

Saga and Pungkad
Two Novel Views of Nation Building

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It is no coincidence that two novels, *Pungkad* (Uprooted) by Obasiah Hj Usman, 1989, and *Saga* (Saga) by Abdul Talib Mohd. Hassan, 1976ⁱ, published some twenty-five years apart, pursue the theme of nation building. There is a strong tradition in Malay literature of creating novels about national development. The belief that Malays can be inspired by literature written in their own language, a language of which they can be proud, was created early in Malay literary history. Some two hundred years ago, *Hikayat Abdullah* was written by Melaka-born Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munshi in which he urged Malays to modernize. At the turn of the twentieth century, Syed Sheikh Al-Hady also counted himself among religious Modernist or *Kaum Muda* supportersⁱⁱ. Modernist views were popularized in Singapore by a journal, *Al-Imam*, which was printed in 1906ⁱⁱⁱ. Malays needed skills, agriculture, preservation from their enemies and also:

‘education to rescue us from the slough of apathy and indolence [...] but the one thing that will strengthen and realize all our desires is knowledge of the commands of our religion’^{iv}.

These views were also expressed in a best-selling novel *Faridah Hanom* (1925-6) by Syed Sheikh Al-Hady^v. Writing and politics were inextricably intertwined. Among other authors supporting Malay nationalism were Ibrahim Ya’acob and Ishak Haji Muhammad^{vi}. After the Second World War, many Malays, especially those with a Malay-based education, actively supported the use of Malay as the national language. Literature was to be used as a means for building the nation, and also as a means for creating literary art^{vii}.

Pungkad (Uprooted) by Obasiah Hj Usman, 1989, and *Saga*, by Abdul Talib Mohd. Hassan, 1976, follow in this tradition. Both write about power, development and appropriate leadership. They offer two different approaches to these issues and where *Pungkad* stresses good political leadership, *Saga* emphasizes vigorous rural development programmes. Both novels stress the problems of gaining the acceptance of new ways among the villagers and of the danger of violent protest.

It is significant that both novels are set in the *kampung* since the *kampung*, a quintessentially Malay institution^{viii}, is a site which is charged with meaning:

The idyll of the *kampung* as a place of communal cooperation, harmony, and other positive traditional values tends to go unchallenged by the average Malaysian and has always been a dominant theme in Malaysian cultural representations^{ix}.

Malay villagers were educated in local Malay schools, and showed deference towards their community leaders who were usually taken from the English-educated class of people^x. The *kampung* is popularly regarded as the seat of harmony and purity. However, literature, taken from life, usually has a different story to tell. Malay novels have both reflected and challenged this traditional view, at least since the 1960s, the 'golden age' of the Malay novel. Many Malay writers come from rural backgrounds, among them Usman Awang who writes of the Emergency in the Johor area in *Tulang-Tulang Berserakan* (Scattered Bones), 1966, which is partly autobiographical^{xi}. Although villagers believe that the *kampung* is the ideal place, writers reveal the bias in this view. The reader of the Malay novel will therefore anticipate scenes of violence towards the outsider and will not be disappointed in these two novels.

***Pungkad* (Uprooted) by Obasiah Hj Usman, 1989**

Synopsis

Pungkad is set five years after the election of Butai as *Wakil Rakyat* (Member of Parliament) for a mountain area of rice-growers, about fifty miles from Kota Kinabalu in Sabah. The rural area remains undeveloped with poor communications and little work for young people. The explanation can be found in Butai. His last months as the people's representative reveal him to be selfish, uneducated and immoral. He cheats the villagers of their own land, their land grants, and of their government-issued fertilizer, whilst rewarding his own family and his friends, neglecting his electorate and living a drunken and dissolute life. His wife, Isniah, does not know that he has taken a young woman, Sumandak, to be his second wife or that Nancy is his 'modern' girlfriend.

Anggas, Butai's deputy and also his close relative, performs most of his work. Anggas is in effect, the people's real leader. Butai fires Anggas and his efficient office staff for their criticism of his behaviour. He appoints his incompetent and drunken relatives, See, Iron, Tumin, and his girlfriend, Nancy as their successors. Lacking Anggas's moral scruples, the young men eagerly do Butai's bidding. Anggas, unaware of Butai's perfidy, and still popular with the electorate, at first rejects their call that he should stand for election.

