ISLAMICISATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND ENGLISH LITERARY STUDIES
In the Age of Islamophobia and Westernophobia

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements vii
Foreword viii
Editors' Introduction x

PART 1
Islamicisation of Knowledge, Language and Literature in Islam

An Introduction to Islamicisation of Knowledge 2
Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf

The Position of Language and Literature in Islam 14
Akmal Khuzairi Abdul Rahman

PART 2
Making Connections: English Literary Studies, Islam and Islamic Literature

An Overview of English Literary Tradition from Beowulf to the Twentieth Century 34
Qurat-ul-Ain Shirazi

The Image of Muslims in the Elizabethan Literature 54
Mohammad Makram

Edgar Allan Poe’s Islamic References and Possible Influences 75
Faatimah Sabryyah Raheem

Free-will as Self-Assertion: A Comparative Study of Selected Poems by Muhammad Iqbal and Robert Browning 92
Aimillia Mohd Ramli
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A Geography of Knowledge: The Kampung and the Journey Towards Knowledge in Awang Goneng’s Growing up in Trengganu and Riri Riza’s Laskar Pelangi

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Introduction

From Thailand in the west to the easternmost islands of Indonesia, the kampung, or the village, has defined Southeast Asian living space and built environment for thousands of years. As a philosophy and approach towards living, the kampung combines social ties (which are inclusive of family and kinship structures as well as those between neighbours) with the physical environment, both natural and man-made. Kampungs continue to survive in the twenty-first century, although the onslaught of globalisation and “progress” has seen the demise of many; over the years, kampung-dwellers too have migrated to urban centres, displaced by progress or attracted by promises of wealth and opportunity in the great cities of Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur or Bangkok.

The kampung now brings to mind a myriad of associations — on the one hand, it could be an idealised space of a simpler, less materialistic existence; a place for urban-dwellers to heal their weary minds and rejuvenate their spirit and, on the other hand, a backwater of ignorance and bigotry. Less explored is the concept of the kampung as a base for the transmission of knowledge, whether as informal knowledge (advice, instruction and wisdom from parents and elders; experience; interaction with the local community) or as formal knowledge (instruction by teachers at schools and places of worship).

Two narratives — Growing Up in Trengganu (2007) a memoir by Awang Goneng, a Malaysian journalist and writer based in the United Kingdom, and Laskar Pelangi (2008), directed by Riri Riza, the film adaptation of a bestselling, semi-autobiographical Indonesian novel of the same name by Andrea Hirata — have at their hearts the journeys of their protagonists towards knowledge in the kampung. The kampung as a geography of knowledge consists of geophysical structures and features, built environment, routes, pathways, and social networks that, taken together, create a distinctive learning environment for the protagonists of Growing Up in Trengganu (GIT) and Laskar Pelangi (LP).

The Kampung, the Politics of Space and the Journey Motif

Both Growing Up in Trengganu and Laskar Pelangi are set in kampungs populated by Muslim Malay communities, in the Malaysian state of Trengganu and the Indonesian island of Belitung respectively. Linguistically and ethnically speaking, despite the physical distance between these two sites, the two communities or kampungs are Malay, speaking the Malay language in their respective dialects. In the novel version of Laskar Pelangi, Ikbal, the narrator, recalls evenings when his father would listen to Malay songs on a Malaysian radio station; a parallel episode can be found in Growing Up in Trengganu, when the writer recounts the Malay songs sung by R. Azmi, a popular singer in the 1950s, which he heard playing on the radio in a coffee-shop near his childhood home (GIT 25-26). These two instances indicate both linguistic and cultural affinities between the communities of Trengganu and Belitung.

The geography of knowledge represented by the built environment and social networks of the kampung in both texts will be examined from Islamic and Malay-Nusantara concepts of knowledge and space, among them the significance of mosques, religious schools and surau as centres of learning, the role of informal instruction and education, the role of village elders, parents, teachers, neighbours and other figures as facilitating the protagonists’ entry into the world through

A map would show the reader that Trengganu or Terengganu (modern spelling) is located on the northeastern coast of the Malay Peninsula, while Belitung lies to the south of the Peninsula, a point between the Peninsula, Sumatra and Borneo islands.

