Syekh bin Syed Ahmad al-Hadi had translated the Rocambole series from its Arabic translation rather than from its French original (Roff 1974: 460). In any case, Rocambole as “the famous and intrepid criminal-adventurer-detective” (Roff 1974:460) was introduced to the Malay reading public.

### Selective Translated/Adapted Malay Detective Fiction

Year	Title	Translator/Author	Publisher	Place
1922	Kechurian Lima Milion Ringgit	Muhammad bin Muhammad Said	Majlis Ugama Islam press	Kota Bharu
June 1923-Jan 1924	Nicholas Carter	Muhammad bin Muhammad Said	Journal <i>Al-Hedayah</i>	Kota Bharu
March, June-Dec 1924	Nicholas Carter dengan Wakil Sulit Kerajaan Brazil	Muhammad bin Muhammad Said	Journal <i>Al-Hedayah</i>	Kota Bharu
1928	Cherita Rokambul dalam Jel dan di-Paris	Syed Syekh bin Syed Ahmad al-Hadi	The Jelutong Press	Penang
1929	Cherita Rokambol dalam Siberia	Syed Syekh bin Syed Ahmad al-Hadi	The Jelutong Press	Penang
1930	Cherita Rokambol dengan Puteri Russian yang 'Asyik	Syed Syekh bin Syed Ahmad al-Hadi	The Jelutong Press	Penang
1930	Cerita-Cerita Sherlock Holmes	Ahmad Murad	Sultan Idris Training College	Singapore
1931	Cherita Rokambol dengan Korban Hindi	Syed Syekh bin Syed Ahmad al-Hadi	The Jelutong Press	Penang
1932	Cerita Rokambol dengan Malium Kaum Nor	Syed Syekh bin Syed Ahmad al-Hadi	The Jelutong Press	Penang
1933	Cherita Rokambol dengan Taman Penglipur Lara	Syed Syekh bin Syed Ahmad al-Hadi	The Jelutong Press	Penang
1934	Cherita Rokambol dengan Perbendaharaan Hindi	Syed Syekh bin Syed Ahmad al-Hadi	The Jelutong Press	Penang
193?	Cherita James Carter or Penyamun Muda	?	?	Penang
193?	Sarong Tangan Merah	?	?	Penang
193?	Penyiasat Rahasia Sulit	Ismail bin Abdul-Karim	?	Penang
1941	Taligrap dari Perut Ikan, atau Perlawanan Hooker dengan Benhan Carter, Ketua Polis Amerika	Muhammad bin Muhammad Said	Nik Mahmud bin Haji Abdul Majid	Kota Bharu

[Sources: The data were collected from Za'ba (1940a; 1940b) and Roff (1974)]

## Hidden Resistance

There were three distinguished features in the publication of popular Malay detective fiction in the 1930s British Malaya. First, popular detective fiction that feature Raffles, Nick Carter and Rocambole were published not by the Sultan Idris Training College, but private publishers such as the Jelutong Press in Penang. It shows that along with the organized translation endeavor by the Sultan Idris Training College, private translators played significant roles in introducing detective fiction to the reading public.

Second, Penang and Kota Bharu were the two publishing centers of Malay popular detective fiction. Penang is located on the northwest coast of Peninsular Malaya by the Straits of Malacca, whereas Kota Bharu is in the northeastern part of the peninsula (the other side of the Malay peninsula from Penang) and shares the border with Thailand. The population of Kota Bharu was mainly Malay with many potential Malay readers. Unlike the Malay states, Penang and Singapore — where the Chinese population outnumbered the Malays — were a kind of blind spots for the British colonial authorities (Abdul Hamid 2007: 379). In other words, in these two Straits Settlements, non-religious reading materials were not under strict censorship.