When Osu, the head man's son, arrives after studying in the United States, he offers an unwitting challenge to both men. He sees the need for development in the backward area, and sets out to achieve change, though declaring himself unwilling to stand for election. Bainah, Anggas's daughter, also returning from education in the United States, helps the backward village women to develop their skills. She too, declines to play a role in politics. A general election is declared. Who will be their next political representative? Will Osu or Bainah change their minds?

Leadership and development

The novel explores the question of who ought to lead. Elderly villagers fear the loss of their traditional right of respect from the young. However, a theme is that a forward-looking nation must reject traditional ways to allow room for new roles but still within an Islamic framework. The novel explores ways in which people can make a break with tradition. Sabah is inhabited by a number of different ethnic groups, including the Bajau, Osu's community, some of whom, though Muslim, still retain certain animist practices. Osu discovers that the area is untouched by development. He says:

Rumah kita masih memakai generator dan lampu minyak tanah (Obasiah, 1989:15). Our house still uses a generator and kerosine oil lamps.

The area is also lacking in education, and the true spirit of Islam, and so its young men are idle. The theme of Butai's political shortcomings eddies slowly throughout the novel, as villagers struggle with the failure of the area to develop.

'Butai tak adil. Mentang-mentanglah orang kampung tak berdaya, diperbodoh-bodohkah pula. Sudahlah miskin, ditambah pula penderitaan kita. Tak ada timbang rasa langsung' [...] 'Yang menderita, orang kampung,' desis Dellah. Dia amat kesal. Seharusnya Butai berikhtiar mencari jalan membantu kesusahan orang kampung. Mengatasi kesempitan mereka. Membangun dan meningkatkan kehidupan orang kampung adalah tugas Butai sebagai wakil rakyat (Obasiah 1989:138).

'Butai is unjust. Why on earth is he working against the villagers, and making fools of them as well? We are already poor, and he is only increasing our suffering. He didn't think stop t think.' [...] 'It's the villagers who are suffering,' murmured Dellah. He was very disappointed. Butai really ought to have found a way of helping the villagers out of their poverty by overcoming their narrowness. Butai's job as their political representative was to increase the villagers' living standards.

Later in the novel, too drunken to realize that he is not talking to his young male relative, See, newly appointed to assist him in the electorate, but to Anggas, his deputy, Butai accidentally makes a full confession of his misdeeds, admitting that he is charging for free government fertilizer, and the tractor to spread it, and also making them pay for free government land allotments, he says:

'See, engkau mesti ambil dua ratus ringgit seorang. Jika tak mahu, jangan beri. Baja, engkau mesti minta lima puluh ringgit satu keluarga. Jika mereka tak mahu juga, katakana peruntukan telah habis' (Obasiah 1989:101).

'See, you must take two hundred ringgit from everyone. If they won't pay then don't give them any. About the fertilizer - ask each family for fifty ringgit. If they won't pay, just say there's none left'.

This is the first time that Anggas, himself moral, has had evidence that Butai takes bribes and that they are on a large scale.

Actively standing in the way of development

The villagers have important business with Butai who is rarely in the office. He prefers the immoral pleasures of Kota Kinabalu. An angry man reprimands Butai:

'YB hanya pentingkan diri sendiri. Tak mahu melihat bangsa sendiri maju [...] YB telah lupa, suatu ketika dulu, pak cik pernah menghulurkan sampul surat untuk ditandatangani? Apakah jelas penerangan pak cik?' [...] 'YB tinggalkan surat itu, sehari setelah berlalu tarikh penutupan permohonan anak pak cik. Adakah YB takutkan sesuatu?' (Obasiah 1989:116).

'You only think of your own importance, YB. You don't want to see your own people get ahead [...] Have you already forgotten such a short time ago, when I gave you an official letter to sign, YB? Do I make myself clear now?' [...] 'You deliberately left the letter for my son until the day after the applications closed. What are you afraid of?'

Butai does not encourage progress in the area because of his jealousy. He will allow only his family to benefit from his rule, and so will not encourage education in any other child for fear it disadvantages Buyung, yet Butai's son, Buyung, aged six, is not yet of an age to compete with anyone. Butai then commits an act that ensures his political downfall. He dismisses his staff for their criticism of him. Butai's office is then run entirely by See, his inexperienced young relative, aided by Iron and Tumin, who are indolent and pleasure-loving.