A surau or musolla is a small prayer hall that caters to the needs of the community that lives in its vicinity; a person may choose to perform congregational prayers at the surau if the larger mosque is far away.
wisdom and knowledge, and the significance of the journey, both actual and as a motif, in the quest for knowledge.

Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of smooth and striated spaces (cited in Van Leeuwen 2007) will be deployed in my reading of the depiction of Belitong in Riri Riza’s Laskar Pelangi. The film highlights the wide gap between children who attend privileged schools and those who could only afford basic education provided by Muhammadiyah, a non-governmental, Islamic organisation, through cinematic images of the island’s built environment and geophysical features.

When discussing the journey motif in literature, it is important to include the concept of rites of passage, those momentous times and events in a narrative when the protagonist crosses thresholds — from being an individual to becoming a member of society, from childhood to adulthood, from ignorance to knowledge. The *kampung* provides many instances and settings for such events, as several episodes from Awang Goneng’s memoir and Riri Riza’s film show. Joseph Campbell sums up the stages in the journey motif as ‘*separation – initiation – return*’ (1973: 30; author’s emphasis); several episodes from the two narratives echo this pattern and it will be shown how they represent the protagonists’ journey towards knowledge.

The *Kampung* as Social Space

In tracing the origins of the *kampung*, Raja Bahrin Shah notes that the earliest definition of the *kampung* was attempted in the text of the Law of Melaka, as “the ‘compound’ of a wealthy person” (1988: 12). However, coming up with a definition proves to be as difficult a task as determining the boundaries of the *kampung*, for “villages sometimes grow and extend towards the fringes of one another” (Raja Bahrin Shah 1988: 12). He explains that the *kampungs* in the Malay Peninsula appeared and developed along rivers and on coasts in response to international trade, as well as to serve the needs of the ruling class in a feudal system — *kampungs* housed the followers and retinue of sultans and local lords. Today, the *kampung* is understood as a village or rural settlement, but pockets of such settlements can also be found in urban areas, such as Kampung Baru and Kampung Dato’ Keramat in Kuala Lumpur.

The layout and limits of the *kampung* are determined by socio-religious relations rather than by engineers or professional housing planners, and the concept of space is fluid. Family and kinship ties as well as the proximity of houses to a local mosque or *surau* are important factors in determining who or what constitutes a *kampung*. This is elaborated by Raja Bahrin Shah:

A *kampung* in Terengganu is usually defined by the relationship of its inhabitants to the mosque. As Clarke says in his study on another East Coast town, Kota Bharu in Kelantan, “most areas have a central identifying physical feature and from this the area radiates in various directions. Boundaries are indistinct...” He further states that all those taking part in the election of the mosque committee belong to one *kampung* irrespective of where they actually live. The *kampung* is therefore in essence, not a residential ground in the sense that the term is defined in sociology textbooks. (15)

Boundaries are almost non-existent in *kampungs*, save for “fallen coconut tree trunks and a cleanly swept compound” and “much importance is attached to the usufructuary rights to the fruit trees and coconut trees” (Lim 93). The absence of concrete boundaries in the form of walls or fences (only the houses of the ruling class had these) indicates the sociable nature of *kampung* life, therefore “[h]ouses are joined by free-flowing paths winding around the houses [and] house compounds flow into each other” (Lim 93). A private space such as a house compound can become public space when it is used as a children’s playground, a court for traditional games or *silat* training, or to host a *kenduri* or feast.

Before the onset of globalisation in the last decades of the twentieth century changed the way of life of Malaysian and Indonesian communities, the *kampung* was a space where knowledge was available in the form of schools, *surau*, mosques and the houses of religious scholars. Mosques not only determined the layout of a *kampung*, but also became centres of learning, as they had been since the earliest days of Islam (Mohamad Tajuddin 7). Spaces for acquiring knowledge were easily accessible to children and adults alike, and did not incur high financial costs. In addition, the social nature of *kampung* life meant that informal learning often occurred, where parents, teachers,
village elders or any member of the local community could impart wisdom, lessons or advice to the young. There are also times when this informal learning occurs through direct experience — whether in the form of a mistake made, a fall or an accident that befalls a young learner and from which he or she would later imbibe lessons about life.

