

THE NEW PENGLIPURLARA
Spoken Word Poetry
and the Revival of the Storyteller
in Malaysian Literature in English

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Abstract

The New Penglipurlara is a pragmatic and eclectic approach to the field of spoken word poetry. It identifies and explores the phenomenon of performing personal stories as reflected in its increasing visibility in Malaysia over the past decade. This proliferation of events and sub-communities of contemporary storytellers appear to be reflected not only in critical discourses including narratology, performance studies and the postcolonial scholars' interest in oral tradition, but also in areas such as cognitive science. Despite this, spoken word poets and their works remain relatively absent in literary criticism and theory, an omission that may have arisen in part due to a fixation on the dichotomy of the oral and the text, rooted in an Eurocentric mindset that regards literacy as a defining feature of civilization and orality as an archive of its primitive predecessors. This study aims to address this under-explored area by plotting a local literary history of performing stories beginning from the traditional Malay storyteller known as the penglipurlara to a selected group of contemporary, urban spoken word poets based in Kuala Lumpur who actively contributed to the artform from 2007-2017. It argues that not only do these two groups of storytellers share more similarities than differences, the popularity of spoken word poetry in the last 10 years is evident of the country's oral/aural past and its return to the verbal art as a mode of communication in Malaysian society. Drawing largely on methodologies informed by folklorists, postcolonial and performance theorists, it investigates how spoken word poets use the medium as a way to challenge established narratives and engage with the personal and the concerns of their society at large. Through an interdisciplinary reading of spoken word poems, observations and interviews, this study reveals that spoken word poetry functions as an emergent site of complex and multilayered identities and meaning making. It also shows how this new generation of oral storytellers offers researchers and practitioners valuable tools and resources with which to navigate and re-map the fields of contemporary Malaysian literary studies.

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Preface

We are, as a species, addicted to story. But the addiction runs deeper than we think. We can walk away from our books and our screens, but we can never walk away from story. For humans, story is like gravity: an inescapable field of force that influences everything but is so omnipresent that we hardly notice it.

Jonathan Gottschall¹

This thesis began with a story.

More specifically, it began when a group of Malaysian spoken word poets under the collective known as Poetry Café KL (which has since rebranded itself as My Poetry School)² embarked on a collaborative, cross-disciplinary ensemble spoken word project titled *Pontianak*. Founded by Elaine Foster, the collective was not only instrumental in raising awareness on poetry education through series of workshops and poetry slams targeting international and national schools in Malaysia, it also pioneered ensemble shows that incorporate spoken word poetry with theatre and storytelling. The show debuted at the Melaka Arts & Performance Festival in 2014, restaged two more times in the following year at the Georgetown Literary Arts Festival in Pulau Penang and the Suatukala Festival in Langkawi before it was put to rest, indefinitely.

As one of the poets involved in *Pontianak*, my involvement in the project personally left an indelible mark on me as it presented a timely opportunity to contextualise and re-evaluate spoken word poetry by reflecting on its development and prospects in Malaysia. The show required its poets not only to adapt, write and rewrite well-known local and western folklore as

¹ Jonathan Gottschall, 'Storytelling Animals: 10 Surprising Ways That Story Dominates Our Lives', *Huffington Post*, 21 June 2012 <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jonathan-gottschall/humans-story-telling_b_1440917.html> [accessed on 3 July 2015]

² My Poetry School, Facebook <<https://www.facebook.com/mypoetryschool/>> [accessed 21 February 2020]

performance poems but also included the additional task of converging their individual story with the folklore's central character. During the preparation stage of the show, a critical turning point occurred when I attended a storytelling event organised by Pusaka and watched the rare performances of two penglipurlara namely Tok Selampit from Kelantan and Awang Batil from Perlis.³ During their sessions, I noted down observable similarities and differences in their stories and performance. Although the stories are different, they appear to adhere to a basic narrative structure (beginning, middle and end), lean heavy on their didactic quality and feature the conventional elements of a story including protagonist, supporting characters and conflict. In terms of their delivery, both storytellers perform in his own distinctive dialect and style, with no formal breaks in between, accompanied by stage props and music.

From my perspective as an audience member, I was aware of the juxtaposition of the penglipurlara's performance and the urbanised setting he was performing in. Despite the entertaining stories and the almost spiritual atmosphere of their performances, there is a palpable disconnect between the world contained within these stories and the world inhabited by the attendees. At the same time, the very presence of an audience at the event suggests an existing interest in attending public events such as this. As a performer, on the other hand, I immediately recognised traits in these two performances that are also present in spoken word poetry: the presence of poetic devices in the stories, the constant rhythmic arrangement of the verbal delivery that appeared to function as a mnemonic aide, and the controlled use of body and voice that correlate with certain characters and parts of the story. Furthermore, in one part of Awang Batil's performance, the penglipurlara began singing a Hindi song and inserted humour: two of the many strategies available one can use to shift the pace and retain the audience's attention.

There are differences, of course. Unlike the predominant use of first-person pronoun 'I' by spoken word poets to mark the dynamics of the

³ Pusaka, '*JANGAN BAKAR AKAR: Storytelling magic by Pusaka (Art in the Park)*' [Facebook Event Post], 25 October 2014
<<https://www.facebook.com/events/882506948434128/>> [accessed 10 December 2015]

performance as it shifts back and forth from the communal to the personal space, the penglipurlara feature a clear and objective narratorial voice in their stories that involve a variety of different characters. But the similarities led me to question: is the spoken word poet a storyteller? And if so, is there a relationship between the traditional Malay penglipurlara and the contemporary Malaysian spoken word poet? This preface serves to highlight the key reasons why I argue for the Malaysian spoken word poet as the contemporary storyteller in Malaysian literary studies.

Here, it is important that I make clear at the onset of this thesis, my positioning as both performer and researcher. From the standpoint of a practitioner, I have no difficulty agreeing that spoken word poetry has encouraged a significant number of young people to engage, through the telling of their personal stories, with themes critically relevant to and reflective of previous research done in the field of Malaysian literature. It is my role as researcher, however, that has brought to the surface a series of challenges when attempting to study the works of local spoken word poets.

Despite the accessibility and availability of both texts and performances, there has been and still is an observable lack of academic interest towards the practice. Over the entire duration of this thesis, I had only been informed of one journal article that mentioned about the local spoken word community and notwithstanding his suggestion that “the future of poetry written in English in Malaysia will eventually be found in its new centre of gravity within the spoken word form,”⁴ the article did not include any analysis of these spoken word poets’ works and instead included poems written by other poets including the Singaporean poet Alfian Sa’at and the Malaysian poet Wong Phui Nam. Most of the coverage on spoken word poetry is also limited to print and online new media where critical discussion of the practice tends to be impressionistic, suggesting that there is no unifying consensus on what it meant by spoken word poetry.

⁴ Leonard Jeyam, “[T]he most underrated genre’: Malaysian poetry in English in the 21st century”, *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature*, 12 (2018), 125-136 (p. 134).

Previous research conducted on spoken word poetry largely centres on its function as a pedagogical tool by educators or as a gauge of one's politics of identity by anthropology and folklore studies researchers.⁵ My interest, clearly does not begin here. Instead, by concentrating on a broader idea of spoken word poetry as a type of verbal art, this thesis seeks to reveal that approaches to spoken word poetry have yet been clearly identified and thoroughly theorised. This gap of knowledge becomes more obvious when it concerns ideas such as what constitutes the definition and distinguishing features of Malaysian spoken word poetry. The overwhelming majority of references currently available on the topic are limited to those provided by western scholars about works written by poets from the West. This thesis addresses this lack of a clear definition of spoken word poetry and offers one that is informed by those who practice it in order to investigate both how and why they write and perform.

It also raises concerns on whether spoken word poetry is a practice foreign to the literary history of this country. More specifically, it sets in motion a chain of events that led to a questioning of spoken word poetry as part of a long and rich but discontinuous local oral tradition represented by the figure of the *penglipurlara*. Is spoken word poetry a new practice in Malaysia or is it part of a larger phenomenon signalling a return to oral performance? And if so, in what ways do the poem-stories told by these contemporary storytellers tell us about the audience that directly contributed to its popularity over the past decade? More importantly, if these poem-stories reveal insights into the concerns of contemporary Malaysian society, why is there a general lack of interest among scholars to address this emergent practice?

A quick look at the conversations surrounding spoken word poetry in neighbouring Singapore reveals a similar lack of academic coverage. Despite having a more matured spoken word poetry scene compared to Malaysia with its first slam organised by the not-for-profit literary arts company Word

⁵ Ruth Finnegan, *Oral tradition and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices*, ASA Research Methods (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 6.

Forward for public participation as early as 2003,⁶ the poet and performer Ng Yi Sheng shares the same concerns as expressed in this study when he wrote:

What irks me is that almost nothing has been written about Singapore's slam poetry in academia. In fact, there's been very little documentation of the history of poetry in performance in our nation, in spite of the fact that many of our most important poets were deeply committed to the performative experience of their works.⁷

Bearing in mind that the separation of Singapore from Malaysia occurred only 55 years ago in 1965, one would assume that this dearth in documentation of poetry in performance mirrors the situation in Malaysia as well. This is of course, a naive hypothesis. It is not difficult to see how the very conception of a national literature in Malaysia is characterised by a history steeped in anti-colonial driven nationalism, a deep desire for a body of works that could represent its multicultural national identity and a language that could do so most effectively. According to Tham Seong Chee, it was the 1960s and specifically the years after the 1969 racial riots, that marked the beginning of a literary discourse supported by racial-based politics in Malaysia.

Even before the country's independence in 1957, the two main groups that contributed to the dialogue of a national literature differ in their opinions concerning language. The first group was Asas '50, the first literary association established in Malaya on the 5th of August 1950. Active in their advocacy of an 'intellectual and political socialisation of its populace through the literary medium'⁸ and vocal in their push towards the independence for Malaya, Asas '50 rallied for a national literature written and published in the

⁶ 'Singapore Poetry Slam', *Word Forward* <<https://www.wordforward.org/singapore-poetry-samtrade.html>> [accessed 10 December 2017]

⁷ Ng Yi-Sheng, 'Unwritten: An Anecdotal History of Performance Poetry in Singapore', *Singapore Poetry*, <<http://singaporepoetry.com/2014/02/20/unwritten-history>> [accessed 3 January 2017]

⁸ Tham Seong Chee, 'The politics of literary development in Malaysia', in *Essays on literature and society in Southeast Asia: political and sociological perspectives* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981)

country's *lingua franca* since the 14th century: Bahasa Melayu. The second group of writers were represented by those who believed in the English language's neutral grounds in a country where language, race and religion are intricately intertwined as well as its ability to represent a newly formed national identity. The literary publication *The New Cauldron*, established by the University of Malaya's Raffles Society in 1949, was a direct outcome of the group's efforts. Dudley De Souza quoted Wong Phui Nam's 1958 article published in *The New Cauldron* where he explained why English should be developed as a secondary literary medium aside from Bahasa Melayu:

Malayans are not Europeans, but we should have no qualms in inheriting all that is best in European culture and with other infusion from the Indian and the Chinese traditions, local writers may be in the distant future forge a body of literature in English, which shall be unique and valuable.⁹

In spite of this positive outlook, De Souza pointed out how Anglophile writers were faced with two gnawing issues. The first concerns itself with the limitations of English when writing about the Malayan experience. Although there were attempts to 'malayanise' the English language by replacing words with Malay, Tamil or Cantonese words such as the failed EngMalChin movement, English and the colonial baggage that came with it had several writers questioning its suitability as a medium for a national literature. The second issue, which I believe is much more pressing and relevant to the topic of this thesis, pertains to an absence of a national mythology for its anglophile writers to relate to and use in their writing. The current delineation in terms of the historical and cultural resources used by those who study Malay Literature and Malaysian Literature in English is but one example of its rippling effects: the detachment from the country's oral tradition that are not only rich in stories but offer much to learn from its narrative structure, imagery and symbolism, literary tropes and others for local writers.

⁹ Dudley De Souza, 'The roots of Malay(an) literature in English', in *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, ed. by M. A. Quayum and Peter C. Wicks (Petaling Jaya: Longman, 2001), pp. 2-12.

Regardless of their differing opinions on language, both groups appeared to work relatively well and provided stimulations to many constructive dialogues around questions of identity and politics or what De Souza described as 'a self-conscious attempt at providing for a literature to express the national identity that was in the process of forming and, at the same time recognition of the important part that this literature has to play.'¹⁰ This continued until the introduction of the Language Act of 1967 dramatically halted all existing dialogues. The prolific scholar of Malaysian literature in English, M.A. Quayum summarises the devastating effect this national policy had on one of the two major groups discussed earlier below:

First and foremost, it has pushed writings in English (together with writings in other ethnic languages) to the margins of national culture, forcing some writers to forsake English as a literary medium and frustrating others who could not but continue writing in the language. [...]The options left for them in the face of this essentialist political development were either to continue writing in spite of the consequences, migrate to a new land where they would be more at home with their tongue, or just stop writing.¹¹

The historical context provided above is important to our discussion of spoken word poetry as it explains the idiosyncrasies of Malaysian literature in English. There remains a disconnect between Malaysia and its pre-colonial past due to the politicisation of language exacerbated by specific policies in the 1960s. Although Malaysian writers who write in English struggle to be acknowledged and included as a part of the country's national literature, there is still a sizeable market of readers particularly in the urban cities for those who write in prose. Writers such as Tash Aw, Rani Manicka, Dina Zaman and Tan Twan Eng have all achieved numerous accolades for their works in fiction outside of the country.

¹⁰ De Souza, p. 7.

¹¹ M. A. Quayum, 'Interrogating Malaysian literature in English: Its glories, sorrows and thematic trends', *Kunapipi*, 30 (2008), 149-168 (p. 153).

Less so can be said about Malaysian poetry in English. As grimly pointed out by the illustrious poet Cecil Rajendra, “I think I can safely say that there has never been a big market for poetry. Just because a lot more people are writing and publishing their stuff these days, doesn’t mean that there is any sort of market out there.”¹² He also echoed the same sentiment concerning the proliferation of poetry readings and performance events. I disagree with Rajendra’s opinion and instead argue that not only does the market for poetry exist, the demand for it has never waned. The noticeable difference now is a revival of interests in the ways a poem is shared, which is through the medium of performance. Thus, this thesis posits 2 reasons behind the curious absence of critical discussion on works of spoken word poetry: 1) that the selection and treatment of literary works are still strongly influenced by a particularly western, colonial and binary approach to literature and 2) that there remains a lack of awareness on theoretical models of analysis that equally address both the literary and performative aspects of a written work. It also speculates that contemporary spoken word poets’ choice to engage with the corporeal as speaker and storyteller is evidence of oral residue rooted in Malaysia’s oral/aural past.

Although spoken word poetry did not begin organically in the country, its increasing number of practitioners and increase in popularity suggest that the verbal arts is a practice deeply rooted in this country. One avenue of this exploration concerns what characteristics the spoken word poet and the penglipurlara share. I attempt to link these two traditions by looking into the role of the storyteller and the performance of stories. In addition, I also discuss the idea of audience, looking at the relationship between storytellers and listeners, and how it differs from the relationship between writers and readers. As a result of these explorations, I reveal that what have been explored and studied regarding the penglipurlara’s stories and performance, are also applicable to the spoken word poet.

¹² Terence Toh, ‘Why is poetry becoming more popular in urban Malaysia?’. *The Star*, 28 June 2018 <<https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/culture/2018/07/23/malaysian-poetry-popular/>> [accessed 10 September 2018]

Finally, I show that engaging both the literary and performative aspects of spoken word poetry has a transformative effect not only on our understanding of the poems but the changing landscape and voices of contemporary Malaysia. It is from this perspective that I propose the concept of spoken word poet as the country's contemporary *penglipurlara*, which I argue, is more in keeping with contemporary ideas surrounding the intersections of individual, communal and national Malaysian identities. In other words, I argue that spoken word poets and their performance of personal narrative texts provide important insights into the development of the verbal arts in the country and further contribute to the country's continuously expanding literary tradition.

Introduction

The artist as researcher can begin to consider and act upon substantive questions about consciousness, communication, and culture without giving up membership in the profession of the art.

Allan Kaprow¹³

According to the Greek philosopher Socrates, 'the only true wisdom is knowing you know nothing'. This thesis is the culmination of this admission: one that begins with the researcher not knowing and begins a journey to find the answers. This study presents itself as an exploratory study that aims to situate spoken word poetry within the field of literary studies by tracing how they have appeared in literary criticism and theory. The chapter is divided into two interconnecting parts, all of which serve to show a general disconnect between the burgeoning interest in spoken word poetry and the little theorisation on the subject-matter.

It begins by highlighting the main challenges faced by the practitioner-researcher, who confronts a mountainous task of navigating their research due to the absence of a well-defined methodology and an established theoretical framework. This is followed by situating spoken word poetry within the definitions of both written and oral literature. Here, I show how the lack of research is symptomatic of a long-existing and problematic set of assumptions held by literary researchers and critics that prioritise text over performance. These assumptions, I contend, are entrenched in a colonial positivistic research paradigm. In response, the adoption of the bricoleur and situated knowledge approaches forms the foundation needed to begin the investigation. Concluding the chapter, the schema of this thesis will be provided at the end.

¹³ Allan Kaprow, 'Nontheatrical performance,' in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life: Expanded Edition*, ed. by Jeff Kelley (California: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 153-180 (p. 177).

The Spoken Word Practitioner as Researcher

From the moment the decision is made to study the artform in the last 10 years in the urban setting of Kuala Lumpur, I continue to find myself at a crossroad.

A series of questions began to crystallise that requires me to define the term, enfold it within an established frame or tradition, and endow it with meaning. In order to find the answers to these questions, it is imperative to leave the familiar space of *knowing* as informed by my involvement as a spoken word practitioner for the admittedly less comfortable place of *seeking*. Similar to the endeavours of philosophers, scientists and historians, literary scholars too rigorously explore meanings and meaning-making.

My dual role as both researcher and practitioner demands equal emphasis on a working theory and practice that is situation within a framework of symbols and cultural meanings given by aspects of life stories brought into the observational setting.¹⁴ Taking into consideration that spoken word poems are written not only for one's reading but also viewing and listening consumption, how does one analyse and critique these texts without disregarding either its written or oral features? It also acknowledges that the struggles of studying performance texts can be narrowed down to one single question: how does one balance between partiality and objectivity when critically engaging with texts that are not only typographic but performative, and convert it into a work of qualitative literary analysis?

Defining Spoken Word Poetry

Because everybody's voice is heard.
Because Old White Guys as usual.
Because it's the opposite that includes the
opposite.
Because do not institutionalize the anti-
institution!

¹⁴ Arthur J. Vidich and Stanford M. Lyman, 'Qualitative Methods: Their History in Sociology and Anthropology', in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (London: Sage Publications, 1994), pp. 23-44.

Because it's meant for middle and high
 schoolers
 so they get adrenaline poetry shots.
 Because Pepsi and Nike have conflicting ideas
 about the team uniforms.
 Because competitive.

Bob Holman¹⁵

For the uninitiated, spoken word poetry refers to poems that are written for performance. Compared to its early 20th century reference to all recorded and performed texts on broadcast radio, the term 'spoken word' as understood now was first coined by the American-Polish performance poet Hedwig Gorski to describe her poems that are "written for or during performance instead of for print publication".¹⁶ Its point of entry into the mainstream popular culture, however, began with a series of poetry open mic events held at the Get Me High Lounge in Chicago sometime in the mid-1980s.¹⁷ As pointed out by its founder, Marc Smith, the first Uptown Poetry Slam was created in 1986 after he began noticing the correlation between the generally negative social perception of poetry and what he describes as "a lifeless monotone that droned on and on with no consideration for the structure or pacing of the event,"¹⁸ Positioning itself as a break-away from the standard format of poetry reading circles or the 'dry' recitation of poems by the speaker in front of a listening audience, Smith started the poetry slam.

Branding the event as a radical move that aims to democratise poetry, **poetry slam** is a competitive poetry event where participants (also known as slammers) perform poems in front of an audience and a randomly selected panel of judges.¹⁹ The format of a slam is simple and easy to follow. Before the

¹⁵ Bob Holman, 'Praise Poem for Slam: Why Slam Causes Pain and Is a Good Thing', <<http://bobholman-blog-blog.tumblr.com/post/85030405760/praise-poem-for-slam-why-slam-causes-pain-and-is>> [accessed 18 June 2016]

¹⁶ Hedwig Gorski, *Hedwig Gorski*, <<https://sites.google.com/site/hedwiggorskisite/>> [accessed 1 May 2020]

¹⁷ Marc Smith, 'About slam poetry', in *The Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip Hop & the Poetry of a New Generation*, ed. by Mark Eleveld, (Illinois: Sourcebooks Inc., 2003), pp.116-120.

¹⁸ Marc Smith, 'About slam poetry', in *The Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip Hop & the Poetry of a New Generation*, ed. by Mark Eleveld (Illinois: Sourcebooks Inc., 2003), pp. 116-120.

¹⁹ Smith. p. 118.

start of the competition, five judges will be randomly selected from the audience. There are three rounds for each slam, in which a slammer will perform their poem within the given time frame of 3 minutes. Those who exceeded the time limit will have their marks deducted. During the performance, the slammer is not allowed to use props, costumes or music accompaniment. After the performance, the poem's content and delivery is judged by the five selected judges using a scoring scale of 0.0 – 10.00. The winning slammer (or the slam champion) is the poet who successfully advances through all three rounds and accumulated the highest average scores.

Often held in non-traditional spaces one may not associate with poetry such as pubs and bars, community centres and even in the streets, poetry slams are the antithesis of poetry readings. While the latter may bring up images of an attentive audience quietly listening to the poet's recitation of poetry, poetry slams are characteristically boisterous. Audience participation, if not necessitated, is strongly encouraged by the host. It is not uncommon to witness the audience reacting strongly to a performance in a poetry slam by snapping their fingers, clapping, heckling and booing. In the first causeway slam the researcher participated in, she vividly recalls the moment when several members of the audience physically stomped their feet up and down the venue to show their displeasure towards another slammer's performance.

Not surprisingly, this subversion of traditionally held format of poetry readings led to a general criticism of poetry slam as it gradually increased in visibility and popularity over time. Examples include Paul Vermeersch who blamed the practice for the bleak future of traditional storytelling²⁰ and the influential literary critic Harold Bloom who commented in the *Paris Review*:

I can't bear these accounts I read in the Times and elsewhere of these poetry slams, in which various young men and women in

²⁰ Paul Vermeersch, 'Why I Hate Spoken Word Poetry', <<http://www.paulvermeersch.ca/2008/05/rant-why-i-hate-spoken-word-poetry.html>> [accessed 10 January 2015]

various late-spots are declaiming rant and nonsense at each other. The whole thing is judged by an applause meter which is actually not there, but might as well be. This isn't even silly; it is the death of art.²¹

Strong reactions such as these are clearly not representative of the academia as a whole and certainly not of the public. Poetry slams are particularly popular among the youth and translates well into mainstream media and specifically the 21st century's dependence on technology. Recorded live performances and stylised productions of poems are easily accessible on social media such as Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter; with feedbacks and sharing of poems encouraged via all the platforms. Instead, Bloom and the rest failed to acknowledge two important aspects of a poetry slam. First, the slam stage was never intended to be a platform to gauge the 'literariness' of a poem but rather the symbiotic dynamics of both text and performance. The prevalent negative perception of slams, according to Marc Smith and Joe Kraynac, suggested an ignorance of slam culture particularly among the members of the literary circle:

At a poetry slam, a light-hearted scrap of doggerel performed passionately can prove stronger than a superbly crafted villanelle recited by a poet who barely exhibits any signs of life, and by the same token a fine poem partnered to a fine performance can bring the rafters down. The goal of performance poetry is to couple the best possible text to the best possible performance - to compose superior poems and perform them with razor-edged precision.²²

Furthermore, a slam is an event that is open to novice and experienced performers alike. One can liken participating in a slam to revising or editing a

²¹ Frost, p. 3.

²² Marc Smith, 'Roots Philosophies of Slam',
<http://blog.bestamericanpoetry.com/the_best_american_poetry/2015/05/marc-kelly-smith-roots-philosophies-of-slam.html> [accessed 1 July 2016]

text. Consider a poem that is designed to be read on a page. Before it is published, the poem must first go through cycles of rewrites and edits based on the editor's comments. A similar process takes place at a slam, except that the performed poem receives real-time feedback from the audience either through their vocalised reactions or body language. While these observations do not imply that there is an absence of interaction between poets and their readers, the performing poet does have the added advantage of making these 'edits' live during the performance itself and the opportunity to 'present' a revised version of the poem on another stage. Andrew Gerstle, in his article on the Kabuki artform, explains how performance should be viewed in the same thread as text where its form can be observed in its repeated performances. The 'textual' quality of the performance emerges through its physical existence in sound and movement. Once it finishes, the traces of this text only remain in the memory of its audience.²³ Criticising poetry slams based on a sampler of performances viewed and events attended is as unfair as labelling poetry 'boring' after reading a few random poems or the early drafts of one.

Secondly, it's up to the audience to decide what is or is not a good slam poetry performance and what they want to hear from the poets. This relationship between poet and audience is potentially an interesting field of inquiry, specifically in the highly competitive environment such as poetry slams. The performance artist Jean Howard describes how the origins of performance poetry (and by proxy, poetry slam) can be traced back to the highly experimental and collaborative spirit of performance art in her essay entitled 'The Two Sisters'.²⁴ Referring to performance poetry as the sister of performance art, she recalls how Marc Smith would feature a different group of performance artists every Monday night at the Get Me High Lounge who would explore the different ways to use poetry to engage with the audience.

Within the space of a slam, the audience is given "a voice, letting the audience say if they like a poem. By cultivating their participation, poetry

²³ Andrew Gerstle, 'The culture of play: kabuki and the production of texts', *Oral tradition*, 20 (2006), 188-216.

²⁴ Jean Howard, 'The Two Sisters', <<http://jeanhoward.com/slam-poetry-2/slam-poetry>> [accessed 23 June 2016]

slams build an audience for poetry, bringing everyday workers, bus drivers, waitresses, and cops to a reading and letting them cut loose.”²⁵ One of the strategies that continues to be used by today’s spoken word poets is the adoption of the vernacular while others, such as Tim Anderson’s sexually provocative piece that ended with the artist exposing himself on stage, may not fare as well.

Another point of divergence is the audience expectation of a spoken word performance. One main criticism came from the mass commercialisation of poetry slams over the past 30 years or so that resulted in **slam poetry** and the curious phenomenon referred to as the ‘slam voice’. While slam poetry is often used interchangeably with spoken word poetry, there are dissimilarities between the two. The most important is that slam poetry refers to the poems that adhere to the rules of a poetry slam. Spoken word poetry, on the other hand, can be performed either solo or in an ensemble, utilise stage props, be accompanied by audio-visual accompaniments, and [be] presented in other formats including audio and video recordings. Thus, while all poems featured at a poetry slam are spoken word poems, not all spoken word poems are written to be performed at poetry slams.

In her linguistic examination of slam participants in her community, fellow practitioner-researcher Lindsay Alley discovered slammers using the same rhythmic pattern in a voice that is significantly high-pitched compared to their regular voice, resulting in an unnatural-sounding performance.²⁶ The irony is hard to escape as they are performing a personal narrative in someone else’s voice. The increasing number of people performing in slams may have contributed to this tendency for poets to gain more marks and provoke a stronger response from the audience by using a ‘mournful tone, stilted, shatneresque packing and long crescendos’.²⁷ The performer-writer

²⁵ Gary M. Glazner, *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry* (San Francisco: Manic D Press, 2000), p. 11.

²⁶ Jesse Donaldson, ‘This Is Why You Probably Hate Slam Poetry, according to a Linguistic Scholar’, *Vice* <https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/aejne8/this-is-why-you-probably-hate-slam-poetry-according-to-a-linguistic-scholar> [accessed 1 March 2017]

²⁷ Susan B.A. Somers-Willett, ‘Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity’, *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 38 (2005), 51-73 (p. 52).

Chris Gilpin also laments this problematic and limiting desire to conform in order to be taken seriously on the slam stage. According to him, the worrying numbers of slammers adopting performance cliché such as ‘yelling, speed, tones of distress, waving their arms [...] has crushed a great deal of artistic self-expression, encouraging poets to conform to something they can’t even define.’²⁸ A similar criticism of slam voice can also be found in the Kuala Lumpur scene. In the interview with Melizarani, she showed disapproval at the lack of variety in performance styles observed at *If Walls Could Talk*, the open mic poetry event that she founded and regularly hosted. Although she did not specifically use the term ‘slam voice’, she suggested that there was a propensity for poets to conform to a set of delivery manners or performance clichés when they are on stage.

Themes or subject matters that deal with both the particular and universal aspects of identity are also proven to be better received at slams. Directly mirroring what the audience wants to hear from them, a significant number of successful and popular performances revolve around the poet proclaiming and interacting with the conflicts that arose from their lived experiences as members of their society.²⁹ Rather than addressing these topics directly in the poem, the first-person pronoun ‘I’ is commonly used to link between the personal world of the speaker and the larger world that revolves around them. From the researcher’s own experience, there is the sense of self-empowerment that comes from performing one’s story on their own terms rather than those dictated by social conventions. This reminds us of Vermeersch’s earlier criticism of slam poetry and offers the opportunity to address the question of spoken word poetry as a form of storytelling or a communal activity that signifies a complex process of communication that binds the narrator, the experience and the audience/listener together.

In other words, both spoken word poetry and its competitive twin slam poetry can be regarded as examples of creative storytelling or more

²⁸ Chris Gilpin, ‘Slam Poetry Does Not Exist: How a Movement Has Been Misconstrued as a Genre’, *litlive.ca: Canadian Review of Literature in Performance* <<http://www.litlive.ca/story/602>> [accessed 10 January 2015]

²⁹ Susan B.A. Somers-Willett, ‘Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity’, *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 38 (2005), 51-73.

specifically, representations of personal narrative performances. As writer Josh Healey highlights:

Creative storytelling — whether it's spoken word, music or even your crazy little blog — is so powerful because it flips that paradigm. By telling your own personal truth, you're able to break out of the boxes and stereotypes and show us, 'Hey, this is who I really am. Take a good, hard look.'³⁰

In her article on the performance of personal narratives, Langellier explores how this type of narrative is situated within the forces of discourse that shape language, identity and experience. Langellier explains, "personal narrative performance is radically contextualised: first in the voice and body of the narrator; second, as significantly, in conversation with empirically present listeners; and third, in dialogue with absent or 'ghostly audiences.'" ³¹ In the context of spoken word poetry, the effectiveness of a performed personal narrative is dependent on how empathetic the audience is with the poet and the poem's subject-matter. Langellier's research further identifies two functions of the personal narrative: first is the referential function or descriptive details of the event, such as setting and characters; second is the evaluative function or the teller's understanding of the event. While the former situates the story, it is the evaluative function that marks the difference between a story from a report and provides the needed impetus for the audience to pay attention to the reason why the story is being told. This explains why a significant number of successful and popular spoken word performances revolves around themes of identity, sexuality, politics, race, religion, and other forms of social injustice.³² In a well-delivered

³⁰ Mehroz Balg, 'Slam Poetry: A History', *Huffington Post*, 12 May 2014
<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mehroz-balg/slam-poetry-a-history_b_4944799.html> [accessed 1 March 2017]

³¹ Kristin M. Langellier, 'personal narrative, performance, performativity: two or three things I know for sure', *Text and performance quarterly*, 19 (1999), 125-144 (p. 127).

³² Susan B.A. Somers-Willett, 'From Slam to *Def Poetry Jam*: Spoken Word Poetry and its Counterpublics', *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, 10 (2014), 1 – 23.

performance, McIrvin states that the shared experience of a spoken word poem can potentially represent:

a reflection of the emotional life of the speaker as inflected by his/her political and economic reality, and it is shared in a community that uses language nearly as tribals use it, as a way of establishing and maintaining social bonds. Frequently it is also a way of establishing an identity in contradistinction to the larger culture that has marginalised the speaker.³³

When the competitive format of the event is removed, however, spoken word poetry becomes a chosen mode of discourse formed and informed by the interaction between the performers (or tellers) and the audiences. It brings into question the role of the spoken word poet and the specifically adopted strategies and choices designed to facilitate an effective transference of a message from author to receiver either visually, aurally or both. It also addresses the intent behind the decision to perform and the extent of the audience's influence on the works produced by the poets. More importantly, as a written text designed for the performance of personal narratives, it asks the question: where is spoken word poetry situated in the domain of literary studies? Is there a link between poetry, spoken word poetry and the tradition of storytelling? Is spoken word poetry rooted in both traditions, or does it merely approximate them?

Problematizing Literature

Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.

Ezra Pound³⁴

A brief look into the discourse of literature over the past century promptly reveals a fluctuating pattern of seeking and finding, acceptance then rejection,

³³ Michael McIrvin, 'Why Contemporary Poetry is Not Taught in the Academy', *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, 54 (2000), 89-99 (p. 93).

³⁴ Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 28. Monoskop ebook.

developments and stagnations, as well as the radically shifting of thoughts that concern themselves with the best approaches to a work produced by the literary artist. Through the field of literary criticism or the study, evaluation and interpretation of literary works, bodies of influential texts or canon function as the sounding board for the literary researcher to test and evaluate the significance and validity of their findings. The abundance of this assorted and extensive range of theories, however, is fixed upon an understanding of the term 'literature' and its emphasis on the text. We'll begin with Peter Widdowson, who defines 'literature' as follows:

works whose originating form and final point of reference is their existence as written textuality—however much individual texts may be performed, produced or reproduced in non-written form (hence plays but not film-scripts, performance poetry and poetry set to music but not song lyrics).³⁵

According to Widdowson, literature refers to texts that are written and read; not works that are orally and aurally transmitted. This definition, based on the classification of what it is and what it is not, offers the readers a glimpse of the underlying tension the spoken word practitioner-researcher is subjected to when attempting to analyse a spoken word poem as a literary text. We will use an example of Gorski's poems, "Teenager in Nova Scotia" to illustrate the matter. In this recorded performance, she delivers her poem in an almost song-like manner, her rhythm and inflections mirroring the musicians' arrangement.³⁶ It shows an intended and collaborative dynamic between the words and the music played by her band, in which the latter is used not as a mere background for her words, but was composed for it. Such a poem appears to be in opposition with Widdowson's definition, where the combination of the words 'written' and 'textuality' further frames the idea that what constitutes a literary work is that of material culture or physical

³⁵ Peter Widdowson, *Literature: The New Critical Idiom*, ed. by John Drakakis (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 15.

³⁶ Hedwig Gorski, *Teenager in Nova Scotia* by Hedwig Gorski, a performance poetry on the Vermilion River, Louisiana, online video recording, YouTube, 7 September 2010, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYhTEMnSroI>> [accessed 1 May 2020]

objects that inevitably reflect the distinctive worldview of its maker.³⁷ While the poem may have been written in textual form, its final point of reference is non-written and thus, does not qualify as a work of literature.

This definition reflects the current attitude observed in the standard qualitative literary research framework, in which meaning making is often understood as a process made possible through logical observation and the use of reason. Vidich and Lyman posit that this practice can be traced back to the heavy influence of the Comtean positivist approach as used by European ethnographers in the early 19th century.³⁸ Based on ideas mooted by the French philosopher August Comte, the tenets of the positivist research paradigm revolve around the impartiality of truth from the world and the researcher's access to this higher plains of understanding only through the study of evidences found in its natural setting. Although the term 'positivism' conventionally refers to the study of the natural sciences, its impact can be seen in the study of human civilisation or anthropology, the subdiscipline known as ethnography or the science devoted to the social descriptions of a people and their culture as well as the field of literary criticism.

Notable and influential scholars such as Emile Durkheim, Emile Zola, Wilhelm Scherer and Dimitri Pisarev have long contended that the qualitative researcher must become the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis as an important safeguard relating to the integrity of the research process. In order to do so, established theories or models of 'truth' are used to analyse empirical evidence so as to generate factual, value-free, measurable and verifiable knowledge. In the latter, these models of 'truth' are more often than not reliant on the idea of the text as a fixed material product, one that is sufficiently stable for scholarly analysis.

A possible explanation can be seen in the etymological roots of the term 'literature'. Although its classical Latin equivalent *literatura* (or *litteratura*) translates as "writing formed with letters," it only acquired its current meaning in the late 19th century as works that were generally produced in

³⁷ Librettexts, *Sociology*,
<[https://socialsci.librettexts.org/Bookshelves/Sociology/Book%3A_Sociology_\(Boundless\)](https://socialsci.librettexts.org/Bookshelves/Sociology/Book%3A_Sociology_(Boundless))> [accessed 10th September 2019]

³⁸ Vidich and Lyman, p. 26.

print.³⁹ The academic pursuits of literary scholars involve approaching the text either as an independent or contextual object that when examined in detail, would reveal an archive of information pertaining to how individuals use language to communicate, describe and make meaning of the world they are in. There appears to be a connection between the mass commercialisation of printing technology in the 19th century, the subsequent rise of popular literature, and the growing interest in the formalistic study of literature. By then, there is a unanimous agreement amongst the traditional poets and literary critics that what constitutes works of poetry, especially those with high literary merit, can be observed through the poet's use of language. In Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'A Defence of Poetry' (1840), he explains how:

within the arrangement of language as formed by the imagination one can discover the nature of poetry itself: a more direct representation of the actions and passions of our internal being, and is susceptible to various and delicate combinations, than colour, form, or motion, and is more plastic and obedient to the control of that faculty of which it is the creation.⁴⁰

Concretised further by traditional values that equate objectivity with validity and rigor with credibility, the writings of Gustave Lanson in the early 20th century for example, exhibit pursuits of objectivity in literary criticism through "understanding literary texts, in comparing them to distinguish the individual from the collective ... in grouping them by genres, schools and movements, in determining finally the relationship of these groups with the intellectual, moral and social life of our country, as well as with the development of European literature and civilization."⁴¹ Other schools whose practice also show positivistic influences are Russian Formalism and New Criticism. With their emphasis on the dissecting of linguistic and acoustic

³⁹ Online Etymology Dictionary, *Literature*, <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/literature>> [accessed 10th September 2019].

⁴⁰ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry and Other Essays*, website, Project Gutenberg <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5428/5428-h/5428-h.htm>> [accessed 6 February 2015]

⁴¹ A. Owen Aldridge, 'Babbitt, Literary Positivism, And Neo-Positivism', *Humanitas*, 9 (1996), 65-78 (p. 67).

properties of language, and the notion of 'literariness' found within a work of literature that distinguishes it from other forms of discourse, the literary text functions as a stand-alone unit of meaning isolated from both the author and its social environment.

This emphasis on textuality can be observed in the substantial resources available on the poetic form. From the study of diction and syntax, to the application of poetic devices that include both linguistic and acoustic components of language such as alliteration, assonance, meter, simile, metaphor, symbolism, rhythm and rhyme; there is a tendency among scholars of poetry to limit their research to works published solely in the written form. The American poet Adrienne Rich, who was known to be a formalist in her early years as a poet, echoes this penchant for poetic composition when she reminded her readers in her 1993 essay "Someone is writing a poem" that poetry is not just about words but rather the "polyrhythmic sounds ... prismatic meanings lit by each other's light, stained by each other's shadows."⁴² This connection, according to Rich, ensures that a poem is finally completed. But has the concept of literature always been one of finality? The emphasis on text disregards the fact that despite how a concrete and singular definition of the term may be, the idea of what literature is and is not remains far from one's grasp and often subjected to different opinions and interpretations.

Countless celebrated poets who have attempted to *poetically* speculate what poetry is, defines it in rather ambiguously: from Emily Dickinson's oft-quoted "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry" to D.H. Lawrence's "poetry is, as a rule, either the voice of the far future, exquisite and ethereal, or it is the voice of the past, rich, magnificent." T.S. Eliot based his understanding of the term as a counterreaction to well-accepted views on poetry. In his critical essay "Tradition and the Individual

⁴² Adrienne Rich, 'Someone in writing a poem', *Poetry Foundation*
 <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69530/someone-is-writing-a-poem>>
 [accessed 16 February 2018]

Talent', Eliot's definition was a direct riposte to William Wordsworth⁴³ and his Romantic notion of poetry:

poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.⁴⁴

Other definitions were driven by delineating the social role and function of poetry in human civilisation, emphasising the relationship established between poet and reader. Examples include Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Chapter XIV of *Biographia Literaria*, who acknowledges the influential effect of poetry to stimulate "the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature [...] the modifying colours of imagination",⁴⁵ and William Hazlitt who describes Poetry as light that both "shows us the object" while also stressing the function of the imagination to reveal "the inmost recesses of thought."⁴⁶ Such discussion of what constitutes poetry is relevant to our discussion as it shows how terms like 'literature' and 'poetry' remain a contentious subject until today.