Third, we gather from the number of translated publications that, unlike in the neighboring Dutch East Indies, Sherlock Holmes was not the most popular fictional detective figure in the 1930s. Instead, Rocambole and Nick Carter seemed to attract more readership. Using Antonio Gramsci's argument, Renate Holub maintains that in popular literature the heroes are more important than the authors (Holub 1992: 105). Unlike Holmes, whose exploits serve the interest of the authorities and work to regain social order, Rocambole is a cynical gang-leader (Roff 1974: 461) who is "superior to the judicial apparatus" (Forgacs and Nowell-Smith 1985: 369). Living outside the law, to his fans Rocambole represents "true justice."

In fact, it is safe to say that Rocambole as a fictional hero was well received among the Malay reading public for precisely this reason. If Rocambole as Gramsci describes was "superior to the judicial apparatus," then he represents a challenge to the colonial authorities (even if only on a collective mental level). What made it possible in the colonial context?

I imagine that the small circulation of such translated detective fiction was the reason. Although I have no data regarding how many copies of popular Malay detective fiction were published and sold, the circumstantial facts tell us that the Malay reading public was not large enough to sustain extensive Malay publications and periodicals for a long period, such as what we see in the Dutch East Indies. Studies show that Malay periodicals were short lived, even in the 1930s when Malay newspapers enjoyed a boom (Wan Suhana 2006). In other words, the colonial authorities did not consider Malay detective fiction as a threat to the colonial law

and order. In fact, under the colonial rule, Malays were not allowed to participate in politics, while Western educated Malay aristocrats were mobilized into colonial bureaucracy. Islamic reformers like Syed Syekh bin Syed Ahmad al-Hadi did not have any chance to engage themselves in colonial politics.

It is in this context that Malay detective fiction publishers and translators/authors pursued another kind of politics, that is, the politics of resistance. They did not partake in the major publishing market in British Malaya, which was in the English language. Even in the Malay publishing market, their circulation was small. Their publications did not contribute to the creation of a Malay communal culture, which consisted of Islam and hybrid Malay. About the creation of a Malay communal culture, Anthony Milner argues that those who committed themselves to Malay politics under British colonial rule contributed to Malay ideology-making that later became the core ideology when Malaya gained independence (Milner 1995: 2). Nevertheless, under such circumstances, Malay detective fiction publishers and translators/authors continued to translate detective fiction with outlaws, figures who cannot be considered model colonial subjects. What they appear to attempt was to instill a culture of resistance in their readers, albeit on imaginative level, through popular detective fiction.

In explaining the interaction between the dominator and the oppressed, James Scott uses the term “public transcript” for the open interaction and the term “hidden transcript” for the critique of power in which power holders do not see or hear (Scott 1990). In my view, the Malay popular detective fiction, printed in the *Jawi* script, is a form of “hidden transcript” — a critique of power in the fictional realm. This is the art of resistance (Scott 1990) that “the weak” could carry out (Scott 1985). It may be hidden, and its effect is hard to measure, but its signals are difficult to dismiss.

Due to the Japanese occupation from 1941 to 1945, the context of this hidden transcript was forced to alter. But after Japan was defeated and the British returned to its colony, the Malay publishing community, even if small, re-emerged in the post war period by producing literary journals. In 1948, Harmacy, a publisher based in Singapore, launched a new literary journal called *Dewan Pujangga*, printed in the *Jawi* script. The journal’s second issue is *Pachar Merah Malaya*, inspired by the Indies Patjar Merah series of an Indonesian revolutionary fugitive. The Indonesian Patjar Merah series was published in Medan in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and it features a real life revolutionary figure, Tan Malaka, in fictionalised form. In the late 1920s and 1930s Western powers in the region had in fact collaborated in order to snare him, but Tan Malaka somehow always succeeded in escaping from prisons, travelling and living incognito in various places, while continuing his political activities (Yamamoto 2011). His exploits and success in eluding the authorities were made legendary by the Patjar Merah series. It should come as no surprise that this revolutionary hero was revived in a literary journal in Singapore in 1948. Although Malaya did not experience a revolution or anti colonial war the way Indonesia did,

the resistant spirit is too palpable in their popular literature and can be detected even in translations of the detective fiction of the 1920s and the 1930s.

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