Anggas, his half-brother as well as his right hand man, reminds Butai of his leadership failures. His repetition of 'YB' (Yang Berhormat), perhaps best translated as 'Sir', although this translation retains the original words, is ironic, and stresses that Butai's position is one of responsibility as well as power:

'Bukankah kita bertugas demi agama, bangsa dan negara?' tegas Anggas [...] 'Apa gunanya kita menjadi pemimpin, jika kita tak mampu melayani kehendak bangsa sendiri. Turun naik politik YB bergantung kepada orang-orang kampung. Mereka menentukan kedudukan YB!' (Obasiah 1989:125).

'Are we not the servants of our religion our race and our country?' demanded Anggas [...] What use is it when we become leaders if we are not capable of serving the will of our own race? Your rise and fall in politics, Yang Berhormat, depends on the village people. They ensure your position, Yang Berhormat.'

Gaining and keeping political power

In the ensuing quarrel Butai dismisses Anggas, and Anggas resigns. Butai forgets that he is totally dependent on Anggas to support him in office. He cannot run the electorate without Anggas's lead, and neither can he organize his next election

campaign by himself. As his anger abates, Butai begins to reassess his position. Other potential political candidates are emerging, among them Osu.

The novel analyses power – how it is created, how it can be used and how it can be lost. A successful *wakil rakyat* does not rule alone. And Butai's political expertise is strictly limited. We may even wonder how he came to be elected in the first place.

Anggas

We find that Anggas is the power behind Butai. A former teacher, he writes Butai's speeches and organizes the office for him. Anggas, incredibly and even unbelievably, does not know about Butai's corruption but when he discovers it, he remains loyal. However, as his subsequent dealings with Osu show, he, too, can be self-seeking. Although Anggas is the natural political heir of Butai, and sympathetic towards the people, as Butai is aware, there is a complication.

Osu

The complication is Osu. His arrival disturbs the balance of power. An active man, he works his way into the community slowly and with tact. He wants to find a way of occupying the numerous idle young men who allow their parents to support them. He enlists the help of his two friends, Magit and Atoh, and they call a meeting to introduce him. Osu does not refer to the elections at all, which everyone seems to expect, but speaks instead about the need to follow Islam. His second meeting repeats this: '*asalkan pertemuan itu tak bertentangan dengan tradisi orang-orang di sini,*' *kata Magit*' (Obasiah 1989:147). ('As long as the meeting does not conflict with the traditions of people here', said Magit).

Osu educates the youths in the Islamic religion, of which, as formerly animist Bajau, their understanding is weak. He tells them that Islam teaches people to be independent and to stand on their own feet. He offers them suitable social activities and becomes a popular figure. He plans to offer people without land a share of his own land, so that they can become self-supporting. He also has plans for the farming of fresh water lobsters. He acts with no thought of political reward:

Kedatangannya ke daerah pergunungan itu bukan perampas mahkota kedamaian. Tetapi membangun bangsanya. Mengajak mereka memahami erti hidup, erti akidah, erti pegangan, agar wujud kesenangan dan kesejahteraan (Obasiah 1989:168-9).

He had not come here to the mountains to steal the crown of peace but to develop the people. He wanted to teach them to understand the meaning of life, the meaning of belief, the meaning of guidance, so that they could create peace and tranquillity.

Criticism of Osu

Not only are Anggas and Butu angry, but Osu's mother has already warned Osu that village people are envious and will not accept him easily back into the community^{xii}. People will feel that he has no right to step in after so many years of absence. As a virtual stranger, he will be seen as interfering with well-established customs. The older villagers are quick to criticize Osu on traditional grounds:

'Apa perlunya Osu mahu mengajar aku? Rambut aku sudah beruban' (Obasiah 1989:156).

'What need is there for Osu to teach me? My hair is already gray', grumbles one old man.

The animosity towards Osu culminates in his receipt of a *surat layang*, an anonymous, 'poison-pen' letter. Everyone receives a copy. It accuses him of interfering in village matters. It concludes that people should really be thinking of re-electing Butai, the leader of the future. At the culmination of the campaign against him, Osu is served poisoned coffee by Laat at a *kenduri* or special ceremonial animist feast, held by Anggas to help cure his sick father. Osu quickly recovers but Anggas holds himself responsible. He had hoped to silence Osu, so that his own election to power and leadership would be assured.