The problematisation of the term 'literature' and by default, the term 'poetry', is a necessary one. The purpose of our discussion up until now has been to begin with the idea that boundaries are seldom fixed, even more so for those that concern the notion of the literature frame. According to Corey Frost, those who regard spoken word poetry as a work of literature appear to possess more flexible and democratic definitions of poetry while those who

⁴³ In his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1801), Wordsworth defined poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity."

⁴⁴ T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921) Online edition Bartleby.com, July 1996. <<https://www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html>>

⁴⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, website, Project Gutenberg <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/6081/6081-h/6081-h.htm#link2HCH0014>> [accessed 6 February 2015]

⁴⁶ William Hazlitt, *On Poetry in General*, website, Saylor <<https://resources.saylor.org/wwwresources/archived/site/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/ENGL404-Hazlitt-On-Poetry-In-General.pdf>> [accessed 6 March 2016]

disapprove tend to view poetry as a serious field that is 'tied to formal characteristics such as line breaks and prosody but also to aesthetic evaluation'.⁴⁷ Perhaps it would be much clearer if we were to understand the latter group as one who adheres to a formalistic approach to the poetic text. As a result, there is little room for the practitioner-researcher to make a case for spoken word poets and their predecessors within the current positivist-centric literary framework. Responding to Widdowson's definition, for example, shows that while a spoken word poem is undeniably an example of material culture and it too shows an aesthetic use of language to communicate ideas, its oral delivery doesn't fulfil the expectation of a literary work.

But even before Gorski's use of the term, the oral properties of poetry have been a part of a number of significant western literary and cultural movements over the past century. Examples include the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement that produced poets with works that merge music with poetry like Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown and Amiri Baraka; the experimentation with sound properties in the postmodern avant-garde works of the Russian and Italian Futurists as well as the Dadaists such as Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's 1914 visual-sound-concrete poem *Zang Tumb Tuuum*;⁴⁸ and particularly the poets of the 1950s and 1960s Beat Generation who were instrumental in popularising public poetry recitations, led by the likes of Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Whether or not these oral poetic properties were extensively studied, however, remains debatable. The domain of literary criticism appears to be determined in keeping the textual from the oral features of poetry separate from each other.

The relationship between writing and speech can in fact be traced back to its Hellenistic roots. Aristotle in *Poetics* regarded *poeisis* or the act of creating something that never existed before as an all-encompassing term that included what we now identify as drama and epic poetry, and that addressed the philosophical ideas of unities along the lines of both written

⁴⁷ Corey Frost, 'Border disputes: spoken word and its humble critic', *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, 10 (2014), 1-20 (p.2) <<http://liminalities.net/10-3/disputes.pdf>> [accessed 18 June 2016].

⁴⁸ 'Words-In-Freedom', *Guggenheim* <<https://www.guggenheim.org/arts-curriculum/topic/words-in-freedom>> [accessed 16 February 2018]

and performed works. Plato, through the persona of Socrates, on the other hand, regarded poetry as a powerful rhetorical tool in the pursuit of truth but also one that is capable of influencing those on its receiving end. More importantly, the lines that are now strictly guarded by literary critics were not only absent but favoured the oral over the written.⁴⁹ In *Phaedrus*, the dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus moves into the potentially dangerous consequences of the written text. Unlike speech that allocates the opportunity for others to respond to and receive answers from its speaker, writing connotes instead an absence of the poet.

Here, the topic of authorship or the authority of the writer comes into being. Bringing into the context the strong influence and popularity of poets and rhapsodes at that time, Socrates believed that the very foundations of the republic would crumble if the written technology falls into the hands of those whose lies are masked as truths, and could escape blame via the written text. This is why, in the later books II, III and X of *Republic*, the narrator argues for the banishment of poets whose works neither transmit messages of morality and truth nor prioritise the rational over the emotional as imitators “thrice removed from the king and from the truth”.⁵⁰ This supposed dichotomy of the oral and the written, as we can see in the existing reservation concerning the study of spoken word poetry, has yet to be resolved.

What can be noted and included in our discussion however is that while the current and dominant hierarchical notion of text over the oral in literary discourse became prominent in the 19th century Europe due to technological advancements in printing and rising literacy rates among the middle and working classes, the return of orality to literary criticism began in the 1960s with the publication of Albert Lord’s *The Singer of Tales*,⁵¹ Marshall McLuhan’s *The Gutenberg Galaxy*,⁵² and Eric A. Havelock’s *Preface to Plato*.⁵³ The significance of these studies lies in its contribution to the revival of scholarly

⁴⁹ See Plato’s *Ion*, *Republic*, and *Gorgias* to read more on the debate between philosophy and poetry; and *Phaedrus* on the virtues of writing over speech.

⁵⁰ Plato, *Republic*, website, Insituto de Desenvolvimento do Potencial Humano <<http://www.idph.net/conteudos/ebooks/republic.pdf> [accessed 6 February 2015]

⁵¹ Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960)

⁵² Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962)

⁵³ Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1967)

interest in oral tradition, previously the subject of anthropological-based investigations. Although this thesis does not engage with these three scholars, I argue that their works have expressively challenged the prevalent definition of literature.

Albert Lord, together with his teacher Milman Parry, discovered what they called the theory of Oral-Formulaic Composition based on Parry's ethnological studies of oral epic singers in then-Yugoslavia. Through their studies, the formula functions as a working model of classic epic performance that could be applied in a wide variety of texts, from Homeric poems to religious sermons and written poetry. McLuhan and Havelock extended the Parry-Lord thesis by arguing that the introduction of a given communication technology would indelibly result in a shift of an entire culture's worldview. While the shift from orality to literacy marked the beginning of rational western thought, as evident in Plato's scathing criticism of Homeric oral poems; Gutenberg's invention initiated the shaping of modern western civilisation and the importance placed on the written text. Today, the rising accessibility of electronic media as the primary tool of communication echoes McLuhan's prediction of an impending transformation of the human sensorium away from the linear and mechanical written media:

Our extended faculties and senses now constitute a single field of experience which demands that they become collectively conscious [...] As long as our technologies were as slow as the wheel or the alphabet or money, the fact that they were separate, closed systems was socially and psychically supportable. This is not true now when sight and sound and movement are simultaneous and global in extent.⁵⁴

With the proliferation of television, radio (podcast) and the internet, it is imperative upon the literary critic and scholar to challenge, revise and in some cases, make new their approach to the production of material culture. Spoken word poetry is but one example them. It involves a series of complex strategies that begin with the written composition and followed by its oral

⁵⁴ McLuhan, p. 5.

delivery with the intent to effectively communicate a message in a way that fulfils the audience expectations of a performance. The meanings derived from it too, are co-constructed together by both performer and audience during the performance of the poem. The absence of research on spoken word poetry suggests the need to shift the existing paradigms within the academic world; one that no longer ascribes to a restrictive and singular definition often characterised by dichotomy.

Referring once again to the definition of literature, the influential scholar of folklore studies John Miles Foley reminds us that the word *littera* or 'letters' can be traced back to the medieval Latin *literatus* or the individual who uses particular symbols that harmoniously combine both visual and sound properties.⁵⁵ Thus, by its very nature, the act of using letters is an action-oriented process and thus, the individual must then navigate through a system of letters and string them into words, phrases and sentences in order to form and express meaning. He observes a more inclusive approach to the term literature and posits that there is no divide between what is written and spoken because not only are all textual strategies rooted in oral expressions but "they can and do coexist in the very same culture and society, and even in the very same person."⁵⁶ Thus, an individual can acquire fluency in both oral and written skills, and produce works in which a subject of material culture, be it oral or written works, can be analysed. He therefore defines literature as 'a spectrum or continuum with innumerable different forms that depend upon the special circumstances of different cultures and genres.'⁵⁷

In reference to spoken word poetry, Foley's proposed definition replaces the traditional structure of hierarchy with an ecology or ecosystem of oral poetry. Here, a phenomenon as recent as spoken word poetry may now be regarded with the same interest as the traditional practice of Somali oral poems.⁵⁸ This encourages researchers, including the practitioner-researcher

⁵⁵ John Miles Foley, 'Comparative Oral tradition', *Traditional Oral Epic Conference*, 4 November 1993, <http://bdb.bertozale.eus/uploads/edukiak/liburutegia/xdz4_ld_000169_01.pdf> [Accessed 10 January 2015]

⁵⁶ Foley, p. 11.

⁵⁷ Foley, p. 8.

⁵⁸ Foley, p. 16.

herself, to engage with creative cultural productions that may have either been marginalised or appropriated due to them not fulfilling all the requirements of a particular discipline in the past. Foley offers the following table of reference as a model framework for works he classifies as oral poetry:

Category	Composition	Performance	Reception
<i>Oral Performance</i>	Oral	Oral	Aural
<i>Voiced texts</i>	Written	Oral	Aural
<i>Voices from the past</i>	Oral/Written	Oral/Written	Aural/Textual
<i>Written oral poems</i>	Written	Written	Textual

Table 1. Foley's Categorisation of Oral Poetry⁵⁹

The implications of Foley's table of categorisation are two-fold. First, based on the three parameters given, spoken word poetry fulfils the category of *voiced texts* or poems written by literate individuals to be orally performed and aurally received by a literate audience. Secondly, it brings together the contemporary form of oral poetry with the much older tradition of oral storytelling. More importantly, however, Foley's definition also suggests that for a text to be marked as one of literary value, it must also be situated within the critical and literary traditions it is a part of, steered by the ideals held by its canons. The question that we ask now is: by *whose* values, traditions and canons are the works of spoken word poets, specifically its Malaysian counterpart, to be guided? This can be done not by breaking away from the tradition but changing the way we understand the very notion of knowledge acquisition: research is not static but a dynamic and continuously changing way of *seeking*.

⁵⁹ Foley, p.13.

Framework and Methodology

Acknowledging the complexity of the inquiry at hand, I choose to actively construct its framework in a non-hierarchical, critical qualitative inquiry setting.⁶⁰ The reason behind this decision lies in the intention to present the discussion from a perspective of a spoken word practitioner who is also concurrently exploring possibilities of more effective performances in the future, a positioning which I believe is integral to the development and accessibility of the research as a whole.

Rather than ascribing to preexisting and standardised literary methodologies, this study draws largely from two knowledge production practices namely (a) bricolage that enables the practitioner-researcher to participate in a continuous process of interrogating, negotiating and readapting the phenomenon in question through the use of different perspectives, theories and methodologies, and (b) situated knowledges, which facilitates the process of objectivity by demanding the practitioner-researcher to be critically aware that the 'self' is never a fixed entity but instead consists of multiplicities.

The French term 'bricolage' was first used by the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss in his book *The Savage Mind* as a metaphor that challenges the then-dominant structuralist ideology practiced within the anthropological field that separates the mythical rationality of pre-literate prior communities from the scientific rationality of the literate modern society.⁶¹ Instead, he suggests that all forms of meaning-making are derived from the same innate demand for order. However, unlike modern scientific processes of knowledge construction, societies that adopt mythical rationalists stitch together their life experience with 'whatever knowledge tools they have at hand in their repertoire (e.g., ritual, observation, social practices) and with whatever artifacts are available in their given context (i.e., discourses, institutions, and

⁶⁰ Norman K. Denzin, 'Critical Qualitative Inquiry', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23 (2017), 8-16 (p. 10).

⁶¹ Claude Levi Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. by George Weidenfield and Nicholson Ltd. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962)

dominant knowledges)'.⁶² These intellectual bricoleurs, Levi-Strauss further explains, utilise these varied repertoire and tools to meet the daily tasks of making meaning of the world they are in.

When used by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln in their studies on qualitative research, the terms bricolage and bricoleur departed from the structuralist standpoint by using the term to describe the significant shift from the use of the traditional positivist approach to ones adopted by researchers that are more interpretive and flexible.⁶³ In his extensive research on the interdisciplinary feature of qualitative research, Denzin further explores the possibility of using multiple methods of exploration to 'secure an in depth understanding of the phenomenon in question.'⁶⁴ The researcher as bricoleur approaches their research subject knowing that 'theory is not an explanation of the world – it is more an explanation of our relation to the world'⁶⁵ and instead weaves the different representations of the phenomenon using a variety of strategies and means.

As this study looks into both the literary and performative qualities of spoken word poems from the perspective of a practitioner, the end goal of this research is the interpretivist researcher's bricolage, in which 'research is an interactive process shaped by the personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity of the people in the setting.'⁶⁶ This interpretivist approach concentrates on localising knowledge with the intention of understanding the subject more cohesively by offering its researchers the flexibility of using different methods such as interviews and analysis of texts written by the individuals committed to the artform as well as the theoretical fields associated with it.

⁶² Matt Rogers, 'Contextualising Theories and Practices of Bricolage Research', *The Qualitative Report*, 17 (2012), 1 – 17 (p. 3).

⁶³ Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd edition (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1999)

⁶⁴ Norman K. Denzin, 'Triangulation 2.0', *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 6 (2012), 80-88 (p. 82).

⁶⁵ Joe L. Kincheloe, 'Introduction: the power of the bricolage: expanding research methods', in *Rigour and Complexity in Educational Research: Conceptualizing the bricolage*, ed. by Harry Torrance (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004), 1-22 (p. 2).

⁶⁶ Denzin, p. 85.

The references used come from the field of Malay literary studies, as well as engage with contributions made in the fields of orature, postcolonial studies, narrative study, and performance studies. My findings suggest the importance of Malay oral tradition in the ongoing discussions pertaining to the role and significance of Malaysian literary studies in the present time. These findings also enrich the field by considering the development of works produced in other forms aside from the written word. More importantly, interpretive bricoleurs are required to reflexively engage with their research process with the understanding that knowledge is never bias-free but instead is informed and shaped by the researcher's positioning and interpretations:

Reflexive analysis in research encompasses continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself. It involves a shift in our understanding of data collection from something objective that is accomplished through detached scrutiny of "what I know and how I know it", to recognizing how we actively construct our knowledge.⁶⁷

Unlike the positivist's insistence on the practice of planning research strategies in advance, the bricoleur embraces the complexity of meaning making by connecting multiple theories, techniques and experiential knowledges while avoiding deterministic and standardised modes of knowledge production. This point of view is not without its critics as Michael Crotty points out how the meaning of the term originally refers to one's preoccupation with objects and their constant search for meanings, which in turns reveals its potential limitations. What bricoleurs need instead, Crotty adds, is the 'ability to "re-vision" these bits and pieces, casting aside the purposes which they once bore and for which they were once designed and divining very different purposes that they may now serve in new settings'.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Linda Finlay, "Outing" the researcher: The provenance, process, and practice of reflexivity', *Qualitative Health Research*, 4 (2002), 531 – 545 (p. 532).

⁶⁸ Michael Crotty, 'Constructionism: The Making of Meaning', in *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* (Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 1998), 42-53 (p. 51).

Acknowledging Crotty's criticism, rather than limiting its findings to a single and conclusive end, what this research intends to show is what Levi-Strauss initially presents as the need to interact "with a particular relationship between nature and culture definable in terms of his particular period and civilization and the material means at his disposal."⁶⁹ This idea was further theorised by Joe L. Kincheloe and Kathleen Berry with an emphasis on the bricoleur's active approach to research methods.

Research, from the perspective of the bricoleur, is an intellectually rigorous process that addresses discourse as a site of power relations and resists those that 'regulate which knowledges are validated and which ones are relegated to the junk heap of history'.⁷⁰ This critical approach presents itself as a response to the dominating positivist slant towards research inquiry and brings into question further obligations placed upon the practitioner-researcher to address how they position themselves in the research process from emancipatory and interdisciplinary epistemological rationalities. Equally critical to this process is the understanding that what is unearthed in this process is regarded not as *finite* truths but knowledge 'grounded in local and situated inquiry of local contexts, practices, and settings.'⁷¹

This is where 'situated knowledges' comes in, a term coined by feminist scholar Donna Haraway in her influential 1988 essay as a critique of the patriarchal, positivist idea of objectivity widely practiced by researchers. Although her arguments were primarily directed to those in the scientific field, the strict emphasis on the relationship between the researcher's objectivity and the validity of their research can also be observed in the field of humanities as well. According to Haraway, this commonly accepted image of the ideal researcher as a detached observer studying his subject in isolation

⁶⁹ Levi-Strauss, p. 19.

⁷⁰ John L. Kincheloe, 'Introduction: the power of the bricolage: expanding research methods', in *Rigour and Complexity in Educational Research: Conceptualizing the bricolage*, ed. by Joe L. Kincheloe and Kathleen S. Berry (London: Open University Press, 2004), 1 -22 (p. 7).

⁷¹ Sharon M. Ravitch, 'The Transformative Power of Taking an Inquiry Stance on Practice: Practitioner Research as Narrative and Counter-Narrative', *Perspectives on Urban Education Journal*, 2 (2014), 5-10 (p. 6).

ultimately erases the reality of multiple embodied knowledges, which are those that are shaped by the specificities of gender, place and time.

Particularly for female researchers, Haraway adds, the dominant belief in a universal theory or methodology that is solely informed by information from the external world ultimately necessitates a radical counterapproach to knowledge production. This, she argues, begins by taking back the metaphor of vision in feminist discourse from the disembodied, oppressive male gaze:

I want a feminist writing of the body that metaphorically emphasizes vision again [...] We need to learn in our bodies, endowed with primate color and stereoscopic vision, how to attach the objective to our theoretical and political scanners in order to name where we are and are not, in dimensions of mental and physical space we hardly know how to name.⁷²

Self-reflexivity enables researchers to responsibly engage with their subject of research in a way that acknowledges the researcher's privileges, responsibilities and limitations, highlights the importance of producing knowledge that empowers the practitioners as active collaborators and benefits its communities as a whole. In the context of this study, my positionality as a female Malay Muslim Malaysian spoken word poet informs and situates my understanding of the practice. This I combine with literary research. It also pushes to the surface the unique set of resources, data and decisions that I may or may not be privy to due to my own intersections of personal, communal and social identities. One such example can be seen in my position as an event curator and long-term practitioner in the community.

I had initially attempted to distance myself from performing poetry for close to a year in order to be objective in the way I view spoken word poetry, only to realise the near impossibility of conducting the study without acknowledging how my practices lend considerable weight to the accessibility of the information, insight into the community, and the artform.

⁷² Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14 (1988), 575-599 (p. 582).

Whereas my positioning is a prime factor in my ability to secure interviews with the poets and record field observations in a suitable duration of time in the first place, it is this same position that creates a barrier between myself and Awang Batil.

In the field of ethnography, it is ethical practice to spend at least one year with the research subjects in a natural and non-manipulated setting so as to establish relationships based on familiarity, comfort and trust in the community. While all three were present when engaging with fellow practitioners here in Kuala Lumpur, they were understandably absent when the practitioner-researcher first conversed with the penglipurlara Awang Batil after his performance for Pusaka in 2014.⁷³ When I approached him to discuss the nature of this study, he appeared weary of my intention to interview him regarding his work. In retrospect, the dynamic between myself and Awang Batil were marred from the very beginning without the intention to do so.

Firstly, there is the imbalance caused by the role of the detached researcher and the isolated study subject. Prior to attending the event, my awareness of the practice was limited to reading texts concerning the practice and learning from second-hand resources. Based on past studies on the penglipurlara, I have discovered that the conventional qualitative research design adopted has long based itself on ethnography and ethnographic writing through long term fieldwork and active participation in the tradition I choose to study. According to Haraway, such is an example when the object of study is seen “as screen or a ground or a resource [...] as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of “objective” knowledge.”⁷⁴ As the study of ethnography is “an embodied practice; it is an intensely sensuous way of knowing”,⁷⁵ scholars such as Conquergood and Denzin have acknowledged the problematic nature of such an approach that automatically reverts to the positivist adherence to the textual model. The consequence of such emphasis on the methods of

⁷⁴ Haraway, p. 592.

⁷⁵ Dwight Conquergood, “Rethinking ethnography: Towards a critical cultural politics”, *Communication Monographs*, 58 (1991), 179-194 (p. 180).

inscription and thick description is a form of ethnographic textualism that writes and reads culture as a book⁷⁶ and “privileges distance, detachment, the said, and not the saying, the done, and not the doing”.⁷⁷ Similar limitations have also been addressed by theorists in the study of oral literature. While it champions the revival of orality as a field of study and concerns itself with treating both the written and oral as equals, Ruth Finnegan refers to researchers’ unconscious reversion to interpreting transcriptions of oral text as valid primary materials and neglecting the performance component.⁷⁸ Finnegan, who disagrees on the separation of text and performance, argues that similar features of the material, multidisciplinary and multidimensional can be observed in written works and those that are written for the stage. Thus, evidence of overtones and multisensory intertextualities can be analysed in both forms.⁷⁹ Efforts were made to rectify this problem of documentation: Bodunde addresses this inclination to revert back to the printed page in his in-depth look into possible research strategies one can use when faced with potential setbacks that may occur during the field research in order to avoid producing one-dimensional findings.⁸⁰ These included the scholar’s responsibility to acquaint themselves not only with texts but extend their resources further into the other forms of media, including audio-visual recordings.

There are also the ethical responsibilities researchers are required to establish and continue taking part in sustaining the relationship with their chosen community. This is one of the main reasons why my study primarily focused on the spoken word community in Kuala Lumpur. Not because I had intended to do so, but to ensure that any engagement with the spoken word poetry community extends further than just a research project. What was

⁷⁶ Norman K. Denzin, ‘The call to performance’, *Symbolic Interaction*, 26 (2003), 187-207 (p. 195)

⁷⁷ Dwight Conquergood, ‘Beyond the Text: Toward a Performative Cultural Politics’, *The Future of Performance Studies* < <http://www.kineticnow.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/conquergood-1998-beyond-the-text.pdf> > [accessed 12 March 2017]

⁷⁸ Finnegan, p. 173.

⁷⁹ Finnegan, p. 175.

⁸⁰ Charles A. Bodunde, ‘Oral Literature: Research Strategies and Problems of Documentation’, *Ilorin Journal of Education*, 12 (1992), 101-112.

initially motivated by a need to find and validate a cultural link between two groups of performers was subsequently replaced by an intellectual inquisitiveness to understand the possible reasons behind the growing interest in spoken word poetry in Malaysia. Therefore, this thesis does not aim to offer strictly literary analyses of Malaysian spoken word texts but aspires to mobilise a descriptive and interpretive exploration of this social phenomenon as conducted from the perspective of a Malaysian spoken word practitioner instead. Rather than defending its legitimacy within the academic field, it is imperatively more productive to engage with basic questions that can lead one closer to understanding all the important aspects that best capture this emergent practice in question.

The Interview

As one of this study's objective is to acquire a better understanding of these prospectively new generation of penglipurlara, it led to my decision to conduct a series of interviews with a selected group of poets. I argue it is integral to the study as it offers an opportunity to build on my limited understanding of the form. Although there are available resources on the general definition of spoken word poetry, the same can't be said about a localised definition. As the very act of naming and defining is crucial, the interviews as an empowering space for the selected poets to contribute and reflect on their roles in the community and the development of the practice. This allows one to approach the works using the means of participatory performance, which provides ample opportunities to study their works based on the researcher's understanding of the process involved in the writing and delivery of the texts. The storytellers themselves should be part of the research as their experience equally matters.

The interview narrows its focus to practitioners who not only are actively practicing the art form but also those who based themselves in the Klang Valley. A basic list of set requirements enables me to identify nine spoken word poets who represent a wide range of performance styles, themes and years of experience in the artform. This, however, does not mean that spoken word poetry is not practiced outside of the capital. There are events

being held in other cities including Pulau Pinang (spearheaded by Ksatriya and Mark Walker of “Say It Like You Mean It”), Ipoh (Projek Rabak collective), Johor Bahru and Kota Kinabalu (Bentarakata collective). However, the number of events held in Kuala Lumpur far exceed the numbers outside, justified by its importance as the first place where spoken word poetry was introduced in the country.

An additional condition of having easily accessible materials is also included to aid in my study of their works by comparing the texts alongside their performed versions. These spoken word poets have also published their works, allowing me the opportunity study the themes and issues explored in their works, and compare them with the performances of their text. The study also narrows down the poets based on language. It’s important to note that there continues to be a pattern of spoken word poets who not only write and perform poems in their mother tongue but also produce multilingual performance poems. Examples of poets who do but are not included in this research include Enbah Nilah, Dhinesha Karthigesu, Veshalini Naidu, Gwendoline Esther Hay and Chuoi Ruoh Peng, whose poems are in Tamil, Cantonese and Mandarin. Without neglecting spoken word poets who perform in other local languages aside from the English language, several of the poets included in this study have demonstrated the ability to produce narratives using multi and intercultural references in more than one language. Translations of non-English words used in their texts will be provided wherever they are needed. The table below shows the list of poets and the poems selected for this study:

No.	Poet	Published Texts (Online and Print)
1	Elaine Foster	‘My Mother Made Me’ and ‘Medusa’, published in an online local anthology: <i>Poems and Other Myths: A Collection of Spoken Word Poetry by Women from Asia</i> .

2	Jamal Raslan	'Human Lens' and 'Motorcycle Diaries', published in a local anthology: <i>Malchin Testament: Malaysian Poems</i> .
3	Illya Sumanto	'Aung Aan Suu Kyi's Pseudo Ex-Boyfriend' and 'Pontianak', published in an online local anthology: <i>Poems and Other Myths: A Collection of Spoken Word Poetry by Women from Asia</i> .
4	Alana Azlan	'fathers and daughters' and 'When you said you wanted to be friends', from her first book, <i>A Female Called Psyche</i> , published in May 2017.
5	Melizarani Selvakkumar	'My Country is a Man' and 'Draupadi', from her first book, <i>Taboo</i> , published in 2015.
6	Azam Rais	'Whore', performed and published via the local podcast <i>PoetX</i> .
7	Jack Malik	Selected poems from his first chapbook, <i>what's on your mind?</i> , published in 2017.
8	Yohanna Yusrinal	'Singa Ladies' and 'Anything but Denial', performed and published via the local podcast <i>PoetX</i> .
9	Dhabitah Zainal	'How to Woman', 'Degree of Self' and 'Almost 25', from her first chapbook, <i>Burning House</i> , published in 2016.

Table 2. Details of Selected Poets

Sensitive to the collaborative nature of this process, the interview is structured as a semi open-ended interview to allow flexibility in the way they answer the questions and encourage the poets to casually converse on the topic without the external pressures of fulfilling set expectations on what the medium is. Questions are arranged into three different sections. The first revolves around the definition of spoken word poetry, the second section focuses on their contributions to the scene and the third explores their

opinions and thoughts on the spoken word scene. Ranging from thirty minutes to up to two hours to complete, they were conducted in public spaces to create an informal, casual setting.

The structure of the interview allows flexibility in the way they answer the questions and encourage the poets to casually converse without the external pressures of fulfilling set expectations on what the medium is. Interviewees are free to discuss about aspects of performing poetry that may have been difficult to understand from the perspective of a non-practicing spoken word poetry researcher. Because of my position as an insider to the community, as someone who shared common ground with them, I was able to elicit personal interpretations that moved beyond the basics.

I was careful not to include the term ‘penglipurlara’ or ‘storyteller’ so as not to lead the interviewees. Instead, the aim is to listen to their personal standpoints and identify potential patterns that may emerge from looking into their poems, both textually and performatively. These findings are then supported by my own input as a practitioner, observations, textual reference as well as video recordings of the selected poets. They are further grounded by an emphasis on the integration of field notes, performance observations and secondary references.

Summary

By situating the study of spoken word within the larger field of literary studies, an academic discipline that has traditionally favoured and separated the textual from the performative aspects of the text, I am keen to observe how spoken word poetry can be used as an empowering tool to initiate positive social transformation. Spoken word poetry also addresses potential areas for improvements in the way researchers approach performance texts. This adopted research framework and methodology enables me, the practitioner-researcher to study the phenomenon ‘from the perspective of

the interacting individual'⁸¹ and understand the world as experienced by other practitioners.

Organisation of Chapters

Outside the introduction and conclusion, this thesis is divided into five chapters centered on key ideas and themes that serve to show how Malaysian spoken word poets engage with their role as contemporary penglipurlara in their community.

Chapter One continues the discussion by charting where and how the spoken word poet as performer has been situated within contemporary literary criticism. It begins by breaking down the term spoken word poetry and shows how this performance text is situated not only in the larger discourse of literature but the broad spectrum of other disciplines such as narrative studies, folklore and performance studies. An overview on the mainstream and local definitions that surround integral terms such as literature and poetry provide the necessary insight into factors that came together long before spoken word poetry was introduced in the country. I assert the importance of previous studies of oral tradition as an area of discipline that acknowledges the pitfalls of the Comtean framework and methodology in the documentation of performances. They show how the discourse of text and performance has long caught the attention of scholars particularly since the performative turn of the 1990s, prompting investigations into its implications in meaning-making. By charting where and how spoken word poetry and oral tradition share more points of commonalities than differences, it re-examines both established oral tradition with more contemporary ones as a form of personal and communal storytelling.

Chapter Two begins by investigating the role of the storyteller in the oral/aural Malay society and key features as outlined by the figure of the penglipurlara in its oral tradition. Based on studies previously conducted, an

⁸¹ Norman K. Denzin, *Critical Qualitative Inquiry, Qualitative Inquiry*, 23 (2017), 8-16 (p. 10).

overview of the socio-historical background of the penglipurlara will be given and discussed along with criticism of established writers and theorists regarding the role of the storyteller. Based on Amin Sweeney's research on the practice of Awang Batil, a discussion of the performance Awang Batil will be used as a starting point for the thesis' subsequent look into the practices of spoken word poets in the country. Here I establish that the term is not limited only to a group of Malay storytellers but functions instead as a storyteller archetype whose features share more similarities than differences with the spoken word poet.

Chapter Three continues this discussion by introducing the Malaysian spoken word poet. Exploring from the standpoint of performance poetry as personal narrative performances and supplemented by previous studies conducted on the performance of text, this chapter brings the previous discussion into the 21st century. It asks the question: does the local spoken word practitioner view themselves as storytellers and if they don't, does it reflect the tensions created by their current and previous literary predecessors. A comparison between the penglipurlara and the spoken word poet offers a potential answer to this question.

Chapters Four and Five highlight specific themes observed in the works of the selected poets, comparisons are made and critical analyses of their works in text form is applied alongside the analysis of their performances. Rising issues and challenges faced by the poets collated from the interviews will also be discussed specifically on an integral theme found in all works of spoken word poetry, which is corporeality or representations of the body used by spoken word poets to negotiate with the contemporary concerns as reflected by their personal and social realities.

Chapter Six revisits *Pontianak*, a show that brings the figure of the local spoken word poet closest they have been to the archetype of the penglipurlara. I posit that as local practitioners, spoken word poets have the potential of being more than just individuals performing their personal narratives. Instead, it balances between the voices of its previous storytelling predecessors and the voices of its current audience through the influence of secondary orality as suggested by scholars such as McLuhan and Ong. It is

shown in the rising interest expressed by both performers and audience in literary performance and further suggests an effort from of its practitioners to bridge the gap that separates the country's literature from its oral tradition; between the textual and the oral.

As one of these practitioners, I provide a reflexive analysis of my own poem 'Mother' that was written and performed in the ensemble show *Pontianak* to show how the process looks like from the inside out. Finally, I outline the challenges as well as the possibilities offered by using local folklores and applied style of spoken word poetry to the field of Malaysian literature in English. Suggestions for future research are provided.

Chapter One: A Review

In a world where nothing is certain, in which transcendental belief has been undermined by scientific materialism, and even the objectivity of science is qualified by relativity and uncertainty, the single human voice, telling its own story, can seem the only authentic way of rendering consciousness.

David Lodge⁸²

In this chapter, several notable names and their key contributions will form the framework needed to analyse both the literary and oral aspects of a spoken word poem. It begins by surveying the discussions surrounding the potential integration of the textual and the oral in research. Three sub-groups are identified: the first belongs to those who identify performance as the universal aesthetic form of expression free from the western colonialists and their reverence to the text. The second looks at those who have attempted to incorporate the oral into the text and finally, a more detailed attention will be given to the Malaysian artist and performance poet, Abdul Ghafar Ibrahim as belonging to the third group: a representation of a hybridised form of orature. To further contextualise the discussion, the issues pertaining to language and identity (two of the most debated issues in the discourse of Malaysian literature) will function as the main frame of this literature review.

The Spoken Word Researcher as Practitioner

Imagine that you are one of the audience members who is about to watch and listen to a spoken word performance. The performer walks onto the stage and positions themselves in front of the microphone. Even before they speak, you

⁸² David Lodge, 'Sense and sensibility', *The Guardian*, 2 November 2002, <
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/nov/02/fiction.highereducation>>
 [accessed 12 November 2015]

are already visually informed of their presence by the way they dress as well as their facial and physical features. Then, the performance begins: you watch as the voice articulates words and the body moves to the uttered words; a story being animated into existence in front of you. Now imagine yourself as the performer.

Coming from the understanding that we all perform or execute a task in one way or another, to state that performing a poem is more difficult than writing one runs the risk of sounding like an understatement. In the composition stage of a poetry, the spoken word practitioner shares more similarities than differences with its page counterpart. Careful attention is equally given to the use of descriptive and figurative languages, rhythm and pacing, and sound devices. Both regard poetry as an effective and affective tool to establish a connection between them and the receiver. The limitless array of subject-matter and structure, ranging from the use of narratives to descriptive and isolated events; fictional and non-fictional. Poetry, both written and performed, is a simulation of experience encapsulated within a body of imaginative writing; a medium that is distinguished by its heightened language in both composition and execution to express thoughts and ideas in a variety of forms, styles and approaches employed by the author.⁸³ What differentiates them, however, occurs in the liminal space between the delivery and reception stage of this process. Unlike written poetry, the meaning of a spoken word poem is constructed simultaneously in the text and the interaction between performer and audience. In his study *Verbal Art as Performance*, the folklorist and anthropologist Richard Bauman, defines performance as follow:

Fundamentally, a performance as a mode of spoken verbal communication consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence. This competence rests on the knowledge and ability to speak in socially appropriate ways. Performance involves on the part of the

⁸³ Michelle Scalise Sugiyama, 'Food, foragers, and folklore: the role of narrative in human subsistence', *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 22 (2001), 221-240 (p. 224).

performer an assumption of accountability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content. From the point of view of the audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus marked as subject to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display of competence. Additionally, it is marked as available for the enhancement of experience, through the present enjoyment of the intrinsic qualities of the act of expression itself. Performance thus calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of the act of expression and gives license to the audience to regard the act of expression and the performer with special intensity.⁸⁴

This definition of performance refers to stylised performances as opposed to the ones observed in our daily behaviours. We'll summarise Bauman's definitions by highlighting the key aspects that presents performance as an aesthetic mode of communication and further supporting them with critical terms used by its theorists. The first and most important one is what Kenneth Burke coined as 'identification' or the shared understanding between performer and audience.⁸⁵ This mutual consideration is established by two main factors: i) assumption of audience and ii) assumption of responsibility.

The assumption of audience involves the performer taking into account the socio-cultural makeup of his/her audience, the setting and time and the communicative resources available. From these considerations, the performer then frames the performance accordingly through a list of communicative means that function as keys to performance in order to facilitate the transmission of the message.⁸⁶ Occurring at the same time is the assumption of responsibility that refers to the performer's skills in delivering

⁸⁴ Richard Bauman, 'Verbal Art as Performance', *American Anthropologist*, 77 (1975), 290-311 (p.293)

⁸⁵ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1969)

⁸⁶ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959)

the intended message according to the expectations of the audience by utilising a wide range of devices that range from the use of figurative language, special paralinguistic patterns of voice quality and vocalisation, formal stylistic devices and disclaimer of performance among others.⁸⁷ Acknowledging the subjective and highly idiosyncratic features of one culture from another, the forms and methods of identification that occur in such a performance will certainly differ from one community to the other. The keys used for one event may not be sufficient to frame the performance and satisfy the expectations of the audience. Such is the subjective nature of a performance. The adherence to particular keys is even more apparent when one looks into well-established oral performances as practiced in and revered by cultures that still exhibit distinctively oral/aural inclinations.

It explains why the early stages of its scholarly efforts were characterised by an almost reactionary exclusion of orality in literary criticism and its study and translations of traditional oral tradition and other untextual forms of communication as observed in the past as well as contemporary societies. More specifically, it refers to the performance of oral literature, an important resource for its scholars.⁸⁸ The Nigerian author and critic, Isidore Okpewho in his book *African Oral Literature*, describes oral literature as 'literature delivered by word of mouth before an audience'.⁸⁹

Ruth Finnegan, an active proponent of a multidisciplinary approach to both literature and performance, provides more body to this stylised, multisensory mode of communication by listing its primary characteristics in her article 'The How of Literature'.⁹⁰ According to Finnegan, the first feature is the importance of the actual performance in real time. Watching a recording of an oral performance, be it audio or visual, is not as authentic as watching it live. This resonates with what Okpewho describes as the distinctive obligations and pressures experienced by performers.

⁸⁷ Bauman, p. 295.

⁸⁸ Read Ruth Finnegan's *Oral tradition and the Verbal Arts* (1992) for an extensive discussion concerning the debates surrounding the term oral literature.

⁸⁹ Isidore Okpewho, *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 70.

⁹⁰ Ruth Finnegan, 'The How of Literature', *Oral tradition*, 20 (2005), 164-87.

Next is the presence of the audience at the performance, where the performer delivers the performance according to the specific composition of the audience. The third characteristic is its variability, which is understood as how the performer's content and presentation may differ and change according to the environment of the said performance. These also include cultural and social environments as determined by its geographical location. The fourth feature is verbal variability, which refers to the ability of the performer to improvise and create new variations of their delivery based on their real-time observation of the audience's reactions and environment. This does not mean that the performer changes his performance according to whims of his or her audience but instead refers to what Okpewho describes as a process of adaptation that takes place prior to and during the performance.

Last but not least is the relationship shared between the performer and the audience. Similar to Bauman's assumption of responsibility and audience, performers are aware of their role in this communication process. Finnegan explains how the audience is often directly involved in the realisation process of an oral literary piece. Thus, the choice of content in a performance relays strategic themes and subjects designed to create maximum effect in the audience.

The term oral literature and its paradoxical nature has been addressed by its scholars. Lord in his later book, *The Singer Resumes the Tale*, commented on the term's simplistic orientation to define itself as one that belongs only to the oral domain of expression when he said, "if literature can be defined as 'carefully constructed verbal expression,' carefully structured oral verbal expression can surely qualify as literature. This is common sense".⁹¹ It seems timely that another term was introduced to the discourse as a solution that accommodates the multiple forms and dimensions of its research concerns: orature.

⁹¹ Albert B. Lord, *The Singer Resumes the Tale*, <https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS_LordA.The_Singer_Resumes_the_Tale.1995> [accessed 4 April 2020]

Orature as Oral Tradition

Fully literate persons can only with great difficulty imagine what a primary oral culture is like, that is, a culture with no knowledge whatsoever of writing or even the possibility of writing.

Walter Ong⁹²

In reference to the relationship between performer and audience, one of orature's main source of information is derived from the oral tradition practiced in world cultures. It stresses on its premise that despite today's modern and predominantly literate human civilisation and its dependence on the written text, societies still exhibit an inclination towards orality albeit in varying degrees. Walter J. Ong, a known student of Marshall McLuhan, focuses his research on such oral inclinations.

In Ong's view, despite the radical break one may observe in the ways human societies communicate via technologies such as primary orality, chirography, typography and now electronics, they all in fact form a continuum.⁹³ **Primary orality**, he explains, refers to the communities in the past whose use of oral and aural communication are practiced long before the emergence of writing. Human societies, driven by their collective need to preserve their cultural identity, have continuously shaped and reshape distinctive strategies to meaning making. This shows how, regardless of time and place, the practices or features that were often used by anthropologists to describe the age of a previous civilisation can still be traced in the present time. In reference to the earlier problematisation of literature, the prevailing idea of what it is and what it represents reveals a tendency to constrain itself only to a singular tradition of writing; a tendency that does not in fact wholly describe the unique traits that different cultures ascribe to.

⁹² Walter J. Ong, "Orality, Literacy, and Modern Media", in *Communication in History: Technology Culture, Society*, ed. by David Crowley and Paul Heyer (New York: Longman, 1999), p. 64.

