



## Humanism according to Raja Haji Yahya, a Malay Muslim poet from Perak in the early 20th century

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### ABSTRACT

*Humanism became a central or important point in civilization because it was often associated with the intellectual movement. This study sought to look at the idea of a Malay literary figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a native of Perak, Raja Haji Yahya about aspects of humanism in his literary work. Qualitative methods with a literature approach were used to achieve the objectives of the study. The results of the study found that Raja Haji Yahya has used poetry as a medium to pour out the essence of humanity in the form of cynical metaphors. This is because at that time, the ruling power of the original inhabitants was taken over by the British colonialists. Following the British entry into the state of Perak, the landscape of governance and community life gradually underwent changes. According to Raja Haji Yahya, the society was divided, with one side being a supporter of the colonialists and the other being an opponent.*

**Keywords :** *Raja Haji Yahya, humanism, metaphors, colonialist*

### ABSTRAK

*Humanisme menjadi titik sentral atau penting dalam peradaban karena sering dikaitkan dengan gerakan intelektual. Kajian ini berusaha melihat pemikiran seorang tokoh sastra Melayu abad ke-19 dan awal abad ke-20 yang berasal dari Perak, Raja Haji Yahya tentang aspek humanisme dalam karya sastranya. Metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan kepustakaan digunakan untuk mencapai tujuan penelitian. Hasil penelitian menemukan bahwa Raja Haji Yahya telah menggunakan puisi sebagai media untuk menuangkan esensi kemanusiaan dalam bentuk metafora sinis. Hal ini karena pada saat itu, kekuasaan pemerintahan asli diambil alih oleh penjajah Inggris. Menyusul masuknya Inggris ke negara bagian Perak, lanskap pemerintahan dan kehidupan masyarakat berangsur-angsur mengalami perubahan. Kondisi masyarakat menurut gambaran Raja Haji Yahya juga sudah terbelah, satu pihak pendukung penjajah dan pihak lain penentang.*

**Kata Kunci :** *Raja Haji Yahya, humanisme, metafora, kolonialis.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Humanism is a philosophy that emphasizes human potential either from the aspect of the individual or social relations. Human beings become the midpoint of a civilization that encompasses morals and life. Thus, humanism is often associated with the intellectual movement (Giustiniani, 1985: 14-15).

The West does not see humanism as an ideology but instead considers it as a combination of knowledge and linguistics based on the restoration of good words (Partner, 1979). On that basis, the study of humanism often involves philosophy, literature, and history. Also discussed in humanism is the use of language styles such as rhetoric, grammar, and poetry (Kristeller, 1965: 178).

This study sought to look at the views of the Malay scholars in the literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Raja Haji Yahya bin Raja Muhammad Ali on the theme of humanism in his writings. His selection as the main object of the study was made considering that he is a Malay literary figure from Perak who most actively produce literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is therefore the aim of this study to look at his contributions in the perspective of humanism as found in his works.

This study uses a qualitative method where the literature approach is chosen to collect information related to the study subject. The themes of humanity found in his work are analyzed and critically evaluated.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Perceptions and Metaphors**

Perception is defined as part of a life process possessed by each person, which is seen by the individual at a certain point, then the individual creates what he sees for his own world, then takes advantage of it for his satisfaction (Lang, 1987).

Involved in the perceptual sphere are signs, symbols and spaces. Among the several theories related to perception are Gestalt theory, Brentano theory and Transactional theory. Gestalt theory states that humans read the meaning of a form or melody that enters perception beyond the sum of individual sensations so that humans see objects as a unity (Bell, Greene, Fisher, & Baum, 2001).

Brentano's theory divides human perception into two namely internal and external. Physical phenomena use external perception while mental phenomena involve internal perception. The duality of these intensities and phenomena is mutually influential between objectivity and subjectivity. The peak of perception is when the experience of a phenomenon is at its highest level, at the moment of simultaneous internal and external expression of meaning (Hall, Pallasma, & Gomez, 1991).

Transactional theory emphasizes the role of experience in perception that focuses on the dynamic relationship between man and his environment. According to this theory, perception is an active process that observes past experiences to be projected into the

present situation in accordance with its needs at the time (Lang, 1987).