Osu and Butai

When Osu meets Butai by arrangement, he reassures the older man by denying that he has any interest in contesting the future election. Butai then offers Osu work in his business but Osu refuses: he wants only to work in his rice fields (Obasiah 1989: 165).

Bainah, women and development

Bainah virtually disappears from view after her initial introduction. However, towards the end of the novel, Osu meets her working in the rice fields. Osu is delighted and astonished that she comes from the same area as himself. Osu is encouraging towards women, regarding their contributions as valuable, saying:

Osu mahu gadis dan wanitanya menjadi seperti Siti Aisyah, Siti Khadijah, Siti Fatimah, menjadi Muslimat sejati (Obasiah 1989: 168).

Osu wants the girls and women to become like Siti Aisyah, Siti Khadijah, Siti Fatimah, and become true Muslims.

He is, of course, referring to the three wives of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.). Even with Magit and Atoh's support, Bainah won't stand for election. She says that she rejects all roles higher than that of facilitator for women, saying: '*Bai nak berkhidmat untuk agama, bangsa dan negara*' (Obasiah 1989:204) ('I only want to serve my religion, nation and country'). To this end, she runs classes to teach the women their domestic role.

A criticism of this illustration of the only significant and moral woman character's role in *Pungkad* is that although Bainah does not exactly waste her own education, she does not find much use for it either. She becomes a leader of women, but she does not provide a role model for female advancement beyond that of the customary housewife. It allows her a status above that of the women, but would not her status as Anggas's daughter have been sufficient for this limited role among women? While her work in the rice fields is depicted as admirable, it is essentially, a highly limited activity. Other representations of women in *Pungkad* are similarly limited, consisting of a secretary, a young second wife and a prostitute... Bainah (or indeed the narrator) may well reflect the limited reality of the area, but she offers no dreams of any other kind of life to the women. Surely her expensive education in the United States could have been put to better use? However, since Osu is attracted to Bainah, she will at least provide him with a reason to remain in the area and support in his work of development.

The future

The future for Butai is bleak. Both his wives leave him and so does his girlfriend, who rejects his belated offer of marriage. See, Tumin and Iron tell him that there is no support for him and so it would be a waste of time for him to seek re-election. Anggas, formerly a strong contender for election, is ashamed of the *surat layang*, the poisoned pen letter, for which he feels responsible, and also for the poisoned coffee. Therefore, he agrees to support Osu:

'Kami menyokong kau demi kebaikan kampung pergunungan ini', Anggas cuba membetulkan keadaan (Obasiah 1989:213).

'We will support you for the good of the mountain electorate,' said Anggas, making efforts to improve the situation.

Osu agrees, reflecting that the life of politics is not a happy one:

Bidang politik tidak menjamin masa depan yang cerah. Begitu cepat turun naiknya [...] Tokoh-tokoh yang kecundang, tidak dihargai dan dihormati. Tetapi dipandang hina [...] Tokoh yang pernah berjasa kepada mereka, akan dilupakan (Obasiah 1989:212).

Politics do not guarantee a definite future. People rise and fall so quickly [...] Those who win elections are not esteemed or honoured. They are considered to be unimportant [...] Once they have been of service to the electorate, they are soon forgotten.

Osu's future life probably includes marriage to Bainah and so the development of the village is guaranteed, since Bainah refuses to leave the area. She encourages him to reflect positively on his future in politics, saying: *'fikirkan masa depan nasib bangsamu'* (Obasiah 1989:214) ('just think of the future fate of your people'). Thus encouraged, Osu finally agrees to stand as the people's candidate in the forthcoming election.

Saga by Abdul Talib Mohd. Hassan, 1995^{xiii}

Synopsis.

Saga takes place in 1956, four years before the end of the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) in a remote area of Johor state. Three young people, Rahmat (Mat), Munirah (Mun), and Hisyam (Syam), who all graduated from university five years previously, leave their well-paid city work when Rahmat persuades them to go to his native village, Batu Ragi, near Batu Pahat in Johor for three years. His father, Pak Utih Rahman, is headman. The villagers have just returned to the area, vacated earlier, due to the Communists. Mat plans to develop the area, so repaying the nation for his education.