⁹³ Walter J. Ong, 'Orality-Literacy Studies and the Unity of the Human Race', *Oral Tradition*, 2 (1987), 371-82 (p. 377)

What it does reveal is its reference to a positivist worldview that may have been accepted as the 'norm' before but now no longer escapes the critical eye. Ong offers his analysis of Tudor literature, a difficult group of texts written by writers in a style that is often regarded as less 'literary' compared to their Victorian and Renaissance kin. He argues instead that what is regarded lacking in its literary value is in fact shaped by its heavier traces of residue from a previous oral culture or what he terms as **oral residue**:

By oral residue I mean habits of thought and expression tracing back to pre- literate situations or practice, or deriving from the dominance of the oral as a medium in a given culture, or indicating a reluctance or inability to dissociate the written medium from the spoken. Such residue is not especially contrived and seldom conscious at all.⁹⁴

Ong's research offers my thesis an alternative way of thinking about communication. Oral residue can be found in all works of literature, regardless of its composition, delivery and reception forms. It can be traced in William Shakespeare's sonnets, Emily Dickinson's poems, J.K. Rowling's novels and the dramatic plays written by the likes of Kee Thuan Chye and Huzir Sulaiman. In a similar fashion, such oral residue can also be observed in texts written for performance, such as the works produced by spoken word poets. Ong stresses that the transformation of communication from the written to the electronic has not only heightened this residue but in fact maximised both oral and written expressions in a way that has never been observed before.⁹⁵ Referring to this shift in thought, speech and writing as **secondary orality** or an orality that is a result of writing technology and print culture, the following table shows the progression that took place between primary orality, writing and secondary orality:

⁹⁴ Walter J. Ong, 'Oral Residue in Tudor Prose Style', *PMLA*, 80 (1965), 145-154.

⁹⁵ Ong, 'Orality-Literacy', p. 377.

Primary Orality	Reading/Writing	Secondary Orality
A strong communal sense formed by listening culture that turns hearers into a group.	Turns individuals in on themselves	Similar to primary orality but immeasurably larger due to modern electronic technology.
Group-minded due to absence of feasible alternatives.	Inward and self-conscious as individuals.	Self-conscious and yet programmed to be group minded.
Promotes spontaneity	Promotes analytic reflectiveness	Promotes spontaneity but one that is by choice and involves careful planning.

Table 3. Summary of Ong's Primary and Secondary Orality⁹⁶

Spoken word poetry, which is not only a modern phenomenon due to its beginning around five decades ago, belongs to this era of secondary orality. Furthermore, the practice of spoken word poetry in Malaysia suggest changes in the way individuals and communities in general send and receive information. Ong further echoes Foley's earlier statement that oral practices observed in traditional communities can also be found in more recent artforms, such as slam poetry. Secondary orality does not replace or negate literacy and certainly does not replace primary orality but is in fact, defined and enhanced by both:

The electronic transformation of verbal expression has both deepened the commitment of the word to space initiated by

⁹⁶ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002)

writing and intensified by print and has brought consciousness to a new age of secondary orality.⁹⁷

Orature as Performance

To illustrate the extent of orature as a theoretical approach and its implications to the study of spoken word poetry, we'll refer to the important convergence of writers held in 1962 at the Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda. Titled "A Conference of African Writers of English Expression", the aim of the event was to propose ways for writers to work together and contribute to the conception of a unifying African Literature. The effort, however, didn't end well. The oppositional standpoints of its two main participants, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe, have since been widely acknowledged for their contributions to the postcolonial literary discourse of language and national identity and an equal emphasis placed on the role of orature.

In an article published in 1997, Ngũgĩ revises the definition of orature by distinguishing it from its commonly acknowledged equivalent, oral literature. Ngũgĩ outlines his argument by beginning with the late Ugandan performing artist Pio Zimiru who he argues contextualised the term as an oral system that is independent from written literary aesthetics altogether. He then proceeded to discuss its evolution by the South African multidisciplinary artist Pitika Ntuli. For Ntuli, the basic characteristic of orature is its fusion of all art forms such as drama, story, song, discourse and performance: it is inherently multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary with its resources of riddles, proverbs, stories, songs, poems, dramas and dances for the people to access and understand their worldview. The well-known Kenyan 'oraturist' and actress Mshai Mwangola provides her definition of orature when she describes it as 'an interdisciplinary aesthetic system weaving together numerous genres in the performance of a concept.'⁹⁸ In this theoretical repositioning of orature as

⁹⁷ Ong, 'Oral Residue', p. 132.

⁹⁸ Mshai Mwangola, 'Completing the Cycle: Stage to Page to Stage', *Codesria Conference on 'Canonical Works and Continuing Innovation in African Arts and Humanities'* <www.codesria.org/Links/conferences/accra/mshai.pdf> [accessed 12 March 2017]

a multidisciplinary discipline, Ngũgĩ uses terms like *Gestalt* and *Weltanschauung* to explain its significance as a fluid and cohesive archive of his or her unique worldview. In an interview conducted by Charles Cantalupo, he explains:

“If you look at orature in all societies, classical or contemporary, it refuses to draw very firm boundaries between disciplines, genres or forms. If you take a story, an oral narrative for instance, it will contain dance or music. The work might also involve audience participation, a chorus, or even the audience as a chorus. Often there are songs themselves or songs that involve dance variations. In some cases the word for the song and dance is the same. A song, a proverb, whatever: it suggests other forms.⁹⁹

While it bears similarities to Foley’s conception of orature as an ecosystem of oral poems, this archive is further described as an intricate web of relationships that is further delineated between nature and nurture, supernatural and supernatural, and cybernurture (also known as cyberture) and cybernatural. Ngũgĩ explains:

Nurture comes out of nature while having its particularity as nurture. Orature does not take the boundaries between the particularity of nature and that of nurture to be absolute. Just as nature has given rise to nurture, nurture itself has given rise to cybernurture or cyberture (virtual reality). Cyberture is to nurture what nurture is to nature. It mimics nurture in the same way that nurture mimics nature. [...] Unique to nurture is the realm of spirituality, a beyond the material, a combination of an awareness of a beyond nature, the supernatural, and a beyond nurture, the supernatural.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Charles Cantalupo, *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams*, The Herald, 6 May 2012, <<http://www.herald.co.zw/penpoints-gunpoints-and-dreams/>> [accessed 10 August 2016]

¹⁰⁰ Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, ‘Notes towards a performance theory of orature’, *Performance Research*, 3(2007), 4-7.

This discussion of orature may appear peculiar when read from the western preoccupation with science and evidences, particular when it comes to the supernatural. But for Ngũgĩ, his repositioning of the orature is motivated by two main objectives: first, to support his assertion on the inability of English to be the medium of writing for African literature; and secondly, to show how orature is distinct and separate from literature based on its organic integration of the material with the spiritual. He supports his argument by citing examples that included Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and the Hindu epics of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. In these distinctively oral traditions, there are no rigid divisions between human beings, animals, nature, god(s) and goddess(es) as they are treated as parts of a whole. Thus, orature becomes an invaluable source for postcolonial writers and readers to rediscover their roots and decolonialise their minds.

Here, it is obvious where the focus of Ngũgĩ's discussion lies: the function of language as the primary vehicle of colonisation. For Ngũgĩ, English is an imperialist language with two specific purposes i.e. to communicate and to transfer the cultural worldview of its owner. Why would an African writer write in a language once used by his oppressors unless he believes that his own language is comparatively inferior to the former? He calls for a total separation from English as a linguistic medium in the production of literary works and argues that it is an obligatory task one must take to be physically and psychologically decolonised and free. Thus, it necessitates the return to one's native language as it was practised before the arrival of the colonisers: their oral tradition. From a brief mention in *Decolonising the Mind*, the aspect of performance takes centre stage as it reverts back to an imagined time period before the arrival of colonial influences. By referring to these resources, African writers and artists can rediscover and develop a distinctive African identity formed by a culture that was invisibilised and marked as inferior to its western counterpart.

The discourse on what makes a creative production part of a national literature above reminds us of the presumed notion that led to the national policies in Malaysia that segregated its literatures based on the language the writer uses. Should one's choice of language be the primary factor that defines

a work as one that is uniquely 'national'? Does writing in English automatically devalue the content of a text and relegate it to a western or colonial import?

Despite being introduced decades after the independence of Malaysia, the first few years of spoken word poetry in this country found itself at odds with its literary counterpart due to the poets' use of colloquial English and popular western cultural references. Arguably, the thesis suggests that the latter may possibly be due to their inability to link the history of spoken word poetry to an already fragmented national literary discourse. While the urban environment of Kuala Lumpur allows and even encourages the spoken word poet to use the English language to engage with the audience, there has been an increasing number of performers who have begun to write and perform in more than one language. The works of the younger spoken word poets, such as this poem excerpt by Azizan Afi,¹⁰¹ transcribed from a radio performance, features a conscious effort to weave both Bahasa and the English language in his writing:

You see
 Aku masih bersama engkau di Rockland
 di tebing insanity
 di penghujung dunia
 di mana kita menari
 meraikan bom nuclear
 jatuh ke bumi
 cos the city is sick of old dreams
 I pour my last cup of coffee
 into a drain flowing nicotine redemption.¹⁰²

Returning to Ngugi's argument, he states that orature is an invaluable source for postcolonial writers and readers to rediscover their roots and

¹⁰¹ 'Speak Easy 5: Beat Poetry', *The Bigger Picture*, BFM, 3rd October 2017
 <<https://www.bfm.my/jack-malik-azizan-afi-speak-easy-5-beat-poetry.html>> [accessed 7 October 2017]

¹⁰² Translation is my own: I am still with you in Rockland / at the border / at the world's end / where we dance / celebrating the nuclear bomb / as it dropped to the ground.

decolonialise their minds and cites examples that include Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and the Hindu epics of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. In this oral tradition, there are no rigid distinctions between human beings, animals, nature, god(s) and goddess(es) as they are treated as parts of a whole. Writing in one's mother tongue is the first step in distancing oneself from his or her colonial past and a step closer to realising an independent African literature. A day after he lost the Nobel Prize to Mario Vargas Llosa, Zoe Norridge wrote how the writer's decision to write in Gikuyu may have been the only reason why it happened:

But if the Nobel committee had chosen to honour him this year it would have renewed the African literary community's belief in the possibility, and indeed necessity, of change. Naguib Mafouz won the Nobel for his work in Arabic in 1988. If Ngũgĩ had won he would have been the first author writing primarily in an indigenous sub-Saharan African language to win the prize. It would have been a reminder to us all of his resistance to the hegemony of European languages.¹⁰³

It is apparent where the focus of Ngũgĩ's discussion lies. From a brief mention in *Decolonising the Mind*, the aspect of performance takes centre stage as it reverts back to the oral tradition, an important resource for Africans to rediscover and develop their identity without leaving their rich history behind. He also emphasises that performativity can be found in all types of literature regardless of its history and location, which is similar to Ong's research discussed earlier. In the same interview, he cites Plato's *Republic* as an example of how the theory can be used to see the work with new eyes where 'the dialogues exist within the larger context of their dramatisation and, furthermore, the contexts of dramatic and religious festivals.'¹⁰⁴ Just like the

¹⁰³ Zoe Norridge, 'Why Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o should have won the Nobel prize for literature', *The Guardian*, 8 October 2010
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2010/oct/08/ngugi-wa-thiong-o-nobel-prize-literature>> [accessed 12 November 2015]

¹⁰⁴ Cantalupo.

evidences gathered by Foley in his studies of oral tradition from different parts of the world, textual strategies are indelibly rooted in oral expressions. And an oral expression, in its most basic level, is a form of performance. He proceeds to give more examples to show the overall integrative quality of performance:

Many disciplines and activities come under the umbrella of orature. The theater is a halfway house in which the realization of the drama is for it to become orature. The realization on stage of a musical composition embraces the concept of orature. While it integrates the many different possibilities of performance, orature also allows for the differences, for example, among narrative, song or drama.”¹⁰⁵

Once again, the key concept that distinguishes orature from literature is performance. Rosalind Thomas situates its place in the field of performance literature. She explains the need for such a study as it opens up the different ways written texts relate to performance, the forms of textuality and the relationships developed between text, performance and reperformance.¹⁰⁶ Rather than looking at the text as a standalone, performance literature brings to surface elements that cannot be contained (such as voice, music, dance etc. etc.) or what Ruth Finnegan refers to as the multi-sensory effects of performance.¹⁰⁷ As a distinct interpretation of a theory, its inclusive quality is one of its most discernible strengths as well its source of limitations. Must a postcolonial writer (and the Malaysian spoken word poet) choose either one or the other?

A study by Sharmita Lahiri on Indian literatures written in English dissects the same question. She concludes her article that the act of appropriating the English language into a local vernacular will diminish its significance as a colonial remnant. She adds, “a vernacular language is more than just a language; it is the language used by cultural insiders. Indian-English

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Rosalind Thomas, ‘Performance Literature and the Written Word: Lost in Transcription?’, *Oral Tradition*, 20 (2005), 1-6.

¹⁰⁷ Finnegan, p. 172.

literature highlights the act that English is one of the languages used by the insiders of the Indian culture".¹⁰⁸ One Malaysian poet in particular, Salleh Ben Joned, has written a number of poems that adopt the local English vernacular known as Manglish. This, he uses not only to communicate but also to criticise the politicisation of language that exists in the country. This excerpt below addresses the ongoing debate on the status of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language at the cost of marginalising other languages including English. The argument of protecting the national language appears farcical when a long list of English words has been appropriated by local writers:

Our *puisi*, our *nobel*, our *drama*, our *prosa*
 may be, in form, borrowed from the west;
 But our writers have shown their ability for
asimilisasi, from old *realisma* to *realisma majis*;
 From *modenisma* to *pasca-modenisma*.
 We know all the teori; no need to read
 the *karya kreatif* themselves. No need.
 Mario vargas llosa, gabriel garcia marquez;
 Magical names to know for the sake of *progres*.¹⁰⁹

While one may agree with Salleh Ben Joned's views that writers should not be limited to only one language especially when he or she comes from a multicultural, multilingual country, Ngũgĩ's belief that language is and will always be the carrier of culture is rooted in his opposition against western colonialism. In the case of Nigeria, he argues how orature, as the oral equivalent of written literature, is one of the two major means by which a language transfers its culture.¹¹⁰ Through the domination of the coloniser's language, Ngũgĩ points out how the people's orature and literature were

¹⁰⁸ Sharmita Lahiri, 'Can a Spirit of Our Own be Expressed in the Language of Our Coloniser?', *Asiatic*, 7 (2013), 39–55 (p. 42).

¹⁰⁹ Salleh Ben Joned, 'We got Minda, They only got Mind', in *Adam's Dreams* (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2007), p.111.

¹¹⁰ Thiong'o, p. 15.

replaced by their colonisers. This is however an approach that was met with opposition by his peers, including Chinua Achebe.

Orature as Text

As an African writer who writes primarily in English, the Nigerian-born poet and novelist Chinua Achebe, referred to as ‘the father of modern African literature’¹¹¹ by Nadine Gordimer, wrote the article ‘The African Writer and the Use of Language’ to discuss several questions that arose from the event’s failure at defining what African Literature is. He defines African literature or literatures as ‘a group of associated units – in fact the sum of all the *national* and *ethnic* literatures of Africa’.¹¹² Regarding the complexities of the African experience, he proposes English as the most suitable language for the national literatures of Nigeria as well as the other countries in the continent. Referring to English as a world language, he cites examples of fellow African writers who have used the language successfully to describe a world that is distinct to their own culture and worldview. These writers, Achebe explains, moulds English into a tool that can be both universal and specific to their experience rather than following how its native speakers utilise the language. While he did not deny the existing handicaps of using English, Achebe insisted on its potentials to alleviate African literature and make it more accessible to everyone else.

Perhaps such was the intention behind the collection of short stories *Malaysian Tales: Retold & Remixed*, published in 2011. According to its reviewer, the subversion and appropriation of popular Malay folklore such as Si Tanggang, Puteri Sa’adong and Sang Kancil are

symptomatic of subterranean currents below the surface
structure of tales of morality that threaten to destroy
formulaic ways of seeing things. By shattering the ways in

¹¹¹ In an interview with The Guardian, Achebe expressed his strong resistance against the title as it undermines all the other writers who have contributed to African literature.

¹¹² Chinua Achebe, ‘The African Writer and the English language’
<chisnell.com/apeng/backgroundnotes/achebe/tfasubaltern.rtf> [accessed 12 November 2015]

which we have read the original tales, these new stories subvert meanings for alternative values and norms to surface.¹¹³

As Achebe sees it, African literary writers belong to a collective that writes in the language that they *choose* to tell their stories in rather than one imposed on them. He continues to emphasise this freedom of choice in many of his interviews, including this one: 'English is something you spend your lifetime acquiring, so it would be foolish not to use it. [...] It is not simply something you use because you have it anyway; it is something which you can actively claim to use as an effective weapon, as a counterargument to colonization'.¹¹⁴ For Achebe, English is and should always be a valid and available option for the postcolonial writer.

Guided by his beliefs in using English to draw his own worldview into existence, Achebe weaved Igbo words and phrases, proverbs, fables, tales, and other elements of African oral and communal storytelling traditions *into* his narration. By doing so, he assumes the role of a storyteller who guides his readers into a world very much different from their own, consciously discouraging them from any judgments based on their own cultural beliefs. In reaction to this novel, several African literary critics including Francis Abiola Irele claimed that Achebe was in no way equal to a storyteller. Referring to the primarily oral nature of these storytelling practices, Irele came from the standpoint that unlike these traditional storytellers, Achebe did not create his stories 'unselfconsciously, out of a full sense of coincidence with the culture within which he practices his art'.¹¹⁵ Oral tradition is often regarded as a repository of culture, which explains the reservations shown when the oral is translated into the written form.

A similar reaction could be observed when the Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston published her memoir *The Woman Warrior* in 1976. In

¹¹³ Ruzy Suliza Hashim, review of *Malaysian Tales: Retold & Remixed*, ed. by Daphne Lee, *Asiatic*, 6 (2012), 192-195.

¹¹⁴ Chinua Achebe, 'An African Voice', *The Atlantic Online*, 2 August 2000
<<https://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/interviews/ba2000-08-02.htm>>
[accessed 12 November 2015]

¹¹⁵ Thiong'o, p. 4.

her book, Kingston too integrated elements of oral storytelling such as myths, legends, autobiography and family stories. In a strategic effort to structure her narrative according to the form of the novel, she incorporates an oral tradition that is practiced in her community known as 'talk-story' through a retelling of stories that were told to her by her mother and the other elders in the community. Her reactions to these tales function as the only information given to readers into the narrator's world before finally inserting her own story (using the first-person point of view) in the end. Using this form, Kingston explores layered themes of history and identity as constructed by the self and society and underlines the message that the stories we listened to become a part of our consciousness. Additionally, there is also the idea that a story is never designed to remain static but instead changes its form to suit a specific time and place. Both of these messages are qualities often ascribed to the oral rather than the written text. As explained by Kingston:

I come from the tradition of talk-story. In a talk-story culture, there are elders and storytellers who transmit a story to the listener. A story can take you through a whole process of searching, seeking, confronting, through conflicts, and then to a resolution. As the storyteller and the listener, we go through a story together.¹¹⁶

Although Kingston's writing style also raised similar criticism revolving around her tampering with Chinese oral tradition, this self-awareness of the writer to bridge the gap between the oral and the written suggests both an openness by writers and readers to the blurring of lines that traditionally separate the two modes of communication. In Achebe's novel, for example, its oral characteristics are described as a major factor in the text's lasting effect particularly on readers unaccustomed to the writer's unique worldview:

You begin to understand their brutal customs borne out of hardship, fear and the wrath of ancestral spirits. You applaud Okonkwo's success, commend him for his obstinate sense of

¹¹⁶ David L. Ulin, 'The Writer's Life: Maxine Hong Kingston picks up the story', *Los Angeles Times*, 6 February 2011 <<http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/06/entertainment/la-ca-maxine-hong-kingston-20110206>> [accessed 14 December 2016]

honour and duty, his unerring principles, even as he drinks palm-wine out of a trophy human head. Western perspective fades and you feel compassion when he accidentally kills a tribesman and is exiled. You realise how difficult it is for us to judge this wife-beating, child-murdering society, right before the Europeans come in and do just that.¹¹⁷

From the practitioner-researcher's point of view, this appears to be a rather sensible proposal considering that African literature brings with it a variety of experiences that make up the continent's different countries, cultures, ethnicities and languages. It mirrors our own complex makeup that was dramatically altered since the arrival of the colonial powers. Does the use of English in one's writing and performance indicate a failure to free oneself from the shackles of western colonialism or does it reflect a choice that suits both the environment and the society, in which they were raised in?

Orature as Hybrid

Ngũgĩ's passion in proposing a performance theory of orature, though it is commendable, appears to ignore the realities of 21st century Malaysia. The practitioner-researcher only notices that there is a disconnect between the concerns of postcolonial scholars and the stories of its contemporary practitioners. Those who have contributed significantly to the study of oral literature and orature, remain as observers rather than immerse themselves in their specialisation as practitioners. Similar to Ngugi and Achebe's own use of local words and stories in their writings, all of the spoken word poets chosen for this thesis have written poems that combine more than one language and demonstrate the ability to create narratives using multi and intercultural references in more than one language.

¹¹⁷ Poppy Adams, 'Book of a Lifetime: Things Fall apart, Chinua Achebe', *The Independent*, 16 May 2008, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/book-of-a-lifetime-things-fall-apart-chinua-achebe-828948.html>> [accessed 12 March 2016]

As an effort to further position this research in the field of Malaysian literary studies, it is important to include the hybrid approach to both text and performance as framed by the renowned Malaysian poet and performer Abdul Ghafar Ibrahim (affectionately referred to as AGI). Although he neither identifies as a *penglipurlara* nor a spoken word poet, he has been actively performing since 1965 and is best known as the proponent of the Tri-V theory.

First proposed in his 1972 essay 'Sajak Audio-Visual' or 'Audio-Visual Poetry' that was later republished by *Dewan Sastera* in 1973, AGI's conception of a hybrid literary/performative poetry consists of three elements, or Verbal, Vocal and Visual.¹¹⁸ In his essay, he explains how these three components are necessary to fully realise the potential of a poem. Verbal, he continues, can be understood as the content of the poem. Notice how he views the written text as equally verbal. He adds by explaining that a well-executed poem (in this sense, one that is recited or spoken out loud) will directly strengthen the quality of its Vocal. Here, Vocal refers to the properties of sound in which every syllable and pauses must be given full attention when reciting them out loud. On the Visual component, AGI states that a poem is and should not be bound by rules but should adhere to a writer's poetic license.¹¹⁹ By treating it as such, it is possible to present it in any forms possible.

From his explanation, Visual functions as an open invitation to the audience to fully comprehend the poem's meaning through the medium of performance. By combining all three components, only then will one be able to achieve a full and pleasurable understanding of the text. He further adds that a good poet (and performer) is capable of critically and successfully provoking the listener/audience to engage with the poem differently than one would when reading it alone. Based on the recorded performances available on Youtube,¹²⁰ the same components being practiced and encouraged within the

¹¹⁸ Syahirah Mustafa, 'Cakap-cakap Puisi AGI-SA', *Resensi Buku IBTM* <<http://ulasbukuitbm.blogspot.my/2014/09/cakap-cakap-puisi-agi-sa.html> > [accessed on 23 July 2017]

¹¹⁹ Mohd. Saipuddin Suliman and Mohd Rosli Saludin, 'Konsep Tri-V dan Penyuburan Jati Diri Melayu dalam Puisi AGI', *Jurnal Peradaban Melayu*, 10 (2015), 45-52 (p. 45).

¹²⁰ Recorded by multiple sources, one of these performance recording can be watched here: ITBMtv, *Abdul Ghafar Ibrahim (Pak Agi) di Malam Puisi Riong 2013*, online video recording, Youtube <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tx1D7VhViH4>> [accessed 26th May 2018]

spoken word poetry scene can also be observed in his performances. It echoes AGI's firm belief that the balance of these three components equals to a viable performance. Situating his works within the field of oral literature and orature, his performances exhibit the basic features of a storyteller i.e. the author of *voiced texts* and a professional performer who performs in a stylised format in exchange for payment (similar to the spoken word poets) based on Foley's and Sweeney's system of categorisation. What sets his works apart from the penglipurlara and the spoken word poets is the visual presentation of his poems. Here is an example of his work, a poem entitled 'Tan Sri Bulan':¹²¹

Tan Sri Bulan di angkasa lepas
 Bak beburung
 Dengan kepak mengembang rancak
 dengan benang ingin bersenang
 kepak kompak benang tegang
 menyentak-nyentak berenang-renang
 baju nipis dengung girang
 ang-ngang-ngang-ngang
 aung-ung-ung-ung
 nngggggggg
 Tan Sri Bulan di angkasa lepas
 bak burung¹²²

There is a noticeably strong influence of concrete poetry movement of the 1950s-1970s in which space plays a central role in both design and meaning.¹²³ This effort to break away from the conventions of poetry is clearly modern in its origin. The poem here can be appreciated in its printed

¹²¹ Abdul Ghafar Ibrahim, *Tan Sri Bulan / My Lord Moon Kite* (Kuala Lumpur: ITBM, 2014), p. 22, 60.

¹²² The given translation is as follow : My Lord the Moon Kite riding freely / like a bird / wings smoothly opening like a flower / Searching / taut silken jacket / shining sahes / lunging / flowing/ kicking/roaring / parrying / shouting / ang-ngang-ngang-ngang / aung-ung-ung-ung / nngggggggg / My Lord the Moon Kite riding freely / like a bird.

¹²³ Christina Aube and Nancy Perloff, 'What is Concrete Poetry?', *the iris: behind the scenes at the Getty* <<http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/what-is-concrete-poetry>> [accessed 14 April 2016]

form but as explained earlier by Finnegan, an oral poem is designed to be watched live because it is on the stage where the performer's ability to bring the piece alive comes into place. According to S. Jaafar Husin, AGI is the first Malaysian poet responsible for dramatising poetry by inserting different elements such as dance, martial arts, music, visual arts and others through his performance.¹²⁴ When compared to several video recordings of this poem available on Youtube, there is a great variability in terms of the performance such as the pace, repetition of words and lines, volume, singing instead of reciting and at times, omission of verses from the original text. Another feature of performance, namely the relationship established between the poet and the audience, is significantly obvious in AGI's performance. Prior to the performance, he encourages participation and responses from the audience by either asking questions, directing them to mimic sounds from his poems or sharing with them insights on contemporary issues.

Although his poems (performances and texts) are not clearly narrative, he creates a storyline through the elaborate use of stage props, body movements and space. From the viewpoint of orature, AGI's works fulfil its two featured requirements. Firstly, the poet carefully designed actions that represent symbolic meanings of the poem. In the poem performance of Tan Sri Bulan, AGI's movements are reminiscent of the poem's primary image i.e. a *wau bulan*, the traditional moon kite of Malaysia. Actions imitating the pulling of and being pulled by the kite are complemented by the onomatopoeic words 'aung-ung-ung-ung' and 'nnggggggg' that imitate the hammering and vibrating sound created by the moon kite in the air. In their analysis of the poem, Mohd Saipuddin and Mohd Rosli opined that the Tri-V theory allows a poem not only to stand on its own on a page but also to be performed without restrictions on the stage. For literary critics and analysts, a performance poem can be analysed in its static page form based on the following Tri-V diagram:

¹²⁴ S. Jaafar Husin, 'Abdul Ghafar Ibrahim: Saya dibebaskan oleh 3-V', *Dewan Sastera*, 21 (1986).

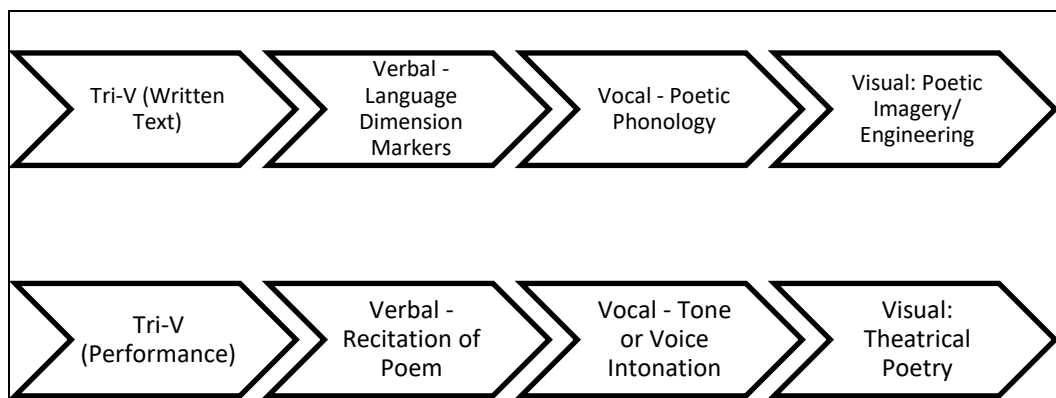


Table 4. Tri-V in Writing and Performance¹²⁵

This wide variability and verbal variability demonstrated by AGI's performance of a poem, from the perspective of an artist-researcher, is understood as an improvisational strategy based on his careful observation of the audience. Echoing the quality of variability in orature and oral literature, his performances change because the audience's assumption is different every time. The question of intention comes into play and in his work, he has expressed ideas that are similar to those who practice spoken word poetry: "My poems are essentially a form of communication. I communicate with other people by letting them know what I am like."¹²⁶ While both performers express themselves through the use of poetic text, the main difference that can be pointed between AGI's delivery style and the spoken word poet's is the former's preference to play with sounds rather than the latter's emphasis on narrating a story. The second requirement, which is the assumption of an audience mirrors the explanation above. Until today, AGI's essay remains the only Malaysian essay that addresses the practical and performative attributes of poetry.

¹²⁵ Suliman and Saludin, p.48.

¹²⁶ Abdul Ghafar Ibrahim, Audio Visual Poetry, in *Tan Sri Bulan / My Lord Moon Kite*, (Kuala Lumpur: ITBM, 2014), xiv.

Summary

Ideally, Malaysian literature is the body of work that reflects and represents the realities and challenges of its people. The same goes for what may one day be referred to Malaysian orature.¹²⁷ Due to its complex history and nature, however, it would not be possible to thoroughly discuss what it means by Malaysian culture and the details of its development within the context of this thesis. However, it is certainly a conversation that is reflected in its material culture, such as those produced by its novelists, poets, playwrights, dancers, and artists. Spoken word poetry too finds many commonalities with the other cultural producers. It shares several similarities to a traditional play such as the awareness of space or stage direction, as well as the use of props and costumes, and the presence of conflict in its story although unlike a play, a spoken word performance is neither represented by actors impersonating characters nor features the use of dialogues. It too uses music and dance, and exhibits a strong inclination to collaborations and multisensory performances.

Spoken word poetry marks its departure from other types of contemporary performances through its emphasis on the performance of personal narratives. As a performance of stories, Amber Lauren Johnson in her doctoral thesis on spoken word poetry states that the artform highlights the merging of 'the boundaries of emotion, politics, culture, generation, and orality'¹²⁸ with a common feature shared by a majority of spoken word performances being its theme of oppression (either physical or symbolic) inflicted by cultural norms. While an actor is expected to deliver the lines of an imagined character, lines that are written by a playwright, there is no distinction between the writer, speaker and performer in spoken word poetry. Distinctively orature in its form and intent, the spoken word practitioner assumes the role of a storyteller. One way to illustrate this is by referring to

¹²⁷ As of now, *kesusasteraan lisan* (oral literature) and *sastera rakyat* (folklore) refer to origin stories or myth, animal lore, legends and the stories of *penglipurlara*.

¹²⁸ Amber Lauren Johnson, "We Don't Write Just to Write; We Write to Be Free": A Rhetorical Ethnography of Spoken Word in Los Angeles' (unpublished doctoral thesis, The Pennsylvania State University, 2006), p. 2.

the unspoken rule practiced by those in the scene: only you can write and tell your story best.

But what's the bigger story at play here? How does the local practitioner see himself or herself in the local storytelling tradition? Are they part of a completely emergent practice never before experienced by their audience or are they simply continuing an existing cultural practice of storytelling? Here, we reach the juncture of our discussion where the spoken word practitioner-researcher once again asks the question: by *whose* values, traditions and canons are the works of Malaysian spoken word poets to be guided?

Chapter Two: Orature as Local Knowledge

[...] the storyteller joins the ranks of the teachers and sages. He has counsel—not for a few situations, as the proverb does, but for many, like the sage [...] His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life.

Walter Benjamin¹²⁹

On the 5th of June 2015, a 5.9 magnitude earthquake struck the area of Ranau in Sabah and claimed the lives of 18 people who were making their way up to Mount Kinabalu. The event caught the attention of the international media not due to the tragic loss that occurred that day but rather the response from the representatives of the state's Kadazan Dusun tribe concerning the reasons behind the incident.

For the community, there is a direct connection between their central beliefs in the Supreme Deities *Kinohiringan* and *Umunsumundu*, and the mountain. According to its mythology, *Umunsumundu* created the mountain to appease her husband whose pride was hurt when he realised how small his clouds were compared to the earth.¹³⁰ This is but one of many legends and folklore that surround Mount Kinabalu, but the one that connected the earthquake with the spirits is the story of how the mountain peak is a sacred place where the souls of the Kadazan-Dusun's ancestors wait for emancipation.¹³¹ From their point of view, the entire blame was to be placed upon a group of foreign climbers who were not only documented taking pictures in the nude but relieving themselves on the summit several days

¹²⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', in *Narrative Theory: Political Narratology* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 88-106.

¹³⁰ Tessa Wang, 'Mount Kinabalu is 'our temple and purgatory'', *BBC News Singapore*, 12 June 2015 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33105624>> [accessed 3 January 2016]

¹³¹ Christy Bidder, Silverina Anabelle Kibat, and Sairah Saien, 'Mount Kinabalu: the Sacred Emblem of the First UNESCO World Heritage Sites on Borneo', *Tourism, Leisure and Global Change*, 1 (2016), 1-9 (p. 5).

before the earthquake struck. This blatant show of insensitivity and disrespect was deemed a clear act of defiling the sacred mountain, thus incurring the wrath of the mountain gods and spirits.

The statement provoked a variety of reactions from different quarters. When the tribe's *Huguan Siou* or paramount leader, Tan Sri Joseph Pairin Kitingan, stressed the urgency of conducting a ritual to appease the mountain spirits, he drew the ire of academicians such as Andrew Aeria who warned of the dangers of superstitious beliefs at the expense of possible scientific explanations behind natural disasters. Aeria further stated that was a clear indication of failure in the country's education system.¹³² What I found particularly interesting and relevant to this thesis, however, was the response given by the Prime Minister's Science Advisor at the time, Dr. Zakri Abdul Hamid concerning the situation:

Science would have a neutral look. Science has no answer to that. If the mountain is sacred, we have to respect that [...] It is part of the traditional and local knowledge that are increasingly recognised by the international community.'¹³³

What was the context behind Zakri's statement, and what did he mean by traditional and local knowledge? Just like the ambiguity of the term 'literature' and 'poetry', there too appears to be a variety of meanings available and attached to this idea; the introductory list of definitions offered in *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* alone includes contributions from twenty scholars.¹³⁴ However, for the benefit of the reader, we will refer to Fulvio Mazzocchi's careful interpretation of the phrase:

¹³² Julia Chan, 'Pairin: Naked tourist brought on mountain's wrath', *Malay Mail*, 6 June 2015 <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/pairin-naked-tourist-brought-on-mountains-wrath>> [accessed 8 December 2015]

¹³³ 'We have to respect beliefs of people – PM's science advisor', *The Borneo Post*, 10 June 2015 <<http://www.pressreader.com/malaysia/the-borneo-post-sabah/20150610/282969628686274>> [accessed 3 January 2016]

¹³⁴ 'Definitions of Folklore', *Journal of Folklore Research*, 33 (1996), 255-264.

The word 'traditional' places the emphasis on the transmission of knowledge along a cultural continuity, but might ignore the ability of traditional societies to adapt to changing circumstances. [...] At present, traditional ecological knowledge is interpreted as a cumulative body of knowledge, practices and representations that describes the relationships of living beings with one another and with their physical environment, which evolved by adaptive processes and has been handed down through generations by cultural transmission.¹³⁵

In our previous discussion on orature, Ngugi stated that language is the main vehicle of culture and orature, different from its written literature, offers an opportunity for one to return to one's native language as it was practised before the arrival of the colonisers: their oral tradition. In a country where its people are predominantly Muslims, there appears to be a shared worldview within its oral tradition that is either accepted or tolerated to a certain degree; one that is pluralistic and contrasts with the nation's strictly drawn delineations of race and religion. But how does this work in the context of Malaysian writers?

Orature in Classical Malay Literature

He started to chant, his voice at first cracked with age and disuse but strengthening as he warmed his tale. The launch clock has struck the hour of midnight: I dozed on the top of my cabin but still his voice rose strong and interested the moonlit bay (...) But as he recited, he lived in a different world; princes in the splendour of old world raiment fought battles with magic arts and weapons, rescued lovely maidens in distress, travelled to land in search of adventure,

¹³⁵ Fulvio Mazzochi, 'Western science and traditional knowledge: Despite their variations, different forms of knowledge can learn from each other', *EMBO reports*, 7 (2006), 463-466 (p. 1).

debonair, irresistible, possessed of the secret perpetual youth and passion.

R.O. Winstedt

In the domain of Malay literary criticism, *kesusasteraan lisan* or folklore (which we will replace with the term orature from here onwards) points towards the body of knowledge that preserves worldview, or as Ngugi refers to as the *Weltanschauung* of its community in the form of stories, collected from storytellers by the transcription and archival efforts of cultural anthropologists in the past. Although anticolonial sentiments had driven the local critics to rely less on previous research conducted by their western counterparts, a substantial number of critical studies on historical Malay literary canons still refer to critical works made available by Western scholars like Wilkinson, Leyden and Winstedt, whose 'writings on Malay literature constitute a western scholarly tradition which influenced Malay thinking about Malay literature for many decades'.¹³⁶ It is reflected in the historical fact where almost all of the current classical Malay literary references available now were only collected and copied from manuscripts in the 19th century, including works that were produced in the earlier periods of Malay history before the arrival of colonial powers in the country.

Ismail Hussein in his article 'The Study of Traditional Malay Literature' states that the whole study of Malay literature had always been comparative, historical and ethnological rather than literary. Driven by demands made by the Malay feudal ruling class, the documentation efforts were limited to a group of written literature cultivated in either Malay courts or homes of the Malay feudal elites, resulting in a literary tradition that failed to reflect the extensive wealth of its oral tradition.¹³⁷ In reference to the colonial contributions to the country's literary traditions, the Malaysian writer Lloyd Fernando has long noted how previous research conducted on literary works have, deliberately or not, excluded the ways 'in which literature is firmly and

¹³⁶ Lisbeth Littrup, 'Development in Malay criticism', in *The Canon in Southeast Asian Literature*, ed. by David Smyth (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 76-87.

¹³⁷ Ismail Hussein, 'The Study of Traditional Malay Literature', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (JMBRAS)*, 39 (1966), pp. 66 -89 (p. 73).

intricately bound to social contexts' that depend heavily on the socio-geographical environment that a person imparts and receives information in.¹³⁸ He questions the intentions and aims of those who have encouraged and helped the publications of these works that treated the study of Malay history from an anthropological inquisitiveness rather than a sincere appreciation of its creative production:

Nevertheless, in terms of living culture, their activity seems rather to have been of the order of preserving specimens for a museum, not of using their researches in the education of new generations of speakers and writers of the language.¹³⁹

Another point that was elaborated further in his argument centered on the problematic western mode of thinking that has distanced us from our own cultural roots. Fernando clearly distinguishes the difference between mode of thinking and culture, stating that there is nothing to fear about British culture as our own rich cultures can discern which part is suitable for Malaysians or not. Echoing Taib Othman's own observation of Malay society's ability to adapt and assimilate to changes throughout their history, Fernando proceeded to criticise the occasional setbacks that may come along with our adoption of the British mode of thinking, stating that it became detrimental to the society's rich oral history. He wrote, 'put simply, we follow the West unquestioningly in refusing, or being unable to see things whole; we proceed by segments. We have ceased to be integral'.¹⁴⁰ As observed in Maxwell, his worldview greatly differed from the subjects of these manuscripts and whose efforts to comprehend the realities of these 'native cultures' often include applying scientific theories of evolution formulated by the biologist Charles Darwin and the philosopher Herbert Spencer, in which:

the study of the evolution of culture and civilization would postulate three stages of culture and would hold fast to the idea

¹³⁸ Fernando, p.53

¹³⁹ Lloyd Fernando, 'English, Literature, and Bilingualism in South East Asia', in *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, eds. by M.A. Quayum and Peter C. Wicks, (Petaling Jaya: Longman, 2001), pp.13-30.

