

# THE MALAYS: A RETROSPECTIVE EXAMINATION ON IDENTITY THROUGH SELECTED WRITINGS BY MUNSHI ABDULLAH, ZA'BA, SYED HUSSEIN ALATAS AND MAHATHIR MOHAMAD

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**Abstract:** *Societies are often fraught with cracks, displacement, and conflicts that are almost always intersected with local and global junctures. These issues, be it seemingly chaotic or minute, need to be noticed and addressed in some ways or another pertinent to the development and survival of the society. Issues which are not tackled early, in time, would have the propensities of multiplying or becoming more acute, and slowly engulf, and may even jeopardize a society. Munshi Abdullah, Za'ba, Syed Hussein Alatas and Mahathir Mohamad are important Malay personages in Malaysia who have written important texts relating to Malays' identity, history and socio-political milieu in their own respective roles, as writers, educationist, sociologist and political leader. They are undeniably the Malay intellectuals who are able to present objective analyses of the Malays of their own time, presided with advanced knowledge, observation and experience. This paper examines their selected writings, that echo their thoughts and writings that they share about the Malays which are crucial cornerstones to attempts at providing a holistic view in the discussion and understanding about the identity of the Malays by looking into their past, which would be insightful to their survival of the present and the future. By combining these three literary writings, interpretative approaches to understanding cultural crises can be established.*

## **Introduction**

Every nation has its own history to reconcile with, visions to achieve and issues to handle in their stead to survive in the ever-changing local and global landscapes of the present day. The Malay people of the then Malaya, and at present, Malaysia, are also fraught with cracks of displacements and conflicts, which intersected with local and global junctures.

Issues regarding the Malays; as individuals, race and nation, have been articulated by many. As noted by Syed Hussein Alatas in his seminal text, *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977), descriptions and issues regarding the Malays were found in colonial documents of the Portuguese, Dutch and British dated from 16<sup>th</sup> Century until 20<sup>th</sup>. Century. By the 19<sup>th</sup>. Century, autobiographical writings and observations by Munshi Abdullah, an important Malay literati, provided a Malay perspective on the subject. Seventy years after Munshi Abdullah's passing, in early 1920's, Zainal Abidin Ahmad, also known as Pendeta Za'ba, wrote about the grim, sociopolitical, economic and cultural conditions of the Malays. These dire conditions enveloping the Malay society in the past that continues into the present is a real dilemma that past and present Malays had to deal with. Articulating this dilemma became Mahathir Mohamad's prime focus in his then controversial book, *The Malay Dilemma* (1970). These important writings stood out, alongside other writers' input with regards the dilemma of the Malays from various perspectives; historical, sociopolitical and cultural; by leaders, historians, economists, social scientists, academicians, politicians and many others.

It is the contention of this paper to examine the writings belonging to these important Malay intellectuals, in order to discuss the image and identity of the Malays' past and present. As aptly asserted by Goh (2007), there are at least three reasons for revisiting the Malay image. Firstly, besides the constant identification of indolence, changes in the racial meanings could also be observed. Second, while racial meanings justified colonial class projects, interpretations of native class society also affected racial meanings; and third, these representations were formative of the colonial state and not just of colonial capitalism. These are critical areas of interests that need to be addressed in the pursuit of the survival and betterment of the Malays, as a race and part of the multiracial nation.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Origins of The Malays***

Wan Teh (2012) dedicated a thorough research on origins of the Malays and its diaspora. His compilation of findings reported the earlier theories formulated by the Saracin brothers in 1892-93 who claimed that the Malays originated from the Yunan Province of southern China. They reiterated that it happened around 3,000-2,500 years BC; that the first large group of Proto Malays arrived in the Malay Archipelago, which was already populated by the Vedda peoples. Van Geldern (1952) supported this theory based on the archeological artefacts he examined at Vienna library, which was said to be found in Peninsular Malaya then, which he believed to originate from southern China (cited in Wan Teh, 2012).

