

# A STUDY OF 'PANTUNS' IN THE MODERN MALAYSIAN ART

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## ABSTRACT

The visual artwork functions as a delivery platform in expressing personal thoughts of an artist. The classical Malay literature has gained the attention of several Malaysian artists in their painting artworks since the 1960s. The *Pantun* as a traditional genre of poems becomes one of the major interests among the artists. The objective of this paper is to conduct an academic study on the forms and meanings of *pantuns* in the painting artworks by artists such as Mohd Tajuddin Gendut and Ramli Salleh. Content analysis is the methodology used in examining the artworks which focus on the formalistic analysis and iconographic approach in understanding the intended meanings by the country's artists in their art and paintings. Findings show that the artists tend to transmit their messages about life and culture in the society which they represent in addition to expressing their appreciation towards the beauty of classical Malay literature as a Malay traditional heritage. It is hoped that from this study, the new generation of artists will preserve the elements of literature in their art activities.

**Keywords:** *Malay Classical Literature, Pantuns, Art and Paintings, Meaning*

## INTRODUCTION

The development of the Malay literature commenced with the oral tradition followed by written works and subsequently in print forms. The Malay literature encompasses all usages of the language be it in the creative form or otherwise (Ismail, 1974). The Malay literature emerged from the cognitive skills of the Malays. These cognitive skills refer to the ability of the Malays in self-expression such as *pantuns*, *pepatah*; the Malay proverbs as well as *seloka* and *gurindam*. The relationship between the classical Malay literature and the modern visual arts began somewhere around the 1970s (Siti Zainon Ismail, 1989: 11). The emergence of visual artworks with Malay contents started when there was a manifestation of love for the indigenous values. This came into effect with the organization of the National Cultural Congress in the year 1971 and the Seminar on Indigenous Roots organized by *Institut Teknologi MARA* in 1979. There was an awareness among the artists on the reality of local values and identity in their works whereby the values and identity in the cultural and artistic aspects of a community

were elevated. The environmental aspects such as the elements of nature, literature, history, art motives, the Islamic approach and so forth were inspired by several local artists (Mazlan & Rahman, 2011). The Malay literature started to gain attention in the 1960s when an artist cum poet used poetry as a genre for his source of inspiration. A case in point was Abdul Latif Mohidin whose paintings were inspired from the intense outburst in his poetry (Mazlan & Rahman, 2011). Other than Latif Mohidin, there were also other artists such as Siti Zainon Ismail who had elevated her paintings in poetry and this includes Ghafar Ibrahim during the 70s and 80s. In the context of the modern art development in Malaysia, an exhibition inspired by the Traditional Malay Literature was held for the first time where *pantun*, *syair*, *gurindam*, *seloka*, *puisi* and such were visually translated in the artworks (Mazlan & Rahman, 2011). The exhibition which was held in the year 2009 was an art event jointly organized by the National Visual Arts Gallery and the Institute of the Malay World and Civilization (ATMA), National University of Malaysia (UKM). The exhibition was held at the National Visual Arts Gallery, Kuala Lumpur with *The Beauty of The Malay Intellect* or *Tampannya Budi* as the theme. The exhibition has its roots in a major research entitled 'The Malay Visual Culture' which was conducted by ATMA since the year 2006 (Salmah Abu Mansor, 2009: 6). The organization of the event has successfully elevated the dignity of the Traditional Malay Literature with a breath of fresh air through visual arts which represented the national identity (Sharifah Hapsah, 2009: 5).