¹⁴⁰ Fernando, p.17.

that the peoples and cultures of the world are arrangeable diachronically, forming "a great chain of being" [...] By using technological as well as social indicators, ethnographers could discover where a particular people belonged on the "chain" and thus give that people a definite place in the evolution of culture.¹⁴¹

While Comte's 'comparative method' argues that the prioritisation of the written text over the oral as observed in Malaysian literary history reflects the society's shift from a primitive to a modern civilisation, the definition of the term 'literature' within the field of Malay literary studies strongly suggests the inseparability of the oral from the text. In their studies, Muhammad Haji Salleh and Muhammad Luthfi Abdul Rahman explains that the term consists not only of oral tales but others that began with the oral before transformed into the written in its various forms, manifestations and transformations'.¹⁴² The term *kesusasteraan* itself is a combination of the Sanskrit word *su* or 'beauty' and the word *sastera* or 'stories and poems that give instructions.' Haji Abdul Halim Ali, in his article on traditional Malay literature, also explains how the best work of literature is one which not only is *indah* or beautiful in its form and content but also contributes to the betterment of the society.

Referring to studies done by other scholars including Muhammad Haji Salleh, he reiterates that beauty, both as an inherent quality of the produced work and of the author, is not only an important requirement but also the measuring stick of how good a literary work is.¹⁴³ This drives its writers to impart works that maintain social norms, develop and preserve the society's beliefs and values, which include both written and non-written representations of literary works. In a separate research, Muhammad Haji Salleh also added how literature, as perceived by classical Malays, consists of three main features namely the *pengarang* (author), *karya* (the work) and

¹⁴¹ Vidich and Lyman, p. 27.

¹⁴² Muhammad Haji Salleh and Mohamad Luthfi Abdul Rahman, 'A Heritage, Decadence and a Hope of Preservation', *Universiti Sains Malaysia* <http://eprints.usm.my/26000/1/A_Heritage_Decadence_And_A_Hope_Of_Preservation.pdf> [accessed 16 February 2018]

¹⁴³ Abdul Halim Ali, 'Konsep Keindahan dalam Kesusasteraan Melayu Traditional', *Pendeta: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastera Melayu*, 2 (2011), 99-117 (p. 101).

most importantly, the *khalayak*, a word that refers not only to readers but also listeners and audience.¹⁴⁴ In the context of the Malaysian writer and reader, one's literature ideally shares universal truths as well as reveals complex nuances of the Malaysian society that may not be easily accessible to those who do not share the same meanings, values and beliefs that characterise and guide the behaviours of its people. It also includes works that are produced in both written and non-written forms. Such views are not unlike the ones provided earlier by Widdowson and Foley, and supported by Fernando.

Addressing this problem, Fernando states the need for scholars and researchers to challenge existing distinctions 'imposed by habits of purely academic study in the West, between works of high literary merit and more popular kinds of written expression'.¹⁴⁵ Referring specifically to countries that were colonised by the British, Lynette Hunter in her 1997 lecture at Gresham College also asserts how western literary criticism has always regarded the written as fixed and stable and equated oral texts to ideas of naiveté and simple-mindedness.¹⁴⁶ This is done by first extending the available definition to include and regard all creative oral tradition and written expressions as of equal social significance before one begins considering any questions of literary value when analysing and criticising the works in question.¹⁴⁷ He justifies this approach based on his discovery that a complete understanding of literature and thus, its capacity to reveal meanings in human culture, is not founded on just a singular literary tradition.

It is well acknowledged that there was already an existing body of literature adopted from oral tradition long before the arrival of western colonialism in Malaya. The existing notion that the Malays greatly owe the British for their existing literature has been heavily contested and disproved

¹⁴⁴ Muhammad Haji Salleh, *Puitika Sastera Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2000), cited in Rahmah Ahmad Hj. Osman, 'Understanding the Classical Malay Literary Framework: A Reappraisal of the Poetic Theories of Vladimir Braginsky,' *Asian Journal of Humanities and Social Studies*, 10 (2016), 148-62, (p.157).

¹⁴⁵ Fernando, p.54

¹⁴⁶ Lynette Hunter, *Orature, Oratory and Getting the Message Heard*, online lecture, Gresham College, 12 November 1997, <<https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/orature-oratory-and-getting-the-message-heard>> [accessed 10 January 2015]

¹⁴⁷ Lloyd Fernando, 'The Social Imagination and the Functions of Criticism in Asia', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 10 (1976), p.54.

by scholars such as Al-Attas, whose research highlights the major cultural and religious influence on Malay society, specifically in its contribution to the transformation of Malay society from an oral to a written tradition based on the Arabic script or *Jawi*. Al-Attas pointed out how Malays, through the arrival of Islam via Indian and Hadrami Arab merchants, became a modern society that embraced intellectualism and rationalism.

During this time, the definition of literature and culture evolved from a skin-deep understanding of religion as dictated by the ruling class to 'a mass conversion of the body and the spirit among the Malays'¹⁴⁸ where scholarly texts are equally referred to as its oral tradition. Taib Osman provided a slightly different perspective. According to him, it was Sufism that made it possible for the society to syncretise Islamic ideas with existing local beliefs and religious notions.¹⁴⁹ Sufism, brought into the Malay Archipelago by travelling Indian traders, offers a pluralistic perspective characterised by spirituality and mysticism. An example of its influence can be seen in the writings of the 16th century Sumatran poet Hamzah Fansuri, whose use of the Arab-Persian poetic form *syair* shows a fine grasp of Islamic mysticism and application of more than 2000 Arabic words in his works.¹⁵⁰

Among the Malay ruling society, writing became widely practiced in the palace courts and encouraged the production of texts known as literary history or the merging of legends and myths with real events that happened in the state. The first role of literary history is to provide the history of a kingdom through the description of its Sultan's *salasilah* (genealogy) while the second role is to emphasise the greatness of its kings.¹⁵¹ Hence, works such as *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* and *Misa Melayu* are filled with elements of the fantastic and the mystical (usually

¹⁴⁸ Syed Muhd Naquib Al-Attas, cited in Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, 'Rescuing History from the Orientalists: Syed Muhd Naquib Al-Attas and Islam in the Malay World', <<http://www.deenrevival.com/rescuing-history-from-the-orientalists-syed-muhd-naquib-al-attas-and-islam-in-the-malay-world>> [accessed 2 February 2015]

¹⁴⁹ Mohd Taib Osman, *Bunga Rampai: Aspects of Malay Culture* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1988), p. 265.

¹⁵⁰ Herlina, 'Islam dan Pengaruhnya terhadap Peradaban Melayu', *Tamaddun*, 14 (2014), 57-78 (p. 75).

¹⁵¹ Norazimah Zakaria, 'Peranan Pengarang Tradisi dalam Melahirkan Masyarakat Pemikir', *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 134 (2014), 259-269 (p. 268).

ordered by the kings themselves). Many scholars have observed and highlighted how rich literary heritage of Persians and Arabs were assimilated into the local written literature as setting, historical events, characters and others. In other works, Hindu myths and legends were also altered or replaced with Islamic motifs. Most of these changes, however, were designed to preserve religious discourses and laws of the ruling power:

Most religious treatises and exegetical works were not primarily intended to be read out to a large audience, but rather to be discussed by small gatherings of scholars: their strongly Arabized diction, their unfamiliar syntax and complex turns of thought and argumentation made them difficult to understand for anyone but the initiated scholar. Legal texts as well, in view of the specialized knowledge they required, must have been less fit for public recitation.¹⁵²

There are also stories that describe a feudal social structure divided between the working class and the ruling class, possibly reflecting Buddhist and Hindu beliefs strategically adopted by the ruling power in their aims to retain the loyalty of the commoners. An example is the concept of the Sultan and his absolute power, which has its origin in Buddhist-Hindu concept of *Devaraja* or the king as god reincarnate. Another example provided by Raja Hassan Raja Noor shows how the application of 'dynasty myth' such as connecting one's ruler with the god Vishnu could promote a sense of awe in the commoners who listen and believe in these stories.¹⁵³ Folklore, myths and legends, in this case, were treated as strategic means used to guarantee merging of the local's worldview with the concept of preservation of power; seen in the existing idea of the mystical and supernatural lineage of the Malay sultanates.

¹⁵² G.L. Koster and Hendrik M.J. Maier, 'A Medicine of Sweetmeats: On the Power of Malay Narrative', *Bijdragen Tot De Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde*, 141 (1985), 441-461 (p. 444).

¹⁵³ Raja Hassan Raja Noor, 'Pola-pola Historiografi Tradisional dalam Pensejarahan Melayu', *Jebat*, 2 (1973), 16-24 (p. 21).

This dynamic feature of Malay culture was also discussed by Mohd. Taib Osman earlier but unlike his awareness of the society's already sophisticated and complex worldview as contained within its oral and literary traditions, Skeat and many after him discovered historical texts that do not fit their presuppositions. Just like the person who found the story of the mountain as a sacred dwelling site for departed souls irrational and farfetched, their reaction mirrors the initial observations made by the first colonial officers who descended on Malaya and discovered a culture that was vastly different from his own. In his preface to *Malay Magic*, Walter William Skeat notes:

Just as in the language of the Malays [...], so in their folklore one finds, Hindu, Buddhist, and Muhammadan ideas overlying a mass of apparently original Malay notions.¹⁵⁴

Animism, a word used to define this worldview, was first used in research by the anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor in 1871 when he proposed that animist thought is the beginning stage of human civilisation and its progression of religion.¹⁵⁵ This definition has repeatedly been criticised for their naive and distinctively Comtean approach and highlights once again the consequent biasness of western scholars when in contact with a community whose cultural practices stood starkly in contrast with their own. However, as pointed by Mazzocchi, the local knowledge is far from static and shows a strong inclination to adapt and assimilate existing values with new ones as the stories are transmitted from one generation to another.

There is general acceptance that the tradition of storytelling and the passing down of communal wisdom affirms how "the presence of disparate elements in Malay folk belief is therefore a historical phenomenon mirroring the socio-cultural history of the people."¹⁵⁶ This communal importance is ascribed to not only by the indigenous communities but also by Malay society,

¹⁵⁴ Walter William Skeat, *Malay Magic: being an introduction to the folklore and popular religion of the Malay peninsula* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1900), preface.

¹⁵⁵ James McClenon, 'Tylor, Edward B(urnett)', in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society* <<http://hrr.hartsem.edu/ency/Tylor.htm>> [accessed 6 February 2015]

¹⁵⁶ Osman, p. 133.

beliefs that are associated with magic and shamanism, spirits and the essential matter or soul (*semangat*) that exists in all living and non-living things.¹⁵⁷ Thus, it is not uncommon to hear stories of that teach people how to avoid upsetting the spirits that dwell in places of nature or the popularity of bomoh (shamans) and pawang (healers) whose healing practices fuse animist chants with Quranic verses. These influences, frequently contested by conservative Malays as contradictory to the mainstream practice of Islam, continue to be practiced by most of the country's Malay population either openly or discreetly.

Additionally, scholars have highlighted representations of a plural identity that seamlessly assimilates differing worldviews as contained in Malay folklores that are then transcribed into the written form. For example, despite Islam's strict proscription against material representations of God or aniconism, the bulk of Malay-Islamic manuscripts show characteristics that fit the meaning of the term 'palimpsest' i.e. objects where an earlier text has been replaced with another. For instance, *Hikayat Seri Rama*, adapted from the *Ramayana* epic, was gradually appropriated for a Muslim audience and now tells the story of how an oath mediated by the prophet Adam was broken by the Muslim king Rawana and the Muslim God.¹⁵⁸ Others found their ways into dances and songs as observed in the *Mak Yong* dance-theatre oral tradition. Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, the country's foremost scholar of traditional Southeast Asian theatre, pointed out how the *mengadap rebab song* sequence, through the characters of *Pak Yong*, *Dewa Muda* and *Dewa Pechil*, makes multiple references to a godly entity.¹⁵⁹

But according to Syed Othman, the final category or the verbal art of storytelling has always belonged to those outside of the palace courts. These were the ones who remained dependent on formal performances of literary works including *hikayat* and *sha'ir* that were all disseminated through the

¹⁵⁷ 'Animism', in *New World Encyclopedia*
<<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Animism>> [accessed 6 February 2015]

¹⁵⁸ William Van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film: Border Crossings and National Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002), p. 55.

¹⁵⁹ Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, 'The Mak Yong Dance Theatre as Spiritual Heritage: Some Insights', *Journal of Archaeology and Fine Arts in Southeast Asia*, 1 (2017), 1-9 (p. 6).

medium of performance. Until advancement in printing technology allowed easier access to written literature a few centuries later, the tradition of oral storytelling remained their primary source of information and entertainment, and a reason to get together.¹⁶⁰ A study of local folklore then necessitates the acknowledgement of the importance of storytelling and by default, the integral role of the storyteller.

Oral tradition is relevant to our exploration of spoken word poetry as a form of storytelling as it continues its emphasis on the interplay of text, narrative and performance in meaning making. This knowledge suggests that stories are a natural tool used by humans to aid in their self-conceptualisation or formation of identity, and provides the opportunity to examine the basic assumptions that exist concerning the way a text is regarded in countries such as Malaysia, where its plural identities offer significantly rich and varied resources of oral and literary traditions for poets and audience/readers alike.

The past several decades has seen a steady increase in scholarly interest in the study of folklore and a similar trend could be observed in the study of Malay oral traditions amongst local researchers. Unlike western preoccupations with documentations and factual writing, the Malay folklorist approaches the text as artifices from his past, one that is an indistinguishable collection of facts and fiction. There is neither hesitance nor issue to gripe with as they came from an oral/aural society where the idea of truth is dynamic and subjective; time has proven that there is wisdom in these stories. Oral tradition was regarded as an equally important source of information on the Malay worldview with the writings in *jawi* that described myths and legends in accordance with the bloodline of Malay rulers. Myths, legends and communal stories such as these are more than just past times but repositories of ancient wisdom concerning one's culture, and the responsibility to upkeep this knowledge lies in the mysterious figure referred to as the storyteller.

A study of these surviving stories offers the possibilities of revealing more about the community it represents and perhaps be a counterpoint to current conceptions that arose from the ethnocentric politics of its written

¹⁶⁰ Sweeney, p.3.

literature. It also suggests that perhaps, unlike the mainstream concerns concerning the accessibility of these oral traditions, there is indeed an archive of local knowledge one can all refer to. This body of stories functions as means to teach and describe the one's worldview or 'the means, by which knowledge is reproduced, preserved and conveyed from generation to generation'.¹⁶¹ This is further supplemented by a study conducted by Syed Othman, where he provides a chronological perspective that may shed light on influences that have directly or indirectly contributed to the tradition of oral storytelling in Malay, and by default, Malaysian society.¹⁶² According to him, the presence of syncretic beliefs can be traced back to pre-religious Malays' dependency on their natural surroundings, from which stories were created based on their observations of nature. Taib's research concurs:

The Malays have been Muslims for at least five hundred years, but their beliefs and rituals do not preclude elements which are incompatible with the strict tenets of Islam. Side by side with official Islamic beliefs and practices, we find a hybrid body of notions and rituals composed of three principal elements: animistic retentions from the Old Indonesian civilization, traces from the Hindu period of Malay history, and popular Islamic practices which stand outside the strict dogmas of the religion.¹⁶³

Taib Osman's statement is an important one as it suggests that Malay society is not opposed to assimilating other cultures and beliefs that resonate with their own and their folklore are evident of this openness. This is further shown in another important study, where Syed Othman provides a

¹⁶¹ 'First Nations Studies Program', *Indigenous Foundations*
<http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/oral_traditions/> [accessed 2 February 2015]

¹⁶² Syed Othman Syed Omar, 'Konsep Bercerita dalam Masyarakat Melayu dan Hubungannya dengan Struktur', *Sari: Jurnal Institut Bahasa, Kesusasteraan dan Kebudayaan Melayu*, 2 (1984), 107-123 (p.283).

¹⁶³ Mohd. Taib Osman, *Malay Folks Beliefs: An Integration of Disparate Elements*, cited in Buerah Tunggak and Hussin Salamon, 'Mengembalikan Kegemilangan Tamadun Melayu-Islam Menerusi Pemupukan Budaya', *Sari: International Journal of the World and Civilisation*, 29(2011), 123-148 (p.133).

chronological perspective that may shed light into primitive influences that have directly or indirectly contributed to the culture of storytelling in the Malay community.¹⁶⁴ According to him, these syncretic beliefs can be traced back to pre-religious Malays' dependency on their natural surroundings, from which stories were created based on their observations of nature. For this researcher, however, the main challenge clearly lies in overcoming the existing barriers formed by a national literary discourse that insists on differences rather than similarities; one that the thesis contends shares an uncanny similarity: its roots in the Comtean-approach to meaning making.

Another example that supports our understanding of the separation of the oral from the literary is the introduction of the western idea of the canon, the concept of a model in which one refers to for a body of rules and standards was made possible only after the archiving of written works. According to Noriah Taslim, there was already a strong awareness among its Malay authors of 'a hierarchical system with layers of literary work whose priority was determined by its distance from the centre or "canon"'.¹⁶⁵ However, it was the colonial scholar Koster who introduced the concept of *Idea of the Book* as an authoritative criterion of judgment. Here, he suggests that the canon that bears the highest and most suitable standards of literary values are the Qur'an, the Book of the Kerajaan Order and the Hadeeth (Islamic traditions).

Through this list of references, any works of literature can be analysed and gauged in terms of its narratorial voice, structure and rules, as well as its quality. Based on his system of categorisation, Koster first divided the body of literary texts based on the demands of its society which ranges between what is considered profitable or beneficial and what is deemed as soothing or pleasing. For a text to be deemed beneficial, Koster posits that its main motivation should be directed towards religious, political and social order of the state and the Malay society whereas texts that are used as means of entertainment through its usage of rhetoric, play of language and the

¹⁶⁴ Syed Othman Syed Omar, 'Konsep Ber cerita dalam Masyarakat Melayu dan Hubungannya dengan Struktur', *Sari: Jurnal Institut Bahasa, Kesusasteraan dan Kebudayaan Melayu*, 2 (1984), 107-123 (p.283).

¹⁶⁵ Noriah Taslim, 'From Ethnocentrism to Eurocentrism: The Position of Abdullah's Discourse on the Malays', *Malay Literature*, 20 (2007), 20-33 (p. 22).

fantastic. The next step is its narrative quality. Here, the primary distinction between narrative and non-narrative texts can be found in its use of temporality and causal relationships¹⁶⁶ similar to what we now refer to as plot or a sequence of interrelated events as presented in a work. The table below offers a summary of the classification of written works into four classes:

	Profitable	Soothing
Non-Narrative	The Melaka Digests <i>Undang-undang Melaka</i>	The Syair of the Wanderer <i>Syair Dagang</i>
Narrative	The Malay Annals <i>Sejarah Melayu</i>	The Story of Raja Muda <i>Hikayat Raja Muda</i>

Table 5. Categorisation of Malay Literature.¹⁶⁷

Equally important to this thesis is the establishment of two primary narrative roles based on this taxonomy. Expanding on Koster's model, two narratorial roles in the Malay literary field were then classified as either a *dagang* (trader) or a *dalang* (puppeteer). Each role represents and reflects the qualities of the earlier categories of the profitable and the soothing texts. Narrators who present profitable texts are labelled as *dagang* while those whose primary role is to soothe the listeners are known as *dalang*. These two roles will be discussed later in relation to the role of the *penglipurlara*. As cited by Norazimah Zakaria in her study on the same subject, Koster explains:

The two narratorial roles of *dalang* and *dagang* dramatize the two powers which Malay reception could ascribe to the text in different degrees and in different mixtures, the capacity to soothe the weary heart (*menghiburkan*, *melipurkan*) and the

¹⁶⁶ Koster and Maier, pp. 444-46.

¹⁶⁷ Koster and Maier. p.446.

capacity to edify (memberi faedah, memberi manfaat). from the Islamic point of view, the *dalang* is the protagonist of pleasure and soothing, seductive beauty, the *dagang* that of edification. The *dalang* is a figure who takes a certain pleasure in his own creative powers, he stands on the side of forgetfulness through emotional catharsis.¹⁶⁸

Koster concludes that the voice of the *dagang* can be described as one that teaches and enlightens through his work, while the *dalang*'s voice is characterised by its entertaining quality as narrated through the medium of stories. He uses the example of *Syair Ken Tambuhan*, inspired by one of the Panji stories and that were popular in the Malay world. Narrated by a *dalang*, the stories use formulaic lines and elaborate expressions used to impart the audience's sympathy for the protagonist.¹⁶⁹ Scholars like Mustafa Mohd Isa and Mohd Luthfi Abdul Rahman, in their research on the *penglipurlara*, have also categorised *Awang Batil* as a *dalang* based on his primary function as an entertainer and his light-hearted stories.¹⁷⁰ While Koster was careful to note that either one of the two narratorial roles may feature characteristics that belonged to the other, he also appears not only critical of the *dalang* within the Malay literary traditions but also rationalises the marginalised position of the oral storyteller in the literary field:

[...] the puppeteer is often associated with films, thus he deals with shadows, illusions and fantasies; he stands besides forgetfulness and neglect. The puppeteer provides a literary world which is beautiful; one which stimulates the senses and emotions of the audience until those who long for something would long no more. This happens in a cathartic way; an emotional-draining experience which soothes one. Thus, in

¹⁶⁸ Zakaria, p. 261.

¹⁶⁹ Koster and Maier, p. 453.

¹⁷⁰ Mohd Luthfi, p. 54.

the Malay literary sphere, the puppeteer is on the peripheral.¹⁷¹

It should be noted that there has been major criticism of Koster's research findings. A study conducted by Rahimah Hamdan and Arbaie Sujud defended the authors of Panji Literature whom were used as an example of a *dalang*. Described by Koster as arrogant and individualistic writers whose works utilised sex and lust to lure the audience in without the intention of benefiting the society, Rahimah and Arbaie argued that such statement only proves Koster's (and his contemporaries) lack of knowledge on the writing conventions in Malay literature. They explain that 'he was still overshadowed by the Western bias that was dominant within him. It is inappropriate to label the writers of the Panji Literature as "*dalangs*" ... because evidently, he did not try to understand the mind of the Malays themselves'.¹⁷² This lack of understanding could be linked to a similar treatment on role of authors as the authority figure in their texts. Donald Davie's essay is reminiscent of Koster's categorisation of writers when he criticises the writers of confessional poetry as the reason behind the shift in the dynamics of sincerity in literature:

And ever since, confessional poems have been the order of the day, with the predictable consequences-the poem has lost all its hard-won autonomy, its independence in its own right, and has once again become merely the vehicle by which the writer acts before his public the agony or the discomfort ... of being a writer, or of being alive in the twentieth century.¹⁷³

Here, he is not equating confessional poetry with bad poetry, per say, but rather suggests that there is a fine line between sincerity and egotism.

¹⁷¹ Taslim, p. 23.

¹⁷² Rahimah Hamdan and Arbaie Sujud, "Arrogant and Seductive" Disclaiming the Opinion of G.L.Koster with Regards to the Authors of Traditional Malay Literature', *Asian Journal of Humanities and Social Studies*, 3 (2015), 548-555 (p. 553).

¹⁷³ Donald Davie, 'Sincerity and Poetry', *The Michigan Quarterly Review*, 5 (1966), 3-8, (p. 5).

Representing opposing sides of this line are two types of confessional poets. Poets who confess to virtue and whose works are distinctively didactic are referred to as the Wordsworthians while those whose works represent confessions and the promotions of vice are called the Baudelaireans. Not surprisingly, he used Ginsberg as an example of a Baudelairean poet due to the writer's use of profanity, controversial subject matters and more importantly, the almost mythical air or 'genius' associated with the poet rather than the poems that he has produced. A year after Davie's essay and less than a century after the British colonised Malaya, Ronald Barthes also lamented on the western preoccupation with authorship in his iconic work "The Death of the Author":

The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the 'human person'.¹⁷⁴

He would continue his criticism on the western world's blind adherence to the author before suggesting a revolutionary idea in which he proposes that the critic and the reader must allow the death of the author in order to provide writing the future it deserves.¹⁷⁵ While this idea would continue to influence the development of contemporary western literary theory and criticism in general, it proves to be ironic when applied within the context of Malay oral tradition considering that prior to the Islamic influenced Malay literary traditions, literature per say is understood as ones that were designed for an audience.

As Muhammad Haji Salleh notes in his work *The Mind of the Malay Author*, Malay society has produced what could be described as 'mystery-shrouded and often enigmatic Malay authors'.¹⁷⁶ Maier took one step further

¹⁷⁴ Barthes, p. 143.

¹⁷⁵ Barthes, p. 148.

¹⁷⁶ Muhammad Haji Salleh, *Yang Empunya Cerita: the Mind of the Malay Author* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1991), p. 67.

when he claims that there is no substantial information on traditional Malay writers, authors, compilers and scribes.¹⁷⁷ This absence of authors is expected in an oral/aural society like the Malays where the transmission of knowledge is conducted in a communal setting. Not unlike the storyteller or the griot, the writer's main responsibility is to tell stories that never belonged to him but to his Sultans and people. He is simply a living archive of ancient stories aimed to stimulate and remind his audience who they are. Even the author of the most important text in Malay history i.e. *Sejarah Melayu* or the *Malay Annals* remains debated up until now despite being referred to as the only available descriptions of the 15th – 16th century Malay sultanate and its people.

Koster categorised the *Malay Annals* as a predominantly profitable narrative that presents not only the history of the Melaka sultanate but the relationship between the ruler and his personages.¹⁷⁸ Here, the author or at least the compiler of the book is Tun Seri Lanang but other researchers have suggested the possibilities that the author could neither be related to the Royal family nor identified as Malay as it was against the common practice of Malay society to draw attention to oneself. In response to the latter suggestions, Siti Hawa explained that Tun Sri Lanang was the author as he followed the practices of religious writings as followed by Hamzah Fansuri, Nuruddin al-Raniri and others.¹⁷⁹ In the case of Raja Ali Haji, the author of the second most important Malay literary text *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, his identity was only made possible from his personal correspondence with Von de Wall.¹⁸⁰ Analysed and discussed by Maier, he noted how the author has the same responsibility as a penglipurlara in the society i.e. he or she is expected to deliver and protect the wisdom of the community.

Thus, it is his words and not personality that matters; the author's personal thoughts were put aside in favour of oral tradition. The varying opinions regarding the authors of Malay literary canons suggest a distinctive perspective on literature where the message is more important than the

¹⁷⁷ Hendrik M. J. Maier, 'Raja Ali Haji dan Hang Tuah: Arloji dan Mufassar', *International Journal of Malay World and Civilisation*. 19 (2001), 159-178 (p. 160).

¹⁷⁸ Koster and Maier, p. 448.

¹⁷⁹ Siti Hawa Salleh, *Malay Literature of the 19th Century* (Kuala Lumpur: Institut Terjemahan Negara Malaysia, 2010), p. 73.

¹⁸⁰ Maier, p. 177.

messenger. The same risk also applies in the study of spoken word poetry and highlights the importance of acknowledging the dynamics that come into play when a text is written for performance.

The Storyteller

The significance of Syed Othman's earlier discussed research is plenty and comes into play here. Not only did he position the penglipurlara in a bigger and sophisticated structure of Malay oral tradition, he outlined the storyteller's important features and emphasised the storyteller's responsibility to their community. By underlining the social and moral value of the storyteller, Syed Othman also highlights the major difference between the words of the penglipurlara and the scribe. What we do see when we read or hear the word 'storyteller? What images come to mind? Now replace the word with 'penglipurlara'. What do we see now?

While the word may conjure images of a traditional Malay storyteller, the term is much more inclusive that one might expect. The title was never officially adopted by these professional storytellers but more commonly referred to by the names of their stories' central protagonists instead.¹⁸¹ The word penglipurlara simply means the 'soother of woes', a direct reference to its role and function in the society they belong in. Thus, the Kelantanese storyteller is known as Tok Selampit after the name of his main protagonist Selampit, the storytellers in Perlis and Langkawi are commonly known as Awang Batil or Awang Belanga while Tok Jubang is the name given to the Kedah teller whose stories revolve around the character Jubang Linggang. Exceptions can be observed in certain states like Pahang, where their storytellers are simply known as ahli cherita or storyteller. One of the earliest documented evidence of the traditional storyteller can be found in W.E. Maxwell's study of Malay folklore, published in 1886:

¹⁸¹ Amin Sweeney, 'Professional Malay story-telling', *Journal of Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 46 (1973), 1-9 (p. 6).

Sitting in the *balei* of a *raja* or chief, or in the veranda of a private house, when the sun has gone down and the evening meal is over, the storyteller, very likely a man who can neither read nor write, will commence one of the romances of his repertoire, intoning the words in monotonous chant as if he were reading aloud from a book. [...] There is no hesitation or failure of memory on the part of the bait; he has been at it from his youth up, and has inherited his romances from his father and ancestors, who told them in days gone by to the forefathers of his present audience. A small reward, a hearty welcome, and a good meal await the Malay rhapsodist wherever he goes, and he wanders among Malay villagers as Homer did among the Greek Cities.¹⁸²

In his observation, we note the following: the storyteller is likened to Homer, the Greek epic poet; he is a professional storyteller, exchanging stories with payment; he does not take the role of an author but rather a caretaker or guardian of stories; and he has access to a repertoire of stories received via verbatim utterances from older storytellers. But the most important part in the quotation, however, was when the storyteller was described as chanting words monotonously “as if reading aloud from a book”. In the 19th century, the storyteller and the main composition of his audience were largely illiterate and did not share the same point of reference as the observer. How was it possible to ‘read’ from a book? This was a flawed observation, an erroneous misconception made by Maxwell and many of his counterparts due to a general failure to situate their western worldview in an environment that was closer to a primary oral culture.

Although Koster and Maier highlighted in their research the role of written narratives in the development and confirmation of the Malay identity as well as the cohesiveness of Malay life and society, it does not suggest that

¹⁸² Mohd Sharif Mohd Saad, ‘History, dreams and reality: storytelling programs in Malaysia’, *Dreams and dynamics: selected papers from the annual conference of the international association of school librarianship*, (Adelaide, 1993) 40-50.

these written works were completely cut off from its oral tradition. In fact, the written works produced before the arrival of the Dutch and British powers showed distinctive oral features:

There were manuscripts. And the same rhetorical weapons that stood the Malay in good stead in verbal exchanges were also required in written documents, for instance, in exchanges of letters. These, too, had to be witty and elegant. Their effect was all the greater if they lent themselves to being read out aloud in a sweet voice, pleasing to the ruler and to the courtly audience. The formal features of most Malay manuscripts bespeak the fact that they served mainly as a prop to memory and were not meant to be read silently, but were supposed to be read aloud or sung to a listening audience.¹⁸³

As Muhammad Haji Salleh points out, the probability of its survival is greater for oral stories as they tend to have a life of their own, alongside the print and the cyber forms of the narrative.¹⁸⁴ Amin Sweeney, for example, points out that such adaptation of tales from an oral to a literary medium was practiced long before the efforts of the British, apparent from the existence of literary works such as *Hikayat Pelanduk Jenaka* and a variety of *wayang* tales that are clearly oral in origin.¹⁸⁵ This traditional knowledge, through the figure of the storyteller, refers to the long and rich history of folklore, a body of stories contained within the country's oral tradition, such as the one illustrated in the significance of Mount Kinabalu as a sacred site.

It was this realisation that Amin Sweeney came to in his research: all the available transcriptions of oral performances from 19th century Malaya have neglected the fact that the works were performed, not read. In an article published in JMBRAS, he highlights the negative effects of transcribing oral stories without considering their inherent oral nature:

¹⁸³ Koster and Maier. p.444.

¹⁸⁴ Salleh, p. 155.

¹⁸⁵ Sweeney, p.2.

The texts of 'folk literature' published during the last ninety odd years have all been put into literary Malay and are, in varying degrees, to be regarded more as the work of the scribe than of the teller. [...] The screen interposed between the teller and ourselves by the interpretation and remoulding of a third party, the writer, has resulted in our losing sight of the oral nature of oral literature and, although every member of Malay society is the bearer of variety of oral tradition, he fails to recognize it as such.¹⁸⁶

There is also the missing element of the audience in these transcriptions, the relationship between the performer and the listener. He elaborates on this oral nature through the nuances and performative styles that differ from one state to another, complementing the social characteristics of each storyteller's geographical location. Thus, Awang Batil from Perlis uses chanting, rhythmic speeches as well as the use of a *batil* or brass pot while the Kelantanese Tok Selampit uses singing, chanting, rhythmic speeches while playing the rebab or bowed spiked fiddle; vital details that were absent in the process of documentation and transcription of stories that would later on be referred to as oral literature.

The penglipurlara is an example of such a storyteller, whose stories are didactic in nature, namely possessing the dual responsibility of both maintaining social norms and providing entertainment to the audience.¹⁸⁷ Scholars such as Roslina Abu Bakar and Arba'ie Sujud agree that the popularity of these storytellers stemmed from their audience's appreciation and understanding that the stories contain not only entertaining plots but also a thought and belief system, lifestyle and social culture that mirror the society's worldview.¹⁸⁸ It can also be found in one of Skeat's many observations where he noted how the Sultan of Kedah even had an official storyteller in his palace, whose responsibility was to narrate stories of their

¹⁸⁶ Sweeney, p. 1.

¹⁸⁷ Abdul Halim Ali, 'Konsep Keindahan dalam Kesusasteraan Melayu Tradisional', *Pendeta*, 2 (2011), 99-117 (p. 101).

¹⁸⁸ Roslina Abu Bakar and Arba'ie Sujud, 'World-View Dan Sistem Politik Masyarakat Melayu : Penelitian Terhadap Cerita Rakyat Melayu', *Pendeta*, 4 (2013), 142-161 (p. 145).

history and heritage.¹⁸⁹ The penglipurlara's stories have, for many centuries, faithfully retained the Malays' unique worldview: a complex amalgamation of animistic, Javanese and Islamic influences where spirits exist, and every living and non-living thing possesses its own *semangat* or spiritual essence. Encapsulated within these stories are moral lessons and social values important to the local psyche, disseminated through the medium of performance as necessitated by its oral/aural roots.

The Psychodynamics of Orality in the Penglipurlara Tradition

Walter Ong argues that the technology of mass media and the written word, although they are partly to be blamed in the slow demise of the wise storyteller/sage, are not the only explanation behind the dwindling visibility of traditional storytellers. In an environment that has placed much importance on the archiving of folklore and separated the storyteller from it, Ong argues that it is inevitable that their value and relevance will decrease in time.

However, various forms of oral performances have also begun to emerge in different communities in the later part of the 20th century; a phenomenon that Walter Ong associates with the coming of a second orality in literate societies. Using Ong's list of psychodynamic features in *Orality and Literacy*,¹⁹⁰ an overview of these traits will be discussed to show the extent of oral residue observed in the general practice of the penglipurlara.

1. Additive rather than subordinate

The first feature refers to a narrative structure that features repetitive use of parataxis or the act of stringing thoughts or story segments together by using repetitive words such as 'and' and 'so' instead of complex grammatical rules observed in written sentences. Previous studies on the penglipurlara have shown that a single performance could

¹⁸⁹ William Walter Skeat, 'The Cambridge University Expedition to The North-Eastern States and to Upper Perak, 1899-1900', *JMBRAS*, 26 (1953), p. 126.

¹⁹⁰ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 33-56.

run from a duration of several hours until seven nights in length, necessitating the storyteller to find creative ways to lengthen or shorten their stories. Unlike writing and its dependence on clear grammatical rules and forms, the storyteller is unconfined and unperturbed by these concerns in his utterances.

2. Aggregative rather than analytic

Used mainly to aid memorisation, a range of formulas and mnemonic tools that include repetitions, alliteration and assonances, as well as formulaic phrasings and expressions¹⁹¹ can be found not only in the transcribed stories of the penglipurlara but is still observed now. In Malay tradition, there is an extensive list of proverbs or *peribahasa* that is “a conclusion which is compactly and pithily stated, sometimes in the form of a quatrain, sometimes consisting only of two sentences and some even being drawn in a very short sentence.”¹⁹² Examples of these formulaic phrasings include ‘air yang dicincang tidak akan putus’ (literal: water can never be broken), which is similar to the English proverb, ‘blood is thicker than water’.

Another type of popular formulaic expression is the traditional fixed poetic form known as the pantun, a sophisticated rhyming quatrain that follows a strict formula of end rhymes (ABAB) and uses between eight to twelve syllables in each line. In the transcribed performance of *Hikayat Malim Deman* as narrated by the late Perak penglipurlara Pawang Ana, we can see two pantun quatrains:

Kerikal gulai maman,
Digulai dengan daun campa;
Mengapa orang muda di laman,
Silakan naik kita berjumpa.

¹⁹¹ Ong, p. 39.

¹⁹² Lim Kim-Hui, ‘How Malay proverbs encode and evaluate emotion? A paremiological analysis’, *Sari International Journal of the Malay World and Civilization*, 28 (2010), 57-81 (p. 58).

Bunga angsana di kebun nenek,
 Dahannya rendang pohonnya rampak;
 Bagaimana kami nak naik,
 Tuan rumah belum lagi nampak.¹⁹³

In the *pantun* above, the penglipurlara narrates a short dialogue between the speaker of the first quatrain and the second, reminding his audience to enter someone's house only with permission. Other observations were also made concerning the use of padding devices or repetition of stock descriptions, filler lines as well as synonyms and parallelism. Such deployment of devices allowed possibilities for the storyteller to take in and manage the flow between the story segments as well as enable them to control the audience's attention no matter how disruptive the background noise may be during these sessions.

3. Redundant or 'copious'

Similar to the rhetorical term *copia* or the heavy use of epithets and descriptive phrases, Ong describes how storytellers in oral cultures would utilise it for two possible reasons. The first is as a means to create a multisensory image, such as the lines observed in the same penglipurlara performance below, in which all nine lines feature the use of similar words to describe the weather:

Hari Ahad bertimpa Isnin
 Dua belas hari bulan,
 Dua belas tapak bayang-bayang,
 Menderau-derau hujan panas,
 Sabung-menyabung kilat,
 Panah-memanah halilintar,
 Berbunyi sekalian bunyi-bunyian.
 Maka permaisuri pun berputeralah seorang

¹⁹³ Mohd Saad, p. 41.

Laki-laki...^{194,180}

Repetitions of images, words and phrases encourage the listeners to visualise the story in their minds as clearly as possible, a trait of the spoken word that allows the mind to naturally take ideas as a whole compared to the isolating process of the written word'.¹⁹⁵ The second function is to sustain the flow of one's narrative utterances because "hesitation is always disabling. Hence it is better to repeat something, artfully if possible, rather than simply to stop speaking, while fishing for the next idea."¹⁹⁶ In another example, Koster and Maier provided an excerpt from *Syair Ken Tambuhan*:

When Ken Tambuhan had finished dressing, she wore a silken robe that was purple as the sky at sunset. Around her breast she had wrapped a saffron-coloured cloth of Indian satin, on which patterns had been drawn in gold paint. The sash she was wearing was a Malay cloth. Her ear-studs were shaped like palm-leaves and were the work of slaves. To buy such priceless beauty no treasure could suffice; all who beheld it felt wistful. On both arms she wore two *kana*-bracelets inlaid with red gems. The colour of her lips was a fiery red and her mouth was like the bursting pomegranate [...]¹⁹⁷

Oral storytellers are obligated to repeat words and phrases to ensure that the audience is kept in sync with the stories told. Such process, Ong explains, reflects one's natural thought and speech process unlike how our minds now work in linearity after the introduction of

¹⁹⁴ Translation is my own: Sunday falls after Monday / Twelfth day of the month / Twelve shadowy prints / Summer rain gushes forth / The lightning hits over and over again / The lightning hits over and over again / All that can make sounds, make sounds / And so the queen gives birth to a son / A boy ...

¹⁹⁵ p. 52.

¹⁹⁶ p. 40.

¹⁹⁷ Koster and Maier, pp. 454-55.

literacy.¹⁹⁸ As the example above shows, more emphasis is given to the princess' physical features so as to assist in the listeners' imagining of the character.