Islam, Journeys and Knowledge

In the Islamic tradition, the trope of the journey occupies a significant place. The *hijra* or migration of the early Muslims from Makkah to Yathrib (later renamed as Madinah) was a journey undertaken to escape persecution and to establish new roots and connections from which Islam would grow. The Prophet Muhammad’s (s.a.w.) journey from Makkah to Baitulmaqdis (Jerusalem) and from there to Paradise, known as the *isra’* and *mi‘raj* respectively, are physical and metaphysical travels during which he received new knowledge and commandments from God.

Van Leeuwen (2007: 18) notes that Muslims are encouraged to travel for specific reasons and should not leave their places of residence otherwise. These reasons are “to fulfil the duties of religion, such as the pilgrimage, or hajj; when migration was required to earn a livelihood; when a journey was intended to acquire knowledge and learning” (Leeuwen 18-9). However, the history of Islam shows that Muslim travel grew with the expansion of political and military might, trade, and the establishment of schools and centres of learning throughout the Islamic world.

Citing a study by Touati on Muslim travel in the medieval period, Van Leeuwen further discusses the significance of journeys of knowledge in the Islamic tradition:

As Touati demonstrates in his study of medieval travel in the Muslim world, the genre of the travelogue in Arabic literature was rooted in two forms of the journey, or *ribla*: the scholarly journey, undertaken for the acquisition of knowledge; and the pilgrimage, the sacred journey meant to salvage the soul...By their travelling, scholars created a geography of learning, with its own infrastructure of institutions and centres of scholarship. Towns and regions were ordered in hierarchies for their specific merits for learning and the Hijaz was singled out as a space where the true values of Islam, the characteristics of authentic Arabic, and the sanctity of the first community of believers could still be studied and experienced. (Van Leeuwen 19)

It is this “geography of learning” and the role that the built environment and social ties in the *kampung* have in creating that geography that are the subjects of this examination of Growing Up in Trengganu and Laskar Pelangi. Related questions that will be attempted are: (1) How do the author and filmmaker employ tropes of the journey to mark the protagonists’ progress towards knowledge? (2) How do the *kampung’s* geophysical features and built environment enable the protagonists’ formal and informal learning? (3) How do social networks in the *kampung* combine to create a learning environment for the protagonists?

Awang Goneng’s Growing Up in Trengganu

The *kampung*, its built environment and geophysical features is almost a character in Awang Goneng’s memoirs of his childhood in Trengganu c.1950s – 1960s. Memories, life events and sensory perceptions are linked with the local geography in such a way that the book itself becomes the writer’s personal map of Trengganu. The writer’s journey towards knowledge occurs in several sites in Kuala Trengganu, which consist of several *kampungs*. The ones that are discussed here are the mosque, the *strau* and the tomb of a revered religious scholar known as Kubur Tok Pelam. These are places where the writer’s younger self acquires knowledge about his community and also the world, whether through direct instruction by adults or indirect instruction through observation and experience.

The local mosque, Masjid Abidin is significant to the writer’s informal education. It is mentioned in the memoir’s first fragment, “Hanging from the rafters” as the mosque where his father took him to perform the *tarawih* prayers in the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. As a rite of passage, attending and performing congregational prayers marks the writer’s gradual entry into adulthood, as normally
only children who have reached a phase known as *mumayyiz*, are taught to perform prayers by their parents. Taking their children (usually boys) to the mosque to pray together with the local community is one way in which the parents assist their children in taking their early steps towards adulthood and joining the ranks of the community.