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Classical Malay Literature is very high in value. During the Negeri Sembilan Traditional Text Discourse program held on the 16 August 2017, organized by the Institute of Language and Literature (*Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*) with the cooperation of the Museum Board of Negeri Sembilan and the Department of Culture and Arts of Negeri Sembilan, the Hon. Tan Sri Dato' Seri Utama Dr. Rais Yatim mentioned in his keynote address that the quest for knowledge and the Malay intellectual skills as contained in the old texts needs to be exposed so as to hold the community heritage in high esteem. This study chose *pantuns* as one of the genres in Malay literature which is part of the old Malay texts. The Malay *pantuns* are Malay ancestral heritage based on the intelligence and experience of our elders. Nevertheless, studies on the Malay intellect and psyche in *pantuns* and paintings are scarce. Such studies which focused on the forms and implied meanings based on the themes of the Malay intellect and psyche are not extensively carried out in art and paintings.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To study the forms of images as contained in the paintings derived from the Malay *pantuns*.
2. To study the implied meanings of the Malay *pantuns* in the paintings.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Pantuns* as a Traditional Poetry Genre

*Pantuns* are a traditional poetry genre other than *syair*, *gurindam*, *nazam* and *seloka*. Harun Mat Piah states in his book *The Traditional Malay Poetry: A Discourse on Genre and its Functions* (1989: 91) that *pantuns* are forms of poetry which in general have four lines in a verse, four words in a line, a rhythmic end of a-b-a-b with few variations and exceptions. The first two lines are called the foreshadower and the last two lines make up the content/objectives. Based on studies in traditional Malay sayings, poems, proverbs and old Malay *pantun* verses, Hashim Hj. Musa (2008) was able to establish 26 core Malay psyches or social character traits. Those who were able to adopt these traits were perceived to have high ethical and moral values as well as excellent conduct and they were highly respected by the society. They were regarded as the gentiles who were good natured and well-mannered, polite and urbane, sensible and of influence, as well as insightful and wise.

## The Concept of the Malay Intellect and Psyche

The concept of the Malay intellect and psyche refers to their ability and competency in using their mind and thoughts by the Grace of Allah (God). Their quick wittedness in facing and overcoming life challenges were determined by various factors such as education, experience and religious faiths. The concept of Malay intellect and psyche was defined by faith and fear of God (Allah). Thereafter, it becomes the foundation for life principles, thoughts and philosophy in the lives of the Malays. The concept of faith was much discussed in the Malay expressions such as *peribahasa* and *perumpamaan* as well as *pantuns*. In short, the concept of the Malay intellect and psyche consists of three major components which determine the measure of wisdom i.e. knowledge, universal view, values and their conduct (Norazimah et al. 2017). These three components were blended to form good manners, behavior, discretion, psyche and common sense in generating righteous human beings. Therefore, the legacy of the Malay social personality traits was preserved in their character traits or psyche which were manifested in their actions, behavior, good manners, values, norms, thoughts as well as their knowledge.

## SCOPE OF STUDY

The scope of study focuses on three painting artworks by three local artists. The artists have made paintings as their main interests. The selected masterpieces were obtained from the catalogue booklet "*Tampannya Budi*" (The Beauty of the Malay Intellect) which was published by the National University of Malaysia (UKM). The visual texts in the selected painting samples are realistic in nature. Realistic paintings were chosen as they facilitate this study to trace the theme of the Malay intellect and psyche in the painting artworks compared to abstract paintings.

## METHODOLOGY

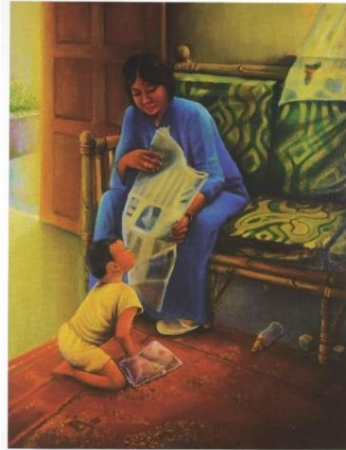
The research conducted was a descriptive study with the objective to discuss the findings of the Malay intellect and psyche in *pantuns* by using the qualitative analysis. The approach of this study on the visual texts and their meanings formed the basis of this study.

Content analysis was used in this study to examine the sample of the study. Iconographic analysis was used to examine the latent meaning behind the painting artworks. Iconography is the theory in the study of meaning which was contributed by Panofsky. In his book *The Meaning in the Visual Art* (1955), Panofsky stated that a work of art can be evaluated in three levels of analysis, i.e. *primary* (natural), *secondary* (conventional) and *intrinsic* (symbolic) or also known as pre-iconographic, iconographic and iconological.