Other researchers assert that based on similarities of cultural artefacts found in Peninsular Malaysia with those in the Indo-China Peninsular, a new speculation points to Dong Song,

in the Northern part of Vietnam as the location of the ancient Malay-Champa Kingdom, which was a continuation of previous two large kingdoms: Funan (1<sup>st</sup>.-4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> Century) and Champa (2<sup>nd</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>. Century), before it was vanquished by the Khmers from Cambodia and Dai Viets (also known as the Hans) from China. Fleeing from the ruins, these deutro-Malays migrated to the south between 500-1,500-2,000 BC.

Bellwood (1997) proposed the “Express Train from Taiwan to Polynesia” model that speculates the migration of Malay-Polynesians southward from mainland China, through Taiwan, and arrived at the Malay Archipelago after the submersion of the Sundanese Plate in 2,000 BC. He asserted that this group of Malay-Polynesians were responsible in driving away the natives of the Malay Archipelago: the Australoid, Negroid and Melanesian descents further south into the Australian continents and the neighbouring islands.

More recent findings by Nik Hassan Suhaimi and his team in 1996 yielded evidence on archaeological remains of the Malays in the Malay Archipelago dated 15,000 to 35,000 years ago. These findings disqualified earlier speculative assumptions by Sarasin & Sarasin, more than 100 years ago, that the Malays had originated from mainland China. Research on archeological remains at Yunan ‘s Kunming University found that none of the 26 ethnic groups of Yunan belongs to or speaks the language of the Malay-Polynesian race, which was attributed to the roots of the Malays: a race with 250,000 million population. The absence of any traces of a Malay descent in Yunan defeated deductive logics that such a dominant race originated from it. This indirectly debunked the theory of migration from the North to South as earlier attributed to the ancestors of the Malays (Wan Teh, 2012).

De Silva’s (1987) research on the peoples of Sri Lanka provided more information regarding peoples in the Malay Archipelago. His findings indicate that the earliest human civilization and the earlier inhabitants of Asia, dating 17,000 years ago, which pre-dated paeleolithic Chinese civilization began at the Malay Archipelago; on the Sundanese Plate around 15,000 BC, before its submersion between 14,000 to 8,000 BC, due to a massive volcanic eruption, tsunami and sudden increase of the sea levels. This theory was also supported by other research done on site which connects the lost Atlantis to the Malay Archipelago (Oppenheimer,1999; Santos, 2011). Wan Teh (2012) also reported other theories that speculates the Malay-Polynesians’ origin as connected to the Palestine’s Hebrew-Jews. In all these diverse reportings; one common trait that remain constant about the Malays is their forte as seafarers that made their migration and expansion through the archipelago and the seas beyond, possible.

### ***Who Are The Malays?***

Hundreds and thousands of years BC ago, the Malays were known to build yachts and outrigger boats capable of reaching across straits and oceans, particularly, the Pacific Ocean for them to inhabit islands as far as New Zealand, Hawaii, the Mauritius, the Tahiti and many more, and expanding into Polynesia, even before the European and other Asians venture the seas (Wan Teh, 2012). As adept seamen, the Malays also ventured across the Atlantic Ocean to create settlements in the islands of Madagascar even before the arrival of the Africans. For 2,000 years (until the 15<sup>th</sup> Century), the Malays conquered the Eastern Seas, not only as highly-skilled sailors or sea-farers, but are also known as, knowledgeable and accomplished inter-continental trading people.

### *History of The Malays In The Malay Archipelago/Malaya/Malaysia*

In the known history of the then Malay Archipelago/Malaya, nearly half of the content is about the history of the Malays. The Malays were known to be the first major civilized race to inhabit Malaya and whose residence has been consistent since the onset of colonial rule some 461 years ago, and still is known as the dominant race in independent Malaysia, today. Malacca or *Malaka*, which was founded by a Sumatran prince, Parameswara, around 1400 (Khoo, 1974; Clifford, 1968) became a symbol of the traditional Malay glorious era. Parameswara had transformed the insignificant fishing village into a prosperous cosmopolitan trading centre, received important recognition from the Emperor of China (Wilkinson, 1971). Allen (1968) asserts that Malacca inherited Srivijaya's commercial power which is in a better position than Palembang to control the Straits of Malacca. Malacca's power was extended in every direction until 1500 A.D., where it reached its zenith (Clifford, 1968). As a very flourishing entreport in the Malay Archipelago, Malacca attracted foreign interests. Contact with the Portugese marked the fall of Malacca in 1511, and the beginning of Western domination in the Malay Archipelago (Abd. Wahid, 1970).