Munirah is Rahmat's childless wife, of Goan Indian and Portuguese descent and a convert to Islam. Hisyam is a bachelor, popular with women. Munirah and Hisyam teach, and Rahmat organises their many-sided development programmes. Some villagers resent them. Their lives are threatened several times. Drug trading and murder occur and are attributed to communist insurgents. Will the three idealists be accepted, and succeed in improving the people's lives? Will Hisyam find the wife of his dreams?

The title of '*Saga*' is a generalized one: the novel is the story of any extended Malay family. Again, this novel is set in the *kampung*. Efforts were made in *Pungkad* to dislodge Osu from the village because he is seen as an outsider. Will there be a break with this tradition in *Saga*?

The Leaders

Munirah was educated at an English-language convent school in Ipoh, but Rahmat and Hisyam have received a prestigious Malay-based education at Malay College, Kuala Kangsar, which encouraged nationalist pride and with it, the use of the Malay language. Rahmat expresses nationalistic ambitions:

'Dari mulai aku melangkah kaki masuk MCKK dulu, aku sudah disulam oleh perasaan ingin berkhidmat untuk rakyat' (Abdul 1995:289).

'Right from the beginning when I first set foot in MCKK, I was filled with the desire to be of service to the little people.'

He even wants to '*Hidup sebagai rakyat*' ('Live like the little people')^{xiv}. To follow his dream, he has worked for five years in a senior position, and saved sufficient money to spend on the development of Batu Ragi. Mun is similarly inspired by Islamic idealism:

'Kita ke mari untuk sesuatu. Kita membawa satu tekad untuk mengubah. Kepercayaan yang bertentangan dengan konsep-konsep Islam dan moden hendaklah ditukar. Kita sendiri telah bersedia dengan kepercayaan yang bertentangan dengan kepercayaan mereka'. [...] 'apa sahaja yang bertentangan dengan konsep Islam harus dihapuskan daripada kalangan

orang-orang yang mengatakan dirinya Islam. Aku akan menjadi pengubah' (Abdul 1995:334-5).

'We are here for a reason. We bring with us a firm intention to bring about change. Beliefs that contradict Islam and modernity must be changed. We are armed with beliefs that contradict theirs. [...] whatever contradicts Islam must be obliterated from any community which acknowledges itself to be Muslim. I will bring about this change.'

However, the three protagonists find that the area is still very troubled, due to the political situation, including the fact that the Emergency is still in evidence.

The Emergency (1948-1960)

The Emergency was an undeclared civil war fought against the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), which was a predominantly Chinese movement. The MCP retreated to the jungle at the end of the Pacific War against the Japanese Occupation (1942-5), to fight against colonial exploitation. Villages in certain areas, predominantly Chinese, were cleared of their inhabitants to deprive the MCP of its lines of supply^{xv}. Another account of this period is found in Usman Awang's semi-autobiographical novel, *Tulang-Tulang Berserakan* (Scattered Bones), 1966.

In *Saga*, suitable wood must be found for building in the village. Going into the jungle to prospect, Rahmat falls into Communist hands. He then meets Ismail, a former university acquaintance, and finds that he has sought an alternative path to Rahmat, so that he is now a communist leader. He explains to Rahmat: '*Kami tidak mengganas. Kami cuba ingin mengubah keadaan negara kita ini*'^{xvi}. 'We aren't savages. We are just trying to change the situation in our country'.

Style of Narration

Hisyam, Rahmat and Munirah take it in turns to narrate, so presenting multiple viewpoints. However, much of the story represents the leader, Rahmat's masculinist point of view. The delicate situation of two men loving one woman provides considerable narrative tension and serves as a fascinating counterpoint to the struggles of the three to develop Batu Ragi. Rahmat is fulfilled, preoccupied and often away from home in the city, where he meets the national planners. Hisyam and Munirah, thrown together by their shared work as teachers, are less satisfied to be so far from modern life.

Munirah is childless and lonely. Mat is often away for a week at a time: '*Meninggalkan aku sepi lagi*'^{xvii} ('Leaving me to be alone again'). Jalil, Mat's half brother, takes advantage of Mat's absence to sexually harass Munirah.