The sampling method in the research data was conducted by using qualitative analysis in this brief study. This method was chosen based on selected samples consistent with the aspect of the study. The actual number of samples in this study is not the main objective in this study but the results derived from the data examined.

## ANALYSIS ON ARTWORK

The function of the Malay *pantuns* mirrors the thoughts and philosophy which portray the Malay community intellects who created them. Consistent with the functions of the *pantuns*, several mediums are used to communicate the purpose and intent which are expressed and implied. Among those are the color strokes in the paintings. In this section, three works of art are selected for analysis based on the *pantuns* which are included in the catalogue booklet *Tampannya Budi* (The Beauty of the Malay Intellect). Iconographic analysis was used to mark the projected images.



**Figure 1 Artist: Mohd Tajuddin Gendut, Title: Untitled, Year: 2009,  
Medium: Oil Paint on canvas, Size: 1102 cm x 81 cm**

The artist's drawing was based on the *pantun* which reads:

<i>Rumah kecil tiang seribu</i>	A tiny house with a thousand pillars
<i>Rumah besar bertiang sebatang</i>	A sole pillar holds a huge house
<i>Kecil-kecil ditimang ibu</i>	As kids we were pampered by mothers
<i>Bila besar ditimang gelombang</i>	In life we are so full of grouses

**Reference: The catalogue booklet "Tampannya Budi". Published by the National University of Malaysia (UKM)**

### **Pre – Iconographic**

The adoption of images is in the forms of rattan chair, door, carpet and curtains, a feeding bottle in addition to a newspaper and a book in the lower region. The woman is portrayed to be sitting on the rattan chair with the cushions in green and yellow patterns while reading the newspaper. The shade in the house adopts a monochromatic colour of yellow progressing to dark brown. The lighting effect as portrayed on the right creates a dark atmosphere and depth in space. The woman is wearing a blue *baju kurung* and is looking towards the small child who is at her feet. The image of the small child is portrayed sitting at her feet looking up with his posture facing towards the woman while he is holding a book. The small child is wearing a t-shirt and a pair of short trousers. Both images are dominantly portrayed as it is set in the middle of the living area. As a whole, this portrait is realistic in nature.

### **Iconographic**

The piece of artwork portrays the mood of a mother and child in a Malay family. The depiction of the Malayness is defined by the clothes as a subject which are worn by the woman in *baju kurung* and the atmosphere in the living room of the Malays. The gentleness and love of a woman towards her child are portrayed in the way she is holding the newspaper.

### **Iconology**

The interpretation of the artwork is defined in the third line *kecil-kecil ditimang ibu* (as kids we were pampered by our mothers) and in the fourth line *bila besar ditimang gelombang* (in life we are so full of grouses). Thus, the desired message is that no matter how great we are, the remarkable nature of a mother who gave birth and brought us up with much love is incomparable. In addition, no matter how high our standing is, there is no comparison to the magnificence of a mother. Such is that her prayers have no boundaries in the eyes of God.

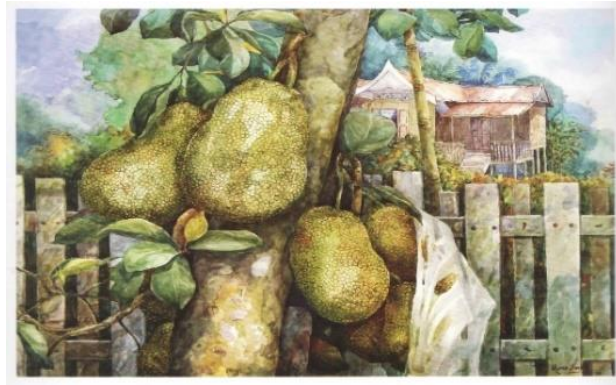


Figure 2 Artist: Ramli Salleh, Title: *Buah Cempedak di Luar Pagar* (The *Cempedak* Fruit outside the Fence), Year: 2009 Material: Water Color on paper. Size: 80 cm x 91.5 cm

The artist's drawing was based on the *pantun* which reads:

