

## POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM IN SABAH: A REVIEW

JENNA DESIREE ROBERT

Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Sabah Branch, Kota Kinabalu  
Campus

[desiree@uitm.edu.my](mailto:desiree@uitm.edu.my)

### ABSTRACT

Sabah, formerly known as North Borneo during the period of British colonisation from 1888-1963 produced many texts about the British presence and their activities on the island. This review highlights that the post-war studies especially Sabah's colonial literature is the missing link to its alternative history. Colonial literature has left its legacy in the form of history, anthropology and art but also in the textual and literary representations of Sabah through a western lens. The critique of colonial fiction and non-fiction texts in former colonies in Malaya and Sarawak have paved the way for critical examination and commentary on the modes of representation of the indigenous and immigrants. This review discusses the highlights of postcolonial criticism in Malaysia. It briefly introduces some of the issues about postcolonial criticism in Sabah and its potential.

*Keywords:* Borneo Studies, Sabah, Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Literature

### 1. Introduction

A postcolonial study is a form of deconstructive reading or the study of reading and rereading texts which colonisation has inevitably impacted. These texts are not limited to literary fiction but also historical records, anthropological accounts, scientific discoveries, and administrative writing. Mcleod (2000) established two periods of colonialism which are, the decolonisation period during the twentieth century and prominent intellectual developments in the last part of the twentieth century. Postcolonialism studies the effects of colonisation on cultures and societies (Ashcroft *et al*, p. 168) which aims to demonstrate the extent to which the text contradicts its underlying assumptions (civilization, justice, aesthetics, sensibility, race) and reveals its (often unwitting) colonialist ideologies and processes (Ashcroft *et al*, p. 173).

Historical records show British colonisation in Malaysia. In 1786, Francis Light established British prominence in Penang while James Brooke declared himself Rajah of Sarawak in 1842. The British North Borneo Company (BNBC) in 1881 began to exploit North Borneo's resources till 1964. Within this period, various texts in English were published. British imperialism and imperial travel enabled its subjects, white novelists, ethnographers, explorers, and colonial administrators to create a systematic recording of colonial narratives which formed the representation of Peninsula Malaysia, Sarawak, and Sabah's native culture and people vis-à-vis historical and administrative documents, volumes of ethnographic and anthropological publications and travel narratives through a Western worldview for a white audience. The term, Orientalism, means a system of representations that function to justify western colonialism. These imperial narratives, were part of a larger systematic collection of knowledge, which according to *Orientalism* took root in the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient dealing with it by making statements about it, authorising views about it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style of

dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (Said, 1978, p. 3). Their written accounts about the colonised are an agent that disseminates and perpetuates stereotypes and personal judgements about the colonised. In the process, colonial travel accounts marginalised and casted a negative glance at the cultures it portrayed. The images of indigenous and non-indigenous Sabahans in the public and domestic space have spawned and influenced decades of stereotypes, racial and communal structure in the Sabahan society. These images are reflected in Gingging (2007) in *I Lost my Head in Borneo*. In so doing (Western travel narratives) created, developed, and reproduced an image of Borneo as a place that is undomesticated and mysterious; a place where wild men live as one with nature (p. 4).

In Borneo, western narratives abound in topics centralising on colonial history, geography, biology, botany, and cultural anthropology from an overwhelmingly western lens. Much of this literature *written by males* was treated as the definitive compendium of Borneo and it is accepted by the academia. Goh (2015) stated that “there is a lack of resources depicting British colonial lifestyle especially colonial women in and around the Borneon island”, and this is the gap in literature.

Sabah's colonial travel writers and their works have not been critiqued as such as the researchers who have studied about them view their works as counter-colonial discourse. Agnes Keith and Tina Rimmer are unique cases whereby research has not viewed their works under postcolonial analysis - that is to say, the works have been argued to be anti-oriental in representation compared to other travel writers in the region. As a result, these writers and their texts have been given the peripheral treatment in academia. For decades, more attention and significance has been accorded to the scientific and historical research of Sabah. Research in these fields are given greater attention while literary criticism – which is crucial for any postcolonial society – is the missing link to Sabah's alternative history. Notedly, these personalities, who shaped the literary and scholarly landscape of Borneo Studies were largely limited to men. Colonial texts were also a predominantly male venture. Although there is a gradual paradigm shift, colonial narratives and travel books are viewed as a way for Sabah to reclaim their own identity and history from a western point of view.