The Portugese's conquest over Malacca was vaunted as a great triumph of the "Cross over the Crescent"; by the year 1600, nearly the whole commerce of the Straits had fallen into the hands of the Portugese (Bird, 1969). According to Allen (1968), the Portugese appeared to have operated with fanaticism and ruthfulness which was repaid in kind by the displaced Malays. This would be among the traits that will be discussed in this paper in relation to the identity of the Malays. A hundred and thirty years later, the Dutch with the assistance of the Johor kingdom succeeded in defeating the Portugese in Malacca. However, the importance of Malacca gradually declined as priority was placed upon Batavia as the commercial trade centre. In 1786, the British acquired Penang, and eventually Malacca in 1795; which marked the beginning of the vast economic and social transformation in Malaya (Rabushka, 1973; Khoo, 1974; Bird, 1969). The British's zest for economic pursuits and power was made possible through the assistance of mass crowd of cheap labour from India and China brought into the country in the late 19<sup>th</sup>. Century. This marks the beginning in the history of multiethnicity in Malaya and further exploitation upon the country by the foreigners (Bird, 1969).

The British imposed the "Divide and Rule" system which placed groups of different races and sometimes, status, at different places of residence and occupations from each other and ruled separately; the Malays at agricultural sites which were economically less developed, the Chinese at the mining areas and urban sites, and the Indians at the rubber plantations and estates (Stenson, 1980; Roff, 1967; Abd. Wahid, 1970). These social distances and segregation were purposely planned and executed with the aim to secure the importance and security of the British in the country, and also to prevent social/racial problems among the peoples (Chew, 1979). This system bore many economic, social and political implications upon the people of Malaya during the British rule and particularly after they left. From the economic point of view, the Malays were made peasants in their own country, and deprived of the economic, education, medical, infrastructure and technological advancements experienced by the Chinese and British in the urban areas of the country (Roff, 1967). While the Indian coolies and estate workers remained as the core to the estate labour force (Stenson, 1980). Segregated at different locations, living their own distinct culture and language resulted into minimal or in certain cases, no evident quality of interaction within this plural society (Rabushka, 1973). This bred ethno-centricism, prejudices, stereotypes and discrimination among races, especially in the case of the Malays and the Chinese (Chew, 1979).

As customary of other colonized nations, likewise, the Malays as colonized people, suffer; most evidently in terms of social and economical backwardness. Though the Malay authority 'returned' when Malaya gained its independence, and the Malays once again assumed their primary position in spearheading the country; centuries of becoming a colonized race have 'configured' the psyche and identity of the once, Master of the eastern Seas and trade.

### **Findings and Discussions**

Discussions among the Malays and non-Malays about the Malays continue until today in their attempts at understanding their origin, history, identity, traits, psyche, and other aspects. As central Malay figures, Munshi Abdullah, Za'ba, Mahathir Mohamad and Syed Hussein Alatas' thoughts and texts about the Malays have been recognized as pertinent work to attempts at providing a holistic view in the discussion and understanding about the Malays' history and identity, which will form as important parts of this paper.

#### ***Munshi Abdullah***

*Kisah pelayaran Abdullah* (1838) and *Hikayat Abdullah* (1849) are two seminal works of Munshi Abdullah that earned him the title, "Father of Modern Malay Literature". These partly autobiographical work and narrative contain Abdullah's criticisms towards the Malays based on his observations of the Malays in Malaya and Singapore during his work trips accompanying Sir Stamford Raffles.

Murad (1996) reports that in his writings, Abdullah spoke sternly of Malays who took their mother tongue for granted, and not willing to study the language and provide place to study the language. These comments were also directed to Malays who do not appreciate the Malay language. Abdullah expressed his sadness towards the Malays who failed to see their backwardness. In his writing, he reiterated the fact that every creed in this world would learn and master their language; How to acquire other languages if one does not know one's own? (Ahmad, 1957; Hamdani, 2007).