Syam yearns for Munirah. He sets a limit of three years on his activity, and sometimes retreats to a friendly villager, Seman's *kedai* (stall) to sleep. Right from the beginning, he counts the days: '*tempoh percubaanku hanya tinggal dua tahun tiga ratus enam puluh hari sahaja*'^{xviii}. ('My time of trial will last for only another two years, three hundred and sixty days').

Division of duties

Rahmat plans to administrate and finance the project. He has plans to erect a mosque, a school, a meeting hall, a road and bridges over the rivers to link Batu Ragi with other settlements. He also wants to see main roads built to link the area with towns and cities, like Segamat and even Kuantan and will become a registered contractor. As he says, he is only part of state-wide and national plans for Malayan development:

Ada ura-ura daripada pegawai daerah yang rancangan FELDA, FELCRA dan Persatuan Peladang akan dibuka di kawasan ini, Rancangan Tanah Pinggir dan Rancangan Tanah Belia pun akan dibuka (Abdul 1995:82).

There is talk from the authorities here that FELDA (Federal Land Development Authority), FELCRA and the Farmers' Cooperative plan to open up this area, and also that the Plan for Border Lands, and the Plan for Uncultivated Land will be applied.

Mat has no plans to leave the area. He regards his residence as permanent. Later, he may even become a local political or national leader. While Mat plans and sees officials, Syam and Mun do the 'real' work of teaching, organizing and urging the villagers to modernize and Syam accompanies Mat into the jungle when he hunts for suitable wood.

Reactions to their work

Mat is a virtual stranger in the *kampung*, and his work is received with suspicion. His half-brother Jalil, Jalil's mother, Mak Cik Saarah, and Pak Ngah Baki, her brother, become his enemies. There are demands for the resignation of his father, Pak Utih Rahman, as village headman. Mak Ngah Saarah, Mat's father's second wife, is resentful of Mat and his work. Jalil, her son, is encouraged to be jealous and to *merajuk* (sulk). Pak Usu Rauf is also against Mat.

When some of the highly useful projects created by the three newcomers are wrecked or burnt down, including a popular trading and coffee stall, run by Seman, and a bridge which now connects the area to Segamat, the three wonder which of Mat's resentful relatives is responsible. It is later discovered that Pak Baki is behind the destruction, and it is he who encourages Jalil and others to do the dirty work. It seems that Pak Baki holds the biggest grudge because he and Mat's father had planned to marry his daughter, Salwa, to Rahmat.

Hisyam's contribution

Their projects are imaginative and make a notable contribution to the prosperity of Batu Ragi. Syam solves marketing and transport problems to make the area more prosperous. He makes plans for the future too. A villager, Seman is being trained to take over from him:

Paling menggalakkan bagi Hisyam dia sedang melatih Seman agar satu hari nanti dapat diserahkannya beban tersebut kepada Seman (Abdul 1995:282).

What Hisyam found most pleasing was that he was training Seman so that one day he could hand over the burden to Seman.

Munirah and women's position

Munirah receives very little support in her work of modernization among the women of the village. She is a lone voice. Her husband is not sensitive towards women or their point of view, and professes himself unwilling to challenge traditional ways. He fears more the loss of the villagers' cooperation. As a result, there is only muted criticism of the beliefs of village midwives about childbirth and maternal nutrition. Munirah has no power, and her attempts to make change are limited, yet, Munirah's work is exacting:

'Setiap pagi, lima hari seminggu, aku ke sekolah. [] Setiap petang, tiga atau empat hari seminggu aku mengajar dan mendidik kaum ibu dan gadis-gadis serba sesuatu yang perlu diketahui tentang urusan rumahtangga. [] Dua petang mengajar menjahit, memotong kain, anyaman dan sulaman. Sepetang untuk masak-memasak dan segala sesuatu mengenai makanan yang seimbang serta dengan zat-zat dan vitamin serta menjaga kesihatan umum. [] Dua tiga malam, aku mengajar Seman dan beberapa orang pemuda lain [] main gitar' (Abdul 1995:282-3).

'Five mornings a week, I teach at school. [] Three or four afternoons a week I teach the married women and younger girls how to run a household. [] Two afternoons I spend on sewing, cutting material, mat weaving and embroidery. One afternoon I spend on cooking, teaching them what they need to know about the right foods, about vitamins and keeping healthy. [] Two or three evenings I spend teaching Seman and a few other young men [] how to play the guitar.'