The current literature on women's travel writing about Sabah (Hull & Mohammad Rashidi, 2015; Pakri & Openg, 2013; Lind *et al.*, 2015, Lind 2017) has studied the narratives of Agnes Keith and Tina Rimmer (*Land Below the Wind* and *A Life on Two Islands*). Susan Morgan (Introduction, *A Decade in Borneo*, 2001) and Nicholas Tarling (*Mrs Pryer in Sabah*, 1991) have provided critical commentaries on Ada Pryer's writings. Goh (2017) studied Rimmer's paintings from the colonial era. Recently, Robert (2020) examined three texts written by Ada Pryer (*A Decade in Borneo*, 1894), Agnes Keith (*Land below the Wind*, 1939) and Tina Rimmer's *A Life on Two Islands* (2017) and their representation of Sabah's landscape and its people to the western world in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hitherto, scholarship on colonial travel writing as a genre critiqued men and women's travel writings in the Peninsula and Sarawak. This field of study is notably limited in Malaysia, but it is in no small way enlightening to the field of postcolonial studies and revisionist history.

## **2. Colonial Narratives of Sabah: Future for Criticism?**

The Malay Archipelago fascinated other writers, such as Joseph Conrad because it offered their works a landscape that could highlight their hero's rejection of a corrupted European world for the uncorrupted existence in a remote and primeval world (Dingwall, 1994, p. 216).

From the onset of colonialism, the physical geography of Borneo attracted western male adventurers for its enormous and unhabituated tropical jungles as well its exoticness and the sublime which became narrative topics. Furthermore, the exuberant and lesser-known peoples' cultures and practices fed the Western imagination. The start of novelisations of Borneo in the

literary genre was substantiated by Joseph Conrad's earliest novels, *Almayer's Folly* (1895) and *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896) as well as W. Somerset Maugham's *Borneo Stories* (1976). Frank Swettenham, Alfred Wallace Russell, Anthony Burgess, Isabella Bird, William Somerset Maugham produced known works pertaining to the British hegemony and their works are considered canonical in the context of Malaysian history. In Borneo, the works that stood out in scholarship were writings of Joseph Conrad, James Brooke, Owen Rutter, Redmond O' Hanlon and Kennedy Gordon Tregonning, Agnes Keith, and Harriet McDougall. Most of these writers are males. Women writers are noticeably scarce.

The texts written by males were androcentric and typically reflected on bureaucratic activities, adventure and anthropology. According to Holden, the tradition of European writing in Sabah developed into two disparate traditions: Earlier travel writers were explorers who "published accounts of both military conquest and feats of exploration" (p. 756) and scientific investigations which Holden states as having "a strong cohesiveness and a considerable investment in exoticism, with almost obligatory descriptions of durians and orang utans" (p. 756–757). In comparison to many colonial narratives critiqued in west Malaysia, there is an abundance of literature in Sabah which are yet to be scrutinised by scholars.

Looking at past scholarship will allow many to understand the critique of western accounts or fiction in pre-Malaysia. Researchers produce critical commentary of colonial literature such as *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977) by Syed Hussein Alatas; *Resisting Colonial Discourse* by Zawiah Yahya (1990); *Colony, Nation and Globalisation: Not at Home in Malaysian and Singaporean Literature* by Eddie Tay, 2011, the critique of racist depictions by Frank Swettenham and Isabella Bird and colonial discourse in fiction and non-fictions (Tay, 2011; Siti Nuraisyah, 2014) and critique on colonial travel writing (Tay, 2011; Chandran & Vengadasamy, 2018). Since colonialism was "no place for a woman", texts written by colonial women travel writers would be impactful on the British image and readers.

Since the movement of women's emancipation in the 1970s, the study of gendered writing was apparent. It was a regular practice for colonial European women to produce appropriately informal and personal narratives in the form of letters and diaries which often remained unpublished in writer's lifetime or were only compiled and published as an afterthought (Saunders, 1998). Usually, these literary works were compiled in travel guides or anthologies that were dedicated for the traveller or reader reading about travel.

