

## ULASAN BUKU/BOOK REVIEW

*Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness* by Maznah Mohamad and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (eds.). Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2011, 370 pp.

*Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness* is an interesting title for an edited volume of 12 essays discussing the subject of Malayness. In the preface, Maznah Mohamad and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, the two editors of this volume, state while the main aim of the book like many other books on Malay Studies is to examine the complex subject of Malay identity, it intends to distinguish itself by examining it "with new and wide-angled lenses." The "new and wide-angled lenses" involves both the widening of the scope of discourse by examining "neglected issues and social actors" such as the Orang Asli or aboriginal peoples of Malaysia, Peranakan Chinese and modern Filipinos; and also, the approach taken by the contributors.

The contributors of this volume, state the editors, "historicise the richness, complexity and mystique behind the intents and aims of those very actors involved in the process of constructing, reinventing and even effacing the markers that are traditionally seen as crucial to any claims of being Malay" (p. vii). Thus, collectively, the volume seeks to critically understand the lived and realised meanings of Malayness, particularly the present day meanings and dynamics of Malayness, which the editors assert, are very much lacking in recent works on the subject, such as Leonard Andaya's *Leaves of the Same Tree* and Anthony Milner's, *The Malays*, which mainly focus on the history of an ancient and arcane Malay identity across Southeast Asia. By adopting this approach, the editors hope that their volume will not only revitalise the declining scholarly interest in area studies but also to give a new direction to the study of Malayness.

*Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness* is divided into four main sections. Section 1 deals with *Malaysia: Contending Imaginations of Malayness*; Section 2 with *Singapore: Malays as Minorities and the Politics of Identities*; Section 3 examines *Indonesia and the Philippines: Borderland and Forgotten Malays*; and Section 4 discusses *Across Nations: Representing/Rejecting Malayness*.

In the first and biggest section *Malaysia: Contending Imaginations of Malayness* are five essays. They are Judith Nagata's *Boundaries of Malayness: "We have Made Malaysia: Now It is Time to (Re)Make the Malays but Who Interprets the History?"*; Maznah Mohamad's *Like a Shady Tree Swept by the Windstorm: Malays in Dissent*; Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid's *Malay Racialism and the Sufi Alternative*; Rusalina Idrus's *Malays and Orang Asli: Contesting Indigeneity*;

and Wong Soak Koon's *Gender, Islam and the "Malay Nation" in Fatimah Busu's Salam Maria*. In this section the inclusion of "neglected actors" such as the Orang Asli, present day Sufis and women are clearly visible. The new approach of conceiving Malayness beyond the restrictive notion of ethnicity to include a whole range of associations such as places, languages, cultural symbols, events, texts, political parties and religious beliefs, is critically expressed by Judith Nagata in her discussion on the shifting boundaries of Malayness in Malaysia.

Nagata argues that "for more than a millenium, *Melayu* identity has been a moving target with boundaries that have been bent by changing waves of migration, trading relations, commercial cultures, religious conversion, exposure to and inter-marriage with external immigrants, and finally, colonial and modern states" (p. 27). However, she observes, the promotion of a homogenous conception of being a Malay in Malaysia which is "based on conformity to a political party and agenda and the official range of expressions of Malayness is now one of the narrowest in history" and "since Malaysia is the first state and only state nation named for Malays, it tends to serve as a reference for the modern Malay, and has set a standard by which to measure Malayness by other self-identified Malays in Southeast Asia" (p. 4). Nagata's view resonate throughout the volume and it provides the framework for its discussion. All the essays discuss the subject of Malayness with reference to the broad and wide understanding of *Melayu* which cannot be easily and simply defined and circumscribed.

If the essays in Section 1 discuss Malayness within the cultural and political context of Malay majority and dominance, the essays in Section 2, namely, Syed Muhd Khairudin's *Malay Identity in Postcolonial Singapore*; Suriani Suratman's *Tudung Girls: Unveiling Muslim Women's Identity in Singapore*; and Ivan Kwek's, *Malayness as Mindset: When Television Producers Imagine Audiences as Malay* deal with the subject of Malayness within the social and political context of a Malay minority. For Muhd Khairudin, whether it be a Malay majority state or a minority, the issue of the heterogenous nature of the Malays, the continuous debate and contention of Malay identity, and the politics of identity formation abounds.

Jan van der Putten's essay *Riau: A Malay Heartland at the Borders* and Rommel A. Curaming's *Filipinos as Malay: Historicizing an Indentity* of Section 3, together with Neil Khor's *Absent Presence: The Malay in Straits Chinese Literature* and Hendrik M. J. Maier's *Melayu and Malay – A Story of Appropriate Behavior* of Section 4, highlight the neglected issues and actors in contemporary discussion of Malayness and the paradoxes involved by such a neglect and omission. Such a paradox is eloquently expressed by Maier when he states that Hang Tuah, "the personfication of *Melayu*" and "the outstanding symbol of

Malayness" far from representing Malay homogeneity and uniformity is "ambivalent and manifold." A critical reading of *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, argues Maier, shows that he "cannot be contained or pinned down in one place, in one moment of time, in one quality, in a single identity" (p. 321).

Thus, Maier concludes that *Melayu* can neither be comprehended nor defined; it can only be explored.

*Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness* is an intellectually engaging work as it challenges the prevalent view that *Melayu* or Malayness is a uniform, static and homogenous concept bound to a restrictive notion of ethnicity and advocates instead, a heterogenous, expansive and dynamic concept. All 12 essays showcase original research which draw upon historical and contemporary case studies to demonstrate the variety of manifestations of Malayness to be found which do not justify for *Melayu* to be regarded as a uniform and homogenous concept by academics, and more so to be reduced to a specific, politically convenient notion imposed by a ruling party in power, be it in a Malay majority state or otherwise. The volume provides fecund material for further reflections, deliberations and studies on the complex subject of who is a Malay and what constitutes Malayness. Hence its aim to engender greater debate, examination and intellectual engagement of the subject is achieved. Future studies will have to make some reference to this volume either in agreement or disagreement with its approach, intellectual framework and interpretation of the fascinating and politically relevant subject of Malayness.

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