

## ALTERNATIVE AND NON-OBJECTIVE MUSLIM MALAY WORLDVIEWS IN DINA ZAMAN'S "KING OF THE SEA": THROUGH THE LENS OF MAGICAL REALISM

<sup>1\*</sup> Ida Baizura Bahar and <sup>2</sup> Nor Kamal Nor Hashim

<sup>1,2</sup>Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Malaysia

\*Corresponding author: idabb@upm.edu.my

### Abstract

Literary reviews on *King of the Sea* (2012), a collection of nine short stories, by the Malaysian author Dina Zaman (b. 1969), have highlighted the theme of the supernatural through issues on the diversity of the Muslim Malay way of life. The text is a fictional narrative on the Muslim Malay beliefs and practices in the phenomenon of supernatural existence and how the influence of beliefs in the supernatural is inherent in the Malay culture. While literary critics agree that the stories are weaved with aspects of the magical to make it more culturally acceptable as a social reality, Bradley (2012: 206), however, contests this view by describing it as Dina's transient and elusive attempt at magical realism although he concedes that there exist some vague impressions of it. Here, magical realism is understood to be fantastical elements which are miraculous, yet seen as ordinary, and ordinary as miraculous where the reality is not abandoned but is extended. Focussing on Dina's depictions of supernatural beliefs among the Muslim Malay characters, this paper aims to discover how the alternative and non-objective Muslim Malay worldviews are demonstrated by the author in *King of the Sea* using the understanding of magical realism as conceptualised by Maggie Ann Bowers (2004). The findings show that Dina depicts the alternative and non-objective Muslim Malay worldviews of the Muslim Malay characters as grounded in their beliefs in the local Malay superstitions, myths and legends reflected through literary elements which are indeed characteristics of magical realism.

**Key words:** Alternative and non-objective Muslim Malay worldviews, "King of The Sea", magical realism, Malay myths and legends, Malay supernatural beliefs

### Introduction

Our critical thinking today is circumscribed by our culture and civilization; that is to say our perceptions of things and events are based upon our knowledge and way of thinking. There are certain things which are acceptable to our minds and certain others which are not. There are limits to which we respond in either belief or disbelief.

This is best described by Bidney as the “psycho-cultural attitude or degree of belief” (p. 300). Thus, we use the word ‘myth’ to describe the elements of belief held by others but not by us. In literature, the theme of the supernatural represents our thoughts and beliefs with regards to how the human mind views life in general. It has been presented in literary works as a way of life for society, focussing on the themes of good versus evil as part of our system of belief beyond our own social reality. Previously, the role of literature was to act as a medium to record past thoughts and beliefs pertaining to paranormal elements for the awareness of future society.

The most recent and prominent fictional literary work in Malaysian Literature in English, which features supernatural themes, can be found in a collection of nine short stories, *King of the Sea* (2012), written by the Malaysian author, Dina Zaman (b. 1969). We argue, in this paper, that Dina’s collection contains elements of magical realism intertwined with depictions of the Muslim Malay character’s supernatural beliefs and practices in the local Malay folklore where the Muslim Malay characters consistently relate spirituality in Islam with folkloristic traditions.

In this study, we analysed the Muslim Malay characters’ belief and practices in the supernatural by applying the magical realism framework conceptualised by Maggie Ann Bowers (2004). The focus of this study is not only to provide a clear and organised outline of the aforementioned depictions based on the Muslim Malay characters’ supernatural beliefs and practices as recorded by the prominent Malaysian professor of anthropologist Mohd. Taib Osman (1988; 1989), but also to embark on an analysis of the topic with strong focus on Muslim Malay supernatural beliefs and practices which implicitly depict the disconnection of the Muslim Malay identity and Islam as their religion. In conducting this study, we relied heavily on studies on magical realism and employed the socio-anthropological approach outlined by Mohd. Taib, which could be considered as using a multidisciplinary approach.