Munirah has much to offer. She has been trained by her father, a medical doctor, in simple village health care and diet and lectures on family planning. However, she lacks male backing, such as Mat might have offered, had he been so-minded. She sees that important issues in the village remain untouched, and that traditional child-birth practices threaten the health and lives of the women and babies, yet the village midwife and the village *bomoh* (medicine man) reject all possibility of change. To admit change would result in a loss of their authority, power, prestige and the earning of their living.

Anti-feminist sentiments

The villagers practice a particularly vicious form of sexism. Masitah, Mat's unmarried sister falls sick. A rumour starts that she is pregnant. The community do not consider women important enough to be transported to hospital and so Masitah dies in agony of appendicitis. Mat explains that Masitah is really too sick to transport safely, and if she were to die, as seems inevitable anyway, it would prejudice the villagers against

hospitals and inconvenience them. Munirah sees clearly that the real problem is inertia and indifference towards women.

Marriage

Marriage is another issue where women are not treated well. Masita was engaged to Azlan before her untimely death. Recently, he had sent news that he had married another woman in Melaka (Abdul 1995:253). Jalil, engaged to Lijah, simply abandons her when she becomes pregnant with his child. This is balanced by Seman, who is happy to marry Lijah after her subsequent attempted suicide. Munirah has a sad story to tell as well. She was originally attracted to Syamsal, but Mat then deliberately raped her, so that she would marry him instead. Mun reflects:

Terlalu takut aku pada peristiwa itu. Tidak mungkin siapa tahu melainkan aku dan Rahmat sendiri (Abdul 1995:281).

I was really frightened then. No one could possibly have known about it except me and Rahmat.

Rahmat was jealous of Syam:

Aku yakin Munirah tentu akan memilih Hisyam. Dan aku telah bermain kotor untuk memiliki Munirah. Akhirnya Munirah terpaksa mengalah kepadaku.[] Munirah menyerah kepadaku kerana akulah lelaki yang membunuh kesuciannya (Abdul 1995:369).

I was sure that Munirah would certainly chose Hisyam. I played dirty to get her. In the end, Munirah was forced to accept me [] Munirah surrendered herself to me [in marriage] only because I was the one who took her purity.

Mat's second betrayal of Mun

Mat's subsequent betrayal of Mun is all the greater. Mat's step-mother, Mak Cik Saarah advises him:

'orang kampung tidak berapa suka Munirah [] Hati Pak Ngah kau dah luka. Ayah kau telah menyebut-nyebut untuk menjodohkan kau dengan Salwa [] Semuanya kecewa, patah hati. Tetapi kalau kau kahwin dengan gadis yang asalnya sebangsa dan seagama dengan kau, itu mungkin ringan' (Abdul 1995:372).

'the village people don't really care for Munirah [] Pak Ngah's heart is wounded. Your father had already spoken of engaging you to Salwa [] Everyone's disappointed, broken hearted. Now, if you marry a young girl of your own race and religion, then things may improve'.

Thus, Munirah is eventually sacrificed on the altar of Mat's dreams, just as the young women of the village are controlled by the tradition in the *kampung*^{xix}. Rahmat resolves the situation of having offended the villagers by marrying an outsider in an

imaginative way. Hisyam decides to take a holiday. Taking his cue from Hisyam, Rahmat decides to join him, bringing Munirah along as well. However, when the train arrives, Rahmat does not go. Instead, he stays behind, bidding Hisyam and Munirah a final farewell. Is this a cruel way of divorcing Mun or a calculated risk to increase her happiness? Does Rahmat in fact know about Hisyam's feelings for Mun? The evidence is not in his favour.

Does Rahmat sacrifice Munirah for the sake of community development?

Providentially, Mat acknowledges the wrong he did in competing with Syam for Munirah's affections by giving her back to Syam. However, his action is still self-seeking. Mat will definitely improve his position in the villagers' eyes by divorcing Munirah and marrying Salwa, as their parents planned. He can then repair the damage he has done in the eyes of the community by arriving with a 'foreign' bride. He wants to see the area developed and this ploy will help him to succeed. Rahmat has therefore paid a high price to develop his community. Does Rahmat atone for his bad behaviour towards Munirah or not? His act would have been more impressive had he had any idea of the feelings shared by Syam and Munirah, but he clearly does not. It is purely providential that Munirah happens to prefer Hisyam and so she gets her just reward.

