

## WRITING THE NATION 4

### A Malay take on anti-Japanese resistance

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Malays writing and publishing in English have always played a significant role in the local literary scene, but until recently have preferred to write poems, plays, short stories, memoirs, and sociopolitical commentaries. As a result English-language novels by Malay authors came relatively late to the scene.

The first novel in English by a Malay author was published in 1984. From that year until 2005 only two others were published. However, from 2006 onwards, there has been a steady stream of Malay novelists entering the scene.

Of the novels between 1984 and 2011, six have historical settings. Three are true historical novels – the novels are set in the past and the narratives stay within that time-frame. These are Mohd Tajuddin Samsuddin's *The Price has been High*, Iskandar Al-Bakri's *The Beruas Prophecy* (2011), and Kamsiah Bostock's *Malacca: A Romance* (2011). Three are "heritage" novels – novels that look back to the past from a later time-frame. These are Adibah Amin's *This End of the Rainbow* (2006), Shahriza Hussein's *Legacy* (2008), and Shaari Isa's *Kirkby: The Life and the Loves* (2009).

In this article, we explore *The Price Has Been High*.

The novel is set in the jungles and villages of Perak during the Japanese Occupation. The central character is Rahim Yusuf. The novel opens on the brutal killing of his parents by a Japanese major. Then only 16 years old, Rahim sets out to hunt down and kill the major but ends up joining the Kinta One Hundred, a guerrilla group led by Hassan Amin. The rest of the novel tells of his experiences as a guerrilla fighter until his death a couple of years later.

The novel may seem to be an adventure story, but it is much more than that.

It is the first English-language novel about the unofficial Malay anti-Japanese resistance. Until its appearance, most books about the anti-Japanese resistance were by British, American, and non-Malay local authors, all of whom had little to say about Malay freedom fighters. In his

Acknowledgements, the author tells us that the novel is based on his older sister's recollections of their father's experiences during the Occupation. The novel is therefore not pure fiction; it is part of our national history.

As history, the novel gives a more inclusive picture of the resistance than official accounts. Through Rahim's experiences, we learn that all kinds of people were involved: the *orang asli* who passed on information about the movements of Japanese soldiers, the Chinese herbalist who healed the wounded combatants, the wealthy Indian who made his car and motorbike available for the cause, the Chinese shopkeeper whose wife had been raped but who chose to stay alive and fight rather than die of shame; the Indian *capati* maker who fed those stranded by curfews.

The novel can also be read as a discourse on Islamic values. To understand the national significance of this discourse, we have to remember that by the early 1980s, Islam and politics had become intricately entwined, and many Malaysians were apprehensive about the rise of religious fundamentalism.

With this as background, the portrayal of Rahim and Hassan stands out as a reminder that there are principled and humane rules of engagement governing the waging of a defensive war or jihad. Young Rahim, new to guerrilla warfare, constantly asks how one can be just and honourable when dealing with invaders, oppressors, fellow Muslims, and non-Muslims.

As a good Muslim, he bravely confronts those who break the rules, including his leader, Hassan. Acting contrary to Malay custom, he voices his disapproval of Hassan's order to kill 14 Japanese in their sleep, which he sees as murder. When some women wishing to join the group are laughed off by the men, he stands up for the women and gives the men a lecture on gender equality.

Hassan, on the other hand, exemplifies the good Muslim leader. Although irritated by Rahim's confrontational manner, he accepts the criticisms as justified, apologises, and makes Rahim his second-in-command.

Throughout the novel, we are also reminded that it is not colour or creed – sometimes not even actions – that defines a person's worth, but rather the intention. In the broad canvas of the fictional world, we find combatant and civilian collaborators, informers, procurers, Japanese sympathisers, brutal killers, and torturers from all communities. And we find nobility

among those perceived as invaders and oppressors, such as the Australian, Alec Harding, and the Japanese, Colonel Keiko Mimura, who lose their lives in pursuit of peace.

The novel's message is summed up in the episode of a mass burial for the victims of war: "... Bahar's prayers were for every one of them, Muslims and non-Muslims. They were, after all, the children of God."

That Tajuddin chose to write in English suggests that he intended his message to reach not just the Malays but the non-Malays as well.