## Literature Review

The collection of short stories *King of the Sea* by Dina, published by Silverfish Books of Kuala Lumpur, is her collection of third fiction published after a long break of fifteen years following her second collection of short stories, “night & day” (1997), published by Rhino Press, Petaling Jaya. Dina writes using language that is contemporary and unconventional, which displays her non-censored style by allowing her characters a total freedom in speech including swearing and obscenities. Dina has been described as a Muslim Malay writer who defies social convention and is boldly outspoken, and she writes about people who do not live in the mainstream of society. However, as it is a relatively contemporary collection, consequently there is yet to be noteworthy academic studies on the collection except for a few notable literary reviews (Bradley, 2012; Uthaya, 2012; Alifah, 2015). Therefore, due to the fact that the collection has yet to be analysed using a critical literary approach, we decided to select this collection due to its themes and portrayals of characters which depict supernatural beliefs and practices among the Muslim Malay characters by utilising the conceptual framework of magical realism by Bowers (2004).

The most notable journal review about her collection was published in *Asiatic: IJUM Journal of English Language and Literature* (2012) by Martin Bradley. Bradley, in his review, questioned Dina's "bold attempts to impart a taste of magical realism into many of the stories" (Bradley, 2012, p. 204) as he argued that they, in turn, become a sheer fantasy which, as a matter of fact, made the attempt falter and dissipate as he believed that she is not on a par with established magical realism writers, such as the British writer Angela Carter (1940-1992) or Salman Rushdie (b. 1947). So as to reach the status of the writers, Bradley (2012) was of the opinion that Dina needs to mend her craft more closely in order to escape from being accused of merely dabbling into magical realism.

In another review, Uthaya Sankar (2012) focused on the issues of Malay culture and Islam which heavily influence *King of the Sea*. To be more specific, Uthaya suggested that Dina reminisces a lot about her stories and memories back in her hometown, Terengganu, when she was furthering her studies in Lancaster, England. He added that all the nine short stories in the fiction are able to stand on its own and they invoke a particular holistic depiction into the folktales and stories of the writer's hometown. Uthaya (2012) further argued that the fiction also illuminates the Muslim Malay community life stories which reflect closely the Malay beliefs of shaman, midwife, and local traditional delicacies. To him, Dina has brilliantly weaved the short stories with certain dialogues and phrase in the Terengganu dialect which inevitably give local value towards all the short stories that she has written in a creative manner. The way Uthaya (2012) saw it, the stories of local fisherman village along the beaches, which underlie the fiction, is not mundane and, in fact, Dina is able to blend the content, theme and narration technique extremely well to the extent that all the 'ordinary and easy' actions of everyday life become 'extraordinary and interesting' throughout her meticulously written fiction.

On the other hand, Alifah Zainuddin (2015), in her review of the collection, discussed the issue of the Muslim Malay identity. She put emphasis on the disconnection and disintegration of the Muslim Malay identity especially those residing in the rural districts and the need to re-evaluate the perceived religiosity of the *kampung* (village) populace. In her opinion, *King of the Sea* echoed any typical Muslim Malay village in the country and the religious image depicted by the Muslim Malay villagers, appearing to be demure and respectable, are shattered by the supernatural beliefs, the reality of which reveal a deeply-rooted misguided notion of the professed religion.

According to Alifah (2015), the cultural animistic beliefs and practices, which are contrary to the strict dogmas of the religion, have confused the nation's attempt to define Islam as the practising religion of the majority. Giving example from one of the short stories, Alifah (2015) questioned the misinterpretation of the basic tenet of the Islamic faith where the Muslim Malay characters in the short story clearly show two opposing elements of Islam which are monotheism and polytheism playing side-by-side. She suggested that Dina's characters in the short story subtly address the way Muslim Malays always tend to relate spirituality in Islam with mythological or folkloristic tradition which also, based on her observation, is thematically present in

many Malay literatures. She reiterated that, in the inconclusive portrayal of Dina's characters, some explanation or rather confirmation needs to be sought as to whether these diverse interpretations of Islam among the Muslim Malay community are deviated or simply a matter of perspective.