Perception relates to the transfer of meaning which is usually in the form of symbols or metaphors. Both are symbolic architectures that convey meaning. Aristotle states that there are 4 types of meaning transfer, namely from general to specific; from specific to general; from specific to specific; and analogy (Soedarsono, 2000).

Metaphors in terms of their expression can be divided into 5 types namely,

1. Conventional metaphor-refers to the everyday meaning used in life that is automatically processed.
2. The metaphor of the channel-ideas become objects while words become containers.
3. Poetic metaphors-symbolic words are meant in life.
4. Effect metaphor - projecting a structure from one concept to another in the form of an effect.
5. General level metaphors-words that are not limited by location (Soedarsono, 2000)

Furthermore, metaphors in the form of architecture are divided into three categories, namely,

1. Abstract metaphor - the idea of metaphor comes from an abstract concept or thought.
2. Concrete metaphor - the idea of metaphor comes from the visualization of concrete objects.
3. Combination metaphor - the idea of metaphor comes from a

combination of abstract and object visualization (Soedarsono, 2000)

In summary, metaphor is a form of stimulation captured by the body's senses. This metaphor then forms a perception that is processed by the mind and then translated into behavior.

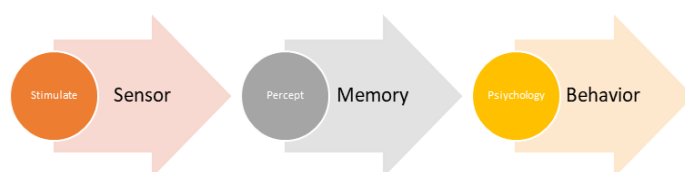


Figure 1: Metaphor's transformation from sensor to behavior

### **The Malay community and Perception**

The Malays have a high perception of courtesy (Moain, 2001). That high perception is translated in the form of perfect and pleasant language politeness. In other words, the perception of the Malays in society is associated with a noble (Rashid, 2005). In the context of psychology, courtesy and morality are closely related to positive behavior.

One of the practices of the community which is translated in the form of politeness language is poetic. Poetry is a traditional poem that expresses the thoughts and feelings of the poet imaginatively and is compiled with an approach focusing on the strength and structure of language in terms of both physical and mental (Dharmawijaya, 1998). Thus, the wording in the production of selected poems is

appropriate to the meaning to be conveyed without ignoring philosophical modesty that became emblematic personalities who excelled in the community at one time.

One of the important themes translated in the form of language decency is humanism. This theme talks about a series of events that take place in a sociologically motivated society such as love, justice, and suffering. Metaphorical scenes are commonly used to express emotions and feelings about an unfolding scenario.

In the context of the community, the poet was active with how quickly respond to social events happening around them. However, they are wise when working on themes that are closely related to the sensitivity of society so that the discussion of such themes is so easy to be accepted by the audience of readers because of the politeness of the language presented (Pogadaeva, 2011).

### **Raja Haji Yahya Malay Literary Figures**

The Perak writer who received high appreciation from the British government a long time ago was Raja Haji Yahya bin Raja Muhammad Ali (1870-1931). Despite working as a penghulu in Chenderiang, Perak, he is very capable in the science of authorship. His expertise has greatly helped the British government to collect oral stories of the history of the State of Perak. Raja Haji Yahya also has a good relationship with the traditional Perak storytellers like Pawang Ana and successfully restructure 5 Malay soap opera story which is very valuable. In appreciation of his services and contributions, British officers Frank

Swettenham (Resident General of the Federated Malay States) and R.O Winstedt (Director of Education, Federated Malay States and the Straits Settlements) has awarded the title of Poet Laureate (the poet) to him (Bastin, 1964).

Winstedt relationship with Raja Haji Yahya became increasingly tight when the Sultan Idris Training College to be established in 1922. With the help of Raja Haji Yahya, Winstedt managed to collect a lot of reading material for use in class Malay teachers. Among Winstedt's most important writings fully assisted by Raja Haji Yahya were such as *The Malay Magician* and *An Unabridged Malay-English Dictionary* (Winstedt, 1982) (Winstedt, *An Unabridged Malay-English Dictionary*, 1965).

