

**Malay literature** Historically, Singapore was important in Malay court histories and literature. The island was referred to several times in old texts such as the Malay Annals (SEJARAH MELAYU), Hikayat Hang Tuah (Life of Hang Tuah) and the 19th-century historical work TUHFAT AL-NAFIS (Precious Gift). Modern Malay literary activity in Singapore began in the early decades



Typewriter used by Suratman Markasan.

of the 19th century. Amongst the earliest works that were published and circulated here were MUNSHI ABDULLAH ABDUL KADIR'S *Syair Kampong Gelam Terbakar* (Poem of the Burning of Kampong Glam)(1830), *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah* (Travels of Abdullah) (1843) and *Hikayat Abdullah* (Life of Abdullah) (1849). Other early works include *Syair Potong Gaji* (Poem of the Pay-cut), *Syair Dagang Berjual Beli* (Poem of Commerce) and *Syair Tenku Perabu* (Poem of Tenku Perabu) which were banned from circulation by the colonial authorities. What is significant is that these works departed very much from traditional, *istana* (palace)-centric literature. They were works of realism that captured the concerns, interests, anxieties and hopes of the ordinary Malay people in Singapore. This would be a central feature of Malay literature in years to come.

**Literary centre**

The introduction of the printing press in 19th-century Singapore had a great

impact on Malay literary development. By the mid-19th century, Singapore was the leading centre for Malay literature, housing several Malay newspapers and publishing companies. This led to Singapore becoming a major centre for Malay intelligentsia, especially at the beginning of the 20th century. Many leading Malay journalists and literary figures worked here, such as Abdul Rahim Kajai, a prolific writer of the modern Malay short story, who worked at UTUSAN MELAYU in the 1930s. Keris Mas (pen name of Kamaluddin Muhammad), famous for his short stories and reflective essays, also worked in Singapore and was active in the Singapore-based Angkatan Sasterawan 50 (Writers' Movement) (ASAS 50), alongside Usman Awang and A. Samad Said.

The formation of ASAS 50 provided the impetus for the development of Malay literature in Singapore. It also created competition amongst language and literary activists. Soon after its formation, Lembaga



Diary of Harun Aminurrashid, 1965.

Bahasa Melayu (Malay Language Board) was set up to provide an alternative. In 1954, journalist and writer Hamzah Hussin led an association, the Persatuan Angkatan Persuratan Melayu Baru (Union of The New Malay Literary Movement), which opposed ASAS 50's arts-for-society philosophy for being propagandistic.

The separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965 saw the shift of the Malay literary centre from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur. Prominent Malay writers

**Malay Literature Timeline**

1800s



The Hikayat Abdullah was written in 1849.

1930s



Abdul Rahim Kajai was the editor of Utusan Melayu and is remembered as the 'Father of the Malay Short Story'.

1950s



Literary activists founded ASAS 50, a movement that remains active, and influential. Masuri S.N. is seated second from the left.

During the period between 1872-1882, the number of Malay schools in the colony rose from 16 to 85. In 1882, the Malay school at Telok Blangah was converted into a training college for Malay teachers. Problems in the administration and standards of Malay schools persisted and in the 1890s all were closed pursuant to the recommendations of a Commission set up in 1893. In 1924, Richard Winstedt, a Malay language scholar, was made Director of Education. He tailored the curriculum of Malay vernacular schools to focus on skills such as fishing, gardening and basket-weaving.

After World War II, virtually no provisions were made for Malay education. In 1951, policies relating to Malay education were revised. The revisions proposed that Malay be made the medium of instruction for the first three years of schooling, with English as a separate subject. English would then become the medium of instruction for most subjects from the fourth to the seventh year. Students who excelled would qualify for the 'Special Malay Class' in an English-medium school at Standard 5.

Malay education thrived when the PEOPLE'S ACTION PARTY (PAP) came into power in 1959 and campaigned for MERGER. The teaching of Malay at the secondary and

the pre-university level in Singapore became an important political point in the PAP's pro-Malaysia campaign. Malay was declared the NATIONAL LANGUAGE and opportunities were made available both in schools and through adult-education classes to learn the language. Malay-medium secondary schools were also opened. In the years that followed, enrolment in Malay-stream schools rose.

The emphasis on industrialization, especially in the 1960s, led many Malay parents to send their children to English medium schools. By the 1980s, Malay medium schools had all closed down.

More recently, concerns have been raised within the community about the dwindling usage of the Malay language. In view of this, the Ministry of Education set up the Malay Language Review Steering Committee in 1999. The objective was to have every Malay Singaporean study the Malay language for as long as possible, and to as high a level as possible.

A Malay Language Advisory Committee was set up to solicit feedback from the community. The committee's proposals included a four-year enrichment programme for secondary school students who took Higher Malay from 2001, as well as a Malay Language Elective Programme

for university students who had taken Higher Malay at 'A' level. Students who took this option would also be eligible for the Malay Language Elective Scholarship. In addition, a new syllabus—the 'ML B'—was introduced at the secondary level for students who faced exceptional difficulties in learning the language. Students who pass the ML B would be deemed to have met the threshold requirement for entry into junior college or university.

**Malay Film Productions** Film studio. The SHAW BROTHERS opened Malay Film Productions (MFP) in 1947 at Jalan Ampas, off Balestier Road, to produce movies in Malay.

The studio produced over 160 movies before closing in 1967, making it the most prolific in the history of Singapore cinema. This high rate of productivity was due to the Shaw Brothers' adoption of the successful Hollywood model, in which production was integrated, and producers were granted final control over all films made.

MFP signed up many actors and directors, including Kasma Booty, S. Roomai Noor, B.S. RAJHANS, L. Krishnan, Siput Sarawak and P. RAMLEE—all of whom were leading names in Malay cinema. The first film produced by the studio was *Singapura*



Malay Film Productions: screen logo (above); studio gate passes (below).