More importantly, Alifah (2015) posited the view that perception and reality are the short stories' main concern and these issues match a magical realism text whereby magical realism provides 'another way of knowing things'. She also described Dina as a traveller moving across borders by breaking the walls of preconceived beliefs and her navigation, through the lives of the village folks in Kuala Terengganu, is merely another route she has embarked on towards understanding the Muslim Malay identity. In her view, Dina's narrative reveals a kind of hypocrisy in the Malay ideals of Islam and, in their distinct categorisation of non-Muslim as non-believers, the Muslim Malay fails to recognise that some of the beliefs and practices could classify them as hypocrites which, in Islam, is worse than being a disbeliever. As Alifah (2015) viewed it, Islam provides an ethical framework that stems from the belief in the oneness of God. Thus, it is reasonable to draw a parallelism between the correct practice of Islam with a person's moral values and outlook.

Alifah (2015) also highlighted Dina's portrayal of the Muslim Malay characters in one of her short stories which involves black magic ritual in order to earn a living which she argued is a familiar circumstance in the Malay *kampong* community. The 'Malay dream', as it has been called, revolving around the idea of acquiring wealth and health in a 'magical' and almost effortless way, stems from an age old tradition of seeking the advice of *bomoh* (spiritual healers) instead of truly understanding and relying on God. As a result, the Muslim Malay *kampong* folks are left in a state of spiritual, mental or economical backwardness in their lives. Partial understanding of Islam among the rural folks also leads to moral depravity in the community.

Even though most of her non-fiction and fiction books have been examined in academic studies (Washima, 2007, Jerome, 2013), the fictional portrayals of Muslim Malay society has, so far, been overlooked in *King of the Sea*. Given the fact that Malays, as Muslims, undeniably inherited the ancient-old beliefs of Hinduism and Buddhism from their ancestors, it is not illogical to state that, in certain ways, these old age religions influenced the Muslim Malay aspects of life, such as their culture, custom, tradition and lifestyle. The beliefs in the supernatural are prevalent and have been practised by Muslim Malay society previously and may have been passed on orally or in written forms. In this regard, in contrast to Bradley's conviction, we hypothesise that Dina, in her collection, *King of the Sea*, has injected, highlighted and illuminated ingenious elements of magical realism which explicate more on the diversity of the Muslim Malay way of life and practices.

In our view, this is indeed the gap in academic scholarship on Dina's *King of the Sea* that we hope to fill through the findings obtained in this study. This collection contains many characteristics of magical realism which can be explored through the concept we will be using in this study. In addition, the portrayals of the characters in the

collection can be seen as illuminating the beliefs of the Muslim Malay characters in the supernatural belief and practice in local Malay folklore. The short story from her collection which we have selected for analysis is "King of the Sea".

## **Research Method**

In this section, we introduce the conceptual framework of our study, namely the notion of magical realism which has been refined and conceptualised by Bowers (2004). Her framework describes "a kind of realism different from the realism that most of our culture now experiences, where magical realism conveys the reality of different or alternative worldviews that actually exist or have existed" (Bowers, 2004, p. 90). There are two types of magical realism; firstly, ontological magical realism where "the beliefs, practices and actions described, as its source material, are derived from the cultural context of the community in which the text is set" (Bowers, 2004, p. 91) and, secondly, epistemological magical realism "which is influenced and motivated by sources which are not necessarily derived from the cultural context of the fiction or of the writer and in this type everything is led by the author's knowledge and understanding of literature" (Bowers, 2004, p. 92).

More importantly, writers in English are given the opportunity to express their perspectives regarding the unclear, far-fetched and absurd episodes in the real world which cannot be explained through cultural displacements. What they do then is to combine the local legends, myths and folklore images which are derived from the local cultures with the theme of the supernatural in order to represent societies. The following are elements of works of magical realism; "they contain fantastical elements; the fantastic elements may be intrinsically plausible but are never explained; the characters accept rather than question the logic of the magical element; they exhibit a richness of sensory details; they use symbols and imagery extensively; the emotions and the sexuality of the human as a social construct are often developed in great detail; they distort time so that it is cyclical or so that it appears absent" (Bowers, 2004, p. 92).