4. Conservative or traditionalist

While writing allows one to speculate, theorise and acquire new data without the fear of forgetting them, oral culture shows a conservative mind that inhibits experimentation and restraint in selecting thoughts for preservation. The complexities involved in learning by memorisation and mastering performance were given to those viewed as sages, spiritual teachers and storytellers.

This does not imply that the storytellers like the Malay storyteller are averse to change. Instances of stories being slightly modified to suit their audience's expectations have been noted by scholars such as Amin Sweeney. The penglipurlara, through observation and repeated recordings, showed instances of introducing new elements such as a song or a new instrument or reshuffling the old stories in their performances. Sweeney included examples of the late Ismail bin Hassan, whose performances could be done either with or without accompaniment. If requested, he would also include the playing of gendang Keling along with a four-man orchestra.¹⁹⁹ However, the bulk of the stories' themes and characters have always remained unchanged.

5. Close to the human lifeworld

This is observed in most penglipurlara stories: the use of a simple narrative plot and characters that closely refer to the world they live in. Hence animals are used as characters, dialogues are embedded with instructions for specific acts, and themes revolve around the familiar and the pragmatic; away from the symbolic and the abstract more commonly used in written poetry and novels today.

6. Agonistically toned

¹⁹⁸ Ong, p. 39.

¹⁹⁹ Sweeney, p. 3.

According to Ong, this feature has been central to the development of western culture particularly in the art of rhetoric observed in the dialectic of Socrates and Plato.²⁰⁰ In Malay culture, however, the lack of name calling (vilification or praises) and descriptions of aggressive acts in the stories suggest a culture that avoids confrontations. However, this characteristic did manifest in the form of direct and indirect verbal battles, as documented by Koster and Maier below:

People of all walks of life would try to outdo each other. For these verbal battles they needed a large variety of weapons. [...] At village meetings speakers needed a knowledge of proverbs and rhymed sayings in order to be able to persuade their opponents in deliberation. Religious teachers, too, would not shun the devices of rhetorics and would warn their flock about the Day of Judgement in sweet-sounding prose and memorable verse.²⁰¹

7. Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced
As pointed out by Havelock, learning in an oral culture means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known learning.²⁰² This means that any knowledge acquired and disseminated in this society is done for the collective communal 'soul'. In an interview conducted by the local newspaper *Berita Harian*, the *penglipurlara* Awang Batil or Romli Mahmud explained how the name Awang does not refer specifically to a unique individual but refers to the name of a famous Malay warrior in the olden days: a symbol of the heroic Malay. The art of Awang Batil, he added, is more than just for entertainment but also raises the dignity of Malay culture.²⁰³ The *penglipurlara* is aware of their

²⁰⁰ p. 45.

²⁰¹ Koster and Maier, p. 444.

²⁰² Havelock, 1963, pp. 145-46

²⁰³ Latifah, *Awang Batil julang keperwiraan Melayu*, online newspaper, *Berita Harian*, 26 August 2015, <<https://www.bharian.com.my/node/77307>> [accessed 2 July 2015]

responsibility to safeguard the stories and thus, speaks through the character they are named after.

8. Homeostatic

Referring to the act of discarding memories that are no longer useful, the choice of words (and dialect) in an oral performance often reflects the speech pattern and features of its primary audience. In the context of a performance however, one would observe instances of 'distortions of grammar and pronunciation, special words and phrases, and other devices used to produce a "heightened" form of the local dialect'.²⁰⁴ While still reflective of the local dialect, they are unique and functional to the conventions of their genre. Additionally, it refers to few semantic discrepancies of the words used in the story. The meaning here is based on how the word is used in real-life situations.

9. Situational rather than abstract

Last but not least, oral cultures acquire context based on their surroundings and do not engage with abstractions such as literate societies do. There is no decontextualisation of the self or self-analysis. For the storyteller, stories function as 'models of behaviour according to the Malay way of life'²⁰⁵ and concerned with situations that familiar and possible. The use of stock characters is plenty and animal characters are anthromorphosised in detail. This also explains why abstractions such as the afterlife do not come into place as they deal with concerns that oral culture could not observe and derive from their surroundings.

From what we have uncovered in the first documented description of the penglipurlara's performance as well as local folklorists, there are several important details we can gather for the purpose of our discussion. First, a penglipurlara is a travelling storyteller who receives remuneration in

²⁰⁴ Sweeney, p.3.

²⁰⁵ Koster and Maier, p. 445.

exchange for telling stories. In his 1985 field research on the puppeteer or *dalang* storyteller in Kedah, Inon Shahrudin noted that the performers received a considerable fee between 9 to 11 ringgit per show compared to 2 ringgit they would have earned from a day of tapping rubber.²⁰⁶ The late penglipurlara from Johor, Ali Badron was inspired to become a storyteller at the age of 13 years old after seeing the respect and reverence given to storytellers such as Pak Arab back in the 1940s. He remembered how the invited penglipurlara was paid between 10 to 13 ringgit a night, served with roasted chicken at weddings, and personally picked up and sent back home regardless how long the journey took.²⁰⁷ Sweeney documented that the late Ismail bin Hassan, a Tok Selampit, was paid a substantial amount of 25 ringgit for a five-hour performance of Selampit or Si Suton stories, with or without accompaniment.²⁰⁸ Next, the penglipurlara is best known for his ability to reach into a vast collection of stories or folk romances, all committed to memory, that were passed down from one generation of storytellers to another.

In the case of Ali Badron, the penglipurlara from Johor, his education consisted of observing and listening to the storyteller for almost a year before he could perform on his own. Even then, his earlier years were spent harnessing his skills through the guidance of popular penglipurlara at that time i.e. Wak Donan, Man Budek, Dolah Jepun and Haji Dolah. A similar process is also seen in two penglipurlara from Kedah who performed the Wayang artform. Mohamad Noh bin Haji Mahmud went through years of practice himself until he could be called a professional performer while Hamzah bin Awang Ahmad acquired the knowledge from his father and other experienced storytellers for almost two decades before he became a fully qualified Dalang. This knowledge included performance and memorisation formulae as well as protective charms.

²⁰⁶ Inon Shahrudin Abdul Rahman, 'Two Dalangs: A Comparison of Style and Dialectics', *Sari: Jurnal Institut Bahasa, Kesusasteraan dan Kebudayaan Melayu*, 3 (1985), 49-73 (p. 53).

²⁰⁷ 'Perjuangan seni seorang penglipurlara', *Sinar*, 17 May 2012.
<<http://www.sinarharian.com.my/hiburan/perjuangan-seni-seorang-penglipurlara-1.48777>> [accessed 2 July 2015]

²⁰⁸ Sweeney, p.3.

Earlier research on the practice of the penglipurlara also showed ritualistic elements involving the process of transferring stories from one person to the other. The late Awang Batil from Perlis, Mahmud bin Wahid, described his learning process as one filled with rituals rooted in mysticism. In order to 'receive' the stories, one was required to prepare betel nuts, sintuk, tobacco cigarettes and incense. The student would begin learning the stories while playing the batil simultaneously once the teacher gestured him with a physical tap.²⁰⁹ The burning of incense appears to have a functional as well as spiritual role in the performance of a penglipurlara. Both the late Awang Batil and Tok Selampit used incense not only to aid in their memorisation or as inspiration for their stories but also as protection from any unwanted attention.²¹⁰ The evidence of ritualistic elements is expected considering the artform's roots in animistic beliefs and practices. They also show how the art of the penglipurlara requires more than the simple act of reading out as from a book but intricate performative skills that took its practitioners many years to master. The third feature concerns the structure and devices employed by the storyteller in their performance, the immediacy and temporality of storytelling gives a strong sense of responsibility to the words uttered. The body becomes a vehicle to deliver the truth, which is an element not to be found in print. This performative aspect of the penglipurlara will be explored and analysed further in the practices of Awang Batil, the penglipurlara from the state of Perlis whose line of professional storytellers reaches back to at least 300 years of oral tradition.

Awang Batil

How I see it, Awang Batil was killed by the
Bangsawan (classical Malay opera), the
Bangsawan was killed by the radio, the radio was

²⁰⁹ Mohamad Luthfi Abdul Rahman, 'Awang Batil dan Pura Taman: Suatu Perbandingan Tradisi Penglipur Lara Melayu dan Orang Asli', *Atikan: Jurnal Kajian Pendidikan*, 5 (2015), 49-64 (p. 51).

²¹⁰ Persembahan tradisi, 'Persembahan tradisi selampit', *Jurnal Warisan Indera Kayangan*, 3(1991).

killed by the television, the television was killed by the mounds of CDs and DVDs, then they were killed by the Internet.

Ramli bin Mahmud²¹¹

Based on historical documentations, this storyteller travels from village to another and performs his humorous and interactive stories in the vicinity of one's home during special occasions such as weddings. His stories are episodic, performed in a combination of rhythmic prose and verse, and characterised by the use of dialogue, chanting, masks and limited acting.²¹² Functioning at the backbone of the performance, the rhythmic sound of the brass bowl (*batil*) controls the flow of the stories that can last for several hours at a time.

The most famous Awang Batil was the late Mahmud bin Wahid, who was the subject of Amin Sweeney's research. His son, Ramli bin Mahmud, is now considered the last surviving Awang Batil. Ramli was named as heir by Mahmud when he was only 12 years of age but became a professional penglipurlara at the late age of 41 years old. Although he already had memorised the stories since young, most of them gradually taught to him by his father as bedtime stories while several others were learned from two other storytellers i.e. Tok Umar Gelombang and Tok Din, several factors contributed to his lack of performances. First, he believed that the quality of his performance needed much practice before he could call himself a penglipurlara and second, there was also an initial reluctance to perform due to the lack of public interest. Ramli only agreed to perform after he was

²¹¹ This was the answer given when asked for his opinion on the current status of Awang Batil in an interview conducted by. The original is "Pada saya Awang Batil 'dibunuh' oleh bangsawan, bangsawan dibunuh oleh radio, radio dibunuh oleh televisyen, televisyen dibunuh oleh lambakan CD dan DVD, CD dan DVD pula dibunuh oleh internet." Translation is my own.

²¹² Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, 'Awang Batil', in *One Hundred and One Things Malay*, (Singapore: Partridge, 2015).

persuaded by the writer Rejab FI and other cultural activists.²¹³ Since then, he has performed not only in Malaysia but also in Germany, Japan and Brazil.

In the performance of a penglipurlara, these stories are performed in rhythmic prose or verse with the accompaniment of musical instruments in front of an audience. Sweeney proceeded to classify the practice into three modes of expression:

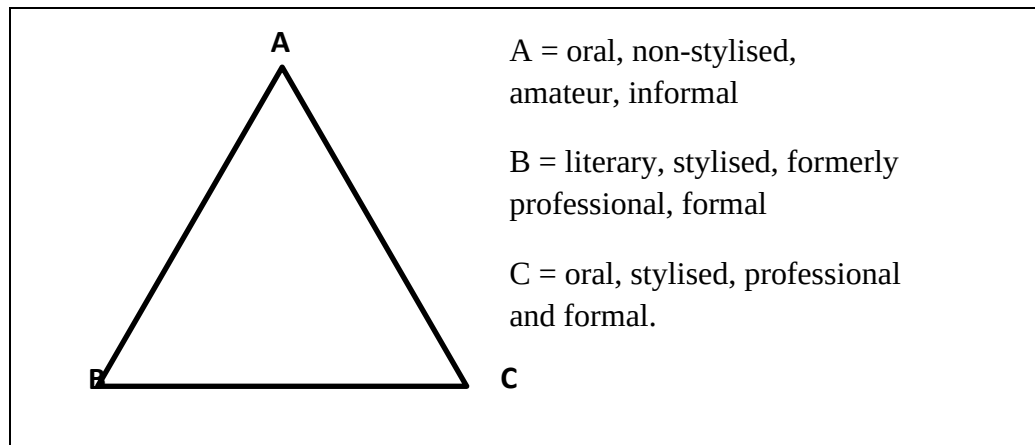


Table 6. Sweeney's Classification of the Penglipurlara Performance

It is important to note that almost any person can tell a story but the performance of a penglipurlara, as supported by Sweeney, is conducted in the oral, stylised, professional and formal expression. It is an artform that requires skills and experience not unlike other forms of specialised performance art. As pointed by Okpewho in his own research, the art or skills of telling a story involves two types of training i.e. by spending time with people with the skills in the art that would then teach you a basic level of competence or by undergoing a period of training under a professional in a specific form of storytelling.²¹⁴ In Sweeney's system of classification, there are four factors that are taken into consideration:

²¹³ Jimadie Shah Othman, 'Selamat tinggal', Awang Batil terakhir', *Malaysiakini*, 14 May 2017,

<<https://www.malaysiakini.com/hiburan/382161>> [accessed 2 July 2015]

²¹⁴ Isidore Okpewho, 'The World of African Storytelling', *FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and Arts*, (2009) ed. by Lena Wanggren and Ally Crockford.

i) Oral versus literary

Self-explanatory, 'oral' refers to narrative literature that are composed for performance while the term 'literary' refers to ones that are written for one's reading consumption.

ii) Stylised versus non-stylised

The term 'stylised' refers to a heightened use of language to express oneself that is different from one's way of communicating to others daily. Thus, how we speak to our friends and family members is categorised as a 'non-stylised' expression compared to how we would structure and present our thoughts when we are required to give a speech or find ourselves in a formal setting. Sweeney also notes that 'stylised form' should not be confined only to the use of a stylised language in isolation but rather treated as a series of strategies adopted to produce specific effects.²¹⁵ This is particularly important especially in the study of oral literature or narrative performance where musical accompaniment, singing and acting are fused together with the stories.

iii) Professional versus amateur

Considered as a heightened form of expression that requires experience, skills and discipline, a performance given by the 'professional' performer is paid by those who made the invitation.

iv) Formal versus informal.

Referring to the social context, these modes of narration are influenced by the circumstances the speakers find themselves in. Any penglipurlara performance can be regarded as formal because of the factors that surround the story delivery such as setting and the rituals that occur before and during the performance. The same stories can be casually retold or summarised by either the penglipurlara (to his

²¹⁵ Sweeney, p.3.

student or family member) or someone else in an informal occasion. The rule of thumb, as explained by Sweeney, is one's speech becomes more stylised when the reasons behind the narrative turn formal.

Structure

The stories of Awang Batil follow a narrative structure similar to the stories of other *penglipurlara*. In general, they can be divided into three parts: exposition, development and resolution. In the exposition, details are given and elaborated on the history of the main character or whatever that occurs prior to the main adventure. The second part contains the main conflict which drives the protagonist in his adventures. Finally, the resolution is what occurs after the main conflict is resolved, usually with a wedding scene or other variants of a happily ever after. Using the story of Awang Akar Larak²¹⁶ as example, one can see a similar structure being used. Following the same structure, the summary of the story below will be divided accordingly:

[EXPOSITION]

The story began with Awang wanting to hang himself with an *akar larak* (a type of climbing shrub) as he could no longer stand living in such a hard and poor life, a burden to his mother. Before he could do so, a mysterious old man appeared and advised him to abandon his plans. Based on the old man's advice and guidance, Awang soon became a *bomoh* (healer).

[DEVELOPMENT]

After successfully healing a list of people, the news of Awang the Healer spread throughout the kingdom and reached the knowledge of the ailing Sultan. He was instructed to heal the Sultan but his efforts were mocked by the people in the palace

²¹⁶ Mohd Syamril Akmar Chek Kassim, 'Penglipur Lara Awang Batil: Nilai, Fungsi dan Falsafah dalam Penyampaian (Cerita dan Lagu)', *Proceeding of Symposium of International Language & Knowledge* (2014), p. 4.

as an attempt to swindle the Sultan. Although he was hurt, Awang did not retaliate despite being looked down due to his poor background. When the Sultan was miraculously healed, Awang was appointed as his replacement and became so rich that he no longer wanted to die.

[RESOLUTION]

After building a place in the middle of the ocean and getting married, he passed away after the birth of his child.

Themes

With a repertoire of folk romances in the hundreds, these stories are characterised by stories of romantic adventures undergone by its protagonist (in this case, Awang Batil) in faraway lands. Based on myths and legends, the story of the namesake Awang for example, is the story of a man with the same name who was born without a father. His mother, Mek Siti Galing, became pregnant after accidentally drinking water from a puddle left by the footprint of a mythical white elephant. Ostracised by the community for being born out of wedlock, he went searching for his father in the jungle until he met the same white elephant. The animal led him into a cave and presented him the brass bowl. It was with this skill that the character Awang travelled from one village to another, entertaining those around him with comical and tragic stories of his life until he was finally accepted by all.²¹⁷ It is the persona of this character that is adopted by Ramli in his performances. Examples of other stories in Ramli's repertoire include Awang Biawak, Awang Denoi, Raja Darah Putih, Raja Sultan Dewa atau Awang Ada Duit Semua Jadi and Si Tokong Boge atau Batu Belah.

A common element that can be found in all of the stories is the presence of conflicts relatable to his audience. These conflicts can be either between individuals from the same class or those from different classes. The more

²¹⁷ Aniza Khalid, *Biodata Awang Batil*, online document, *DocSlide*, 26 October 2015, <<https://dokumen.tips/documents/biodata-awang-batil.html>> [accessed 2 July 2015]

popular conflict appears to be of that between the commoners and members of the royalty. The story Awang Akar Larak provides an example of such conflict that drives the story told by the penglipurlara. The hero Awang's intention of wanting to cure the Sultan's sickness with his magical healing gift was received as an attempt to trick the Sultan. This was of course untrue but because Awang is from a poor family, he was regarded as a thief and unworthy of trust. True to the storyteller's role of soothing one's woes, the story ends on a happy note when Awang proved the Sultan wrong.

Considered as one of his more popular stories, it is in line with the concept of a didactic storyteller. Regardless of how comical, tragic and fantastic the stories can be, there remains a strong element of morality in them.²¹⁸ For this story, how poor a person is does not reflect his or her level of trustworthiness. The tension between the upper and lower class is also treated albeit in a lighthearted and entertaining way, which allows such stories to be told with ease.

Performance

Previous scholars including Sweeney have observed commonalities between him and his father's format of performance; namely the setting of the stage, seating position and the positioning of the brass bowl.²¹⁹ As Awang Batil usually travels to perform, the stage requirements are distinctively basic with no use of backdrop sceneries or change of costumes required. If the occasion leans towards the formal such as the end of the harvest celebration, the platform where he performs may be raised to ensure that the audience can see him without difficulty.

Ramli has performed on chairs before but noted the difficulty of picking up the masks and instruments from this position. In terms of body positioning,

²¹⁸ Mohamad Luthfi Abdul Rahman and others, 'Awang Batil: Penglipurlara Bijaksana, Penyelesaian Konflik', ed. by Rahimah A. Hamid, Saad Othman and Ahmad Moghni Salbani, *Rekayasa Kearifan Tempatan dalam Sastera Melayu*, (Pulau Pinang: Universiti Sains Malaysia Press, 2014), pp. 16-25 (p. 22).

²¹⁹ An anecdote: Ramli's father was the first one to change the original name of Awang Belanga to Awang Batil after his pot (*belanga*) was broken and could no longer be used. Here, it shows that the name Awang Batil consists of two parts i.e. the name of the character and the instrument used by the storyteller.

Awang Batil is always seated, cross-legged with the batil placed on his lap. A double-reed oboe or any other instruments along with the masks that the performer intends to use are placed in front of him for easy reach. In more formal events, a short dagger (*keris*) is used for ceremonial purposes. The performance begins with a ritualistic opening in which Awang Batil recites the following lines:

Hei! Riu rendah gegak gempita,
 Inilah hamba nak mula cerita,
 Hang tengok kat aku, aku tengok kat hang,
 Hang kuit aku, aku kuit kat hang,
 Hang gelak kat aku, aku gelak kat hang,
 Hang jeling kat aku, aku jeling kat hang,
 Hang kecip mata, aku kenyut misai,
 Hei beginilah mula ceritanya [...] ²²⁰

In the performance the researcher watched in Kuala Lumpur, the same lines were used to open his performance. However, in the research done by Halimah Mohamed Ali and Mohammad Lutffi Abdul Rahman, they observed a different opening that hinted at its roots of animism. There is a possibility, supported by Ramli's own admission, that the current negative perception of animist practices within the Malay Muslim community has caused the omission of the rituals once practiced in a penglipurlara performance.

Returning to the performance, it is performed in the Perlis dialect and the storytelling session begins right after these opening lines are presented. Complementing the stories is the use of masks and the change of music instruments to indicate changes in scenery or characters. Traditionally, Awang Batil utilises four different masks made from wood that represent a court official (*temenggung*), a minister (*menteri* or *wadit*), a warrior (*hulubalang*)

²²⁰ Translation is my own: Hei! What noisy ruckus / I am here to tell my stories / You look at me, I look at you / You poke me, I poke you / You laugh at me, I laugh at you / You give me the eye, I give you the eye / You blink, I play with my moustache / Hei this is how the story begins.

and an astrologer (*ahli nujum*).²²¹ Ramli explains that the use of masks is primarily intended to bring the characters to life and make them more realistic. He adds that certain masks have their own personalities. For instance, the warrior mask often appears in the stories as it represents a young commoner who is loyal to the King whereas the astrologer will only make its appearance when there is a conflict in the palace and a solution is needed.²²² In a performance that goes up to an hour in length, these changes will provide the necessary stimulus for the audience.

Music plays an essential role in the performance of Awang Batil. Not only does it provide the pace and rhythm for the performer but attracts the attention of the younger crowd. Based on previous interviews conducted with him, Ramli repeatedly mentioned the differences between him and his father's practices. For instance, Ramli no longer burns incense (*kemenyan*) in his performance like his father would, a part of the traditional penglipurlara performance that is not an uncommon sight in older Awang Batil performances but also in those performed by Tok Selampit, Dalang and Pura Taman. He has also made changes to several of his father's stories to make them funnier for the audience and included contemporary Malay and Tamil songs to make them relatable. In another effort to provide more variety in his performance, Ramli added two more instruments i.e. violin and tambourine (*rebana*) on top of the original set of double-reed oboe and brass bowl. These are then played at different parts of the performance. At the end of the performance, the audience is informed by Awang Batil who will proceed to stop playing the *batil*.

However, despite the changes, Ramli still appears to be a traditionalist when he showed reservation at efforts by others to include a group dance performance and a theatrical segment in between his performance. Several individuals have also expressed interest in learning the stories but Ramli was quoted believing that there is still no suitable candidate that could take over the role of Awang Batil. This is because he believes that to be a good

²²¹ Ahmad Abu Hassan, 'Siapakah pewaris Awang Batil?', *Orang Perlis*, 23 February 2017, < <http://www.orangperlis.com/siapakah-pewaris-awang-batil.html> > [accessed 2 March 2017]

²²² Latifah.

penglipurlara, one must also have a keen understanding of the arts and a natural talent.²²³ This is an expected stance considering that performing Awang Batil is a highly specialised artform that involves memorisation and improvisation of stories narrated to the rhythmic beats of the *batil*. One is expected not only to do this but also master the instruments involved, sing, chant and apply a range of vocal techniques throughout the performance.

Based on these observations, there is no doubt that the stories of Awang Batil are important and a rich source of myths and legends for writers and readers alike. Unfortunately, modern Malaysian society no longer sees it as a form of entertainment but rather a specified and often isolated cultural heritage. Past efforts to revitalise it by incorporating dance and drama were unsuccessful. The use of heavy Perlis dialect also poses a problem for those who do not understand it and having subtitles might not be the most suitable solution considering that the penglipurlara tends to organise his stories according to the audience, improvising as he sees fit. There is also the issue of passing down the stories to the next generation of Awang Batil, which is highly intricate as it involves learning the skills practiced by those who were once part of an oral-aural society.

By the time Sweeney concluded his extensive field research on the penglipurlara in 1973, there was already a limited albeit rough estimation of fewer than fifty storytellers found in different parts of peninsular Malaysia. Both Perlis elite storytellers (a Tok Selampit and an Awang Batil) included in his studies have also passed away. His failure to locate any penglipurlara in East Malaysia is understandable due to several factors. The first was that the penglipurlara refers to a group of storytellers who identify as native Malays, which leads to the second factor i.e. Sweeney's studies were categorised under Malay literary studies.

This does not mean that there are no non-Malay storytellers in the country or that there is an absence of storytellers in Sabah and Sarawak but simply the lack of resources to explore storytelling in other languages and

²²³ LeadsTV, *Awang Batil – Romli Mahmud (Penggiat Awang Batil)*, online video recording, Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzaM6zeg_v4> [accessed 17 March 2020]

regions. According to Mohammed Taib Osman, there has always been a vibrant storytelling heritage in the two states, practiced differently from one indigenous group to another. Thus, according to him, 'the repertoire of tales and the tradition of storytelling in these two territories show greater autochthonous-ness than in peninsular Malaysia'.²²⁴ This quality of autochthonous, referring to traits that are indigenous rather than derived from migrants or colonists, is noticeably lacking in the Malaysian peninsular. There remains an urgent need for future study of the penglipurlara tradition in this country. Since Sweeney, no substantial research has been done on the penglipurlara other than those aimed at recording, preserving or promoting the art form. There is however a small albeit very useful collection of videos of performances and interviews available on YouTube. Those who argue that preservation is possible through transcriptions and translations ignore the reality that the stories cannot be separated from its performance.

Although the transliteration of oral stories to print can make the general themes of folk romances accessible, they have failed to factor in the living nature of the storyteller i.e. the penglipurlara's ability to bring his stories alive through his carefully honed performance and the crucial factor that differentiates orature from the written is the relationship between the performer and the audience.

²²⁴ M. T. Osman, 'The tradition of storytelling in Malaysia', in *Traditional storytelling today: an international sourcebook*, ed. by M.R. Macdonald (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1999), pp. 138-41.

Chapter Three: The Malaysian Spoken Word Poet

In the performance of a spoken word poem, effective communication ultimately relies on the interplay of text, event and social environment. While slam culture, from which most contemporary spoken word practitioners come from, is one that encourages the performance of a poetic text along with the deployment of different devices and tactics according to both internal and external factors that include space, time, venue and the kinds of audience one is performing for; it is the practice of performing spoken word poetry outside of the slam event that this thesis is more interested in. But there is an unescapable tinge of irony when reflecting on the short history of Malaysian spoken word poetry.

One would have expected that it began and grew organically, fertilised by a rich storytelling tradition and tended by the recent technologies that have created Ong's notion of secondary orality. Instead, the Malaysian spoken word poetry community that emerged would not have been possible without the collaborative efforts shown by the British Council and Apples and Snakes (the UK leading organisation for performance poetry). Through *Animating Literature*, a two-year regional-based project aimed at promoting reading and writing in South-East Asia, a number of selected British spoken word poets including Charlie Dark, Malika Booker and Jacob Sam La Rose were flown in to conduct a series of workshops for local poets, writers and teachers from 2006 to 2008.²²⁵ The researcher herself was part of this small group of poets who attended these by-invitation workshops. Focused on the performance of poetry, these poets were reminded about the importance of voice and voicing out; taught composition techniques and performance strategies; encouraged to produce pieces that explore contemporary issues and themes as observed around us.

As a follow up to these workshops, a slew of events followed after and gave most of us the opportunity to take the stage and perform our poems. The very first spoken word poetry event held in the country was *Wayang Kata*,

²²⁵ British Council Malaysia, 'Foreword' in *Wellversed*, (Kuala Lumpur: British Council Malaysia, 2007), pp 5 - 6.

which was held on the 5th of April 2006 at La Bodega Tingkat Tong Shin. Hosted by the Troubagangers, the event featured Francesca Beard as its headlining poet and a group of local poets consisting of Bernice Chauly, Rahmat Haron, Sharanya Manivannan, Fahmi Fadzil, Pang Khee Teik, Jasmine Low, Ruhayat X and Jerome Kugan. This was preceded by *The First Cross-Causeway Poetry Slam* in 2007 that was jointly organised by Readings and WordForward Singapore (a non-profit literary arts company founded by Chris Mooney-Singh in 2003). On 23rd February 2008, the first official *Kuala Lumpur Poetry Slam* was held at The Loft and featured the theme of John Keats' poetry. A number of those who attended these workshops and participated in the slams were instrumental in ensuring that spoken word poetry became a common fixture in the KL literary and performing arts scene.

This is not to say that there were no events that offered space for poets to animate their works before. A few notable examples Bernice Chauly started Readings in January 2005, which currently holds the title as the city's longest running live literature event. Others included the open-mic events Troubadours KL (made up of Azmyl Yunor, Tan Sei Hon and Jerome Kugan) and Doppelganger KL (founded in 2002 and hosted by Jasmine Low). But since the first slam, a series of monthly events were created to accommodate the demands, which include Poetry Café KL's 'The Big Fish', the multidisciplinary arts event 'Numinous' created by myself and the now defunct 'If Walls Could Talk', founded by Melizarani Selvakkumar and Will Beale. Currently, it is common to see at least one open-mic poetry event offered every month, supported by groups such as Poets Passport, Makhluk Seni, Jalan Dalam, Oral Fixation and others. Furthermore, a considerable number of spoken word poets have had their works featured in anthologies of poetry alongside established names such as Muhammad Haji Salleh, Kee Thuan Chye, Shirley Lim and many others. Notable publications are *Malchin Testament: Malaysian Poems* and *Asian Centre Anthology of Malaysian Poetry in English*. Others have also been invited and featured at both local and international literary festivals including the Georgetown Literary Festival and the Ubud Writers & Readers Festival. Reflective of these activities is a growing

body of performances available for public consumption through live events, publications as well as audio-visual materials.

Definition

In the interview, all the poets were asked to define and specify the features of a spoken word performance. Most discussions concerning the definition of spoken word poetry involve comparing it to page poetry and highlighting the features that set spoken word poetry from the other. Thus, the keywords 'performance' and 'audience' are highlighted and emphasised when describing what spoken word poetry is. All of them express a similar understanding that it is poetry written for performance and for the consumption of an audience, a definition that mirrors our earlier discussion of the form. Elaine Foster describes spoken word poetry simply as personal stories told by the poet to an audience. The poets Jack Malik, Alana Azlan and Illya Sumanto also support this perspective when they identify spoken word poetry as a two-way communication between two parties.

Jamal Raslan's definition of spoken word poetry mirrors the discussion on communication as performance when he breaks it down to three main features namely representation, relevance and resonance. Echoing AGI's 3V theory, Jamal proceeded to explain that representation refers to the message of the poem, which then influences the nuances and the style of delivery. The second feature, he adds, is relevance or the poet's ability to connect to the audience and invoke a reaction from them. One of the ways to do this is by using a variety of poetic devices. Jamal's third feature i.e. resonance refers to what the audience takes from a performance or how they are transformed by it. In my interviews with Jack Malik and Jamal Raslan, they both define spoken word based on its literal definition i.e. words that are spoken as opposed to words delivered in specific styles one may find in the Malay *syair*, *gurindam* or a traditional poetry reading.

Yohanna Yusrinal, who represents the younger generation of spoken word poets in Kuala Lumpur, emphasises the calculated use of devices such as metaphor, rhyme, wordplay and alliteration to facilitate the audience's

understanding of the performance as opposed to them uncovering different layers of meaning through the repeated reading of a poem. Shedding more light on this term, Peter Elbow describes how resonance links the sounds with how we respond to the person delivering the poem, “if we value the sound of resonance—the sound of more of a person behind the words—and if we get pleasure from a sense of the writer's presence in a text, we are often going to be drawn to what is ambivalent and complex and not just to earnest attempts to tell the sincere truth.”²²⁶ This, he explains, can either be a new awareness of the topic or a new-found interest in the subject matter.

A list of qualities was compiled by the researcher as determining factors that qualify as an effective spoken word performance. These qualities include a poet's preparedness prior to taking the stage, voice projection, proper use of space and their confidence or attitude. Descriptors that are repeated multiple times and feature prominently in the interviews are listed below.

Voice and Sincerity

[Poets] are in touch with "voices," but this is the very essence of their power, the voices are the past, the depths of our very beings. It is the deeper, not “lower” [...] portions of the personality speaking, the middle brain, the nerves, the glands, the very muscles and bones of the body itself speaking.

William Carlos Williams²²⁷

²²⁶ Peter Elbow, ‘What Do We Mean When We Talk About Voice in Texts?’, in *Voices on voice: perspectives, definitions, inquiry*, ed. by Kathleen B. Yancey (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1994), 1 - 24.

²²⁷ William Carlos Williams, cited in Amy Childers Mansfield, ‘Mapping the Voice Swamp’, *International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 1(2015), 88-95 (p. 91).

One does not have to be a spoken word poet in order to know that the term 'voice' refers more to how one uses it rather than how one sounds like. How you speak at the supermarket is different compared to how you would speak when giving a presentation at a meeting. One can also notice the differences when speaking to a child or to an authority figure. Your voice may sound the same but the way you express yourself changes depending on the context that you find yourself in.

Yet, the voice, on its own, possesses no identifying personality except in relation to the body it comes from. For spoken word poets, the choices they make in the delivery of voiced texts are pivotal and contribute to the production of an effective performance. Finnegan describes the complex process that is involved in the production of voice when she states:

—rhyme, alliteration, assonance, rhythm, and acoustic parallelisms—are only a small sample. There are also the subtleties of volume, pitch, tempo, intensity, repetition, emphasis, length, dynamics, silence, timbre, onomatopoeia, and the multifarious non-verbal ways performers can use sound to convey, for example, character, dialect, humor, irony, atmosphere, or tension. And then there are all the near-infinite modes of delivery: spoken, sung, recited, intoned, musically accompanied or mediated, shouted, whispered; carried by single or multiple or alternating voices.²²⁸

Applying voice within the context of orature, however, one will have to refer back to Ngũgĩ's concepts of representation and assumption of audience. Unlike one's daily way of speaking, the voice assumes a symbolic rather than a utilitarian role. According to William J. Kennedy in his study on voice, 'speakers and audiences together enter the discursive field as makers, shapers, formers, and transformers of meaning.'²²⁹ The exchange is far from static. Depending

²²⁸ Finnegan, p. 170.

²²⁹ William J. Kennedy, "'Voice' and 'Address' in Literary Theory", *Oral Tradition*, 1 (1987), 214-30 (p. 227).

on the situation, there would be the increasing and softening of volume, the use of pauses or the quickening of pace, as well as the adoption of a local dialect or colloquial expressions used by the majority of the audience as strategies to retain the audience's attention. This appropriated voice may still hold semblance to the way one would usually speak but ultimately involves the adoption of specific strategies unlike one's daily communication with the world around us.

In the context of a stage performance, voice requires a series of questions asked prior to its delivery, which "involve the character of the speaker, the nature of his or her knowledge and will, the composition of the audience, and the speaker's interaction with the audience registered in various forms of voice and address."²³⁰ Essentially, voice in spoken word poetry refers to a stylised speech that combines the oratory and the rhetorical. Such multifaceted approach to voice is not surprising considering the complexity of the human experience with its endless range of possible expressions.

Different types of voice too can be found in the works of spoken words. Generally, these can be divided into two major categories. First is the dramatic voice, which is commonly practiced in theatre where the performer assumes the role of a fictional character without the imposition of the speaker's own voice. The second category is narrative, which is more commonly found and identified in the works of both spoken word poets and the penglipurlara. According to Peter Elbow, this category allows the performer to either 'speak in one's own voice, or in an assumed fictive voice or mixture of voices that imitate the speech of various characters.'²³¹ Each of this variation is used according to what the poets believe work most effectively.

Closely related to voice is sincerity. From the interviews, the term is understood as the courage of a poet to narrate a personal story to an audience from a position of self-awareness and vulnerability. During a spoken word performance, the audience assumes that the performed piece is based on a real-life experience of the poet. The poet Melizarani Selvakkumar is known to

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Peter Elbow, 'What Do We Mean When We Talk About Voice in Texts?', in *Voices on voice: perspectives, definitions, inquiry*, ed. by Kathleen B. Yancey (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1994), p. 3.

repeatedly describe the act of writing poetry as 'bleeding', one that connotes ideas of truth seeking and self-excavation which may or may not be a positive experience. In her thesis on performance poetry, Goggins received a similar answer when interviewing spoken word poets from the cities of Atlanta and Charlotte. According to them, a good performance is one that balances 'honesty with finesse, never straying from what they believe is the truth.'²³² In the interviews I conducted, I have found that all nine poets are certain that the audience can determine whether or not the poet is sincere in their words.

From the viewpoint of literary criticism, however, sincerity has always been problematic due to its abstract nature. There is also the issue of defining it. How does one gauge a poet's intention in poetry? Referring to Roland Barthes who once declared the death of the author in 1967, it was primarily a decision to remove the independent text from the shadow of its author and allow it to converse with the reader freely. To support his idea that there has always been a disconnection between the author/narrator and the text/story, Barthes cited how storytelling was conducted before the modern literary writer came into existence:

in ethnographic societies the responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman or relator whose 'performance' – the mastery of the narrative code – may possibly be admired but never his 'genius'.²³³

The significance of this quote reveals what can be understood as the role of the storyteller as the mediator of his community's ideas of what is right and wrong: morality, ethics and universal truths. Such is the role of Awang Batil. As mentioned earlier in this study, the Malay oral tradition places great importance on the power of words. This cultural trait, seen in old proverbs such as *talam dua muka* (the tray has two faces) and *terlajak perahu boleh diundur, terlajak kata buruk padahnya* (if you go too far with your boat, you

²³² Bessie Lee Dietrich Goggins, 'Rhetorical Relationships in Performance Poetry' (unpublished master's thesis, Western Carolina University, 2009), p. 73.

²³³ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, music, text: essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 142-148 (p. 142).

can turn around: but once you have said something wrong, there is no turning back), reveals a society that equates verbal utterances as signifiers of truth.²³⁴ Thus, while both Awang Batil and his audience are aware that the stories he narrates are fictional (rather than confessional) and are designed to entertain, there is an understanding that characters in the story not only reflect thoughts and behaviours that mirror their own but verbalise words that are meaningful and contain wisdom. How successful the performance is would then be directed to the sincerity and commitment of the penglipurlara in delivering the stories.

In his essay 'The Cult of Sincerity', Herbert Read suggests that readers/audience can gauge the sincerity of a text/performance using their pre-existing distinction between poetry and experience. Poetry and other forms of art, Read adds, are known to be products that have been moderated for public consumption.²³⁵ Hence, the concept of sincerity here should not be taken in its literal sense because works of art are, to an extent, fictive. This is applicable to both poets and spoken word poets because the writer's personal experiences have gone through a process of introspection, filtration and rewriting before produced into poems. It is also fictional when one considers the idea of the conscious or subconscious use of persona in literature. How much of one's real self and ultimately the truth, can be revealed when the act of writing poetry connotes revisions, rules and structure?

When the modern predecessor of spoken word poetry i.e. the Beat poets began gaining popularity in the States, one of their most distinguishable traits is also the insistence on expressing the multiple facets of Truth. Stream of consciousness became an indispensable tool for most of these counterculture confessional writers to pen down their thoughts. As prescribed and practiced by Allen Ginsberg through his mantra "First thought, best thought", the method encourages the stripping down of any possible barriers between the writer and the intended thought.²³⁶ The main argument for this

²³⁴ Lim, p. 59.

²³⁵ Herbert Read, 'The Cult of Sincerity', *The Hudson Review*, 21 (1968), pp. 53-74.

²³⁶ William Deresiewicz, 'First Thought, Best Thought', *The New York Times*, 8 April 2001
<http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/04/08/reviews/010408.08deresit.html>
 [accessed 28 April 2017]

writing technique is that truth excavation inevitably involves the meditative process of free writing without the writer filtering or tainting the flow of their consciousness.

Poets like Elaine Foster, Jamal Raslan, Illya Sumanto and Azam Rais wrote poems that highlight social and political issues that occur in the country. Other poets such as Dhabitah Zainal and Yohanna Yusrinal practice responsibility to improve on their writing when they describe the personal fulfilment experienced from receiving immediate feedback from fellow poets and the audience. Sincerity connotes a sense of integrity or possessing a set of principles that involves self-consciousness of a certain degree. Even the central motivation behind the writing of the Beat Generation, regardless of their styles or tendencies to push the envelope, revolved around wanting to change what they saw as psychological and cultural stagnation in their society.