During Abdullah's work under Raffles, he observes the accumulation of books and hikayats collected and bought by Raffles from the Malays to furnish the British on knowledge regarding the Malay people. Abdullah expressed his concerns that in the excitement of the Malays with their new-found profits provided by the British; one day, the Malays may lose all and not be able to read anymore of their books or hikayats as they have sold the original texts to the British (Hamdani, 2007). The quest for knowledge has always been close to his heart, thus he always advised the Malays to seek knowledge. Abdullah also warns the Malays against indulging in superstitious beliefs, as it conflicts with the Islamic belief and degrading their intellect.

Abdullah's hikayat reveals his strong disapproval for indolence. To be lazy or indolent is considered a disgrace to the Malays, as illustrated by Abdullah's personal experience as a student. His hikayat gives illustrations of the strict environment and punishment for laziness when he was schooling (Darus, 1957; Hamdani, 2007). Abdullah also presented an interesting case of indolence he observed among the Malay males in Pahang, Trengganu and Kelantan. According to Abdullah, the males became indolent for fear of their hard-earned property being taken away by their rulers and henchmen. Thus, they chose to be in idleness and poverty in order to survive their situations (Hamdani, 2007). Salleh (1997) refers to Abdullah as a social critic who writes to instil awareness, in order to bring about a beneficial change in the Malay society.

### *Zainal Abidin Ahmad / Za'ba*

The Malays as a race, Islam and the Malay language are three central themes in Za'ba's writings. According to Za'ba, the definition of a Malay rests upon three criteria; belonging to the Malay ethnic group, a Muslim by faith and speaks Malay. One is not considered a Malay in the absence of any of the said criteria. This was the concept of nation and nationhood understood by the people of Malaya during pre-independence (Haji Omar, 2015).

In his observation, even when he was a small boy, Za'ba was aware of the plights revolving his people, and he compared their conditions with the other races around him. Islam takes center-stage in his deliberations about language and nationhood. The privilege of having an English education and interactions with peoples of other races expanded his horizon concerning his people.

In Za'ba's opinion, British colonial rule and pre-British Malay rule are the primary reasons to Malay poverty. The British colonial practices which brought suffering, violence and pain had influenced the Malays and conditioned them with low and weak behaviour and habits due to the strains forced upon them. The Malay rulers then were also violent, in a way, Za'ba was thankful to the British for saving the Malays from their own rajas and nobles (Hasan, 2008). Other causes to the backwardness of the Malays attributed to the shallowness of the Malay's ancestral worldview; and also, at being too dependent upon family members and other people. Misconceptions of the teachings of Islam is also an important cause to the Malay's backwardness. These became integral reasons for Za'ba to further equip himself with Islamic knowledge, and close ranks with movements initiated by Islamic scholars like Syed Syekh al-Hadi and Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin.

On poverty, Za'ba classified the Malays' poverty into five distinct categories: material, knowledge, mannerism, spirit to live and religious and practice. In his observation, these five states of poverty are caused by; the geographical prosperity that the country provides, the tropical climate that discourages physical work and easily tires the Malays, the declining quality in religious faith and counter-productive culture and way of life. The first and second points are considered as minor causes to the backwardness of the Malays, whereas the 3<sup>rd</sup> and fourth points should be the main considerations in uplifting the state of the Malays (Nawang, 1996).

In his works, Za'ba identified three types of Malays, as part of his examination of the attitude of three different groups of Malays (Nawang, 1998). According to Za'ba, the indifferent Malay Masses comprises the vast majority of the Malays. Their distinct features are; kampong type, understands nothing, care less, on the side of their leaders when they are convinced that the leaders are adopting a course of action for the good of the Malays, and of the country, as a Malay country. The second type is labelled as the "Anti-Immediate" or "Pro-Delaying" Group. Characteristics of Malays belonging to this group, among others, are; educated, thinking classes, taking to politics seriously, with English education, educated in Malay and educated in Arabic. The third group he referred to is the "Non-Political Group" who, among the traits mentioned, are; educated, do not bother with politics, do not see anything good of politics, except crooked dealings. Malays are also seen as fearful, poor, childlike and fond of gossip-mongering (Hasan, 2008).