Tay (2011) and Sharifah Osman (2012; 2014) have reviewed the work of Isabella Bird and Emily Innes and their commentary on the indigenous women folk, racist depictions and ambivalent views on colonialism in colonial Malaya and Singapore. Robert (2020) claims that Keith's *Land Below the Wind* patronised orientalist views because it was viewed under a western lens. Robert also stated that Ada Pryer was more concerned with the commodification and representation of Sabah as an exotic and resourceful home for the empire while Tina Rimmer's narrative celebrates the belatedness of empire and its heroes and constructs new meanings for cultural appropriation in Sabah.

The literature review shows that postcolonial research and more endeavour can be carried out on colonial texts produced about Sabah to uncover more orientalist depictions of Sabah in its colonial past. The next section entails a logical reason as to why this should be undertaken.

### 3. The Missing Link: Postcolonial Studies in Sabah?

Earlier, this paper discussed colonial texts and the study of postcolonialism on them while this section will assess texts written by Malaysians about colonialism. This section also highlights that Borneo and Peninsula have their own separate identities and stories when it comes to postcolonial literature. Moreover, this section attempts to situate important periods of critical

thought in literary criticism in Malaysia. In comparison to Peninsula Malaysia, where writers and critics have produced various fiction and/or commentaries on post-colonial literature the Malaysian Borneo narrative is missing. Several researchers have asserted that Sabah and Sarawak literature in English is rich and diverse due to the population of numerous ethnic groups (Toh, 2016; Yeoh, Arbaayah & Sivagurunathan, 2012). A pioneering researcher on Borneo literature in English, Patrick Yeoh (2016), stated while Sabah and Sarawak are usually referred to as East Malaysia, as if they are one entity – which, to some extent, may be justifiable geographically – from the literary perspective, we are talking of two quite different niche areas of study despite certain cultural similarities (Toh, *Star Online*, p. 3).

The statement above suggests two pertinent aspects: 1) Borneo has been identified in a rather stereotypical and over-simplified way and 2) there is a burgeoning interest in what Sabah and Sarawak can offer to the literary world from an academic standpoint. Therefore, the literature of Sabah and the literature of Sarawak can be critique separately. Currently, English forms of writing can be found in the work of creative writers who contribute short stories to platforms such as Fixi Novo and the Borneo Book Project (*Chronicles of KK*, 2016; *Borneo Tales*, 2018) and local stories and legends written in English (*Kadazan Folklore* by Rita Lasimbang and a collection of local Bajau stories written by Sirhajwan Idek).

The English postcolonial writing scene in Borneo began later in comparison to West Malaysia. As mentioned before, the first academic institution in the country, the University of Malaya, had, for a clear reason, affiliations with the Malayan consciousness<sup>1</sup>. The English language, as Wignesan laments in *Writing in Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei* (1984), failed to spread roots in Borneo since Bahasa Malaysia, the National Malaysian language, superseded English in January 1983 (p. 149). He goes on to say that although a few Borneon-born writers wrote and learned to publish in English with an effectively appropriate use of standard English, the works failed to impact the individual, or regional and linguistic needs (p. 149). Additionally, Wignesan said of Borneon writers, “the competence of the Borneon writer in depicting his mileage, customs and legendary past may not be called into question: only his lack of a literary approach to his subject” (p. 151). The indigenous then, is expected to carry on the white man’s burden of circulating knowledge in English. To give emphasis to this point, Tay stated that, “English literature was the focal point around which the culture of the metropolitan centre was authorised, established and disseminated in the colonies” (p. 46). Wignesan could thus be viewed as lamenting the lack of canonical fiction and non-fiction writing about Borneo. The indigenous of Sabah and Sarawak practiced an oral tradition rather than the written form.

The study of postcolonial literature began not long after when Malaysian scholars took the helm from essentially English educators. The literary academic scene gave birth to many Malaysian Chinese and Indian writers who took to migrant issues such as diaspora, dis belonging<sup>2</sup>, and many more. Malay writers and scholars also wrote about reclaiming their identity. Novelisations of these aspects infused the Malaysian scene with a very poignant reality of being a former colonised state. Thus, the post-war English literary scene in Malaysia was and still is dominated by a Malayan consciousness. According to Patke and Holden, Major developments in creative writing in English had to wait until after the second World War. While

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<sup>1</sup> The University of Malaysia Sabah was only instituted in 1994 and even now does not teach Literature as a subject course for its students nor has an English department unlike major public universities in Peninsula Malaysia.

