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A Comparative Study of the Malaysian and the Philippines War Novels

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE MALAYSIAN AND THE PHILIPPINES WAR NOVELS. By Sahlan Mohd Saman. Selangor, Malaysia: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1984. 126 pages.

Nusantaraism, the sense of belonging among the Malay people, calls for comparative studies crossing national boundaries among the ASEAN countries. Sahlan's comparative study of the literatures of Malaysia and the Philippines, two neighboring Southeast Asian countries, is his contribution towards a more comprehensive and meaningful understanding of two analogously developed literatures.

Based on a 1981 UP Arts and Sciences Graduate School thesis, the book studies seven Malaysian war novels in Bahasa Malaysia and five Philippine war novels in English, with the Japanese Occupation of the two countries during World War II as the fictional subject matter. Both Malaysia and the Philippines had a colonial history prior to 1941, and in both countries the Japanese forces drove away the foreign colonizer. At the end of the war, the Japanese armies were in turn driven away by these colonizers: the British in Malaysia and the Americans in the Philippines. These parallel historical and political backgrounds provided the basis for a promising comparative study.

Sahlan rightly chose the novel as the literary form that could give free play to manifestations of both the intrinsic complexity of the war experience, and the two countries' colonial histories and mixed ethnic populations. Added to these complex conditions was the ambiguity of Japanese propaganda vis-a-vis military conquest and cultural development. Both colonized Malaysians and Filipinos responded to the war in different complicated ways, and the complexity and ambiguity were depicted and analyzed in the war novels.

This comparative study yields interesting insights into the novelists and their depiction of the war. The historico-literary backgrounds of both countries' novelistic traditions largely derived from each country's early fantasy tales. Both traditions were influenced by foreign literatures: The Middle-east tradition in Malaysia, and the Hispanic-Anglo-American tradition in the Philippines.

Similarities are seen in the image of the war as depicted and in the fictionists's sources of materials. War was destructive, resulting in psychological and moral changes. People responded in such diverse ways as exploitation, evacuation and sacrifice. War taught the Malaysians and Filipinos political consciousness, affecting their understanding of freedom and nationalism.

War novelists from both countries get their materials from recollections of past experience, combined with relevant reading and the creative imagination. The defensive stance of most novelists is dictated by their desire not to offend the Japanese or to alienate their readers. However, when they want to make their meaning clear, they often intrude into the story.

Differences are found in both war materials dealt with and literary tech-

niques used. In the Philippines, the war suffering depicted is worse, and so the guerilla resistance is fiercer. The Philippine novels are more hero-oriented, with characters like Javellana's Carding Suerte, who is meticulously delineated. The Filipino heroes' conflicts are more varied, ranging from political and moral to religious dilemmas.

The Malaysian characters are more moderate and practical. More historical and political data are incorporated into the novels, a practice which mars the literary achievement of the Malaysian novelist.

Such valid insights are, however, either scattered in the first three chapters or given as generalizations in the last chapters. Consequently, the ideas are often vague and confused. The supporting or illustrative details are difficult to trace because of two major problems.

The first problem is Sahlan's unidiomatic use of the English language. Words put together do not clearly explain ideas. Grammatical mistakes, such as incoherent sentence construction and verb-subject disagreement, are found in the book. Typographical errors (e.g. *sensive* for *sensitive* on page 98) can perhaps be blamed on careless or illiterate proofreaders.

The second reason for the book's vagueness and disorganization is its graduate school flab. Sahlan might have practised greater selectivity in the inclusion of the scholarly materials required of graduate school work—materials quoted from varied sources to prove scholarly research done, and the long literary background to include contextual material.

The actual discussion of the eleven war novels chosen for the comparative study takes up only one-half of the 107-page text. There was not room enough for a thorough in-depth comparative-contrastive analysis.

The conceptual framework and approach were derived from varied sources. The comparative approach of David H. Malone with its emphasis on both text and context was quoted, together with Rene Wellek and Filipino critics like Lucila Hosillos and Jose Villa Panganiban. Wilbur Scotts' critical approaches were to be used on appropriate materials: sociological in the study of society, psychological in the analysis of characterization, and formalistic in the evaluation of the artistry of the work.

This lack of a clearly limited conceptual framework for analysis and definite literary standards for evaluation resulted in a superficial and disorganized discussion. The study did not do justice to either the complicated subject matter or the broad literary form.

Bahasa Malaysia was chosen as the Malayan language. For a comparative study, therefore, the war novels in Tagalog would have been more compatible with the Malaysian materials. The publication outlet chosen was not consistent; Sahlan studied not only novels in books, but also serialized magazine novels.

The choice of specific writers and novels was not adequately explained. The Malaysian side is less problematical, since only a few war novels have

been published. However, the choice of Philippine writers and novels in English is not justified. Too much war fiction in English is ignored, so that any generalization remains suspect. Sahlan states with regret that no frontline (the ultimate heroic deed in war) fiction has been published, forgetting perhaps the frontline stories of Mario Chanco with their recurring characters and continuing storyline. The reasons for the choice of the five novels in English are not explained; neither the exclusion of such interesting war novels as the most traditional in technique (Magdalena Bautista's *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*), the most modernist (Wilfredo Nollado's *But For the Lovers*) or the one written from an American's point of view (Bienvenido Santos' *The Volcano*).

A comparative study must base itself in the context of a broad knowledge of both national literatures and their historical backgrounds, otherwise the inadequately treated literature would be used only as a lame excuse for the study of Malaysian literature. The Philippine materials are largely misinterpreted, the subtlety and restraint of the war novelists in English seen as a reluctance to offend the Japanese. This is not cowardice or reticence, but the writer's strategy to avoid sentimentality and didacticism: two grave errors condemned by Western critical standards.

Malaysians and Filipinos are lumped together as the invaded races that did not resist the Japanese during the initial stage of their invasion, an assertion that glosses over Filipino participation in the USAFFE's valiant stand in Bataan and Corregidor.

A comparative study of two literatures is undertaken to achieve insights which cannot be reached in separate studies of each literature. The hero-orientation, the meticulous characterization and the broad scope of the war fiction in English can be derived from a careful study of the Western influence of formalistic techniques and universal theme. The more destructive war experience and the more violent reaction of the Filipinos are obvious in the light of their pro-American historical, cultural and political orientation.

If no new insights can be extracted from the comparative study of two national literatures, the two would seem to have been put together mainly for the prestige of a comparative work.

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