<i>Buah cempedak di luar pagar</i>	The <i>cempedak</i> fruit outside the fence
<i>Ambil galah tolong jolokkan</i>	Grab a pole to bring it down
<i>Saya budak baru belajar</i>	I am a newbie take no offence
<i>Kalau salah tolong tunjukkan</i>	Please correct me if I am wrong

Reference: The catalogue booklet "*Tampannya Budi*". Published by the National University of Malaysia (UKM)

## Pre – Iconographic

The image in the artwork is of a *cempedak* fruit and the tree. There are four *cempedak* fruits which are realistically painted in water color. Some parts of them are drawn behind a tree while the others are covered with a piece cloth. The *cempedak* fruits are drawn in the foreground whereby the fence is drawn in the middle ground. A kampong house is drawn in the background surrounded by nature. As a whole, the masterpiece depicts the local fruits and the village atmosphere in communicating the *pantun*.

## Iconographic

The foreshadow of the *pantun* which is used by the artist in transmitting the meaning of the *pantun* is *Buah cempedak di luar pagar* (the *cempedak* fruit was outside the fence) and not *buah cempedak di dalam pagar* (the *cempedak* fruit within the fence). In this context, there is a difference between within the fence and outside the fence. Trees which grow or are grown within the fence are considered a private property and belong to someone. Therefore, in order to pluck the *cempedak* fruits, we clearly need the help of another person to bring the fruit down. In the foreshadow of the *pantun*, nothing is stated about who the *cempedak* fruit is for, whether it is for us or for someone else. In addition, we need someone's help to get a long pole to bring the fruit down, reason being we may not know how to do it ourselves or that we perceive ourselves to be the masters thus letting others to pluck the fruit down for us. Without a doubt, the *cempedak* fruit outside the fence is not our absolute property.

## Iconology

The *cempedak* fruit outside the fence is a mere foreshadow. Needless to say, the real meaning is *Saya budak baru belajar, kalau salah tolong tunjukkan* (I am a newbie so correct me if I am wrong). It goes on to show that as a person who is still learning and in need of guidance, advice is much needed to correct any wrong doing. The *pantun* clearly represents the ranking of knowledge, in the mindset of

the Malays knowledge is not privately owned, that it is not within the perimeter, but it could be sought and learnt by all as it is within the grasp of all. Without knowledge, human beings would not be able to differentiate what is right and wrong. Armed with knowledge, human beings are able to progress and prosper. Those who do not seek knowledge are easily duped. Therefore, the *pantun* contains elements of advice in order to help each other in all fields of knowledge thereby forbidding the act of withholding knowledge.

## DISCUSSION AND FINDING

The results of this study show that the images of mother, child and the local fruits as well as the architecture of the Malay dwellings are the focus of the artists. Each painting uses internal spaces in the foreground, middle ground and the background. The *pantuns* applied in the masterpieces above focus on education and advice. The *pantuns* composed are meant for children, adolescents as well as parents. Thus, the Malay intellect and psyche are communicated in *pantuns* and the artists attempted to interpret their perceptions in the form of images. The underlying Malay intellect and psyche represent the Malay perception on education, family affairs and parenting.

## GLOSSARY

<i>Baju Kurung</i>	A traditional Malay dress which consists of a long dress and a <i>sarung</i> .
<i>Gurindam</i>	An irregular verse forms of traditional poetry containing two lines rhyming a-a, containing advice and philosophy.
<i>Nazam</i>	An old descriptive poetry containing advice and religious references.
<i>Pantun</i>	A quatrain rhyming a-b-a-b of which the first two lines present a figurative suggestion of what is more clearly stated in the last two lines.
<i>Pepatah</i>	A saying, expressing general truth.
<i>Peribahasa</i>	A proverb
<i>Perumpamaan</i>	A simile
<i>Puisi</i>	A Poetry
<i>Seloka</i>	A poetry which contains advice or social criticism
<i>Syair</i>	A narrative poetry rhyming a-a-a-a-, conveying a continuous idea from one stanza to the next and is sung in set rhythms

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