In his proposal of taking the Malays out of their dire situations, Za'ba outlined eight criteria in the making of a successful Malay society. They are self-reliance, having sense of responsibility, sense of duty, punctuality, industry, self-sacrifice and public-spirit. These are what he called

“Jalan Keselamatan” or “Salvation for the Malays”. Education is the pillar of success and the only way out for the Malays. Za’ba emphasized the importance of sound early childhood education as an important foundation to nation-building and to be competitive at the international arena (Hasan, 2008).

Za’ba is fundamentally a thinker, and his favourite activity is writing. It is through his writings, Za’ba shared his thoughts on Islam, the Malay people and the Malay Language.

### ***Mahathir Mohamad***

Mahathir Mohamad is a Malay thinker and iconic leader who have witnessed how the Malays at his hometown tried to make ends meet in their difficult economic environment that challenged their social reality (Morais, 1982). He has produced many books, which predominantly concerned the plight of the Malays; the most controversial being *The Malay Dilemma* (1970), following the 1969 riot. The book seeks to explain the causes for the 13 May 1969 riots in Kuala Lumpur, to explain why the Malays are economically backward, to explain why the Malays feel they must insist upon immigrants becoming real Malaysians by speaking the Malay Language (7).

Mahathir Mohamad identified certain traits that are significant to the identity of the Malays. Detailed descriptions of these traits are presented through two of his writings; namely, *The Malay Dilemma* (1970, 2008) and *Malays Forget Easily* (2001). The problems of the Malays during the colonial and pre-independence era were attributed to their poor performance (due to hereditary factors), lacks industrious capabilities (due to the good and easy life), poor education, poor health, economically backward, not willing to learn new skills or trade, fractionalized and disunited, having low-self-esteem and spirit; inhibiting, different and conflicting values with the other races; difficulty in asserting their rights, at the same time balancing the overwhelming desire to be polite, courteous and thoughtful of the rights and demands of others; and finally, having the fear of losing out to the others and fear of being dispossessed of their rights.

According to Mahathir, Malays belonging to the post-independence era display traits such as; not learned from history of colonization, have forgotten their strength and success, and true objective of their political struggle. Another trait which is similar to the colonial and pre-independence era is lacking industrious capabilities (thinking good fortune comes without hardwork), too complacent and too confident. The trait; Lacks interest in pursuing knowledge (especially new knowledge), not grateful, fractionalized and disunited, inhibiting, different and conflicting values with the other races; difficulty in asserting their rights, at the same time balancing the overwhelming desire to be polite, courteous and thoughtful to the rights and demands of others; and fear of losing out to the others and being disposed of their land, also resonate similar traits from the past. Other traits that held the Malays back from moving forward are; not grateful, economically lagging behind (despite government aid through the New Economic Policy (NEP), easily influenced, not wise, emotional and believe in slander; impatient to become rich and loss of nationalism.

As observed by Ahmad Murad Merican, Mahathir’s discourses span the longest (more than 63 years), as compared to other prominent Malay intellectuals; are extremely diverse in topics and the most in number, as he continues to express his views about the Malays, Malaysian politics and society (Hasan, 2008).

### *Syed Hussein Alatas*

*The Myth of the Lazy Native* (Alatas, 1977) is a work which Edward Said refers to as “revisionary history”, a rewriting of history which rejects the dominant discourse in power (the British) and in a more scholarly and concrete manner seeks to comprehend the unusual diverse developments which previous historians or orientalists fail to ascertain.

In *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, Syed Hussein Alatas (1977) traces, examines and challenges the notion of the captive minds, investigates the roots and functions of this “myth” and criticizes the colonialists’ theory that the natives are lazy or indolent. He describes how this perception underlies colonial capitalism affecting the native Javanese, Malay and Filipinos and continues to permeate in the minds of the elite natives from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia.

His readings of earlier colonialists’ documents during the onset of Portugese colonization of Malacca reveals a contrast in the descriptions of characteristics of the Malays as compared to the later reports by the Dutch, British and even the Malay ruling class. The Portugese, namely, Tom Pires and Duarte Barbosa, reported that the Malays were seen as a jealous nation (their wives on covered sedans), serious Muslims leading a pleasant life, polished, well-bred, fond of music and given to love (Myth:35).