One of the traditional roles of the mosque is as a place for formal instruction in Islamic knowledge, for children as well as adults (Mohamad Tajuddin 2005: 14). However, studies of the mosque from the architectural point of view neglect to mention other ways in which it functions as a centre of learning. In a fragment titled “A Mosque in the Heart,” Awang Goneng recounts Masjid Abidin’s role as a social space and site for indirect learning:

The Masjid Abidin was very much the centre of my life in Kuala Trengganu, not because it was the only place Father went to after work — oftentimes with me tagging along — but also because of my uncle’s proximity to it, and an auntie who lived just a minute’s walk down the road near the Rex cinema. I knew the mosque and its people well: ate with them during annual feasts, listened to their adult talk in between evening prayers and sometimes I’d stay there to listen to the imaam’s interminably long talks. (GIT, 213)

The mosque is a significant reference point in Awang Goneng’s narrative, a point by which he orients himself physically (on his personal map of Kuala Trengganu) and socially (through family links and fellow mosque attendees). While the imaam’s sermons represent formal learning through direct instruction, the writer’s listening to the adults’ conversations in the mosque constitutes his informal learning, which seems to have made a more lasting impression on him than the former. The writer’s father also imparts wisdom to his son through personal observations on various mosque attendees’ character. In one instance, many years after the writer witnesses a mentally-ill man at the mosque tearing up wads of cash, his father shares what he has learnt “from a lifetime of mosque-going. “It’s a place,” he says, “that attracts many types: the devout, the wayward, the scrounger and the sad” (GIT 215).

The writer’s informal education continues at another space in the *kampung* that also serves religious and community purposes: the *surau*. Awang Goneng describes his childhood home as situated “cheek by jowl” with the *surau*, “in the huddled way that *kampung* houses stayed together” (GIT 18). A *surau* is one of the focal points of the *kampung*, being one of the structures around which the houses of villagers are clustered or orientated (Raja Baharin Shah 1988: 15). Awang recounts an eventful day when he is thrown into the surau’s *kolab* or water tank by two mischievous friends. He had previously been warned by his father not to use water from the *kolab* because it “contained the remnants of sleep from the eyes of early-morning worshippers” (GIT 32) and had abided by this warning. Awang then relates how his father had watched his antics at the *surau* and then admonished him. The episode brings to mind the phases of separation and initiation mentioned by Campbell (30) as part of a rite of passage, with the writer’s immersion in forbidden territory, i.e. the *kolab*, marking a separation through “departure” from a safe and familiar zone (represented by the rules set by the writer’s father). The initiation stage is represented by the writer’s submission to his father’s authority:

...Father had watched the proceedings — and my humiliation — from a window which looked down on the *surau*, and he’d already prepared some encapsulated wisdom for his returning son from the water, ‘Familiarity breeds contempt,’ he said to me from on high. (GIT 32)

Awang’s initiation at the *surau* is also a moment when he acquires knowledge about the occasional perils of friendship and about the ways of human beings. Once again, his father acts as teacher in his journey towards knowledge. Here, the role of the *surau* in community learning is not in the traditional sense of a place where religious lectures or lessons are delivered and attended by children and adults, but as a symbolic setting for another kind of learning, the informal one, through direct experience.
Trengganu was part of the network of centres of Islamic learning connecting it with Kelantan and Patani. Naturally, Awang Goneng’s personal map of Trengganu includes sites associated with famous sheikhs, or religious teachers and scholars. From his memoirs, readers can discern a geography of knowledge, filled with landmarks, both physical and man-made, marking the presence (or former presence) of centres for Islamic studies. Two will be briefly discussed here, i.e. Kubur Tok Pelam (the tomb of Tok Pelam) and Pulau Duyung.

In a fragment titled “Eggs in a Net,” Awang Goneng describes his fascination with Kubur Tok Pelam, the tomb of a nineteenth-century Islamic scholar whose real name was Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, an Arab of Hadrami stock. The strength of his memories about the tomb is sustained by the mysterious eggs that are kept in Tok Pelam’s mausoleum, which, according to his schoolmates, were laid by a magical bird they called the *buraq*. Despite not having had the opportunity to see this relic himself, it left a lasting impression on his imagination and marked Kubur Tok Pelam as an important landmark in his personal geography of Kuala Trengganu.