<sup>2</sup> Postcolonial literature in works (poems, shorts stories, novels, postcolonial criticism and thought) written by Shirley Lim, K. S. Maniam, Kee Thuan Chye, Tash Aw, Farish A. Noor, Syed Hussein Al-Alatas, Tan Twan Eng and Ee Tiang Hong to name a few.

the British prepared for decolonisation and independence for the region in the 1950's Malayan writers set about the task of defining and inventing a Malayan consciousness in English (p. 43).

Criticism of colonial narratives have revitalised the literary scene in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Patke and Holden argue that English readers in Malaya showed resistance towards foreigners' writing 'knowingly' about Malaysia and propagating stereotypes and clichés to readers of English who do not possess knowledge about Malaysia (p. 136). In tandem with criticism towards colonial stereotypes in the writings of then colonial officers and their spouses, Malaysian writers have tackled issues such as identity and unhomeliness post-independence. In the first wave of literary writing, these writers discuss issues of displacement from their home countries (India and China) while the current issue discussed in novelisations within this century is the sense of a Malaysian identity. This much has been purported by Gabriel (2011), who said while the early immigrants and their immediate descendants would have regarded Indianness or Chineseness as their primary focal point of cultural identification, the newer generational descendants now define their cultural identity in terms of a 'Malaysianness' (p. 342).

Thus, literature informs society about its past and present, while post colonialism as a field of critical inquiry unravels the feelings, emotions, challenges, and history of the colonised. It is apparent that local writing about the postcolonial experience in English in Sabah is lacking therefore revisiting colonial texts might fill in the gap of historical and literary inquiry.

#### **4. Conclusion**

From the brief review, studies on English colonial narratives and postcolonial fiction in Malaysia, especially those in the peninsula has been ongoing for the past three decades. This brief article hopes to stir interest in the field of postcolonial theory and English narratives in Sabah. Theoretically, postcolonial theory rejects orientalist and modes of representations. Thus, the English narratives deserve a second look. This can also become the starting point for postcolonial criticism upon colonial texts – although written in the past – can bring new interpretations and understanding of Borneo from local and modern perspectives. Imperatively, this can pave the way for a wider inclusion of western representations or studies of Borneo to be critiqued and given academic attention.

Much of what modern Malaysians know about Sabah is based on what has been created by the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and its image has been disseminated through social media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore, the importance of indigenous and alternative history cannot be understated. Gayatri Spivak (p. 228) introduced the term worlding which means to deny authoritative status to pre-existing indigenous records of a country so that only the coloniser has the right to speak and write about it. Thus, it is important to reevaluate the written works of colonial administrators, travel writers and authors.

Undeniably, colonial, travel and postcolonial narratives have found resurging popularity. We usually find them exclusively in selected bookstores in shopping malls around KK city they are in the tourist section for leisure reading. Because Sabah has become a popular tourist destination, these books play a role in promoting the state to foreigners. On an academic level, it is apparent that western thought and construction of identity dominates the circulation of knowledge about Sabah. The us versus Other dichotomy is prevalent and dictates the worldview of North Borneo in colonial texts. These enabled colonial writers to project their own views and constructions about North Borneo which was essentially treated as a non-place. An important point Susan Morgan propounds on is that "European travel literature on Borneo alone would require at least a book-length study" (p. 67). On a positive note, NPH and UMS have expanded their research on the cultural heritage and hopefully they will pave the way for criticism on colonial narrative. Lastly, more postcolonial criticism can contribute positively to

the literature and academic studies about Sabah. It can help others understand the implicit meanings of colonial travel texts in the works of male and female travelers and expats who came to Sabah. Postcolonial studies is also useful in understanding the coloniser's view of the indigenous and challenge their perceived superiority by supplementing Sabahan history and indigenous worldview to contrast and balance western and eastern views. Furthermore, postcolonial studies can be a precursor to other studies revolving 'postcolonialism' in Sabah and hopefully spark a debate about colonial subjectivity, appropriation, and neo-colonialism. Another hope is that it will bring attention to Sabah's unique treatment of colonialism in the tourism industries.

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