Another technique is "to collapse time in order to create a setting in which the present repeats or resembles the past; they invert cause and effect; for instance, a character may suffer before a tragedy occurs; they incorporate legends or folklores; they present events from multiple standpoints; for example, alternates detached which involved narrative voice; likewise, often shifts between characters' viewpoints and internal narration on shared relationships or memories; they mirror the past against the present; the astral against the physical planes; or characters one against another; and the open-ended conclusion leaves the reader to determine whether the magical and/or the mundane rendering of the plot are more truthful or in accord with the world as it is" (Bowers, 2004, p. 92).

As stated earlier, as our study examines a supernatural fiction by a Malaysian writer and focuses on Muslim Malay characters; therefore, two important studies by Mohd. Taib Osman, namely *Bunga Rampai: Aspects of Malay Culture* (1988) and *Malay Folk Beliefs: an Integration of Disparate Elements* (1989), will also be employed to assist us

in our analysis. Thus, this approach will also allow us to examine the author's portrayals of the Muslim Malay character's beliefs and practices of the supernatural in local Malay folklore, where we will also use the ontological magical realism concept as our framework in order to examine Dina's depictions of the Muslim Malay character's beliefs and practices in the supernatural.

## Discussion

The research objective of this study is guided by the following research question: how is the alternative and non-objective Malay Muslim worldviews revealed by the author in "King of the Sea"? "King of the Sea", which was chosen as the title of the collection itself, begins with the real world where we are introduced to a male character named Zani, a young boy who is mourning the loss of his father, who used to earn a living as a fisherman. Poverty stricken and the sole breadwinner after his father's death, Zani is asked by his mother to quit school and to work in order to sustain the family's life. He, however, questions her decision and could not comprehend why his brother, who is the eldest sibling, and his sister-in-law are reluctant to shoulder the family's responsibility to provide for the family household since they are older and have completed school. He also encounters unpleasant circumstances as his elder brother's wife is later found to be a witch and they make a living by using immoral means and casting spells. This can clearly be seen in the following excerpt:

*"As he approached Abang's room, he smelled kemenyan. He heard mutterings, a giggle and what sounded like doas from the room. Zani opened the door slowly, to find Kak Ton in a sarong worn as a kembangan, her shoulders exposed, sitting and giggling with Abang. From time to time she would kiss him. In her left hand, she held a Keris. Zani stared. Why is Kak Ton so improperly dressed? She couldn't dress that way here; this is Mak's House. She's nearby." He peered through the door again, and saw Kak Ton sliding the Keris gently against Abang's neck. His brother was smiling. "What do you really want?" she asked Abang. Zani scampered off as quietly as he could. She really was a witch! (Dina, 2012, p. 95)*

As seen above, Zani discovers the two of them engaged in an odd, mystifying black magic ritual. As a witch, his sister-in-law, on a number of occasions, is witnessed by him as being possessed by an evil spirit and, while holding a *keris* (Malay asymmetrical dagger) in a state of trance, repetitively asks "what do you want?" to Zani's brother. In Islam, this is what is meant by the term hypocrite (*munafiq*), where Islam provides an ethical framework that stems from the belief in the oneness of God. Thus, it is reasonable to draw parallelism between the correct practice of Islam with a person's moral values and outlook.