As for Pulau Duyung, which lies near the mouth of the Trengganu River, it is remembered for its “craftsmen, boat makers and scions of saints and religious scholars, islands of erudite and gentle people, unhurried by the rush of fish to shore” (GIT 195). The writer narrates a brief history of Sheikh Abdul Qadir bin Abdul Rahman al-Fathani (d. 1864), “an eminent Shafii scholar” (GIT 195) who originated from Patani, southern Thailand, and who turned his home on Pulau Duyung into a base for teaching of religious knowledge in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

An idiomatic expression used by Awang’s mother to refer to Pulau Duyung — “*tempat sejuk*” — literally meaning “[a] cool place” (GIT 195) is a figurative way of describing its contribution to the education, history and public life of Trengganu through Sheikh Abdul Qadir and his descendants. From his line came Trengganu’s muftis, intellectuals and judges. The word *sejuk* (cool) expresses the locals’ belief that Pulau Duyung’s environment has been blessed with the presence of a man such as Sheikh Abdul Qadir. In contrast is Seberang Takir on the shore opposite to the writer’s *kampung* in Kuala Trengganu, a place of “sun-dried fish, the cries of fishwives and nets extended out to dry” (GIT 215). This contrast emphasises the difference in environment between the two adjacent sites: one, associated with the worldly task of fishing while, the other, a site that encourages the pursuit of knowledge.

**Riri Riza’s *Laskar Pelangi* (2008)**

*Laskar Pelangi* represents the other side of Indonesia. And it seems that our spectators had missed that kind of otherness.

(Mira Lesmana, producer of *Laskar Pelangi*, cited in Ekky 2008).

Indonesian director Riri Riza’s screen adaptation of a bestselling novel by Andrea Hirata, *Laskar Pelangi (The Rainbow Troops)*, presents the different spaces in which the journey towards knowledge can be taken. On one hand, there is the impoverished school run by the Islamic organisation Muhammadiyah, SD Muhammadiyah Gantong; on the other, there is the well-equipped school built by the national mining corporation, PN Timah. The portrayal of both schools in the film is meant to raise questions and awareness about the state of Indonesian education, specifically the one that is accessible to children from marginalised communities. Despite their disadvantaged socio-economic situation, the children (the “rainbow troops” of the film’s title) and teachers of SD Muhammadiyah transform their experience of learning by traversing the natural landscape of their *kampung* and acquiring important lessons about humanity and nature along the way. An island that would be dismissed by some as a backwater is shown as possessing many challenges to the children of SD Muhammadiyah in the form of a series of events paralleling rites of passage.

The film’s opening scenes show a short history of tin mining in Belitong through a montage of old photographs of tin-processing plants and Dutch mine owners before segueing into a scene of Lintang, one of the protagonists, cycling against a backdrop of blue sky and open grass fields. At the same time, the adult Ikal narrates:

*In Islamic tradition, the *buraq* is the magical steed that Prophet Muhammad rode on his night journey to the heavens, the Mi’raj.*

[Sekolah Dasar, i.e. primary school]
After Indonesia’s independence, the people of Belitong have yet to reap the riches of their own soil, free from the ‘walls’ of bureaucracy. These walls have boxed up the people’s opportunities and hopes; but they have never succeeded in breaking our spirit.

This metaphor of walls and boxes implies how the tin industry changed not only the islanders’ livelihoods, but also Belitong’s landscape, setting up wire fences, gates, factories, administrative buildings and staff quarters that “box up” public space. The space occupied by PN Timah is thus what Deleuze and Guattari call “striated space”, “its surface... quantified and divided into compartments of various statuses: organized on the basis of policies and ideologies... stable and occupied by sedentary people” (Van Leeuwen 2007: 16). In contrast, the kampung, where the children, their teachers and their families live, have no fences or walls between houses, and the children are free to come and go to their friends’, teachers’ or neighbours’ homes. In one scene from the film, Pak Harfan, the headmaster of SD Muhammadiyah, is shown riding pillion on Ikal’s father’s bicycle as the two talk and laugh together. They can be said to represent the close relations between members of a kampung community.

One of Laskar Pelangi’s iconic images is the building housing SD Muhammadiyah itself: a long, wooden structure with zinc roofing, supported at one end by two logs to prevent it from collapsing. Holes regularly appear in the roof and walls when the zinc or wood planks rot, tables and chairs are worn and much in need of repair, and goats roam into the classroom when it rains. Despite these, the film shows that the setting enhanced the children and their teachers’ learning and teaching experience. A small wakaf or wooden shelter in the school compound serves as a space where the children learn how to perform the solat (obligatory prayers) from Pak Harfan, while the spacious school grounds is a fluid space where they can climb trees or read books.