Finally, there is the question of the possible changes that occur within the mechanics of sincerity when the element of performance is involved. The studies done on sincerity by the likes of Read Herbert and Donald Davie are concerned with the complexities surrounding its definition especially when applied to published literary texts. Within the context of a performance, however, sincerity extends itself further into the performer's physical presence on stage. Here, both the text and the body are subjected to the reader/audience's consideration of whether or not it is a sincere performance. Aware of the existing scholarship on sincerity, Deborah Forbes in her studies on self-consciousness acknowledges the impossibility of analysing perfect sincerity in both text and the writer. Instead, she begins her research by taking this 'weakness' as a strength. Referring to sincerity as 'a destabilising factor in reading poetry', she formulates the term *sincerity-effects* to describe 'the often-unintended consequences of a poetic commitment to self-expression.'²³⁷ I believe that this is much easier applied and understood in the context of a performance compared to a textual analysis. The obvious reason for this lies in the availability of multiple cues such as facial expression, hand gestures,

²³⁷ Deborah Forbes, *Sincerity's Shadow: Self Consciousness in British Romantic and Mid-Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 15.

vocal inflections and various other signals that are offered to the audience (both consciously and subconsciously) during a performance.

From the perspective of the spoken word poets, there are two important strategies that can be adopted to aid in expressing their conviction. These are eye contact with the audience and text memorisation. As discussed earlier in this study, the two main features of Orature are representation and the assumption of an audience. The first feature informs both performer and audience that the narrative will be presented in a manner and style that differs from their daily communication. There is also the understanding that the poem requires time and energy to create it, which is then turned into a state of audience expectation. Depending on the external factors such as location, time, sound system and the audience themselves, the poet is expected to manipulate the performance and deliver it as effectively as possible.

Amidst all of these variables, the effectiveness of a performance relies on the relationship temporarily formed between the poet who tells the story and the audience who receives it. Establishing eye contact and memorising the text ensures that the connection remains intact during the delivery of the story. Even though memorisation is not compulsory in a spoken word performance, Alana Azlan explains how it allows her to make and maintain eye contact, which in turn encourages the audience to keep their attention and follow the poem from beginning until the end. This is a strategy that I myself repeatedly apply in my own performance as it allows me to interact and communicate with the audience without having to revert to paper. Arguably, this can also assist in establishing sincerity. In the performance of her poem 'When you said you wanted to be friends',²³⁸ Alana begins her intimate story of a relationship that ended with a heartbreak:

I always wondered what life would be like if we
 Could control time
 Like a video strip, in a continuum
 Where we could skip to the parts that matter

²³⁸ Alana Azlan, *When you said you wanted to be friends*, online video recording, YouTube <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBK3mt0PqFc>> [accessed 10 September 2018]

And maybe alter outcomes at a whim.

That thought crossed my mind when you told me it was over.

Using the motif of a video strip, she narrates the story by highlighting specific events that have occurred during the relationship like how one would with scenes from a movie. It is a premise that is very much familiar to an audience regardless of their age, a strategy that encourages relatability. Throughout the performance, memorising the poem allows her to maintain her eye contact with the audience and use her hands to either punctuate words from the poem or imitate the actions of controlling the video such as pressing the play and rewind button. The tone of the poem is one of conflicting emotions, an attempt to understand how one can be in love at one time but move on easily from that relationship after:

“I think we should just be friends”

The first time it replayed in my head, I stood in the rain
For half an hour wishing I was dead.

The second playback, I smoked
A pack and a half in one day.

The third time around was the same night my mother
Found a hickey planted on my neck by another man
The size of a Reese’s peanut butter cup.

Forbes’ notion of sincerity-effects, from my observation of her performance, can be seen in several instances where Alana momentarily looks down. This, I believe was an unconscious gesture, but one that heightens the feeling of sadness described in her narrative. Sharing personal stories with an audience that consist mainly of strangers does come, as pointed out earlier by Ruth Finnegan, with its own set of obligations and pressures experienced by

the performer. In spoken word poetry, the act of sharing one's confessions sends out a message that there is trust involved. By allowing the audience in, the ideal outcome is active listening and attention given from the audience.

Multisensory Effects

The very nature of a performance is, recalling Finnegan's words, 'multidimensional and embodied'.²³⁹ This can be observed in the spatial and temporal nature of a spoken word performance that requires its practitioners to rely on a wide range of devices including visual imagery, wordplay plus variations of rhythm and sound communicate and elicit an immediate, visceral reaction from the audience. There is also the careful consideration for form and structure although form here, does not literally translate to what we see on page poetry.

Both Jamal Raslan and Elaine Foster stress the importance of verbalising the text in the most effective way possible. Usage of metre, space and organisation of lines (including their breaks) are performed as an adherence to a specific rhythm (musical beats), cadence, tone, use of pauses and differing pace, as well as the manipulation of physical gestures. Appropriate use of these devices guides the audience through the poem's structured narrative but also, as pointed out by Walter Ong, emphasises similar use of rhythm and memory aids deployed by orators in primary oral societies.²⁴⁰ It's a complex amalgamation that makes performance what it is. This complexity, as Finnegan mentions in her study, consists of the 'visual, kinesic, acoustic, proxemic, material, tactile, moving, and embodied'.²⁴¹ Therefore, it is not surprising that spoken word poets are open to performing their pieces accompanied by musical accompaniment or collaborate with artists of different mediums. One example is "Seronok!", a 2013 multidisciplinary show that featured spoken word poets, musicians and visual artists from Malaysia, Indonesia and

²³⁹ Finnegan, p. 172.

²⁴⁰ Ong, p. 113.

²⁴¹ Finnegan, p. 172.

America.²⁴² Tackling themes of identity, geographical and psychological borders, national heritage and the mistreatment of domestic workers; its audience was treated to an immersive experience where they too were an important part of the performance. One of the poets, Illya Sumanto, stresses the equal importance of choreography and audience participation.

Labelling spoken word poetry as ‘social poetry’, she views spoken word as a performance that involves the active process of giving and receiving of messages, cultural values and ideas. Thus, the body is an extension of the said values and ideas. Collaborative projects such as this often begin from the very beginning i.e. the literary conception and involves input from all the artists, a creative process Finnegan identifies as a form of multisensory mediation. She explains:

... in some cases, written or spoken words may indeed be used to play a leading role, while in others they may have some part but only as interwoven with, perhaps outranked by, dance, music, gesture, visual images, or tangible artifacts; and it is only in and through this multisensory mediation that words reach their full realization.²⁴³

Two other examples of collaborative ensemble performances that were produced and showcased in Kuala Lumpur are ‘Tongue Tied’ and the feminist-charged ‘Pontianak’, both the researcher was part of. The cabaret-style ‘Tongue Tied’ was particularly interactive and involved the performers having the audience participate in dialogues, games and even the spoken word pieces themselves. The role of the audience in spoken word poetry, which Walter Ong emphasises denotes a collective as opposed to the term ‘readers’ or a group of individuals, is important in the process of creating meaning: one that has been observed and discussed by proponents of oral literature. In the performance of Awang Batil, certain parts of the story are injected with the telling of jokes

²⁴² The group consists of poets Elaine Foster, Khairrani Barokka, Illya Sumanto and Abby Latif, musicians Ardi Kuhn and Cory Rogers and visual artists Fairuz Sulaiman and Nadirah Zakariya. It made its debut in Kuala Lumpur and also featured in Jakarta.

²⁴³ Finnegan, p. 172.

and riddles to engage with the audience. While the interaction may not be as direct as the ones observed in these collaborative ensemble performances, the penglipurlara's pace and selection of stories from his repertoire are subjected to the audience reactions.

Additionally, the formation of meaning in all genres of oral performances (including spoken word poetry) is formed in real time because:

the spoken word is part of present actuality and has its meaning established by the total situation in which it comes into being. Context for the spoken word is simply present, centered in the person speaking and the one or ones to whom he addresses himself and to whom he is related existentially in terms of the circumambient actuality.²⁴⁴

Context, in the performances noted above, is created using costumes, stage setup, musical accompaniment and many more. However, the main medium i.e. the narrative is transferred from storyteller to audience in real time and involves not only the text/story but the *body* as well. The body, in its physical sense, does not exist in literary works and because of its absence, Ong postulates that 'audience is a fiction in literary works: the writer must construct in his imagination ... an audience cast in some sort of role. Audience must correspondingly fictionalise itself, one that seldom coincides with his role in the rest of actual life.'²⁴⁵ An audience, for a spoken word poet, is an embodied presence whose expectations and reactions ultimately affect his or her performance.

In the interview with Illya Sumanto, we discussed about her experience winning the Ubud Writers & Readers Festival's poetry slam competition in 2016. I have watched her perform 'Aung Aan Suu Kyi's Pseudo Ex-Boyfriend' several times but observed a difference in her presentation for the slam. She recalled being nervous in the beginning but the positive reactions from the

²⁴⁴ Walter J. Ong, 'The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction', in *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture*, 3rd (New York: Cornell University Press, 2012), pp. 53-81 (p. 56).

²⁴⁵ Ong, p. 317.

audience allowed her to perform the piece as how she intended it to be. This recalls another point made by Ong, who explains how words obtain meaning from the physical body and its surroundings despite being formed by fleeting sounds.²⁴⁶ Applying this point to Illya's poem, one observes how a rather loosely connected narrative can achieve a unifying effect when the audience is involved in its meaning-making. Using the persona of a younger Aung Aan Suu Kyi,²⁴⁷ Illya touches on issues of religion, gender, race, family dynamics and politics with an imaginary conversation with her Buddhist father regarding her relationship with a Muslim man:

I don't mind being a spinster	-audience laughs
Spinning, twirling, whirling,	-uses body to mimic the motions
swirling in a tornado of stars	
conquering the galaxy like a Sufi.	- audience snapping fingers
Harmonizing the sacred spiral dance	
to celebrate the divine in me	- poet pauses
I can twerk too	- audience snapping fingers

The juxtaposition of the audience's knowledge of the Burmese social leader with the poet's imagined description resulted in a humorous effect that is retained throughout the performance. In the beginning of any poetry slam, the host will inform the audience that immediate responses are strongly encouraged. This follows the traditional format introduced by Marc Smith when he first organised these competitive poetry events. As observed in the video recording, the audience gradually became more verbally (laughter and verbalised appreciation) and physically responsive (finger snapping). The poem shifts from the ideological to the physical as the persona expresses her stance on 'geopolitical utopia', 'the hypocritical words of the national anthem'

²⁴⁶ Ong, p. 56.

²⁴⁷ Spelling is intentional.

and 'self-proclaimed gods' of her society. The inclusion of another voice i.e. the father, introduces a tension that many people can relate to i.e. family expectations:

Daddy said

This is the land of our fathers, not theirs. *Changes pitch and volume of voice*

Use your womb as a weapon *Mimics the act to invite response from the audience.*

against the enemy *Audience reciprocates with laughter*

We gotta maintain our votes! *Present in text and absent from performance*

Get it on and breed
as many Buddhist babies
We five and now we are 25.
You must not lose to over-fertile
Muslim housewives.

But daddy. *Reverts to initial pitch and volume*

I've fallen in love with a Muslim man
whose anarchic nipple hair grew
in random directions

Pauses
Laughter increases

The pauses in her performance recalls our earlier discussion on oral literature and what Ruth Finnegan refers to as one of its five primary characteristics, which is verbal variability. This refers to the performer's ability to improvise based on the surroundings, audience as well as verbal slips committed by the performer herself. Comparing the poem's text with its performed version, Illya manages these unintended errors using strategies such as facial expressions, hand gestures and pauses. I should add that

correcting oneself is best avoided as it does not improve it but rather disrupts the overall flow, tone and overall effect of the performance. This is also supported by Ong, who noted the counterproductive effects of corrections in an oral performance:

A Jesus looking Indian	
who inherited a <u>Muslim house</u>	- Addition to the text. Pauses.
a slaughter house	- Exaggerates face
	- Audience laughs
from generation to generation.	
His favourite dish is a home-cooked	
Persian culinary concoction of casserole	-momentarily fumbles,
	attempts to remember her
sized pieces of lamb, red kidney beans	lines. Counts her fingers.
and middle eastern preserved lemons	Pauses.
I googled the recipe	-Changes the tone and
	smiles.
	- Audience laughs

According to Douglas B. Park in his study on the role of the audience in both text and performance, the main difference found between these two lies in the awareness of the audience's belief, attitudes, and relationships to the speaker/writer. While the writer can only predict what these reactions will be and thus prepare his or her responses in advance, the performer's responses to the audience' reception of their poetry is in real time.²⁴⁸ The interplay between the two reveals not only the empowering role of the audience in spoken word poetry but the multi-sensory effects spoken word poetry offers in its embodied form. Although it was not included in Park's discussion, I do find there is another difference in which the writers have an advantage over

²⁴⁸ Douglas B. Park, "The Meanings of "Audience"", *College English*, 44 (1982), 247-57.

the performance poets. The use of symbolism, which is a powerful device that can transform and effect individuals, is one that the readers are able to appreciate and respond to. Compared to the fleeting nature of a performance, the audience may not have the opportunity to contemplate on any symbolic significance that may exist in a performance poem.

Innovation and the Stage

Although the traditional set up of the poet performing on a simple stage behind a microphone positioned in front of the audience remains a comfortable option for many of its practitioners, others have continuously explored ways to diversify the performance of poetry.

Innovation is a common phenomenon as far as performances are involved. The storyteller Awang Batil, himself, as mentioned in this study has introduced new elements into his performance to adapt to his audience's expectations. These changes such as including contemporary songs in different language and using musical instruments like the violin and tambourine can be regarded as theatrical elements. The performance of Awang Batil may not require the full use of stage space but similar considerations are given in terms of the positioning of the body, musical instruments and masks. One also must not forget the fact that Awang Batil is essentially a stage character, whose stories involve interactions with other characters as narrated by the penglipurlara.

In the past few years, there have been numerous spoken word productions that blur the lines between poetry and theatre. Shows such as *Seronok!*, *Pontianak*, *Tongue Tied Cabaret*, and the more recent *Crossroads* and *Malaysia Throws Herself a Birthday Party* that feature poets reciting individually written verses on a variety of themes and issues via fictional personas in full costumes. Regarding the latter, this immersive theatrical poetry performance featured spoken word poets stationed in different places. Audience members were encouraged to stand around them in an intimate storytelling environment. The audience were in control of who they want to listen to and can listen to it again, if they want to. These are examples of how the spoken word poetry scene in Kuala Lumpur has taken the artform in

different directions. Based on the researcher's personal observation over the years, it is interesting to see how poets from the younger generation are much more open to learn from other poets. One possible reason could be the fact that there are more opportunities and platforms now for spoken word poets compared to what was available ten years ago. What was once limited to monthly open mic events catered for musicians, there are now several pockets of sub-groups in the Klang Valley's community of spoken word poets (each with their own styles and events) for an aspiring new poet to be part of. The space to innovate and push the boundaries is far and wide. Several of the poets interviewed for this study have actively participated in local theatre productions as actors and directors.

The poet Azam Rais, who was initially in the theatre scene before performing poetry, emphasises the importance of poets to dress according to the theme or persona of their pieces. According to him, theatre (which utilises similar devices and strategies in a spoken word performance) is an excellent point of reference to what a performance is and can be. He also adds that regardless of how prepared a poet is, how well written a poem is or how great a performance is executed on stage, a good spoken word piece is directly affected by external factors such as costumes, lighting, venue and sound quality. To further illustrate this, the video recording of Yohanna Yusrinal's piece 'Anything but Denial' shows a modern retelling of Cleopatra's coming of age story set in a contemporary setting.²⁴⁹ It was performed for *Tongue Tied* and incorporates elements that are not commonly found in a standard spoken word poetry format. In the production, the stage was designed to look like the interior of a cabaret club. There are two tables on both sides of the stage where the poets who were not telling their stories were seated, becoming part of the audience. Her entrance to the 'cabaret stage' was marked by the rest of the spoken word poets/actors dancing to an Egyptian-themed tune, transforming the setting to a youthful toga party where a bookish Cleopatra meets the charismatic Julius Caesar for the first time. When she began telling the story,

²⁴⁹ Poetry Café KL, *Tongue Tied – The Monsters from Our Fairytales*, online video recording, YouTube, 2017, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kF-YSICwJEY>> [accessed 10 June 2018]

everyone returned to their seats and the music changed into a series of drumbeats. The narrative of her performance is divided by two separate voices i.e. the more mature Cleopatra as the storyteller, and her younger version in the flashback segments of the poem:

Please, *Narrates as older Cleopatra*
 I stopped wearing blue eyeshadow
 in the 80's

Didn't even go to frat parties,
 I kept my nose in my books
 until my eyes were hooked
 to the boy in political science class.
 The only Mat Salleh for miles
 and he was always at the fraternities.
 Suddenly it's freshies night
 and he's at a toga party.

*The first flashback scene begins. The young Cleopatra leaves the
 microphone, runs around the stage, looking for something to wear
 before pulling the table cloth. She wears it as a toga. Returning to the
 microphone, she appears nervous.*

He sees me.
 Be cool.

With the microphone, Cleopatra dances to the right side of the stage.

Thankfully,
 he meets me halfway.
 With a quick smile he says the words
 that make every girl believe in true love.
 "What a horrible social construct

and appropriation of ancient Roman
culture, am I right?"
I nod and pop a grape in my mouth.
"I know right. So lame!"

The use of props, changes in costumes (first wearing the table cloth as a toga, then manipulating it to look like a robe with a long train and finally replacing it with a blue veil) and stage direction allows the poet to aid the audience in imagining the different scenes, which would be difficult to achieve only through descriptive storytelling. Yohanna also interacted with the other poets, adding another layer to the performance. A few examples are given below:

He was the next ruler,	<i>Approaches Ursula, who the places</i>
and as his lawfully wedded wife,	<i>an olive branch on her head.</i>
I had his olive branch.	
"Smile, sayang,	
you're ruining the dinner.	
Shake a hand, eat the pate."	<i>Shakes Pinocchio's hand.</i>
"Make a joke or two,	<i>Interacts with the Evil Witch,</i>
you're good at that."	<i>lets out a fake laughter.</i>
He didn't want me,	<i>Quasimodo offers a blue veil.</i>
He wanted a charming first lady.	
I kicked him!	<i>All characters on stage cheers.</i>
Straight into the compost	
and plant a rosy thorn bush	
because I'm all out of olive branches.	

In the interviews conducted with the other spoken word poets for this study, there also appears to be an absence of awareness regarding the practices of the penglipurlara. Although most of the poets have heard or seen the name before, there were no point of references or contexts. One possible reason for this is a general limited accessibility to this traditional art of

storytelling. Not only are public performances of the penglipurlara few and far in between compared to the frequency of Wayang Kulit, Mak Yong and other traditional performing arts; the majority of available materials on their practices are limited to academic writings, where the focus is on archiving their stories rather than documenting the practitioners' techniques and styles.

According to oral tradition scholar Amin Sweeney, there have been several undertakings by major organisations such as Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka involving the publication of penglipurlara stories 'all of which have, in varying degrees, been presented in easily understood literary prose'.²⁵⁰ Furthermore, there have always been clear demarcations on the subjects studied in the field of Malay and Malaysian literature. As the penglipurlara's content and delivery of stories are typically in a local Malay dialect and performed in front of a predominantly traditional Malay audience, most research available on the penglipurlara are categorised under Malay literary studies. As its resources are available only via printed materials, this could have further explained the possible reasons behind the spoken word poets' lack of awareness concerning the penglipurlara.

Ironically, references on contemporary Malaysian spoken word poetry is similarly limited and remains much to be explored within the Malaysian literary field due to its performative nature as well as a lack of accessible publications by the poets themselves as the spoken word poetry scene, particularly the ones featured in this study, is still a relatively new phenomenon mostly concentrated in urban cities such as Kuala Lumpur and Penang. Out of the nine poets interviewed for this thesis, only three (Jack Malik, Melizarani Selvakkumar and Alana Azlan) have published a full collection of poems while the others have had their works published in chapbooks, online and print anthologies as well as albums.

There exist differing views regarding the appropriate medium of publication of spoken word poems. Established performance poets such as Shane Koyczan, Andrea Gibson, Omar Musa and Kate Tempest have all

²⁵⁰ Sweeney, p.2.

published their personal collection of poems, while others are of the belief that audio recording is the ideal medium for performance poetry.²⁵¹ This includes one of the poets selected for this study, Elaine Foster, who has expressed her reservations on multiple occasions that the full effect of spoken word poems is lost in translation when transferred to the page. It reminds us that the previous discussion on history and the effects of 19th century predisposition to archive performances into texts reflects the current ideas of what is accepted or unaccepted.

Situating the socio-historical development of both oral and written traditions in Malaysian literary studies now provides us not only an understanding of the development of storytelling prior to the emergence of spoken word poetry but reveal a heightened awareness considering the idea of documenting performance poetry. While this does not suggest the complete removal of western literary tradition, it also ensures that dialogue continues by the very practitioners who produce these text-based performances from a balanced critical viewpoint. A more thorough look into these poets' understanding of audience assumption will be explored in the next two chapters, specifically in their thematic concerns and how they express these subject-matters through the use of performance.

²⁵¹ Susan Weinstein, "A Unified Poet Alliance": The Personal and Social Outcomes of Youth Spoken Word Poetry Programming', *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 11 (2010), 1-24 (p. 7).

Chapter Four: Embodying the Text, Textualising the Body

May my story be beautiful and unwind like a long thread.

A Kabyle folksinger²⁵²

Despite the reliance on text, spoken word poets are aware that the performance itself is far from simply memorising and verbally delivering a poem. There is an understanding that there is nothing but a narrative to connect the audience to the performer due to the clear roles that they both find themselves in. During the performance, the body transforms from a visual focal point to an extension of a multidimensional personality that *sees* you, *speaks* to you and encourages you to *speak back*. Ong points out an interesting phenomenon that occurs in the context of the spoken word as opposed to one that requires the act of reading:

When a speaker is addressing an audience, the members of the audience normally become a unity, with themselves and with the speaker. If the speaker asks the audience to read a handout provided for them, as each reader enters into his or her own private reading world, the unity of the audience is shattered, to be re-established only when oral speech begins again.²⁵³

From the researcher's experience of performing and watching spoken word poetry, this unity Ong describes is created by employing two devices. First is voice. Your ears are listening to the narrative, sometimes struggling to hear if the setting is not conducive, and to follow the pace and rhythm of the poet. You are simultaneously dissecting the information and sewing the words together. Second is an awareness of the body.

²⁵²Quoted by Trinh T. Minh-ha, *from Woman, Native, Other*
<https://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/archive/print_archive/tmmwoma.html> [Accessed 18 June 2016]

²⁵³ Ong, p. 72.

Watching the performance of a spoken word poet, similar to the *penglipurlara*, involves the use of all your senses that merge and collide as they make and connect meaning from the poem's content. Your eyes are constantly moving from one body part to another as the poet makes physical gestures and changes their facial expressions according to the poem's tone and delivery. It's a demanding process that involves both the audience and the performer to be present and open to give and receive in that limited time-temporal space and unite to create an effective performance, one that is akin to a process of deliberate mirroring of one another. The urgency is there simply because, unlike reading, one can't simply choose to flip back the pages to have the poet repeating specific parts again. The performance of a voiced text traverses both sides of the corporeal and the non-corporeal; presence and absence. The second the voice is produced; it is bound to disintegrate. When the audience and the speaker merge into a single unit, the range of sensorial cues encourages the audience to see and feel what the poets are experiencing or have experienced in their narratives.

As my research focus is on the poets themselves, then the questions I pose are how do the poets use their bodies to narrate stories of themselves and the society that they are a part of? How does the corporeal converse with the themes in spoken word poetry? In this chapter, I discuss the theme of corporeality noted in the works of spoken word poets, with specific reference to how the body is used and represented on both the page and the stage within its personal, interpersonal and social dimensions. I argue that the imagery used represents a continuous negotiation with the poets' own cultural beliefs and values that are then shared with the audience. These conflicts and state of tensions observed between the text and its creator, though they do exist in literary texts as well, manifest in a more immediate and physical form when performed on stage. Thus, references to their performances will be included as well.

The Skin, the Hands and the Reciprocity of Touch

Verse should have two obligations: to communicate a precise instance and to touch us physically, as the presence of the sea does.

Jorge Luis Borges

As artists who work intimately with their bodies, writing the corporeal into the text reveals the different representations as described and performed on stage. It also presents the themes incorporated in the pieces. A penglipurlara, as discussed in the earlier chapters, narrates epic legends and folk romances as passed down by their fathers and forefathers. They function as a vehicle or conduit of their people's *weltanschauung*, as encapsulated by the stories' characters and the circumstances that surround the narrative. This role creates a relationship between the penglipurlara and its audience best described as conveyor and receiver. Sometimes, the stories are performed with visual aids such as the *wayang kulit* accompanying the Tok Selampit or musical accompanied such as the performances by Awang Batil. A spoken word poet, on the other hand, narrates personal and real-life stories that occur in a setting that is familiar to the audience, and where the lessons offered are relatively more personal and direct compared to the ones contained in the penglipurlara's repertoire. Sometimes accompanied by music or background visuals, one unique feature that can be observed in the art of spoken word poetry is how the poet embodies the performed text. Still, one easily traces orality which we have discussed earlier using Ong's list of characteristics.

In the works of the spoken word poets, there is a clear use of mnemonics and formulaic strategies to help their memorisation of text. Of primary importance is the application of alliteration, assonance, rhyming and other poetic sound devices that allow the performers to keep track of their performance as well as ensure that the audience is entertained. There is also the aggregative quality of the poems where the poets chosen for this study have each shown a heavy dependence on descriptive language. Imagery is

essential because our understanding of the world is fed by our sensory experiences.

The analyses of the spoken word pieces reveal that corporeality presents itself as a primary theme with a specific preference to use tactile, visual and kinesthetics imagery. This is not saying that the sense of taste, sound and smell are neglected in spoken word poetry. Examples of such references can be observed multiple times in a number of the poems written by the poets selected for this study. Melizarani's poem 'the afternoon affair'²⁵⁴ narrates in detail her mouth's love affair with ice cream while Jack Malik describes his ideal version of love as one that tastes like yong suan's caramel pudding, nasi ganja, ice lemon tea with the right amount of sugar; another poem has him contemplating if the bitterness of coffee tastes like the hardship of life.²⁵⁵ In the poem 'of fathers and daughters'²⁵⁶, Alana Azlan creates the contrast between her never crying when her father first whispered the *adhan* into her ears when she was a new born baby with her memory of her mother sobbing uncontrollably in his father's arms when he told her about his infidelity. For context, although not considered a compulsory act in Islam, recitation of the *adhan* or the Muslims' call to prayer is based on a hadeeth that narrates how the Prophet Muhammad recited it in the ears of his grandchild Hasan, one that has been adopted by the Malay Muslims in Malaysia. In another poem, Dhabitah Zainal's ode to her late father describes how she breathes in the scent and taste of nicotine just so that she could smell her father's familiar scent again.²⁵⁷ The examples are many and do provide the audience/readers with a wealth of details that lie between what is seen/read and what 'is'.

It is common knowledge that out of the five senses in human beings, touch is the first to be developed in the human child. Mothers are encouraged to bond with their children through breastfeeding and both parents are advised to spend time either massaging or increasing skin on skin contact with the baby as means of bonding with their child. In human society, the act of touching is understood as a show of familiarity, closeness and security. Not

²⁵⁴ Melizarani T. Selva, *Taboo: Poems* (Shah Alam: Perfect Binding, 2015), pp. 31-37.

²⁵⁵ Jack Malik, p. 12 and 26.

²⁵⁶ Alana Azlan, *A Female Called Psyche* (Shah Alam: Perfect Binding, 2017), pp. 49 – 52.

²⁵⁷ Dhabitah Zainal, *Burning House: Nine Poems* (Kuala Lumpur: Speak City, 2016), p. 50.

being able to touch or refusing to touch another person indicates the very opposite i.e. that person could either be too far for you to establish contact or there is an emotional barrier or gap that makes touching between these two individuals a source of discomfort. Hence, touch is a concept that involves both physical and emotional space. Most importantly, it is also reciprocal i.e. when you are touching someone or something, you are also being touched at the same time. Touching is, therefore, inherently social.

For those aware of the regular set up of a spoken word poetry event, a well-attended occasion is usually packed and encourages its attendants to be seated closely to one another. This spatial proximity is also mirrored in the close distance between the poet and the audience. Taking into consideration the organic relationship shared between the spoken word poet's body and the poem, the tactile motif of the corporeal presents itself either as an emphasis on its individual parts or as a whole. Each one of these images may bring a variety of connotative meanings, ones created by the poets for the purpose of the performance. As the act of tactility also relates to the sense of kinaesthesia, we will assume that such descriptions also evoke this sensory experience as well.

Tactility, although most of us may not be aware of it, is often bound by social conventions and moral values. In Malay culture, for example, greeting someone significantly older than you require the act of *salaam* i.e. the extending and receiving of both hands to show respect. This differs from the Japanese culture, where both parties greet each other with a non-contact act of bowing their bodies. The ethics of touching in any societies are acquired through imitation or learned from authorial figures such as the parents or one's school. Such differences in the approach to touch, I believe, allow writers and performers to engage with an audience (both through physical gestures and their text) already familiar with how tactility represents the body's responses to its surroundings.

Exploring the motif of hands, skin and the sensations associated with it can be observed in a number of pieces written by contemporary spoken word poets in Malaysia. In Elaine Foster's 'My mother made me', a poem specifically

written and performed for *She Walks Like a Free Country*,²⁵⁸ she narrates a difficult relationship between a mother and her daughter. Describing her mother as a master craftsman, the imagery of hands is seen in the integral role of her mother in making the poet into who she is by carving her out of a block of wood. Yet, the same pair of hands is also responsible in damaging the exterior (i.e. the skin) of this masterpiece that she had created:

Her nails embedded deep underneath my skin.
That day she scratched me so hard
leaving bruised red scars for me to
remember

Her poem reveals to us the different types of touching and its implied meanings. While it is used as means of negotiating social bonds when involving others or familiarising with one's own self through self-touching, it can also be violent such as in the case of non-reciprocal touching, self-harm, physical abuse and rape. The latter, when described in the poetic form, is represented as wounds. Words that are often used to refer to the wounded skin include 'scratch', 'rash', 'scar', 'cracks' and 'bruise'. Although understood as a visual reference, the definition of wound can be best explained by the ancient Greek's equivalent i.e. 'trauma'. Placed within this context, physical wounds can then be connected to psychological inflictions either caused by external sources or by oneself. In Elaine's poem, the absence of touching except for the scratches force her to remember these traumatic childhood memories where her mother is physically absent or distant:

And I remember when she told me I was not worthy
And I remember when she left me standing at the empty school
gates, alone
And I remember when she wasn't there waiting for me when I
got home.

²⁵⁸ Carolyn Oei, 'Lit Up 2013: She Walks Like a Free Country', *The Smart Local*
<<https://thesmartlocal.com/read/lit-up-2013-peek-1-she-walks-like-a-free-country/>>
[accessed 2 June 2017]

Despite being shaped as a masterpiece by her mother, the inconsistent references to a loving and motherly touch creates a complex mother-daughter relationship, which resulted in the poet feeling 'like the outsider'. One possible reason for the distance between these two women could have been triggered by the event when the poet came out to her mother. Providing subtle hints at the pressures of conforming to social norms, her mother's strong reaction of fear and anger scared the narrator in return. The master craftsman no longer views the narrator as a masterpiece, which the poet describes as leaving a 'great big chip' on her shoulder. We can compare this image of the body as a statue in Dhabitah Zainal's 'almost 25' as an example of how reciprocal touching is described as a process that can heal the skin and humanise the self:

And then there was you
 who told me right from the beginning that I
 was a masterpiece.
 You never tried to fix the cracks
 along my skin.
 You just sealed them with a kiss.²⁵⁹

This connection between the corporeal and the psychological can also be observed in Alana Azlan's poem 'Beneath the layers.' Although this poem differs in its point of view, where Alana assumes the role of an omniscient narrator rather than telling her own narrative; a similar imagery of wounds and the traumas that lie beneath them presents itself in the morning ritual of an unnamed female character. This character's act of putting makeup on her skin is described as an act of concealing the uncomfortable truths of her personal life:

the makeup she puts on
 helps cover the mistakes

²⁵⁹ Zainal, p. 35.

of yesterday, of the past
 to cushion the blows of the coming day,
 the slippery creams and liquids
 do well to hide the scars,
 the acne, the bruises from
 misplaced fists.²⁶⁰

The woman's effort to hide, silence and matt out past trauma is far from successful, a fact that the character is well aware of. Similar to the abusive relationship that the character is in (hinted by the narrator who uses words such as 'blows', 'fists' and 'swollen'), she chooses to cover them instead by attempting to act 'normal'. By the end of this ritual, her skin appears flawless. However, there is a hollowness inside that could not be masked by makeup. The reality of her situation has turned the woman from a breathing human being into a lifeless 'China Doll that has been / touched and tampered with / by too many hands.' The image of women as dolls and its reference to notions of mainland Chinese women in Malaysia and Singapore as gold diggers and sex workers addresses the dehumanisation or objectification of the female self; one that inhibits the woman from freeing herself from the expectations and rules found in her environment.

In another example, the wounds inflicted are not necessarily caused by a physical force. In 'Degree of Self' by Dhabitah, the skin becomes the focal point of the anxieties dealing with depression and the stigmas associated with mental illness. This piece, similar to her works in general, can be summarised as confessional. In the interview conducted with her, the poet revealed that she suffers from stage fright but decided to continue performing as it allows her to reach out to others who may feel or relate to the issues she addresses in her poems. Her performances although they correlate with the anxiety associated with stage fright, do however strengthen the content as well as the delivery of her poems. Characterised by slight physical movements relatively less animated compared to the poets studied in this study, her discomfort

²⁶⁰ Azlan, p. 53.

being on stage contributes to the intimately charged poems that deal with depression in the family and suicide. In this case, the poet's indirect use of her body and reference to skin to reveal the inner conflicts experienced in society are effectively rendered.

In Malaysia, such stigmas are rooted in a widespread lack of awareness among the general population and have been reported to cause social isolation, conflicts between family members and even affect job opportunities for those who experience these psychological illnesses.²⁶¹ Treated as a social taboo, and thus, avoided in conversations, Dhabitah addresses the questions posed by those around her about her decision to study psychology:

I wanted to rip open
The blanket of prejudice
And discrimination
That has been covering my
Body since birth
Delaying my own persecution.²⁶²

The image of the blanket, often associated with feelings of security, is described here as a source of comfort to society. Depression, from the perspective of the poet, is described as 'feeling uncomfortable in your own skin'. Coupled with imposed shame, as the poet later finds out, the depression soon manifests its effects on her skin: 'It was around then I realized / The rashes and scratch marks / On my skin came from the blanket.' In her poems, the skin is clear and smooth in its original or healed state, but the negative effects of prejudice are responsible for the markings left on it. By removing the blanket, the poem proceeds to show how acknowledging the issue is the first step to acquiring self-empowerment and changing the perception of people regarding mental illnesses:

²⁶¹ Ainul Nadhirah Hanafiah and Tine Van Bortel, 'A qualitative exploration of the perspectives of mental health professionals on stigma and discrimination of mental illness in Malaysia', *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*, 9 (2015), p. 2.

²⁶² Zainal, p. 12.

I want to live.
 Be happy in being helplessly unhappy
 Outside of my control.
 Be brave in telling myself that this is just a
 human condition,
 meaning I still qualify as a person
 and change isn't out of the question.

In her other piece entitled 'How to Woman'²⁶³, Dhabitah describes how society imposes and constrains the value of a woman based on her physicality. Structured in the form of two sets of instruction, the first set is narrated by society and her mother while the second one is an attempt to revise the first instruction according to her own terms. One of the instructions given by the former pertaining to the image of skin dictates how much one is allowed to be seen by others: 'You see, the world isn't ready / for the blinding glow of your skin / so keep your lights dim. / That way no one would have to die / the way Icarus did.' Retaliating to this oppressive voice, Dhabitah stresses the importance of attending to the skin when she says 'you are supposed to nurse your bruises / until your bruises are skin again. / They are meant to be hold and be held / to feel and be felt.' She also responds in the second part of the poem:

Show as much or as little as you like
 but do not dim your light
 so that others can shine bright.
 Your glow is both the sunset and the sunrise
 A sight that is meant to behold, and they should know
 not to fly too close.

Closely related to skin is the motif of hands or what we regard as, aside from the act of brushing skin against skin, the main instruments one uses to

²⁶³ Dhabitah Zainal, *How to Woman*, online video recording, YouTube, 18 April 2017
 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqtFkzdT_r0> [accessed 30 November 2017]

give and receive the sense of touch. In the same poem by Dhabitah, hands are described as free beings that are not meant 'for chains or birdcages' but instead used to 'trace / the outline of your own body / no matter how big or small / how perfect or how flawed.' Within these lines, the poet states the importance of knowing one's body intimately i.e. accepting and loving it (rather than subscribing to the social mores and decorum provided by others) as part of being a woman. The hands, in this case, assume an active role and the poet uses them to create change.

Sometimes, these changes can be seen in the audience's reaction to a performance poem. Personally, it's always fascinating to observe the audience at a spoken word event, and I believe there is a gap in research to offer explanations as to why spoken word poetry is gaining popularity especially among the younger generation. These individuals would watch hours of poetry being recited in one seating, openly react to the pieces or nod quietly; some of them would engage with the poets afterwards and perhaps perform their own works at the next event. One performance poem that has repeatedly invoked a strong reaction from the audience due its provocative sensuality and use of tactility is Melizarani Selvakkumar's 'My Country is a Man'²⁶⁴. Set inside a closed room where the two characters i.e. the narrator and her country (visualised as a man) are in, the first few lines set the tone for the audience. She then describes the image of a woman's hands and fingers (the poet's) that are in control of the subject as well as the narrative: 'My country is a Man / He does not know love, / without being loved first / And I will trace history, / his story, with my fingers'.

Situating the poem within its context of time and space, the poem's provocative theme is designed to incite a reaction from the audience. Generally regarded as a social taboo and a topic that should be confined within the private sphere, sex and sexuality as themes do not make a regular appearance in the spoken word poetry. One might assume that this is also reflected in the history of traditional literature and orature in Malaysia, but a research study by Rahimah Hamdan on sexual expressions in Malay literature shows

²⁶⁴ Selva, pp. 14-19.

otherwise. What's interesting to note about her findings is that expressions of sexuality were first observed in the domain of oral literature. It is only in written literature where it is considered a violation of social decorum and an evidence of the author's poor morality.²⁶⁵ Treatments of sex in oral literature, however, is constructed within idea of literature as didactic. Thus, it is socially acceptable (if not welcomed) when it both entertains and educates. If we were to analyse the poem from this angle, Melizarani does achieve balance by representing Malaysia as a virile man who physically engages and reacts to the poet's sexual touch.

Referring to our earlier discussion on tactility, Melizarani takes advantage of the sensation of touch and the simultaneous effects of kinaesthetic imagery by shifting the audience's role from passive watching/listening into a form of voyeurism. This view has been also been shared by the journalist Elena Koshy who covered If Walls Could Talk's 1st anniversary gig, where she describes the experience as feeling "a little voyeuristic as the audience find themselves privy to the performer's emotions and state of mind".²⁶⁶ By using both third person and first-person pronouns, the audience realises that they are watching the lovemaking happening in real time from the perspective of a narrator who wants them to be there:

His lips move to the rhythm
of every national anthem, barely sung
before parting to my finger
touching the tip of his tongue
Rolling out speeches
that make other tongues wag

Using words like 'trace', 'outline', 'run', 'trail', 'press', 'caress', 'slide', and 'circle', the female persona maintains skin on skin contact with her male lover

²⁶⁵ Rahimah Hamdan, 'The King Who Loves Sex: The Functions of Literature in Traditional Malay Poetry', *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, 5 (2015), 291-98, (p. 291).