The scenario presented in the form of Zani's brother and his wife is a familiar circumstance in the Muslim Malay *kampung* community. As stated by Alifah (2015) earlier, the 'Malay dream' revolves around the idea of acquiring wealth and health in a 'magical' unIslamic way, where this supernatural belief and practice stems from an

ancient tradition of seeking the advice and service of spiritual healers or shamans (*bomoh*) instead of truly believing in, understanding in and relying on God. In the Islamic teaching, it is known as a practice of witchcraft (*sihir*) but is strictly prohibited to be practised as it is the act of *djinn* (*iblis*) and satan (*syaitan*). This prohibition also applies to the practice of shamanism in the Muslim Malay community even though this practice can be seen as part and parcel of the Muslim Malay life and not alien to the life of a particular Muslim community due to the existence of shamanism and is infused in the lives of the Muslim Malays (Mohd. Taib, 1988). The practice of witchcraft (*sihir*) is compatible with popular religions but some aspects of it do seem incompatible with the strict teachings of Islam, especially where there is soliciting with supernatural beings outside the orbit of Islam as discussed by Mohd. Taib (1989). Thus, one of the rationales used by the shaman (*bomoh*) is to recite verses from the *Qur'an* besides following the ritualistic formulae. The excerpt below reflects this view:

*Zani got out of bed and walked to Abang's room. There had to be money tucked away somewhere.*

*He lit the lamp and found the room empty. Well, they certainly took everything. It didn't look like there was any money in the room.*

*As he was about to leave, he saw a little cardboard box in a corner.*

*He walked towards it slowly, and opened to find candles, a well-thumbed Quran, a little toy elephant with outstretched hands and the Keris he had seen Kak Ton playing with the night he spied on them.*

(Dina, 2012, p. 97)

It is most interesting to note that, in the belief of the Muslim Malays, however, no matter how large a magician's earning is, they cannot bring happiness or riches. It should be borne in mind too that Islam recognises the existence of magic (*sihir*) but the practice is forbidden because it is regarded as the work of evil creatures, such as the devil (*syaitan*) and the 'infidel djinn' (*iblis*) (Mohd. Taib, 1988). As a result, this often leaves the Muslim Malay rural people in a state of backwardness in all aspects of their lives-economically, mentally and spiritually.

Referring back to the short story, the apparition of Zani's dead father appearing from the sea, giving him orders and advising him to continue with life, reveals the reality of life. The message seems to be that one should carry on with life despite whatever obstacles and challenges one needs to endure even if it means we have lost our loved ones. Indeed, the moral of the story here is that life has to go on. Zani is confident that he is not hallucinating but he adamantly believes that the apparition appearing before him from the sea is indeed his father:

*Zani was thinking about all this when he saw a man emerge from the sea.*

*At first, the man's head appeared to be bobbing about, like a seagull on the sea, moving with the waves. Then the man's neck showed, and slowly, with each wave, the rest of him materialised.*

*Zani stared. What was that? A ghoul? A djinn?*

*The man moved towards him.*

*As he approached, Zani realised that the man looked like Abah,*

*"Abah?"*

*The man looked at Zani. It was him! (Dina, 2012, p. 101)*

Apparently, the spirit of the father is still attached to the family, especially Zani. Zani is so ecstatic when he realises that the sea spirit appearing before him is that of his father. He does not question the veracity of the apparition but rather accepts it without any uneasy feelings or rejection, and without doubt having total belief by insisting that the apparition is indeed his father. They even have a very serious conversation in which the apparition is able to give him advice and order. The excerpt below describes the situation:

*The man looked at the darkening skies. The sea began to whisper again.*

*"Tell your mother I love her. Tell your brother to divorce his wife. Tell your sister to be strong"*

*"And me?"*

*"I am the king of the sea"*

*The man dived into the water, and soon Zani saw him swimming away, just like his father once did, with strong arms and weak legs. (Dina, 2012, p. 102-103)*

As seen above, the Malay belief in supernatural entities, such as the force of spirits, is ambivalent. Spirits are forces which pervade the environment and with which man has to come to terms for good or for evil in his daily life. There are, first of all, the nature spirits which control the elements of nature (Skeat & Blagden, 1966). These beings inhabit the sea, sky, land, rivers, hills and forest. The belief, regarding their existence and power, is observed by invoking them at such instances when land is cleared for cultivation, when jungle produce is collected, when they fish in the sea and streams or when they are at the mercy of the elements of nature. The well-being and success of humans are in his ventures; therefore, they are believed to be dependent on the disposition of the nature spirits. The coexistence of religious and spirit beliefs is well illustrated by the fact that, when a child is born, the call to prayer is whispered into his ear but, when the infant is a few months older, rites, in which he is introduced to the spirits of the earth and sea, are also held (Wilkinson, 1957).