In contrast to SD Muhammadiyah is the PN Timah School attended by children of the mining company’s officers, consisting of several concrete blocks of classrooms, a court or playground where students have their hand practice or roller skate, and an ornamental pond with a statue of a Western-looking figure. In the classrooms, the children sit in neat, organised rows and on polished, gleaming chairs and desks. However, the director implies that such a privileged setting is a striated space that is unable to create a curiosity for learning. Flo, one of the protagonists of the film and a student at PN Timah School, looks away in boredom as one of her teachers distributes free calculators. Later, she is shown befriending the students of SD Muhammadiyah; their conversations and exchanges of gifts take place at the school fence, a physical boundary that boxes her in and keeps the poorer kampung children outside and symbolically, outside of the education system.

Through long shots of Ikal and his friends Lintang, Mahat, Sahara, Harun and the others cycling or walking through vast, open grass fields and beaches, Riri Riza conveys the difference in how space is conceptualised in the kampung and in the metropolis. The only boundaries acknowledged by the protagonists are the sky, the sea and the swamps where crocodiles roam, while the PN Timah students stay within the concrete and wire boundaries of their school. These boundaries are part of a striated space, acting as a means for state control of resources and imposing hegemony upon those within. As Van Leeuwen explains:

...boundaries provide the state with a homogeneous territorial control, as basis for the power apparatus and a power structure; ...boundaries create a differentiation with others, a contrast between inside and outside, a possibility of inclusion and exclusion, and ‘dialogic’ relations in which identities and world-views can be developed; ...boundaries are instrumental in the containment of masses and the regulation of mass emotions and migrations. (17)

Similar to Awang Goneng’s narrative in Growing Up in Trenggalek, the motif of the journey clearly marks Laskar Pelangi. In a recent article, Pamela Allen (2011) points out the novel Laskar Pelangi as a bildungsroman because of its obvious use of the journey and the protagonists’ development through education. Indeed, in the film adaptation as well, the children go through a series of events.

“Setelah negeri ini merdeka pun rakyat Belitong masih belum bisa menikmati harta alamnya sendiri, tanpa tembok-tembok birokrasi. Tembok-tembok yang mengkotakkan kesempatan dan harapan. Namun tembok2 itu tidak pernah bisa memolahkan semangat kami.”
reminiscent of rites of passage. Their path is littered with various obstacles that they have to surmount in order to attain the objective of their journey, which is knowledge. These events include Ikal's first experience of falling in love with A Ling; the 17 August Carnival challenge; and the deaths of Pak Harfan and Lintang's father. Each event represents a stage in the children's journey towards knowledge of the non-academic, informal kind. The obstacles become bigger and more serious as the film progresses, culminating in the separation of the children from a parent, a teacher, and from each other.

Two sequences from the film evoking the journey motif will be discussed here: the 17 August Carnival challenge and the inter-school quiz. The challenge represented by the Carnival emphasized SD Muhammadiyah students' lack of material resources; each school in Belitong has to put up a performance representing their school in the annual Independence Day celebrations. However, the students' knowledge of nature and ingenuity enable them to win the competition. Combining their knowledge of local fruits and plants as well as their reading of the National Geographic magazine, Ikal and his friends, led by the artistically-inclined Mahar, perform their version of the Masai tribal dance. What is significant about their success is that it brings with it acknowledgment from the local community of SD Muhammadiyah's efforts at educating the kampung's children.

The final challenge in the film is more dramatic, as SD Muhammadiyah is pitted against better-equipped, better-funded schools on the island. To make matters worse, Lintang is unable to join his teammates for the quiz when a crocodile blocks his path to the school. In the tradition of the quest narrative, a helper comes in the form of a pausang or shaman who coaxes the crocodile to move away from Lintang's path. This enables Lintang to travel to the school where the quiz is held, and he helps his teammates win the first place. However, another obstacle appears when one of the judges accuses him of cheating. He proves her wrong by writing out how he had calculated the answer to a mathematical question. The students of SD Muhammadiyah finally emerge victorious after encountering a lot of hardship.