Saga shows how troubled times result in troubled people. The people of Batu Ragi have been subject to the pressures of the Second World War and the Japanese Occupation, followed by the Emergency, which denied them of their lands and homes for some years. The better aspects of village life including the qualities of generosity and of sharing have been allowed to wither. They will not be rekindled easily. It is therefore less surprising in this context if the villagers do not readily accept new ways, or new people. However, as head man's son, married to Salwa, an appropriate choice since her father, too, is important in the area, Rahmat will atone for past mistakes, at the expense of Munirah.

General Conclusion

These two novels, *Pungkad* and *Saga*, illustrate different aspects of the development process. *Pungkad* illustrates how important good personal qualities are in the individual to be successful in the development process. Without good leadership, a community will not easily prosper. It is important to elect a leader who possesses the quality of selflessness, who has vision, and the will to carry out the aims of the community. As *Pungkad* reveals, the aim of development is the good of the whole community, and efforts should not be confined to improving the lot of one favoured section of it, such as one's own relatives. A leader should be a rich man in his own right, and also needs the support of good officials.

Saga is differently focused. It depicts an area which has been disrupted by the Emergency and which will not recover easily. A fractured community will not cooperate. Tradition has its strengths as well as its weaknesses but the latter may triumph in troubled times.

Both novels show that a young man, however well-connected, who has left the community when young, will be regarded with suspicion when he returns as a mature

man with a university level education, and filled with enthusiasm to modernize the area, due to his lengthy absence. Both novels show that villagers still turn to their own relatives, and that an educated village head man's son is the right man to lead the development process.

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ⁱ This paper uses the 1995 edition of *Saga*.

ⁱⁱ *Kaum Muda* supporters were largely middle-Eastern educated, urban middle class young men who clashed with the established rural *ulama* who believed that ultimate authority in religious matters belonged with them. The new urban group sought to encourage an interpretation of Islam which would encourage an appropriate Malay response to the modern world and the growth of technology. They supported Malay progress through education and the use of reason in Islamic practice, rather than blind acceptance, and also the renewal of Islam. They advocated the education of women, and offered a wider interpretation of women's lives, including the right to select their own marriage partner (Roff, 1974:56-90).

ⁱⁱⁱ Roff 1974:56-67.

^{iv} Roff 1974:56.

^v The novel was either translated from Middle-Eastern sources, as some maintain, or originally composed in Penang (Hooker, 2001:20-39). Other writers who examined similar themes in their novels include Ahmad Kotot who in *Hikayat Percintaan Kasih Kemudaan* (A Tale of Young Love) 1927, argued that 'the gaining of secular knowledge ... enables an individual to discriminate between good and bad and to improve his life' (Hooker 2000:39).

^{vi} Ya'acob was a graduate of the prestigious Sultan Idrus Training College. He wrote for newspapers including *Warta Melayu* and *Majlis*. Ishak Haji Muhammad was educated at Malay College, Kuala Kangsar before writing novels, short stories and newspaper columns.

^{vii} Assisted in Singapore by organizations such as the *Sahabat Pena*, popular nationalist newspapers such as *Utusan Melayu*; the *Angkatan Sastrawan 1950* (The 1950 Generation of Literati), which was a private literary club, and a series of Language Congresses, the growth of literacy the growth of Malay literature was assured.

^{viii} The Malays had always been an overwhelmingly rural community largely engaged in agriculture and fishing (Crouch 1996:15).

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- ix Gaik Cheng Khoo 2002:81.
- x Crouch, 1996:16.
- xi Li Chuan Siu 1975 lists the background of twenty five prominent Malay writers.
- xii Obasiah 1989: 170.
- xiii *Saga* was first published in 1976. This paper uses the 1995 edition.
- xiv Abdul 1995:290.
- xv Hooker 2003:192-200.
- xvi Abdul 1995:381.
- xvii Abdul 1995:290.
- xviii Abdul 1995: 41.
- xix Rosnah Baharuddin (1992) enlarges upon the misogynist aspects of *Saga* in an unpublished paper 'Citra Wanita dalam *Saga* dan *Bayang-Bayang Ungu* dari kaca mata wanita'.