The indigenous terms for these spirit beings are *jembalang* or *mambang*. The term *hantu*, which normally refers to ghosts in general, may also be used. Thus, *jembalang tanah* and *hantu tanah* both refer to the spirit of the earth and *hantu laut* (*spirit of the sea*) is another name of *mambang tali arus* (*spirit of the midcurrents*). The nature spirits have no fixed forms and are conceived in various ways. Annandale and Robinson (1903), believe, for instance, that the *hantu laut* assume many shapes. Like other *hantu*, many different kinds which exist on land and in water, the *sea spirits* have the power of changing their form and of rendering themselves either visible or invisible. They may take the appearance of giants walking on the waves, of phantom that disappear when approached, or of lights like those of enormous fireflies that dance over the sea or settle on the masts of boats. The last is their most common manifestation, as seems to be also the case on other parts of the coast of the Malay Peninsula (Wilkinson, 1957).

It is also believed that a *hantu laut* sometimes sits on a mast in this form and pours down dirty water into boat until it is filled and sinks, the spirit's object being that it may feast on the crew when they drowned. Opinions differ, however, as to whether it actually devours their flesh in which some fishermen asserting that it only drinks up their *semangat* (directive souls). Some *bomoh ikan*, however, know a charm by which dirty water poured down by a *sea spirit* can be transformed into fist of a highly esteemed species know as *ikan duri* (thorn fish) (Wilkinson, 1957). With regards to the apparition Zani meets, it can be identified as "King of the Sea", the *hantu laut* which has taken on the image of Zani's dead father.

It is clearly depicted through the Muslim Malay characters in the short story that the oblivion of the Muslim Malay in putting undivided faith in the power of God and adhere to the true teaching of Islam are shaken by the beliefs and practices in the supernatural. Here, we suggest that Dina implicitly poses a thought-provoking question of the Muslim Malay characters being hypocrites (*munafiq*) and the Malay belief in the force of spirit which is ambivalent. Dina applies the magical realism element of the closeness or near merging of two realms of two worlds which leaves the reader in a timeless stance where life and death co-exist. On one side, Dina has depicted the worldview in a real modern setting, including authentic descriptions of human beings, while on the other side, Dina has also depicted the supernatural, magical and mystical. This is reflected in Zani's confession and undoubted belief that the sea spirit is his father; thus, merging the realism and the miraculous, and providing us with the alternative and non-objective Malay Muslim worldviews as first posited by Uthaya (2012) and Alifah (2015). These characteristics of ontological magical realism then does not support the view suggested earlier by Bradley (2012) who questioned the short story as merely representing elements of magical realism.

## **Conclusions**

Based on our findings, we have discovered that the alternative and non-objective worldviews of the Muslim Malay are put forward by the author to reveal the Muslim Malay view of the world that is different from the objective view of the general people. This indirectly conveys the author's message of demonstrating that the Muslim Malay alternative and non-objective worldviews can indeed be reflected by using magical realism as a medium. This is despite the fact that we have found, along the way, that the non-objective worldview of the Muslim Malay characters collide with the strict dogmas of Islam as the religion thus indicating evidence of the extent of the non-objective worldview of the Muslim Malay characters in the short story.

What Dina has done through magical realism is to show us an alternative world through the eyes of the 'others'. Yet, our analyses of Dina's "King of the Sea" has also shown how she invites readers to compassionately experience the world as many of her fellow human beings see it. Thus, magical realism can be seen to contain a few main effects by which it conveys alternative and non-objective worldviews, and those effects relate to the ways in which this worldview is dissimilar to the objective view. In these other realities, the magical and the ordinary are one and the same, time is not linear and causality is subjective.

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