Vital to the children's achievements are the help and guidance of teachers, parents and community figures, a result of the close social ties forged in the kampung. From the studies by Raja Bahri (1988), Lim (1991) and Mohamad Tajuddin (2005), we know that family, kinship and social ties determine the layout of the kampung. Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the "smooth space" is useful here in understanding how the lack of physical boundaries and hegemonic control of space created a geography of knowledge in Laskar Pelangi. The features of smooth space include "...open and unlimited by external boundaries or internal divisions...it is not occupied by its inhabitants, who are rather diffusely distributed over its surface" (Van Leeuwen 16). The film presents us with scenes illustrating the mobility of persons over space, in which the kampung dwellers freely move in and out between public spaces (the market, the school) and private ones (neighbours', friends' and teachers' houses). In this space, knowledge is not "boxed up" in books or within classrooms, but is everywhere in the children's immediate surroundings. Nothing shows this better than the shots of their school's boundaries, consisting of a low wall and a simple wooden arch that allows easy movement from and into the surrounding landscape.

The kampung, where the lack of physical boundaries encourage a community-based spirit of mutual kindness and helping out one's neighbours (Lim 1991: 84), seems to have been permeated with Bu Mus and Pak Harfan's philosophy on education and knowledge. In their view, the children's character development is as important as their academic achievement, if not more. This is reiterated throughout the film in Pak Harfan's phrase, "Grades and marks alone do not indicate a student's aptitude; one's evaluation of it must also be based on the student's character." The character Bu Mus, the children's teacher, personifies this philosophy; she remains independent and principled, turning down lucrative teaching positions in better-equipped schools so she could continue teaching her students at SD Muhammadiyah. The film also shows her as a member of the kampung community — during school holidays, villagers drop by her house to have clothes sewn by her; her connection to the school also

"Kecerdasan dilihat bukan sekadar dari nilai-nilai dan angka-angka itu, tapi dari hati.* Like her students, Bu Mus too takes up a part-time job as a tailor to supplement her income.
goes back to her late father, who had been one of the school’s founders and a member of the local community.

The lack of physical boundaries between houses, schools, places of worship and other public spaces in a kampung enhances the close-knit ties between parents, children, teachers and the community. In this smooth space, knowledge is diffused, spread out over natural and built environments. In contrast, within a striated space, like the PN Timah School, teaching and learning appear artificial and mechanised, symbolised in the scene where free calculators are distributed to its students. Riri Riza’s portrayal of Belitong’s natural environment and the kampung in the film indeed shows “the other side of Indonesia”.

Conclusion

Awang Goneng’s memoirs of his childhood and Riri Riza’s adaptation of Laskar Pelangi reveal the significance of the kampung as a space where knowledge can be discovered through informal means. Values distinctive to the kampung — mutual kindness to neighbours and kin, emphasis on character development rather than materialistic pursuits, community-centred over self-centred living — add to the protagonists’ learning experience. The process is facilitated by the diffuse nature of space in a kampung, the proximity to geophysical features, such as the sea, rivers and open fields, and close social ties with family and community figures.

By depicting the kampung as a space for the discovery of knowledge, both texts succeed in presenting an alternative view of the kampung as progressive and enlightened, and constituting a geography of knowledge in the Malay Archipelago. Previously, the idea or the sight of a kampung would have invoked parallels with feudalism, backwardness and insularity. However, Growing Up in Trengganu disrupts this stereotype with the author’s recollections of a kampung childhood filled with people, places and events from which something about humanity and the world can be learned. Laskar Pelangi does the same albeit more overtly; its images of the children and their education in SD Muhammadiyah Gantong, shots of the local landscape suggesting boundless space, and filled with opportunities for adding to the protagonists’ knowledge, also challenge notions of the kampung’s insularity.

Further studies on literary and film representations of the kampung will reveal more about its place in the archipelago’s geography of knowledge. Such studies could examine representations of the kampung in relation to the various education systems according to different historical periods. This chapter has dealt with late-twentieth century literary and film representations of the kampung in Malaysia and Indonesia; certainly more studies are possible, particularly interdisciplinary ones that enable a critical understanding of the role and future of the kampung in this region.
References


Notes on Contributors

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