The charismatic Raja Haji Yahya as the author exemplified when 5 story of the famous Malay storyteller published until now. The stories are *Hikayat Raja Muda*, *Hikayat Awang Sulung Merah Muda*, *Hikayat Malim Deman*, *Hikayat Malim Dewa* and *Hikayat Anggun Cik Tunggal*. All of this saga was compiled by Raja Haji Yahya as presented by a prominent Malay storyteller coming from Gopeng, Perak Pawang Ana (Harun, 2018).

### **Themes of Humanism in Poetry**

As a literary figure, Raja Haji Yahya also had the skills to write poetry. The sharpness of his mind highlighting important themes of humanity can be seen through the poems he wrote. There are two poems written in connection with the government. The first poem is a tribute to King Edward who ascended the throne as King of England in 1902. The second poem is about a speech

welcoming the return of Sultan Idris Murshidul Adzam Shah from London after attending the coronation of the King of England that year.

In the poem, Raja Haji Yahya emphasized the importance of a healthy body in a government. Good health not only promotes employment but also encourages pious deeds in government. The internal potential that exists in a government will give birth to admirable behavior, especially being fair and generous to the people as well as highlighting the crown of his government with full honor. This matter is stated by Raja Haji Yahya in his poem as follows  
All bodies are healthy and prosperous  
Righteous deeds on the throne  
Fair and cheap there alone  
Riding like a crown relative (Harun, 2018)

The stratum of society is recorded in metaphorical form as quoted in Syair Raja Haji Yahya. He used many symbols of predatory and non-predatory animals to describe the scenarios that took place in society at that time.

The confusion that occurs in society is symbolized in a unique form. Non-predatory animals live free to do whatever it seems as if the predators are weak or no longer have strength. For example, predatory animals such as tigers and cats do not have the nature to catch their prey, namely goats and rats. Sparrows that are often eaten by eagles are instead able to carry eagles.

While the nature of small animals such as frogs and mice are described as powerful animals and free to do anything. Animals such as lizards turn into foxes while quails have elongated tails and paradise turns into peacocks. The depiction of the physical transformation of a lizard into a fox perhaps symbolizes the predatory nature of taking advantage of turning into a clever predator. As for the quail, the long tail seems to give a picture of the growing influence. While

the bird of paradise that turns into a peacock signals a decline in self-esteem because the bird of paradise is considered a very beautiful bird of high value and has magic in ancient beliefs, compared to a peacock that although beautiful on land is not considered a magical bird worth birds of paradise.

The metaphor of the rat and the frog  
It is very strange to look at the poor  
High mountains become fields  
As long as the rats are good at drumming  
The frog jumped to draw the sword

Metaphors of lizards and foxes  
In the heart is very dizzy  
Seeing the base closed plug  
As long as the herb becomes a banana  
The lizard has become a fox

Metaphors of sparrows and eagles, and tigers and goats  
To the crowded mind and the locusts  
Looking at the eagle barking sparrows  
As long as the tiger is not mottled  
Above his neck a goat hovered

Metaphors of quail, paradise and peacock  
Miracle pensive wonder contemplation  
Seeing a quail with a long tail  
Paradise becomes a thought  
An ocean is being emptied

Metaphors of cats and mice  
God's will is difficult to divide  
The sharp spear became blunt  
As long as the cat has no teeth  
In front of him the rats went home

### **Perception of humanism from the lens of Raja Haji Yahya**

The British strengthened their power in the state of Perak after the signing of the Treaty of Pangkor in 1874. The entry of the British into the state has given rise to various public perceptions including the change of the urban climate. On the community side, there are those

who support and there are those who oppose it. While in terms of development, the British have transformed the traditional economic landscape to a capitalist -based economy. Investors are brought in along with labor from outside (Roff, 1967).

Raja Haji Yahya was perhaps cynically subtly critical when highlighting the chronology of the British entry and the allies who supported it. He translated the critique in the form of a metaphor as contained in the verses of the poem above. The onset of British colonialism after the Pangkor Treaty profound impact on children, especially the Malays. Anyone serving under the British at the time must have been aware of the fact of British power and influence even though their numbers were not very large. Raja Haji Yahya as one Malay who lived through that era has seen many changes but it does not erode the Malay soul or compromising religious customs and traditions.