²⁶⁶ Elena Koshy, 'Poetry in Motion', *Elena Koshy*
<<https://elenakoshy.com/2017/01/07/poetry-in-motion/>> [accessed 30 August 2016]

from the beginning until the end and calmly watches the man's increasingly urgent physical responses to her touch. Here, the narrator takes over what is socially understood as the male or dominant role in the narrative of a nation. Where a country is often referred to as motherland, the role switches from the feminine to the masculine. The poet uses this to emphasise the state of a nation that is often decided by a select few and dominated by a patriarchal ideology of war and aggression. There is an absence of description pertaining to the female speaker's own body, focusing instead on the act of traversing this revised landscape of the male body. She delicately balances between the voice of the maternal and the sensual, focusing on using her fingers and hands to heal and understand a nation that struggles:

And I will circle his scars
that marks each battle he has won and lost
through the ages
scraped knees from when he crawled
bruised shins from his every fall
the boyish risks he took to fracture an economy
and the bullying, that
shaped his firm legs for greater strides forward
though he always takes two footsteps back

The sensuously feminine and sexual aspect of this tactile communication reaches its peak i.e. main objective, which is in her words, to reach 'a compromise'. What began as a sexually charged poem becomes a love poem, and to an extent, a political poem addressed to her country: 'Though we know it's a temporary win-win situation / we will hug and try over and over in anticipation / Hoping that we never get it right / At least not the first 56 times.' By symbolically engaging in an intimate act, one that is regarded as a taboo when addressed openly, with her personified country, the poet echoes the political slogan commonly expressed among feminists: the personal is political. At the end of the poem, the didactic approach is realised when the audience is again reminded that this poem essentially concerns itself with the

idea of intimacy. Just as a relationship is grounded upon mutual understanding, one's relationship with their country is built upon principles that do not oppress one another. The poet may have begun by luring the audience into a false sense of voyeurism but ended with acknowledging their presence, bringing into focus issues pertaining to the often-problematic images of patriotism and nationalism from the perspective of the female poet.

Another variation of audience participation can be seen in Jamal Raslan's poem 'Human Lens'²⁶⁷. Here, he uses the image of hands to highlight the theme of isolation in the midst of technological advancement and individualism:

We live in an age where a screen is more sensitive to touch than
our skin
and we are more sensitive to sensitivities than holding our own
kin
people touching screens to connect globally with another
but still think twice before holding hands with a different colour
the days of shaking hands and touching cheeks
are replaced by accepting friends to update the Family Tree
the friendly nudge is now the fb poke
and a status like is the last time you actually spoke

The poem features words such as 'touch', 'first-hand', 'skin deep', 'naked', 'strip' and 'contact' to emphasise face-to-face communication. In the poem, he describes how the real commodity of value lies in the personal interaction between individuals. Emphasising this, he pauses the flow of his delivery to directly ask the audience several questions: 'But what if I put my hand out first?' and 'Would you reach out to me?'. In his performances of this poem, I have observed how the parts where the questions are posed are often recited in a much slower pace compared to the pace he follows in the rest of the poem. Along with the change in tempo, he also accompanies them with the

²⁶⁷ Jamal Raslan, 'Human Lens', in *The Malchin Testament*, ed. by Malachi Edwin Vethamani (Petaling Jaya: Maya Press, 2017), pp. 97-99.

gesture of offering his hands to touch and be touched. Although Jamal may not be asking for an answer from the audience, the questions he poses do require an answer. Whether or not the individuals in the audience responds is entirely up to them due to the subjectivity of poetry in general. The more important point is that the questions were raised.

The Seer, The Seen and the Sense of Sight

None of us wanted to go back to the gray, chill, militaristic silence, to the intellectual void – to the land without poetry – to the spiritual drabness. We wanted to make it new and we wanted to invest in the process of it as we went into it. We wanted voice and we wanted vision.

Michael McClure²⁶⁸

This imagery of the hand and its sense of touch cannot be separated from the body part associated with sight i.e. the eyes. Continuing from Jamal Raslan's perspective on how the use of technology in communication such as the handphone and the television can obstruct one's sight or as he puts it, the human lens, there is a common theme revolving around how one's society is often too quick to judge based on how they see others.

Focusing only on what is visually accessible without intending to see what is present beneath the skin, the human lens then become a dynamic tool of sight, one that allows the poet to differentiate the valuable from the valueless without the assistance of limiting technological devices and ultimately, see the individuals in the audience for who they really are: 'So what if I think with my heart / listen with my eyes / speak with my hands / see with my mind / I will get you.' Not only that, it also suggests that the sense of sight does not operate solely as a way of seeing things as they are but also to go beyond what is merely physical or on the surface.

²⁶⁸ Neil Genzlinger, 'Michael McClure, Present at Beat Poetry's Birth, Dies at 87'. *New York Times*, 6 May 2020 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/06/books/michael-mcclure-dead.html>> [accessed 14 May 2020]

This multisensory act of seeing with the human lens can also be observed in his other poem 'Motorcycle Diaries'.²⁶⁹ While 'Human Lens' presents a conversation between the poet and the audience; this piece narrates the story of a biker commonly referred to as a Mat Rempit. Regarded as a nuisance and a social ill in Malaysia, these Malay bikers are commonly seen and heard racing or travelling in large groups at night:

You know he's fly when his hair dyed and Brylcream-ed to
spike,
And the only thing he ever thinks about is 'balik sekolah' and
his own motorbike.
Don't bother with the fact that he's too young to get a license
but still wants to ride.

Using his 'human lens', Jamal shifts between what the audience often sees, hears about and associates with the Mat Rempit stereotype and the invisible imagery that are not openly discussed in society. Oppressive images of a broken family and low-cost flats are offered as contrasts to the freedom of racing in the streets, the only place where the male character has control. The character is then presented not as a problem but rather a victim, which according to Jamal, is rooted in the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970. Implemented by the second Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Abzul Razak, after the racial riots of 1969, the New Economic Policy (or Dasar Ekonomi Baru) was aimed at fostering national unity by eradicating poverty and the identification of ethnicity with economic wealth. Later abolished and replaced by the NDP or New Development Policy in 1990, the policy had ironically contributed to the further marginalisation of the very people (i.e. the Malays) that the policy was first implemented to assist. Rajah Rasiah and Ishak Shari's detailed research findings corroborate with the general assumption that the NEP may have briefly decreased poverty and economic inequality (specifically the Malays) but cronyism and deregulation led to further tensions

²⁶⁹ Jamal Raslan, 'Motorcycle Diaries', in *The Malchin Testament*, ed. by Malachi Edwin Vethamani (Petaling Jaya: Maya Press, 2017), pp. 100-104.

from the 1990s onwards.²⁷⁰ Interestingly, the rempit phenomenon reached its peak in the 1990s as well. In the poem, Jamal speaks as the observer except for the part when the main character takes over and directly engages with the audience in an angry, frustrated tone:

“Apa yang dasar hah?! Apa yang baru?!
 Kita baca suratkhbar diaorang baca buku
 Kita beristighfar diaorang nyanyi lagu
 Kita berlapar diaorang buat tak tahu
 Kita terbiar diaorang tak ambik tahu
 Cuma mahu rumah besar-besar dalam hutan batu.
 Berjuta-juta, beribu-ribu setiap satu
 Hei ini bukan negara engkau sorang beb!
 Ini pun negara aku!
 Ini negaraKu!
 Tanah tumpahnya darahku,
 rakyat hidup bersatu dan maju...”²⁷¹

The use of Bahasa Malaysia in this part of the poem is interpreted as a strategy to emphasise the association of the Mat Rempit stereotype as a Malay male youngster. In the performance of the piece, the accent and intonation used by the poet is familiar to the urban speech of the Malay working class community in Kuala Lumpur. The speech act of using the pronouns ‘kita’ (we) and ‘mereka’ (them) suggests the criticism of the economic divide that still exists regardless of the efforts taken by the government during the NEP implementation period. One may speculate the identity of ‘mereka’ in this poem but the switch from the collective pronouns ‘kita’ and ‘mereka’ to ‘aku’

²⁷⁰ Rajah Rasiah and Ishak Shari, ‘Market, Government and Malaysia’s New Economic Policy, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 25 (2001), 57-78.

²⁷¹ In the published version of the poem, Jamal provides the translation of these lines as follow: What policy? What new? / We read papers while they read books / We sing prayers while they sing songs / We sit in hunger while they go out shopping / We patiently wait while they disregard us / We are left to die while they ignore us / Only want large houses in concrete jungle / Millions, thousands each / Hei this isn’t your country alone! It is my country too! / This is my country! / The country I bleed for / People live in unity and progress.

(I) and 'engkau' (you) as well as using the verses from the national Malaysian anthem, create the effect of having the persona personally addressing the audience, who may or may not have existing common prejudice against the *mat rempit*. The narrator then returns to his original role of telling a story and the imagery of sight and eyes is used to show the difference between seeing and *seeing*, in this case, the humanisation of a one-dimensional stereotype:

All you know is that you see him everywhere
 But you'll never look at him in the eye because he'll stare
 At the junctions, traffic lights, on the roads in late nights
 Chasing the brake lights
 Into the twilight
 Out of sight.

A parallel approach can also be observed in the poem 'Whore'²⁷² by Azam Rais. Just as Jamal challenges social prejudices directed towards the *mat rempit*, Azam gives a voice to another marginalised individual i.e. the working girl in Kuala Lumpur. In both poems, names are not given as their stories are the focus of the poem. Another possible reason behind the use of nameless characters is to allow the audience to potentially identify with some aspects of the character.²⁷³ While Jamal narrates from the point of view of an observer, Azam directly engages with the woman who had approached him while he was 'walking down the street the other night'. Offering her company for the evening, Azam refused but began a conversation with the character, who then proceeded to tell her story:

She said, "Sir, don't be so quick to judge a girl
 Listen close and listen well for my story, I will tell
 See I was just 16 when I met this boy
 I thought I found love but all he found was a toy

²⁷² Azam Rais, 'Whore', *TehHalia.my*, 23rd December 2016
 <<https://tehhaliamy.podbean.com/e/poet-x-04-used-and-abused/>> [accessed 7 June 2017]

²⁷³ Suzanne Keen, 'A Theory of Narrative Empathy', *Narrative*, 4 (2006), 207-236 (p. 217).

And like the pages of a book, he was an educated crook
 And oh, how he broke into my body but my heart is what he took
 Now don't have me mistook coz my bed he still shook
 And every time he did so, I had him mistook
 Coz in my head, his love was something new
 But in his bed, my love was nothing new
 And this went on for a month or two
 I thought I found love and I thought he found it too
 But alas, I was too obtuse
 coz he only wanted me for his own use

Written and performed in a loose form of the rhyming couplet, the use of end rhymes guides the audience in what can be considered, when compared to the other pieces discussed in this study, a particularly long piece. His performance of the piece also follows a consistent rhythm and pace, one which he sustains until the end of the poem. It produces a lulling, almost comforting effect which then creates a contrast when compared to the story of the woman, whose unfortunate circumstances led her to becoming an extremely marginalised sub-group of women in Malaysia. In my interview with him, Azam explains how his intention behind writing the piece was to offer the audience a reminder that there is not much difference between the female character in the poem with everyone who is listening and especially the poet himself. 'In a way, we are all prostituting ourselves.'

But what is an easily ignored fact is that the female prostitute in the poem has been abused not only by the men in her life but by society as well. Rahimah Hamdan argues that what began as the elevated and important status of women in Islam has been manipulated into the current existing social stereotype of women as illogical, weak and submissive. In the Malay community, this is extended to the importance placed on their female members' chastity as a symbol of the family's honour. An unmarried woman who is not a virgin is then regarded as dirty, worthless and a source of shame

to her family.²⁷⁴ The men tend to receive less backlash from their families. In most cases, they are often absent from the discussion altogether. Prostitutes, as represented in the voice of the woman in Azam's voice, are regarded as those who inhabit the lowest levels of the community and are destined to suffer discrimination throughout their lives. It is only at the near end of his performance that the woman tells the narrator not to judge her world (i.e. prostitution) too quickly before sharing her perspective on life:

Oh, look how the clever sell their brains
 and looks are by the vain.
 Look how these poets sell their pain
 but you buy it all the same.
 Look how the strong sell their backs
 and the willing sell their sex.
 Look how the singers sell their tracks
 and politicians sell their facts.
 Man look how the mighty rule the meek
 and the bright fool the bleak.
 Oh, how every day we sell our souls
 to corporations that buy us whole.

The repetition of the word 'look' is important because it pushes the audience to see what most choose to ignore, which is the fact that every individual offers something that is considered valuable in exchange for social recognition or acceptance. Furthermore, the repetitive use of the word functions as a directive, a physical gesture that forces the audience to see the reality that one often neglects as it reveals the underlying tensions rooted in gender and economic inequality.

The ending of the poem then provides the lesson to the audience through these lines: 'She said, "Sir, if it's truth I have told / then truth I will tell. / We are all whores in this world / We only choose which parts to sell."' Using

²⁷⁴ Hamdan, p. 292.

the pronoun 'we' instead of 'I' and 'you', the perspective of the female sex worker as different from the speaker and the audience is shifted. What began with how society views her is now replaced with how she views the world. What is interesting to note, is how the poem treats the woman's physical attractiveness as a two-sided coin. How it is both a curse and a blessing because it was her physicality that led her into prostitution, but it is also her only means of survival especially after being ostracised by her family and the society. The voice of the woman in Azam's poem transitions from a victim of objectification to a subject who is in control of her narrative. The sense of sight corresponds to the themes of female discrimination as seen in the objectification and commodification of beauty almost to an ironic degree because it was also her looks that were highlighted by the poet in the beginning.

There appears to be a distinction between the ways male and female spoken word poets use the sense of sight in their writings. In Jamal Raslan, Azam Rais and Jack Malik's poems, they describe in detail what they see and observe around them with minimal reference to how they are seen by others. The complete opposite, however, can be found in the works of their female contemporaries who narrate the experiences of being subjected to different degrees of discrimination or mistreatment in society for the body that they are in. John Berger, in his book *The Art of Seeing*, dedicated a whole chapter to discuss the differences between how a male and a female views the world. According to him, a man's presence is viewed in relations to the power that he embodies. In his discussion, which echoes Donna Haraway's theory of situated knowledges discussed in the beginning of the thesis, he addresses how the male gaze represents the objectification of the female body. While the male individual's physical features are neither associated to his thoughts and ideas nor affect how society perceives him, the female presence is significantly exteriorised by those around her. This means that a woman views herself from the perspective of society; its mores and expectations resulting in the female individual who:

... expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her. Her presence is manifest in her gestures, voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, taste – indeed there is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence. Presence for a woman is so intrinsic to her person that men tend to think of it as an almost physical emanation, a kind of hear or smell or aura.²⁷⁵

The preoccupation with a woman's body and its parts ultimately resulted in a split self where she is constantly conscious of how she looks and how she is regarded. Mirroring this way of looking, the narratives that dominate the works of women spoken word poets revolve around the act of addressing, responding to or overcoming such struggles formed by the sexualisation and objectification of the feminine. For example, in the performance of 'Singa Ladies' (a title that can be roughly translated as lioness) by Yohanna Yusrinal, the audience is promptly presented with the image of untamed, curly hair as seen through the eyes of a disapproving male observer:

Rambut keritingnya berwarna
Balik rumah pukul tiga
Bedtimanya waktu senja
Tak sembahyang pula (sigh)
Inilah pengaruh barat ibunya.

Haram

Haramnya anak Ina!²⁷⁶

To the Malaysian audience, there is a general understanding that the female hair or more specifically the visibility of Muslim female hair has been

²⁷⁵ Yohanna Yusrinal, 'Singa Ladies', *TehHalia.my*, 29 May 2017

<<http://tehhalia.my/ruminate-yohanna-yusrinal/>> [accessed 7 June 2017]

²⁷⁶ Translation is my own: Her curly hair is coloured / Came back home at three a.m. / Her bedtime is during dusk / Did not even pray / This is her Western mother's influence / Sinful / Ina's daughter is so sinful!

the subject of public scrutiny since the 1980s. Traditionally used as a symbol of modesty and privacy, the veil has been a subject of study by a number of scholars who explored the multiple implications of associating the veil with one's faith amongst Muslim women across the globe.²⁷⁷ In Malaysia, there has been an increasing embracing of the veil (also known locally as *hijab* and *tudung*) for the past three decades observed in the proliferation of visual representations of the veiled Malay woman in mass media.

Although the wearing of the veil remains solely the choice of the individual, researchers have pointed out how the covering of hair has become a cultural identifier as well as a gauge of a woman's morality and faith within the Malay community. Rafidah Khalid in her study on the representation of Muslim women in Malaysia, explains how the veil is designed to separate the interior/private and exterior/public sides of the female body.²⁷⁸ The effects of this ranges from the positive to the negative. Those who opt to wear the veil may feel empowered by it or feel a sense of belonging within the community. Others may feel constrained by the society's expectations on how a veiled woman should behave in public. Most of the discrimination, however, is directed against women who choose not to cover their hair.

Returning to Yohanna's poem, her coloured hair quickly leads to a description of a misbehaving young woman influenced by her Western mother. This criticism, made by a character in the poem referred to as 'pakcik' (a common title given to an older man as a show of respect), hints again at a cultural perception that a woman's failure to cover her modesty is inevitably linked to her immorality. The additional use of the word *haram*, which is a term loaded with the Malay cultural-religious values cinches the disapproval. In response, the poet replies in English and Bahasa Malaysia, her choices of language inform the audience of the two cultures she was brought up in as well as the social group that the character 'pakcik' represents in the poem.

²⁷⁷ For the purpose of this study, I have decided to access findings from researches conducted by Rafidah Khalid, Shahreen Mat Nayan, Zulkifli Abd. Latiff, Nurzihan Kassim and Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi. All these studies were published in the last six years, reflecting a modern view on the subject.

²⁷⁸ Rafidah Khalid and Maria O'Connor, 'The Hijab: Representation among the Muslim Women in Malaysia', in *The Second Asian Conference on Arts and Humanities*, (Osaka: 27-30 May 2011).

She describes her hair as messy and confused, which is but a physical part of her that does not represent her religious identity. Through the use of synecdoche, she parodies the man's inability to look past her physical appearance:

Kau ingat aku tiada hala tuju
 Seperti rambutku yang kusut dan keliru
 Pakcik lah yang keliru
 Kenapa rambut ini menyempitkan ruang
 Tanpa sebarang keampunan?
 Kenapa rambut ini migrasi
 dari country ke country
 tak pergi universiti
 hanya berpuisi
 tak reti dibela tetapi pakcik tahu
 aku tak suka kucing
 Takpe lah pakcik,
 I will just update you on Facebook.
 Manalah hala tuju rambutku hari ini
 This hair (pause)
 is everywhere²⁷⁹

The motif of hair continues as she describes herself as a lioness and the elder man as a sheep. The change of visual reference (from 'misbehaving woman' to 'lion') is a strategy opted by the writer to subvert the male character's perception of her. What is seen as a flaw is now equated to an untamed, strong disposition. She also mentions the support of other lions or 'singa ladies', which is in itself an ironic use of contrasting image i.e. the beastly and majestic lions (singa) and the civilised and feminine denotations of ladies.

²⁷⁹ Translation is my own: You assume that I am lost / just like my messy, confused hair / but you are the confused one / why must this hair narrow your mind / Without a glimpse of forgiveness? / Why does this hair migrate from one country to another / not attending university / but to write and perform poetry / unkempt but you know / that I am not a fan of cats / It's okay pakcik / I will just update you on Facebook. / I wonder where will my hair go today / This hair (pause) is everywhere.

At the end of the poem, the response returns to the judgment placed on her non-Malay mother:

You are not a moving ornament for them
 to stare at from a safe distance
 Get out of those cages
 they so desperate want to keep you in
 See a lion is not made for solitary life.
 A lion is born in social structures
 created by the females
 who group their young together
 to teach them how to be the change hunters.
 Ini lah pengaruh ibuku²⁸⁰

Note that there are no mentions of words relating to the image of the *hijab/tudung* in her poem. It is a given i.e. one that both the performer and the audience are well aware of. The issue has never been about a piece of cloth but rather the judgmental eyes that insist on keeping the female body well within the socially accepted standards of the feminine. Another example of female poets addressing the theme of female modesty can be seen in the collaborative piece entitled 'Corrective Couture', which was written and performed by Melizarani Selvakkumar, Elaine Foster and myself. Assuming the personas of the moral gatekeepers, the three poets provide a set of instructions and services that will help women 'dress to conform' regardless of what cultural background they are from:

The measure of a woman is not just her frame,
 It is the entire package
 Her mind, body and ability to be tamed.
 Our fabric is weaved from the finest social expectations
 Stitched with ordained obligations
 Cut from the silhouette of the perfect woman.
 No more indecent exposure!

²⁸⁰ Translation is my own: This is my mother's influence

Now listen, we will give you complete disclosure.

The use of female voices to present such guidelines can also be interpreted as another layer of meaning attached to the performance piece. Judith Butler in her essay on gender performativity, recalls Simon Beauvoir's theory on the distinction between 'gender' and 'woman':

To be female is, according to that distinction, a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project.²⁸¹

As observed in many societies, women themselves can be strong advocates of what and how the ideal woman should behave or present themselves. As narrated in this particular poem, the three personas are then providing directions to its fictional female clients on how to strategically present themselves in society. Performed in an exaggerated and satirical tone, the myriad of rules and guidelines that a Malaysian woman is expected to 'act' in exchange for social acceptance becomes a parody from the length of her skirt, to the choice of her shoes and even the accessory on her forehead, the female body's constant objectification and manipulation to please the male gaze borders on the absurd:

Chest out, suck in, butt out, back straight, don't try to breathe.
Close your legs, speak softly, be humble, bow down, walk
behind, walk backwards, sit down, sit at the back, lie down,
don't move, think of England, don't enjoy it, don't desire, don't
want, don't feel anything at all, take it like a man, don't scream

²⁸¹ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal*, 40 (1988), 519-31 (p. 522).

like a girl, cry like a baby, just accept your fate, don't question,
don't argue, don't dream, apply cream

Most importantly, Butler views the existing tendencies to categorise and define as patriarchal i.e. to impose control. Hence, she stresses the importance of avoiding the traditional gender binary i.e. male and female as it limits the agency of the individual. Instead, she encourages focusing on the 'diverse experiences of women that is being expressed and still needs to be expressed'.²⁸² In other words, the personal human narrative (along with its idiosyncrasies) should take centre stage as it offers the opportunity for the invisible to be seen. As discussed in the previous chapter, corporeality allows the spoken word poet to discuss a variety of contemporary concerns that they see occurring in their society. Through the use of rhetorical and literary devices, the primary aim of these performed texts is to guide the audience to see, feel, taste and smell the world that both the performer and the audience are in. While some of the works mentioned remain in the domain of the personal, the other poets have attempted to impart a sense of right and wrong regarding social issues that are familiar and relevant through the shared narratives.

The Embodied Voice

To hear a poem is to experience its momentary escape from the prison cell of the page, where silence is enforced, to a freedom dependent only on the ability to open the mouth – that most democratic of instruments – and speak.

Billy Collins²⁸³

²⁸² Butler, p. 531.

²⁸³ Billy Collins, 'Poems on the page, Poems in the air', in *The Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip-Hop, & the Poetry of a New Generation*, ed. by Mark Eleveld (Illinois: Sourcebooks Inc., 2003), pp. 3-5.

Continuing with our exploration of how spoken word poets' use of the body as a literary trope, there appears to be less reference to voice as part of the corporeal experience of spoken word poetry even when the production of voice is in itself a three-stage process that involves multiple parts of the body i.e. the vocal folds, the lungs, abdominal muscles, chest muscles, and the rib cage.²⁸⁴ The act of performance is a real-time, temporal utilisation of voice observable to the audience so most may not find it necessary to make references to it in their works. Poets may use similes and metaphors regarding the sounds that we hear around us (auditory imagery) but less when it comes to describing one's voice or how one sounds like. But voice does not exist without the body.

Isabelle Arvers in her study on the essential role of the human voice in the digital universe discusses the unique position of voice as both the incorporeal and corporeal representations of the self: 'Voice reflects the idea of alterity and the relationship to another person. Voice is the simultaneous presence and absence of human corporeality. Voice is the content and the meaning in language but also the sound of a person and their body through time and space.'²⁸⁵ The interplay between voice and honesty can be found repeatedly in his poems along with the process of finding means to locate them both. One of the means he uses to do this is by referring to the works of others, in a bid to find similarities with his own. Below is the beginning of one of his more well-known performance pieces:

every day i hitch-hike other people's metaphors
in search of a place to settle down
and call it my own.

i travel from day to day. through pages and stages:
sometimes i forget this is malaysia;

²⁸⁴'Understanding Voice Production', *The Voice Foundation*

<<http://voicefoundation.org/health-science/voice-disorders/anatomy-physiology-of-voice-production/understanding-voice-production/>> [accessed 15 October 2017]

²⁸⁵ Isabelle Arvers, 'Cheats or Glitch?: Voice as a Game Modification in Machinima', in *Voice: Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media*, ed. by Norie Neumark, Ross Gibson and Theo Van Leeuwen (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2010), pp. 225-42 (p. 234).

you can't kerouac your way out of this,
 so my thumb sticks out like an orange cone
 that's been left on the road, down by the side of the highway;
 whether i'm gripping a microphone
 or holding a book
 nobody stops.²⁸⁶

The poems written and performed by Jack Malik, however, show a particular interest in voice as a conduit for the corporeal nature of performance text. His involvement in the local scene comes at a time when poetry slams and poetry open mics have become a regular feature. Over a timeline of only two years, he has garnered attention from his contemporary practitioners for his eagerness to perform as well as a style of delivery that emphasises more the sound of words rather than depending solely on narratives.²⁸⁷ Another observation is his search for a voice of his own and how he utilises the performative nature of the artform to transform the 'search' into a physical act. In one poem, Jack informs the audience that he is unsure if he is speaking in his own voice even when he is performing:

i wanted to have metaphors that are made up of my breath
 every time i get up behind a microphone, and the image
 of truth is the howl that comes from my voice but, most
 of the time i can only hear echoes of myself, a sound
 i'm still learning to recognise.

This approach to voice recalls an earlier discussion on the importance of sincerity in spoken word poetry and the problematic prevalence of the 'slam voice'. From the researcher's experience, there is an inclination to adopt the style made popular by British and American spoken word poets in the first few years of spoken word poetry in Malaysia. But this has been replaced with a

²⁸⁶ Jack Malik, p. 1

²⁸⁷ In the interview with Jack, he admits that this is a direct influence of AGI, who is known for making meaning through the making of sounds in his performance.

variety of delivery styles that lean more towards experimenting with voice. In Jack's search for the metaphorical voice, I recognise a similar process of observing and learning other poets' style; all the while aware that their styles may not complement one's own:

there are times even i do not recognise the body
of language that dances on
the map of my tongue

i saw cars pass by me like words drove past me
as i looked across the imageries from all poets before me
as well as those that came after

riding on their own voices;

During the interview conducted with the poet, Jack considers the extensive resources available as one of the primary challenges faced by the younger spoken word poets. Citing Saul Williams, he agrees that the current poets overly consume without considering the importance of selection and end up sounding similar to one another. According to him, 'the challenge is how to pick the pieces and become you.' From the point of view of the researcher, this search for self contributes to Jack Malik's use of voice as a motif in his works where the challenge becomes part of the process. Mentioned in his latest chapbook, he describes this process of writing as an exploration of intertextuality i.e. a term introduced by Julia Kristeva in 1961 pertaining to how texts are inherently influenced and referential to existing texts.²⁸⁸ In the example given below, Jack cites names of local bilingual writers who write (not all of them are spoken word poets) and incorporate popular lines from their works, and by doing so making his individual voice a metaphorical extension of the others before him:

²⁸⁸ In Julia Kristeva's groundbreaking research, she proposes that text comprises of the rearrangement, intersection and commingling of several texts, in which they continuously counteract one another in a dialogic manner. Read Kristeva "Word, Dialogue and Novel" and "The Bounded Text" for further study of the term.

kepada salleh ben joned
 kepada mohd jayzuan
 kepada jamal raslan
 kepada melizarani t. selva
 kepada mimi morticiaaaaaaaaaa

and the lovely, sheena baharudin

kepada ariff naqiuddin
 azizan afi dhabitah
 zainal enbah nilah
 yohanna yusrinal
 faadhi fauzi kasvisini
 muniandy khaleeja
 suhaimi & ramai ramai
 lagi

kepada mereka dibawah bongkah iceberg

underground wizards that conjure words
 like abra cadabra like potter slaying
 avada kadavara like not deatheaters but
 poetry-consumers jacking mics stealing spotlights yang mereka

muntah
 jatuh
 bangkit
 hidup
 mati
 menjadikan diri embodiment of syair ditanjikan dibelakang

mikrofon-

mikrofon–
 mikrofon–
 mikrofon–

Peppered with uses of quoted lines, allusion and translation from other texts, they accompany his repeated search for a metaphorical voice. In the interview, he expresses the state of not knowing and although aware that he does write in a distinctive voice to a certain degree, still finds himself questioning it:

i choose to wear your voice
 over my howling silence.

and for every sajakjakjak atau setiap rindu atau voice menjerit bisu
 mencari
 salakan qudusnya adalah kau disisiku mempercayai on the road
 perjalananku
 mengejar bayang suaara that is still so elusive to me.

seperti
 suara
 yang
 belum
 aku
 jumpa.²⁸⁹

Ironically, it is this very method of self-exploration that gives the poet a distinctive voice in the contemporary local spoken word scene. As explained by Ong, this process of intentional 'borrowing, adapting, sharing, the common,

²⁸⁹ Translation is my own: 'and for every poem-em-em or every missing or voice screaming in silence looking for its holy howls is you beside me, believing on the road of my journey chasing after shadows of voice that is still so elusive to me. / like / the voice / that / I have not / found.'

originally oral, formulas and themes'²⁹⁰ is inherently tied to the tradition of storytelling. In the case of the *penglipurlara*, the notion of originality does not exist simply because the stories (*sans* author) have been passed down from one generation to another. Variations in their delivery or content are not frowned upon but rather understood as the storytellers' way of injecting their own style into the stories as those noted by Braginsky in classical Malay written literary works, where poems of Hamzah Fansuri were quoted and paraphrased (at times without even crediting the original writer) by other poets after him.²⁹¹ The oral/aural roots of the society may have then contributed to such practices observed in the literary scene. Intertextuality, as explained by Kristeva, also includes the readers in its process of meaning-making. Considering how influential Hamzah Fansuri was in his time, the readers' ability to recognise and appreciate the Fansuri references made in the works of the other writers reflect the effectiveness of the writers' intentional or unintentional intertextuality in their works.

In the poetry of Jack Malik, the readers/audience, depending on their knowledge of the other poets mentioned in the poems, may or may not notice the direct and indirect references made. From the point of view of the researcher, however, his clear use of intertextuality does effectively enhance the poet's theme of the embodied voice. In a number of poems, Jack describes voice either in relation to another person, as a sound ('howl'), a word ('my voice is the word frustration', 'an antonym') or as an object ('a blank book with no space left', 'a page filled with so much scribbles'). Poems in both Bahasa and English contain references to voice as a coveted object, one that the poet searches in the voices of other poets. Weaved with his own, he cites lines from works written by other poets such as Jamal Raslan ('eyes / are not the first thing / they remember') and Dhabitah Zainal ('stars and satellites / fill up their / heavens while faith / was a search party down on earth/that wore the name / "poetry").

²⁹⁰ Ong, *Orality and Literary*, p. 131.

²⁹¹ Vladimir Braginsky, 'The Name and the Named; On the Extent of Hamzah Fansuri's Renown in the Malay Indonesian World', in *Knowledge, Language, Thought, and the Civilization of Islam: Essays in Honor of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas*, ed. by Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud and Muhammad Zainiy Uthman (Skudai: University of Technology Malaysia Press, 2010), pp. 365-438 (p. 381).

What makes his works distinct from his contemporaries is his vocal delivery, which is often marked by high speed recitation, staccatos of pauses positioned in different places in the poem, use of onomatopoeia, and the act of uttering the words according to their meaning. For example, the word ‘stutter’ was repeatedly forced out, silenced and syllables prolonged of his lips to produce disrupted speech experienced by anyone who struggles with a speech impairment.²⁹² When seen in their printed form, Jack’s poems are structured in a way that reflects their performed version to some degree. However, I have observed slight to clear changes in his performance of the poems due to verbal variability and other external factors common in spoken word poetry. In the excerpt below, we can see how the poem can be recited in a variety of ways thus hinting at the poet’s need to experiment with and push his vocal limits:

Sasterburuburu sasterangkat sasterjatuh sastergolek sasterlebih
sasterkurang sasterapaapasaja –

sastersassas
sastersassas
sasterassass

bersassas mengessas tersassas mensasssas
sassasskan assassssassass
sassssssssasssssaassssssssss

sastra sastera sas-ter-a sas-tera
sas-tra

ah! tulis jelah! sastra/sastera je pun!

The above poem, in its entirety, consists of the poet making modifications to the Bahasa word *sastera*, which means ‘literature’. The

²⁹² ‘Speak Easy 5: Beat Poetry’

decisions to stutter and break down the word into syllables offer multiple interpretations to the poem. One interpretation, made possible through its performance, is the rising sense of anxiety and hesitance the poet feels at the idea of fulfilling the traditional requirements of 'literature'. Another interpretation refers to the discussion we had earlier concerning the Malay notion of word as power. By breaking it down and taking away its meaning when uttered as a whole, the poet resists the established and elitist view of what is and what is not literature. This can be further observed at the end of the poem, where the poet finally voices out: "Ah! Just write! It's only literature," suggesting him overcoming the anxieties of producing works according to social and institutional expectations.

This statement echoes another point made by Walter Ong, in which 'originality' and 'creativity' are notions created by print culture, ones that have created further gap between one writer and those who produced in other media. As seen in the examples taken from Jack's works, he arranges his words and his lines to reflect their physical utterances. The use of punctuations, line breaks and capitalisation of letters are frequent. There is also an awareness that Jack Malik expresses in both his writing and performance, which is the limitations of his own experience i.e. he is part of a bigger group of voices that equally enhance the meaning of what life is and can be. As further explained by Ong, intertextuality refers to a literary and psychological commonplace where 'residually oral manuscript cultures tended to be of a proverbial sort, presenting not 'facts' but rather reflections, often of a gnomic kind, inviting further reflection by the paradoxes they involved.'²⁹³ For Jack Malik, the solutions or possible answers to his continuous questioning and doubt pertaining to the 'voice' sought in poetry, can be found by consciously referring to the works of his contemporary performers or how he puts it: to find me in everyone.

²⁹³ Ong, pp. 130-31.

Chapter Five: Excavating the Past, Imagining the Future

Stories have to be told or they die, and when they die, we can't remember who we are or why we're here.

Sue Monk Kidd²⁹⁴

It was stated early in the beginning of this research that the show *Pontianak* had shifted the researcher's perspective on the role of the spoken word poetry in the society as well as piquing the interest in how the practice can be situated within the Malaysian literary landscape. What the show *Pontianak* did to the spoken word poetry scene is to show the possibility of writing and performing in the English language without disregarding the cultural idiosyncrasies that make up the Malaysian worldview. It also showed that spoken word poetry is flexible in terms of its style and manner of delivery as opposed to adhering to a single conventional form of performing.

While the practice of spoken word poetry may have been introduced only a decade ago to promote the reading of literature and writings in English, the medium has since grown into one that responds to and negotiates with the country and its people. This chapter focuses on the poems that were written and performed especially for the *Pontianak* performance and asks the question: How do the poems in this ensemble performance differ from the works that have been discussed before and what do they contribute to the study of Malaysian Literature?

Revisiting Pontianak

If spoken word poetry is the art of telling one's personal story, then it also directly mirrors how one sees him or herself in relation to their communal as well as national identity. The strongest quality that links the poems in *Pontianak* together is their dialogic and syncretic approach to the artform.

²⁹⁴ Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees* (New York: Penguin, 2002), p. 107.

Each poet from the all-female cast of *Pontianak* contributed to the project from its conception to its final product, which is already different from usual solitary process of writing a personal experience into a spoken word poem. Originally produced for the Melaka Arts and Performance Festival, the original ensemble included me, Elaine Foster, Melizarani T. Selva, Illya Sumanto and Lian Low. Other poets who were featured in *Pontianak* included Nabila Najwa as Puteri Duyung, Mooza Mohd and theatre actress Sandee Chew who played the main character Pontianak.

Similar to the other poems, the theme of corporeality plays a strong role not only in the use of detailed descriptive language but the acting out of specific lines. This is observed in the manipulation of the saree in Melizarani's 'Draupadi,' where the poet addresses society's obsession with the sexual violence committed on this controversial heroine from the Mahabharata:

Everybody wants to talk about the rape.

everybody wants to talk about how
my saree was untied
 over and over and over again
 as gods and kings watched lustfully
while my body became the tapestry
 of a failed lineage²⁹⁵

The persona continues to describe how her body has been used as an object (inspiration for every Tamil movie sex scene / the poster girl for polygamy) or as a morality clause (prostitution is permissible if a whore mimics my dressing / sharing sex is acceptable / if my name is uttered as an example) even long after she has passed away. What should not have been remembered were remembered while the most important fact, according to Draupadi, which is to be acknowledged as a woman of flesh and bones was disregarded and forgotten. Her story touches on themes of gender

²⁹⁵ Melizarani T. Selva, 'Draupadi', in *Taboo: Poems* (Shah Alam: Perfect Binding, 2015), pp. 95-99.

discrimination and traditional gender roles within the Indian community. A woman, similar in other conservative cultures, is expected to fulfill the requirements as a daughter, wife or mother; which are all in relation to a male figure.

Thus, Draupadi wonders why her strengths have been forsaken when she could have 'saved the Mahabharata at least 50'000 shlokas / If I had been queen, / there would have been no war like Kurukshetra / no blood shed but my own / for the birth of a legacy.' The references are complex and layered but they aid in the creation of a fantastic world that would not have been possible without the use of these myths and stories. But for the audience who are familiar with the stories, listening to them would have assisted in their imagining of the narrative while for those who are unfamiliar with them, would have been able to remain interested in the unfolding of this character through its embodied text. The moral lesson, which Draupadi provides at the end of her tale, sums up the failure of her society to see past her physicality and urges the audience to remember her story to create change and avoid the same cycle of mistakes:

So, don't worship me on your knees
but make me a reflection
of your past and present
to build your future

Should you forget all that I have said
then stitch this into your memory:
The unclothing of a woman is the collapse of civilisation

Pontianak, the featured character in the ensemble performance, is one that is deeply infused in the Malaysian society regardless of which ethnic communities they are from.²⁹⁶ Described as a woman who died during

²⁹⁶ Illya Sumanto, 'Pontianak', in *Poems and Other Myths: A Collection of Spoken Word Poetry by Women from Asia* (Big Bridge Press, 2017), in *Big Bridge* <http://bigbridge.org/BB19/poetry/poemsandothermyths/Illya_Sumanto.html> [accessed 24 April 2018]

childbirth, the story of the pontianak (just like the others) is tragic in nature. But she is commonly identified as a monster who preys on human beings and creates havoc wherever she goes due to her uncontrollable rage and hunger. The pontianak that Illya imagined, however, is slightly different from the audience's assumption. Setting the stage for a story that revolves around the theme of death, she began her performance with a ritualistic gesture of offerings in the center front of the stage before reciting an English translated Qur'anic verse used by Muslims when they are informed of the passing of another human being, particularly those they know personally.

What follows after is her telling her side of the story i.e. what happened after she passed away and the circumstances that surround her untimely death. When her body was sent home, the scene described, presented in an angry tone, is rich with multi-sensorial imagery that are equally strange and familiar:

I saw my grandmother with her crooked, stained,
 reddish-black teeth, smiling in disbelief,
 as my body was carried home.
 She chewed her bitter judgement of my dead body
 and spat a thick dark quid off her tongue
 disgusted by my death
 as if the agony of my birth wasn't afflicting enough.
 I eyed the crowd
 Children running around not knowing what was going on,
 Nosy neighbours (one of them in a wheelchair)
 that would say
 "i will pray, for you"
 every time they don't agree with you.
 Orang 100 showed up too- occupant of the 100th house,
 an isolated mad widow of this value-centered small town
 Lit cigarettes on the lips of some familiar faces in the burning sun
 they stood by,
 Analysing the plot breaking down the scenes of

what, where, when, who, how and why
 With every bit of punctuation to engage in the story
 'intellectually' and emotionally-
 "She will be placed with witches and whores in hell
 and be burnt for all eternity"

It is an unforgiving sight i.e. a body of a woman who remains condemned by her society even after her death. The reason for this reaction was that she had committed the equally 'unforgivable' sins of having sex and conceiving out of wedlock. Justifying their condemnation of her, two references to mainstream cultural beliefs (which are relatively questionable, baseless and based on misinterpretation of religious references) were used by the people of her village. For a Malay Muslim, these references are all too familiar: that the female sex is by nature more inclined to sin, and thus there will be more women in hell than men.