After a century of Portugese colonial rule, a distinguished Portugese officer, Emmanuel Godhino de Eredia describes the majority of the Malay nobles as cheerful, roguish and very wanton; ingenious and intelligent, but negligent and careless about studies and arts; spent their time amusing themselves...hence few literati, mathematicians, or astrologers were to be found amongst them (Myth:37). At the same time, he thought better of the common people; have better characters...usually occupy themselves with mechanical arts to earn their livelihood; many of them are very accomplished craftsmen at carving and also alchemy, imparting fine temper to iron and steel for making arms (Myth:37).

As reported in his book, the image of the Malays seem to further deteriorate in the eyes of later colonialists; the Dutch refer them as great thieves (Careri, 1695); having lively nature, witty, with great self-conceit; the most cunning, the most ingenious, and the politest people of the whole East, not much to be relied on (Valentyn, 1726), barbaric coastal Malays (Guirreiro, 1726), comparative rude and uncivilized character, not learned, indolent, the most polite of all savages (Raffles, 1810), lacks geniuses (Crawfurd, 1820), having disinclination to work, opposed to steady continuous work, lacking initiative, fatalist, very superstitious (Swettenham, 1874), sadly dull, limp and civilized West Coast Malays and uncivilized East Coast Malays (Clifford, 1896). However, according to Alatas, four decades after British rule in Malaya, these judgments assumed a more sober tone. Comments outlining the gentlemen nature of the Malay men was still underlined with negative traits toward industry, docility and friendliness (Wheeler, 1928), lack of originality, underserved reputation for idleness (Winstedt, 1958).

Alatas argues that the ‘out-of-context’ interpretation by former colonizers and native ruling elites who subscribed to colonial ideology had caused several negative traits to be woven into the image of the Malays (native). Alatas explains that among other lack of facilities, communication are factors that explain the slow progress of the Malays in emerging from a peasant society rather than the allegedly negative traits of their natural character of any hereditary qualities and the absence of the Malay trading class in Malaysia now is a consequence of historical factors, not a result of the Malay system of values. Historically,

centuries of colonial domination that affected various aspects of their life; sociological, political and economic displacements and abuse by the native ruling class are vital factors to the constructs of the negative image of the Malays. Alatas believes in the importance of revisioning or rewriting history in order to reinstate the dignity of these native races (Alatas, in Alatas, 2016).

### **Conclusion**

Identity marker of the Malays belonging to the early/pre-Colonial era suggested that the Malays demonstrated an elite, stately persona, characterized by the mannerisms of a highly civilized society (see Alatas on Pires and Barbossa). Over time, as the colonization resumed and changed hands from one colonizer to another; descriptions of the Malay identity seem to have deteriorated further. Cross-sectional readings of writings by these well-known writers reveal that certain negative traits discussed (lacking the industrial spirit/laziness to learn/ work, belief in superstitions, lacking religious understanding) seem to be quite consistent with the Malay identity and definitive of the period (19<sup>th</sup>. Century to the present); as evident in the documentations provided by Munshi Abdullah, Za'ba, Mahathir Mohamad and Syed Hussein Alatas. This observation reinforced Alatas' view that centuries of colonial rule and subjugation experienced by the Malay peoples may have negatively transformed them from the noble characteristics that once defined them (world-reknown sea-farers and distinguished statesmen and traders); into peoples with fear and hollowness in their heads and hearts, disgraced and dispossessed of their lands. The changing status, position, opportunities, challenges in the country provide and demand for greater strength and abilities for the Malays to rise and be at par with the others in the country. Time is of essence, which the Malays would need to manage fast and wisely in order to pull themselves away from the negative light and stereotyping, to emerge as Malays with a shining set of identities.

Munshi Abdullah, Za'ba, Mahathir Mohamad and Syed Hussein Alatas have been critical observers of the preoccupations of the Malays of their time, and also of their past. As prominent Malay thinkers of their time, they voiced their ideas and concerns through their writings which continue to become testaments to their genuine concerns of the fate and survival of the Malays as a race and part of the nation. This reiterates the oneness or similarity of concerns that Malay leaders, writers and scholars share which contributes significantly in the understanding of the worldview and psyche of the Malays, in uplifting their morale and identity and in transforming the Malays positively in this country.

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