

National culture distant dream due to Islamisation of Malay literature, says author

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LANGKAWI: The religionisation of Malay literature over the decades has become a stumbling block to realising the national culture, a concept that was proposed as far back as 50 years ago, said prominent writer Faizal Musa.

Faizal, better known by his pen name Faisal Tehrani, referred to the National Cultural Congress convened in 1971, which was also attended by, among others, artist P Ramlee, historian Khoo Kay Kim and journalist A Samad Ismail.

“Whatever discussed in 1971 has not been achieved in 2019. Not only that, the whole thing has veered off the original path,” Faisal said in his keynote address at a seminar on International Literature, Language and Culture organised by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Malaysia Perlis here today.

Faizal, a fellow at UKM’s Institute of the Malay World and Civilization, said the congress had wanted to formulate a Malaysian identity by taking into account the various races and religions, as well as the Rukun Negara principles introduced following the May 13 riots in 1969.

He said Islamic literature was only a small part of Malay literature, but has been given so much prominence that it is today synonymous with national literature.

He said this is part of a trend of Islamists influencing the culture and identity of the Malays.

Faisal shared a story of an ethnic Indian student who told him that he found reading Malay literature uncomfortable as it was replete with religious overtones, as well as themes that are preachy and “laced with Arabic terminology”.

“How would Malays feel if they are made to read school textbooks filled with elements of Hinduism?” asked Faisal, whose seven books remain banned by the Malaysian government.

He said the phrase “Islamic literature” has also become problematic, and themes close to the religion such as oppression, corruption, feudalism, sectarianism and human rights are never part of it.

“Islamic literature still revolves around the theme of love, featuring Muslim couples in skullcap and robe, complete with the salam, Arabic expressions such as astaghfirullah and bismillah, and carefully disguised sexual innuendos,” he said.

Faizal said another dilemma of Malay literature has to do with the works of non-Malays in Malaysia.

He said although Malay is the national language, there are other widely spoken languages such as the Bumiputera languages, Mandarin and Tamil, as well as writers who are brought up in an English

environment.

“Literature is the expression of sense, thought, knowledge and culture. If all these come from non-Malay languages, are they not considered part of national literature?” he asked.

He asked how the public would react if a Malaysian author who writes in a language other than Malay wins an international literary award.

“Will he be recognised as a Malaysian writer? Or perhaps we will be rushed into claiming him to be part of us?” he asked.

Referring again to the 1971 cultural congress, Faisal quoted Malay literary activist, the late Mohd Taib Osman, who called for all Bumiputera literary work to be compiled, translated, published and made into movies.

“How many Iban, Dayak, Sulu and Senoi texts have we identified since 1971?

“We do not translate Mandarin, Tamil or English literary works such as by Bernice Chauly or Dina Zaman into Malay, despite the fact that they are also Malaysians.”

He said Malaysian literature should be able to foster national unity and should not be promoted on the lines of any single culture or belief.

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