The produce of the state of Perak, which has been hidden like a mountain for so long, has been looted by the British colonialists until it has become a field. Proponents of capitalism, unable to play a role when state dignitaries dominated the Perak state economy, began to show up and rejoice at the arrival of the British. Little by little their influence grew and with the cunning they had, their control over the revenue of the state grew stronger. This is probably what Raja Haji Yahya tried to convey in the following verses;

It is very strange to look at the poor  
High mountains become fields  
As long as the rats are good at drumming  
The frog jumped to draw the sword

In the heart is very dizzy  
Seeing the base closed plug  
As long as the herbs become bananas  
The lizard has become a fox

The same goes for the symbols of sparrows, eagles, tigers, goats, mice and cats which are probably addressed to those who have taken advantage of the arrival of the British. As the original rulers of the sultans and nobles increasingly lost their power, pro-British factions increasingly gained a place in government.

While there are also aristocrats who are invited by the British to help develop the state. However, they are only manipulated to be administrators instead of being directly involved in modern economic activities (Abdullah, 1985). The British colonialists are said to have provided a clear policy to locate the indigenous peoples in their own settlement areas while they reaped as much revenue as possible. The matter may have something to do with the following verse,

Miracle pensive wonder contemplation  
Seeing a quail with a long tail  
Paradise becomes a thought  
An ocean is being emptied

The long -tailed quail is most likely compared to a colonizer who gained power. While the bird of paradise that turned into a peacock is like the aristocracy who served the British, the fact is that it has no value because the British continue to reap the wealth of the land of Perak like an ocean that is completely exposed.

The British occupation of the state of Perak was God's destiny until the Sultan and the nobles no longer had absolute power in government. The power of the Sultan and nobles is likened to a toothless cat while the colonizers are symbolized like rats that reap wealth and are taken out of the state. This is the possibility described by Raja Haji Yahya in the verse below,

God's will is difficult to divide  
 The sharp spear became blunt  
 As long as the cat has no teeth  
 In front of him the rats went home

The characteristic of humanism in those days was focused on the clash between two deceitful and cunning characters, power and dignity, colonialists and traditionalists. The British character is portrayed as a cunning and colonial power. While the power of tradition is considered a weak power after being deceived by the British to interfere in government rule. On the social side, humanism is reflected in the form of survival challenges during the British colonial era and the opportunistic attitudes exemplified by the pro-British factions.

In the context of psychology, society at that time was in two states namely the stress of life and the opportunity to improve life. What is meant by the stress of life is that society has to face the rules created by the colonialists because political power has been controlled by those parties. While for those who support the colonialists, the opportunity to make peace with the colonialists is used as much as possible to improve the standard of living.

## CONCLUSION

Besides Raja Chulan author of *Misa Melayu*, Raja Haji Yahya can be regarded as the most influential literary figures in the state at least represents the end of the 19th century and early 20th century AD. His ability to work on the atmosphere of society at that time in the form of poetry provided space for researchers to study from a variety of subjects including those related to sociological relations.

The theme of humanity becomes an important part of the poem where he expresses it in the form of cynical metaphors. Life at that time was described as the fall of the original

government after the entry of the era of British colonialism. The consolidation of British power at that time not only changed the main features of political administration, but also influenced the behavior and lifestyle habits of the local community. The cunning nature of the British and not sticking to promises caused society to be more cautious and not feel safe to deal with things. The proof is that many of the state's produce has been looted by the colonizers and their allies.

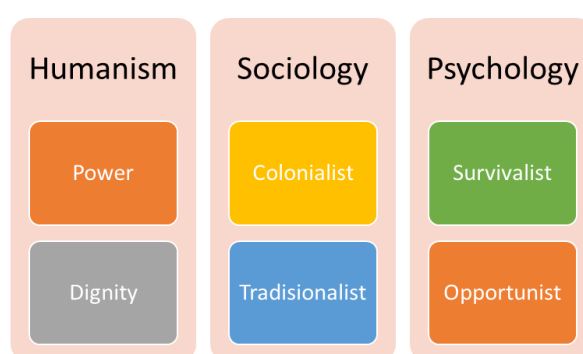


Figure 2: Raja Haji Yahya views on humanism, sociology and psychology during British occupation in Perak

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