Because God created sexual desire in 10 parts;
 9 were given to me
 and 1 to he
 They said
 Prophet Muhammad saw women in hell
 were more than there were men

In her performance of the piece, I should point out that the costume she wore i.e. a batik sarong and a white kebaya top, appearing as a classic Malay woman with her hair undone enhances this story of an innocent woman wronged. Compare this to the red, decadent look of the goddess Draupadi whose stories are of royalty and deities. Pontianak's story changes its tone when she confesses how her only mortal sin was to love a man, who did not love her back. When she discovers that she is pregnant, the man eventually leaves her for another woman. In the following excerpt, she converses with her scared unborn child, revealing yet another humanising feature of her personality that challenges the common image associated with the character::

The voice inside me told me "mother i can feel you there"
 "Mother, I'm sorry.
 I have your beautiful eyes, we can build our own traditions,
 Be a family"
 I said softly, "Yes my child, I promise we'll be together but just not here."

The tender scene ends and is replaced with a violent description of how she kills herself and her unborn child. Adding to the tragic theme of the story, she reveals her intention behind her action, which is: 'to abort this bastard baby / to prevent her potential misery.' To provide context to this decision, unwed mothers and their children born out of wedlock continue to be marginalised and heavily stigmatised by Malay Muslim society. It is a controversial topic, one that is often replaced by the sexualised representation of the pontianak. The narrative-driven poem, with its emphasis on the telling and the acting of the story, reminds the audience that the story of pontianak is a story of tragedy and loss. It humanises the character as one that returned to avenge the injustice that she had suffered in the hands of society simply for being a woman.

Elaine Foster's multi-layered performance piece entitled 'Medusa'²⁹⁷ appears to offer a different way of approaching this theme. Rather than ascribing to the traditional binary of the male gaze with its power to render the female body as powerless, the persona she embodies tells the audience how the powerful gift of sight she possesses is also the reason behind her tragic circumstances. In her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey argues that the female appearance has been coded to connote 'to-be-looked-at-ness'.²⁹⁸ In Foster's queer retelling, Medusa is a woman who is feared thus persecuted by the men in her community for two primary reasons. First, she has a pair of roving eyes that

²⁹⁷ Elaine Foster, 'Medusa', in *Poems and Other Myths: A Collection of Spoken Word Poetry by Women from Asia* (Big Bridge Press, 2017), in *Big Bridge*
 <http://bigbridge.org/BB19/poetry/poemsandothermyths/Elaine_Foster.html>
 [accessed 24 April 2018]

²⁹⁸ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16 (1975), 6-18.

‘could tear you open, / Rip you apart, for me to see, everything’ and ‘turn men into stone.’ The description of her eyes reveals the power she possesses:

Like a magnifying glass, reflecting all heavens and hells
 Burning, doubly glazed, two sided,
 one to enter, one to reflect,
 but never to exit.
 Mirrors reflecting mirrors,
 reflecting mirrors, reflecting mirrors,
 A cathedral of light, lost, and forever.

Second, these eyes are further described as mirrors, a literary trope used to symbolise the ability to access and offer truth beyond what is material. Their capacity to reflect light and create infinite images of oneself forces the person who stands in front of the mirror to see themselves for who they are and question not only what is real and unreal, but aspects of oneself that are usually ignored or hidden from others. As explained by Medusa, this effect of her gaze can be either empowering or debilitating:

Girls - Beautiful innocent and aged by experience
 Women, perfect, wise, wonderful, I celebrated their difference.
 My eyes were so notorious, boyfriends, husbands,
 All men were afraid when they saw me,
 And would hide their women folk away
 Avoiding my all seeing, all knowing, all penetrating, eyes.

Medusa’s eyes are transfixed upon women and the women respond to Medusa’s ability to ‘see them ... better than they can see themselves’ by succumbing to her seduction. These same pair of eyes however appear to be uninterested in men and unaffected by their presence. The combination of these two visuals i.e. her indifference to men and celebration of female differences appear to have left both physical and psychological effects on them. The reversal of power, from the disembodied male gaze to the fully embodied

Medusa renders the men impotent and invisible. In retaliation against this female agency and control of sight, they chose to hide their women from her.

The poem then proceeds to narrate the romantic story of Medusa and the goddess Athena. The motif of eyes is prevalent throughout, emphasising them being the window to one's souls. The lovers see in each other what others do not, reminding us once again how the female body has often been objectified and sexualised; isolated from emotional and spiritual interiors due to the presence of the male gaze. As shown in the excerpt below, the human experience is undeniably complex, dynamic and multisensory. Elaine guides the audience into this intimate space where sight, touch and kinesthetic images are merged into one:

And her body, her body was young and soft
 but I could sense her spirit was aged
 Aged hands worn from touching a thousand past lives
 that gave her the wisdom of an old sage.
 And when I held them, I'd trace her strong but fragile fingers
 from their tips to her wrists,
 Reading, as I went, the poetry that was etched
 Like braille, into her palms.
 She would twist the sinews of my soft tissue which
 Like therapy, released the pain,
 Massaging the weakest muscle in my body which was not my brain
 But my heart, hardened by a kind of emotional immobility.
 My tongue was grateful for the exercise
 to finally express freely.

Consumed with jealousy when Athena was forced to 'date the most eligible bachelor', Medusa isolated herself from everyone and remained so until the tragic violence of Athena's rape. Again, the sense of sight becomes the primal focus in the narrative. She became witness to the violence committed by the town's people and perhaps, disturbed by the truth reflected in her eyes; she was executed as well. Despite her death, the physical presence of the

narrator telling the story allows the audience to assume that Medusa is still alive. What is interesting to observe in the text is the juxtaposition of two extreme emotions depicted in her death.

On one side of the spectrum is the society's show of violence both to Athena and Medusa for their failure to conform to their established social conventions while the other side shows Medusa's choice to love and show forgiveness. Foster alludes to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross when Medusa prayed for her people, 'Forgive them for they know not what they do' in the moments close to her death. Interestingly, according to the late French philosopher and anthropologist Rene Girard, the word sacrifice connotes that the object of sacrifice, in its use as a sign of devotion to a higher being, makes the object itself sacred.²⁹⁹ This unexpected but effective comparison crystallises the motif of eyes, which in this context does include foresight as well. Her tragic ending did not end in her invisibility. Instead, her story remains visible and retold for centuries; her image turned into a symbol charged with different meanings according to those who behold them. Until today, Medusa tells the audience, her all-seeing eyes serve as a reminder of the lesson in her story. Her ultimate sacrifice is exchange for social change:

Remember this tragedy
And use it to change history,
Write your own story.
My love, I worship you and even in death,
we will never be apart.
I will watch over you.
The am that I am is you.

Medusa, specifically, stands out from the rest in terms of style and its reference to a western mythical persona. The poem Medusa can be seen as an example of what Quayum refers to as a dialogic and syncretic approach. Elaine Foster's choice of Medusa is understandable as it reflects her western heritage

²⁹⁹ Jan Garrett, 'Violence and the Sacred', *Western Kentucky University*,
<http://people.wku.edu/jan.garrett/violence_and_sacred.htm> [accessed 15 July 2017]

as well as allows her to address issues of prejudice, discrimination and the 'other'ing of the LGBTiQ community in Malaysia. Through the appropriation of Medusa's voice, the poet excavates the stories from the past and refashions it in a contemporary context for a contemporary audience. This particular type of approach or theme opens up a range of possibilities. Malaysia already has an extensive resource of myths, legends and folklore courtesy of the contributions made by the penglipurlara and the scribes before us. But one wonders if there is a local alternative to the Medusa myth and how it would have affected the performance if it was used. Additionally, if the current exploration of identity is somewhat influenced by the notion that Malaysians have yet to move on from the trauma of the 1969 racial riots, then perhaps the answer lies in maintaining one eye on the stories that have survived for centuries and the other on a mature, confident literary landscape in the future.

Thus, their use of historical, mythological and folklore references is functional i.e. to enhance the meaning of the poetic text. It is also symbolic because of the role of spoken word poetry to give voice to the marginalised or in this case, the very stories that have been forgotten or discarded in favour of others. These references may appear to be archaic or bound by the past, but the issues are contemporary and are still being discussed in the society today. As observed in Foster's performance of 'Medusa' and Selvakkumar's performance of 'Draupadi', their stories are not historical renditions of ancient Greek or Indian values but ones that are filtered through their contemporary understandings of their personal, communal and national identities. Combining these with the pieces' voice that advises, reprimands and questions the audience, the interactions conducted in real-time fulfill the definition of what didactic literature is.

Between the penglipurlara and the spoken word performer

This brings us, once again, to the ever-present question of this study: could there be a trace of a local predisposition to storytelling as a means of engaging with the society's ideas of culture and identity within this practice? Does the spoken word poet have an awareness of how stories do in fact shape

their realities? There is a fine line that exists between a folktale and a personal narrative, one that slightly shifts one's focus from the content to the teller of the story. In a personal narrative, the verity of the story depends on the assumption that it is both real and reveals the personality of its teller. A folktale, on the other hand, suggests the absence of a personality but that the story belongs in a communal realm and in a shared worldview as formed by its surrounding.

Referring again to Foley's system of classification, the performance of the *penglipurlara* conforms to the requirements of an *oral performance*. Closely mirroring the features of primary orality, these traditional storytellers receive their stories orally, memorise them through the repetitive utterances via metric and formulaic expressions, and perform these tales for the audience's visual and aural reception. They are not the authors of the stories but have the flexibility to include variations in the way the stories are told without affecting its main narrative structure. The stories have a specific function: a repository of cultural norms and ideas of right and wrong. storyteller does not write these stories but function instead as a repository of culture.

On the other hand, spoken word poets fulfil the requirements of *voiced texts*, which means that the texts are written, performed orally and received aurally. As the spoken word poet is a product of a literate community i.e. one that is fused with the idea of the scribe, spoken word poets apply 'verbatim memorisation', in which they return as often as necessary to the textual source until their mastery is perfected. Still, there are more notable similarities than differences.

The same devices are often used in spoken word poems and despite being called poems, the works of spoken word artists may range from traditionally rhymed to free verse poems that sound more like prose than poetry. Both groups of storytellers are also expected to memorise their works so that the connection with the audience can be retained via eye contact, which at the same time establishes a sense of trust between the two sides. Their stories possess rhetorical and mnemonic devices as well as incorporate established *pantun*, songs, parables, song or popular references that provide

structure and form. Most importantly, both storytellers' performances are designed to be received by an audience.

When situating spoken word poetry within Sweeney's three modes of expressions, there is little difference between the performance of a professional spoken word poet and a penglipurlara. In formal settings where payments are given, both performers will deliver the narrative stories in a heightened stylised form that uses devices, structures and other tools that separate them from one's daily speech. Secondly, these performed stories can also be adapted for publications or from written stories. Finally, they both can comfortably move between all three modes of expressions depending on the contexts where the narrative expressions occur in. As Sweeney stated in his research, the three modes are not independent of one another but should be regarded as a continuum.

Based on our previous study of the given definitions, the penglipurlara and the spoken word poet can be regarded as professional practitioners of a highly specialised artform that involves memorisation and improvisation. They have acquired and mastered the skills needed to effectively narrate stories in front of an audience using poetic, oratory and rhetorical devices. The stories that they narrate can either be done in an informal setting such as a casual performance or a formal setting complete with music, stage preparation and visual aids. In the case of Awang Batil, he uses masks to represent different characters and plays several musical instruments while narrating. Masks are less common in spoken word poetry due to their possible obstruction of clarity and articulation. There is also the understanding that personas are synonymous with masks.

The penglipurlara and the spoken word poet are also both equally empathetic or socially conscious of the ongoing events in their society and use stories to address and criticise the imbalance around them. This is specifically relatable to spoken word poets as they are known to perform poems that deal with social injustices and abuse of power. In that sense, both artforms are generally didactic in nature as the performers view themselves as conveyors of their society's culture. Thus, one can see how both the penglipurlara and the

spoken word poet encourage participation from the audience. Communication matters.

Both storytellers are also known for their use of colloquialism in their delivery. This can be both an advantage and disadvantage. In the performances of Awang Batil and Tok Selampit, their use of heavy regional dialect often causes a break in communication when performed outside of their state but shows how each penglipurlara specialises in the stories of his people. On the other hand, the spoken word poets have faced criticism for their use of English, blending of multiple languages, slangs and accents. At the same time, the popularity of spoken word poetry among the youth reveals how language is communicated differently from one generation to another. Referring to Ong's concept of the homeostatic in oral literature, their choice of language is understood as style accommodated to the society they belong to. This also contributes to another similarity i.e. less emphasis is placed on grammatical rules and forms.

In terms of the content of their stories, while the penglipurlara's repertoire mainly consists of folk romances that have been passed down from one generation to the another via oral transmission; the spoken word poet writes and performs narratives based on their life experiences instead. Both of them may feature a variety of characters in their stories but where the penglipurlara assumes a strict function of a narrator via the character whose name they are identified with, the spoken word poet is free to tell the story using either their own voice or by assuming a separate persona. During instances when different characters are introduced, both performers exhibit the use of dialogues, monologues as well as changes in voices. When there is a need for it, both groups of storytellers are also known to use songs or perform dramatic gestures in their performances.

Known for their episodic stories that are delivered in a combination of prose and verse, the penglipurlara's stories are often set in a world of the fantastic and the romantic. Love stories and the use of humour are frequently used, as well as elements of the supernatural. This is in line with their function as the soother of woes, or entertainers. Similar to their predecessors, spoken word poets also narrate stories but from a first-person perspective and more

deliberate use of poetic devices. Furthermore, while spoken word poets are equally expected to entertain their audience, the poems featured in this ensemble performance are driven by explicit themes and messages related to contemporary social issues. The observable elements of the fantastic and the supernatural that characterise *Pontianak* were used with a specific, targeted audience in mind.

As for the format, a ritualistic opening may be observed in the penglipurlara's set that serves as a signal to the audience that the performance is about to begin. The performance itself can generally be divided into three parts, which are the exposition, development of plot and resolution. Though not strictly observed in spoken word poetry, having a narrative structure does allow the audience to follow the story easier. The use of ritualistic gestures is uncommon in spoken word poetry with the exception of Illya Sumanto who consciously includes ritualistic movements such as the burning of incense or the lighting of candles. *Pontianak* also features a ritualistic segment to symbolise the commune with the divine and their bodies are channels.

Another point of difference can be found in how they end their stories. Due to the nature of folk romance, these stories are bound to end happily no matter how tragic the circumstances may be. Happy endings are rarer in spoken word poetry. There are several possible reasons for this but based on my own experience in the scene, traditional happy endings do not fit in with the 'situationality' or the quality of verisimilitude of the modern world familiar to both performer and audience. This does not, however, omit its use in the artform.

What they do have in common in the flow of their narrative is the presence of conflict, essential to retain the interest of the audience as well as drive the plot. This conflict can be presented in a variety of situations but usually feature in relationships either between self and another character or between self and society. Both storytellers are driven by an assumption of responsibility to an audience not only in their display of communicative competence but as a functioning member of the very community they perform for. Thus, the penglipurlara's character may be at odds with royalty or deities

while the spoken word poet deals with the conflicts found in class differences, in complex family relationships and even internal struggles with oneself.

Last but not least, the general themes of their stories are not surprisingly very similar because of the nature of oral performance: suffering and joy; death and life; pleasure and pain; satisfaction and discontent. The human experience takes centre stage in the stories narrated by both. More distinguishing differences, however, are present when one shifts their attention to the details of these stories told. The reason again, lies in the assumption of the audience. The penglipurlara and his conservative, heavily didactic messages are formed by beliefs and values shared by members of the Malay community. Hence, the stories of featured characters contain messages often limited to traditional customs that are primarily resistant to change. The audience of Malaysian spoken word poetry, on the other hand, is characteristically more youthful, liberal, cosmopolitan and urban. Regardless of how personal the poem presents itself, there remains a general expectation that the issues addressed in the piece resonates with the audience and stems from a desire to address forms of injustice observed in their society such as gender inequality and racism.

In sum, there are evidence that the penglipurlara and the spoken word poet share more similarities than differences. The lines are even further blurred when performances such as *Pontianak* use the rich resource of stories that are available in the realm of oral tradition. Again, one must reiterate that the rise of spoken word poetry in the country and specifically the Klang Valley, is not equal to the demise of the penglipurlara. Both groups of performers are distinctively different and offer unique perspectives for those interested to know more about the literary development of the country. However, they share the similar role as storytellers, which indicates and proves the timeless appeal of storytelling in a society that still has traits of its oral/aural history intact.

This same argument can be made when comparing the works of literary writers and the works of verbal artists. While the principle line of differentiation is the chosen mode of transmission, there is a valid need to address the existing hesitance behind researching performance texts. Despite

gravitating more towards the role of the storyteller from those observed in the development of Malaysian literature, and their adoption of devices that are specific to their choice of delivery; surely their works share similar concerns as expressed by fiction writers and poets? The same question too can be applied in the performances of the penglipurlara. What are the lessons and points that can be learned in the way these storytellers regard their roles in society and their stories in the bigger scheme of conserving what culture means? The declining demands for the penglipurlara and the increasing demands for the spoken word poetry may just reflect the ongoing changes society is experiencing at the moment. Must the living stories fade along with their storytellers or can they be revived, in a variety of performed modes, so that they may remain accessible and familiar to current and future generations? In a world where everything is undetermined and evanescent, these stories provide the security of the immutable.

Chapter Six: The Spoken Word Practitioner as Storyteller

What began as a personal need to share my poems on stage have since become the start of a personal creative endeavor: a hands-on approach to what makes a performance of a text sufficiently effective to *move* the audience.

Does spoken word poetry have what it takes to be a transformative space for both the individual and the community? This is the question that I have asked myself time and again as a practitioner, one that had pushed me to be more involved in the poetry community by conducting writing circles, curating events, facilitating as well as attending both writing and performance workshops since my first performance in 2004. All these efforts were made due to an intention of fully immersing oneself in the artform.

The first few years of dabbling with the form was not only a learning curve but also an eye-opener in terms of the technical strategies and decisions that occur behind composing and developing spoken word poems; ones I may not be privy to if I had not gone to lengths to play an active role in the development of performance poetry in Kuala Lumpur. An example of the lessons I have learned over the years was my involvement in the project *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, a full-scale theatre production directed by Joe Hasham in 2016.³⁰⁰ As the only spoken word poet in the ensemble, I was informed that the aim of the project was not only to bring the sonnets to life but also to have local artists interact with the pieces and create something new inspired by these poems. I was asked to write a new piece based on several sonnets.

Although I did not struggle with the writing of my own piece and memorising the sonnets was not a formidable challenge, I found it difficult to perform the latter for two main reasons. First, I could not relate to the words I was performing as they were not my mine and secondly, I was unsure of how to utilise the stage and interact with the other actors without feeling disconnected from the audience. It was during the 3-month rehearsal that I

³⁰⁰ Adrian Wong, 'Shakespeare's Sonnets – An Incredible Malaysian Production At klpac', *rojakPOT*, 15 August 2016 <<https://www.rojakpot.com/shakespeares-sonnets-klpac/>> [Accessed 13 December 2016]

was taught how to differentiate the intricacies between performing a persona and performing as a storyteller. While theatre requires the actor to contextualise and internalise the text, a spoken word poet balances between the role of a writer, a teller and a character. A simpler way to explain this would be that while 'the spoken word poet narrates, the actor expresses.'

It would be dishonest of me to say that performing has become any easier over the years considering that it remains an incessantly daunting albeit enriching learning curve. Still, something was holding me back. While the experience brought its own sense of self-fulfillment to a certain degree, there is always the constant need to creatively engage with the environment that I am a part of on a daily basis. And it is this environment that I am in that has consistently remained, in one way or another, unfamiliar with the role of the local spoken word poet. Gradually, however, it became clear to me that this anxiety is based on my general inability to connect my practice with the larger expectations of the performing arts community.

As a verbal artist, there is an expectation to continuously perform new pieces and sharpen the old ones. The audience, despite having access to physical copies of published poetry, attend poetry performance events to watch words come to life on the stage. For a significant number of years, my poems were performed in English at events that are attended by groups that were multicultural and mostly middle class. When in spaces attended by a majority of Malays, I would choose works that reflect my Malay identity. This inclination implied a failure of my own making.

My earlier years of performing were mainly divided between being strongly influenced by spoken word poets from other countries or defined by a constant need to distance my works from them completely. This constant desire to break away from such a limiting process coupled with an urge to innovate and create new pieces resulted in a number of creative tensions: on one hand, I have used it as a challenge to step outside of my comfort zone but on the other, I struggled to consolidate my personal and national identity with the medium of performance. Further problems arose when I could no longer rely on the conventional structures and expectations, which resulted in an internalised conflict that continued for a considerable length of time as I

resorted to creating pieces that I believed would appeal to different audience composition. These different and often times conflicting identities were as telling as it was personally troubling. These led me to revert temporarily to written poetry or ones that are designed to be read rather than heard and seen simply because there was no prime motivator to remind me that what I do was integral to the development of the community that I was a part of.

The opportunity to write and perform for *Pontianak*, however, allowed me to see that there is a possible way to produce a work that requires and delivers more than just another conventional spoken word poem. Over the years since I first performed the poem, there continues to be an observable shift in my personal attitude towards spoken word poetry. An example would be how a piece that is designed for stage performance can be adapted into other forms such as multimedia poetry. Furthermore, upon closer examination, I now believe it is a necessity for a spoken word practitioner to continue self-reflecting and questioning one's intention behind their work as a practicing spoken word poet in Malaysia.

Reflecting on 'Mother': A Retelling of Folklore

The history of storytelling in Malaysia, like any oral tradition observed in other parts of the world, is essentially a history that traces the evolution of human communication, meaning making and shared experience. It is a history that this thesis neither has the capacity nor the knowledge to include in its discussion. Instead, it narrows down its focus to the practice of spoken word poetry as a form of storytelling, more specifically the performance of personal narratives, and questions the possibility of its popularity as a sign of shifting interests back to the communal practice of storytelling.

The inspiration for 'Mother' came out of a need for a new performance poem that addresses an audience that is not only multicultural and multilingual, but also familiar with its local folklore. Written and memorised in the duration of two weeks, the piece was essentially a creative experiment that requires a reading of available resources on my persona of choice: a character known as 'Hantu Tetek' or the breast ghost. Although this demonic

figure is comparatively less popular than pontianak, langsuir and other known folklore figures in the Malay community, the stories revolving this character remain due to her single, distinguishable physical trait. Just as Medusa is identified by her hair, Draupadi by the violation of her body and Pontianak by her long wild hair and banshee-like screams; Hantu Tetek is a female-centered myth that is identified by her disproportionately large breasts.

An important feature that separates this character from the other personas chosen for the project is its lack of a substantial backstory. This gap in information provides me with the opportunity to construct a narrative that is centered on the idea that she too has long been objectified, victimised and misunderstood. As it is my intention to create a performance that relies on juxtaposition and unpredictability in both its visual and verbal delivery, the list of keys included in the performance of 'Mother' is particularly extensive.

The first device used to 'open' the performance is the character's visual appearance. As inspiration, I relied on nineteenth and early twentieth century pictorial references of traditional Malay women. Although there have been several variations in the choices of costumes over the years of performing the poem, I remain careful not to deviate too far from the image of the traditional Malay mother. The first version is the combination of a *batik sarong*, *kebaya* top, plain-coloured top and a loose shawl covering the hair. The second version involves replicating the image of Malay women bathing in the river or the wearing the sarong as a towel with the hair shaped into a bun. Another layer of suggestive visual cues is used including blood red lipstick and long black hair, referring to mainstream images often associated with supernatural female folklore characters as constructed by the male gaze. Compared to my experience performing the poem without costume, I noted how such changes in terms of appearance do influence the audience's reception towards the piece.

Another device used to frame the performance is the use of Qur'anic verses as a way to subvert the audience's assumption of 'Hantu Tetek' as a demonic manifestation. I intentionally begin by reciting the line *Bismillahirrahmanirrahim* (or 'In the name of Allah, Most Gracious and Most Merciful') followed by the poem's first line, which is another Qur'anic verse:

Qul lil mumineena yaghuddoo min absarihim

Sons of Adam,
 you have failed me,
 you have failed me and your God who
 have told you to do since the Olden days.
 to tunduk, lower your gaze

Respect the lineage of Eve, of Hawa,
 Jadi tundukkan pandangan mata
 was what God commanded you
 but that you did not do

The stanzas above illustrate how this poem is in the form of a story told by a first-person speaker. As suggested by the poem's title, I choose not to give the speaker a name and instead played with the idea of how the very act of naming can in itself lead to forms of discrimination and injustice. This motif would be used throughout the poem or the use of multiple names to refer to the same character: each one of them functions as mental visual references for the audience as she continues telling them her story:

Instead you have called me names
 that never once belonged to me
 I've been called a hantu, anak syaitan.
 To you I was the wild and unkempt demon
 who kidnapped kids too curious to stay indoors at dusk
 so I hid them underneath my monstrous breasts
 and watched as they kicked, screamed and gasped
 Like I really have nothing else better to do.

Based on my initial research before writing the poem, multiple scholars have noted and discussed how the sexualisation of breasts (and by proxy, the

objectification of the female body) has severed the body part from its primary function of providing essential nutrition to infants as well as promote bonding between mother and child. This was the motivation behind my second strategy: the deliberate use of maternal images that contradict the names she has been given. The poem reclaims her primary physical identifier and connects that with a series of lines that invoke the intimate and sensory-heavy experiences associated with motherhood:

None of these names come close to the ones that I was given.
 You see I was the first woman your eyes laid upon.
 My heartbeats: the only thing that could lull you to sleep.
 You have called me ibu, emak, mommy, mak, mama, bonda and ummi.
 Yes, the one who sang you those lullabies at night.
 I am your mother and you know that I always nurture my child.

In my performance of the piece, two primary tones were used: the strict and reprimanding tone, and the gentle and maternal tone. Used interchangeably throughout the performance, they were adopted to produce a specific effect that adds another layer of personality to the character. I wanted to create a sense of unpredictability through the voice of the character and instill both feelings of security and fear in the audience. Certain keywords in both Bahasa and English are used to aid in distinguishing these two tones, both in its cadence and pitch, such as the ones highlighted (in bold) in this excerpt from the poem:

But now you identify **me** by the first thing that **your** fallen eyes **see**
 You **obsess** instead over the dimensions of my **breasts**
 Throw names into the air like Hantu **tetek** and Hantu **kopek**
 Through your giggles, cringes and laughter
 You show me **disrespect**, forgetting **everything**
 I taught you when you were young
 well let me refresh your memory **sayang**.

Diction is naturally a primary device I relied on heavily for this effect. There are words in Bahasa Malaysia, a great example being 'sayang', that are simply untranslatable in English; words that have more depth and layered connotations specifically when verbally articulated. The word 'sayang' in the line above is deliberately softened for emphasis when performed and mimics the intonation commonly observed in old Malay movies, suggesting to the audience that the narrator on stage is far older than how she appears on stage and supplemented by the chosen visual cues explained earlier. In the succeeding lines that pay homage to the well-known idiom "hell hath no fury like a woman scorned", the voice of the gentle yet reprimanding mother continues:

You did not laugh when you were hungry for milk
 Instead you cried as loud as you could
 Not out of love but out of a genuine fear of death.
 Let me remind you the power of a woman's wrath
 through the stories of these names
 as I know how to tell them best.

If fear of a name only increases
 the fear of the thing itself:
 then fear me.

Another main strategy I consciously adopted in the writing of this poem was to compose the poem in three specific languages: English, Bahasa and Arabic. Each language contributes not only to the piece's accessibility but also resonates with the persona as a local folklore character. In response to my earlier experience of learning how best to accommodate the initial expectations of the audience, I intentionally wrote the piece in which the character smoothly switches her language as a bilingual speaker would. Instead of translating the lines to provide context for those whose first language may not be either of these two, I chose to embody a character whose fluency in both languages more accurately represent the multilingual

environment my audience is familiar with. In an interview with the local online arts and culture magazine *B-Side*, I was asked about my process behind writing and performing bilingual and multilingual poems.³⁰¹ My answer hasn't changed since: the lines are written to follow a specific rhythm that assists in memorising the text as well as mimic (in a heightened form) the way we combine words from different languages in our daily speech:

Fear me
 for my name is Mahsuri
 whose gushes of darah putih
 caused by the tombak
 not the rage of the keris
 was not blood but the milk
 that was meant for my child.
 As fast as the milk was drained from my body
 so too did my curse dry up
 the fertile soils of Pulau Langkawi.

As a conscious effort to merge my role as a storyteller and a speaker of my own lived experience, I included multiple references to well-known stories and characters. These include the local legend of Mahsuri and the origin story of Ibu Pertiwi; popular names in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition such as Yokhebed, Mariam and Hagar; as well as personify the abstract i.e. paradise. All of these names are tied together by the intention to desexualise the image of the breasts and revert to its symbolic meanings associated with motherhood and the divine feminine:

Fear me for my name is Bumi,
 You used to call me Gaia,
 I am still your Ibu Pertiwi.
 Fear me for I am the mother
 of all your prophets

³⁰¹ 'Weaving multilingual poetry', *B-Side*, March 2019 < <https://b-side.city/post/sheena-baharudin-three-languages-one-poet/> > [accessed 2 January 2020]

I am Yokhebed. The mother of Moses.
 I am Mariam. The mother of Jesus.
 I am Hagar. I am Hajar,
 Si ibu yang berlari dari bukit ke bukit,
 mencari air untuk diminum oleh aku,
 bukan si Ismail.
 The miracle of zamzam was meant for me
 so that I could in turn feed him back
 into existence.

In hindsight, 'Mother' remains one of my strongest performance pieces and I believe it is due to my new understanding of the role of spoken word poetry.³⁰² It would not have been so if I had not explored deeper the roots of storytelling in Malaysia and situate myself as part of an ongoing tradition that has refused to bend to the external changes the country was undergoing. While others may have incorporated their storytelling component in the form of the written text, the mode of performance is a powerful one and the convergence of both in the telling of a community's story has the potential to transform others. What is urgently needed at this moment is the curiosity of its practitioners including myself and this community I am a part of, to continue exploring the medium, possibilities for future creative projects and similar to the passing down of stories from one penglipurlara to another, the sharing of a clear role from one poet to the next.

³⁰² Mohani Niza, 'With her piece called 'Mother', Sheena Baharudin proves she is a spoken word poet of the real deal', *The Culture Review Mag*, January 2020
 <<https://theculturereviewmag.com/2020/01/02/with-her-latest-work-called-mother-sheena-baharudin-proves-she-is-a-spoken-word-poet-of-the-real-deal/>> [accessed 2 January 2020]

Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

That's what literature is about, isn't it?—a record of one human being's sojourn on earth, proffered in verse or prose that artfully weaves together knowledge of the past with a heightened awareness of the present in ever new verbal configurations.

Arthur Krystal³⁰³

By now, it should be apparent that there is no intention on my side to postulate myself as an overenthusiastic proponent of spoken word poetry but merely a practitioner who is looking for possible explanations to an emergent phenomenon in Kuala Lumpur. The study's approach as an explorative look into the practice of local spoken word poetry remains undeterred. It acknowledges the substantial increase of individuals composing and sharing personal narratives through performance in public spaces and highlights the need for a concerted collective effort towards understanding, developing, and addressing spoken word poetry practices and features within Malaysian culture.

For the spoken word practitioner, the intention or rather motivation behind performing a piece lies in the human connection. Unlike the subjectivity and open-ended interpretations of visual arts or the mainstream convivial popular culture of music and film, the art of spoken word relies solely on the ability to make speech as clear as possible without losing out on the 'poetic' qualities of their works. Thus, the spoken word poet places an equal emphasis on the dynamic quality of literary writing and its historical roots in performance. It should be emphasised that my concern here is not to generalise questions concerning orality and literacy. I am not attempting to

³⁰³ Arthur Krystal, 'What is literature?: In defense of the canon', *Harper's Magazine*, March 2014, <<http://harpers.org/archive/2014/03/what-is-literature>> [accessed 5 May 2015]

argue that all the features of the penglipurlara can be explained in full only in terms of their performativity. It is also not my intention to reduce the intricacies involved to a simple dichotomy between oral tradition and spoken word poetry. These two group of storytellers are not subjected to only one immutable set of rules and requirements.

Instead, it is my aim to gain a clearer understanding of the complexities of spoken word poetry and the possibility of its form and traits shifting to accommodate a new audience that may be starkly different from the audience of the penglipurlara and yet, in the same breath, exhibits a similar inclination to storytelling. For the spoken word researcher, on the other hand, one needs to approach it as an emergent practice that is still undergoing changes in its delivery, form and themes. The challenges that arose from this approach are many and several of them, daunting.

What became clear in time is that an attempt to examine these poems that are written for performance could not solely rely on the existing methods employed by our predecessors. On the other hand, the uprooting of well-established western patterns of criticism makes it equally difficult – if not impossible – for the researcher to distinguish between what is a continuation of an innate disposition towards the oral amongst today's generation of spoken word poets and what was adopted from our colonial past. In a discipline where different medias are constantly merging, lines continuously blurred, and new forms of creative expression are shared not only in print but via the rapidly-evolving platforms of social media, critical methodologies and genres can no longer adhere to a binary worldview. A renewed, more inclusive understanding of literature and more specifically of literature from a particular place and time would reveal much to the local scholar about underlying patterns and schematic structures that connect the works regardless of their genres or forms.

My interviews with the selected group of poets for this study have made me increasingly sensitive to the importance of fieldwork when conducting research on spoken word poetry. The one concern that I was very much aware of during these interviews were how recording devices could not capture the visual responses I was receiving during these conversations with the poets. A

considerable number of the interviewees were animated and supported their verbal answers with physical cues that would allow me to engage further with the findings. I attempted to offset these limitations by writing down observational notes while conversing with the poets, which was difficult to do, and I may have lost some important points. There were multiple attempts to reach a balance between these two tasks, but it remained a difficult act as my priority remained on engaging with the poets during the interviews. In response, I intend to video record my future research projects. This, too, is an important reminder when it comes to archiving spoken word performances. In the 1970s and 1980s, a lack of appropriate audio-visual equipment may have also hindered attempts to conduct proper investigation of the verbal arts. Now, technological advancements have made it possible to record oral performances much more comprehensively than before. Future recordings can be used to note down the performative elements often lost when performances are limited to audio recordings for transcription purposes only.

Those who perceive spoken word poetry as a sub-literary tradition imported from the West would not have had the opportunity to understand how this interest in performance poetry is arguably deeply rooted in the poets' familiarity with folklore. Those who do may struggle to legitimise themselves in a society that is more used to consuming written materials than to a certain extent, they have neglected their aural-oral heritage as well as forgotten that there is an achievable balance of both the textual and the performance. There is also the disadvantage that spoken word poetry is still a phenomenon that thrives in the urban parts of the country while the *penglipurlara* remains a mirror of a society bound by traditional constraints and the past.

But this research project has also allowed me to discover the subtleties and facets of spoken word poetry that I was not aware of before. Through the interviews with my fellow practitioners, the spoken word and *penglipurlara* performances that I have watched and attended as both observer and participant, and the wealth of historical and theoretical references that I would not have accessed if I did not ask the questions that I did during my research: I would not find myself in this position where I am equally hopeful and

concerned for the future of literary studies in this country. For a young country that is still negotiating its identity, the issues approached and performed in these poems offer an alternative resource for researchers interested in observing the development of literature in Malaysia. We may still have a long way to go as our written literary traditions are still preoccupied with their language-based discourse, but over the past ten years, there has been a gradual openness to embrace other emergent practices.

Conducting this research has also revealed that despite the welcomed changes in the poets' work, there is still space to grow and challenges to overcome in terms of the content of their work.³⁰⁴ The act of reading, writing and attending poetry-centric events, in spite being indispensable contributors to one's appreciation of the artform, does not necessarily produce a uniform standard of practice among those who pursue spoken word poetry. Referring once again to my experience acting in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, a considerable amount of the time spent preparing for these literary performances was spent on reflexive exercises and group discussions. During these sessions, the actors were encouraged to talk about the poem's meaning and how it relates to core emotions and personal stories. Multiple readings were required and there was constant feedback from the director when a line is recited in a way that doesn't effectively communicate why it is written and who it is written for. This was followed by physical rehearsals, ones that address and question the actor's decisions in delivering the lines. When viewed as a whole, what was happening was the act of embodying the text and this could only be done when the practitioner is forced to engage with it critically and physically. I believe that there is much to be gained by the spoken word community to engage with their poems through a similar methodology.

There is a genuine thirst and demand to have Malaysian spoken word poets reflect the concerns of the community that they are in within their works. Over the years, the number of new works performed on stage and selected for publications has provided me some comfort to know that similar

³⁰⁴ Ista, 'Love and Light Spoken with Sheena Baharudin', *Eksentrika*, December 2017
 <<https://eksentrika.com/love-light-spoken-sheena-baharudin/>> [accessed 2 January 2020]

questions asked during the interview for this research are also asked by others. Compared to the first generation of local practitioners, the works of younger spoken word poets³⁰⁵ are increasingly less constrained and singularly informed by the western tradition of spoken word poetry. This, I believe, is one of the prime motivators in producing important works that contribute to the larger discussions addressed in the study of Malaysian Literature. More importantly, however, is what goes behind the writing of these performance poems.

In the beginning, I posited that the shift from an illiterate to a literate society had left behind the wealth of myths and stories archived within the repertoire of the *penglipurlara*. The gradual albeit damaging politicisation of language and literature then further cut off and alienated both writers and readers (or audience) from the traditions of their oral past. Spoken word poetry aims to revive the practice of storytelling but lacks one important element in its poets' works: a localised social responsibility to create a world that is unique to their audience just as the *penglipurlara* did through stories shared with their community.

Arguably, this situation occurs due to a general inability to link the history of spoken word poetry to the speaker's own cultural identity and history. Unlike the deep roots of the *penglipurlara*, spoken word poetry in Malaysia often finds itself at odds with their society due to his/her use of the English language and popular cultural references to the West. One possible solution, I believe, is for spoken word poets to reconnect not only with their literary predecessors but also their oral predecessors in their own creative works. Compared to its early years, the new generation of spoken word poets have more references and far easier access to information. They are also becoming increasingly open to the different ways of performing, collaborating and expanding their creative reach. This, I consider, is a positive development in the scene. Yet at the same time, I am consciously aware of how their understanding of spoken word poetry is still defined by the traditional and often preconceived features of literary predecessors.

³⁰⁵ These include poets such as Kimchi Lai, Pavithrah Sambu, Yusintha Zemira, Gwendoline Esther, Mochi, Aliff Awan and Chloe Ling.

Returning to my earlier statement about the absence of a national mythology for current anglophile writers to use as reference in their writings, this absence, I argue instead, must be understood from the perspective of post-independent Malaysia, and the politics of its literature. The absence is not physical but psychological. It is not that there are no legends, myths and folklore in the country, but rather an overriding belief that its oral tradition neither mirrors the pluralistic realities and anxieties of its modern nation state, nor represents the national but the communal beliefs of its dominant race. Perhaps we have created our national myth that is driven by the idea of cultural scarcity.

The motivation behind this thesis insists that efforts to document, analyse and produce creative works involve research efforts not only from literary specialists but also those from other fields including oral literature, ethnography, sociology, historians, and the performing arts. There is a crucial need for the dissemination of knowledge and awareness regarding the significance of knowing one's stories. More importantly, it requires the involvement of the audience: a disconnect between them and the practitioners/scholars/educators will result in the assumption that there is simply no value in the medium. There are always opportunities to take advantage of the multidisciplinary features of spoken word poetry by collaborating not only with other creative practitioners but also by engaging with the audience so that they can contribute to the conversation in a more visible, relevant and viable way. As storytelling, regardless of the forms chosen, is essentially a communal activity, it is a helpful tool to explore themes of identity and reconnect with both the internal self and the external world. As beautifully described by Fiona Hanley, Tami Gader and Irene Noy:

To enter a space of dialogue and collaboration is to speak in tongues, it is to enter into the bouquet of oral and written conversation using language, which is itself a mottled conglomeration of tongues ... It is to be opened to encounters –

skin against shimmering skin; a contingent mingling of emergent murmurings.³⁰⁶

Finally, as acknowledged in the beginning of this study, the researcher reiterates that what makes a qualitative research essential in meaning-making is the awareness of what is visible and what is yet to be seen. Suffice to say, the Malaysian verbal and literary arts have undergone a series of transformations and will continue to do so at their own pace and time so as to make possible the creative expressions of its people's fears and aspirations. To insist on spoken word poetry merely being 'a phase' or temporary phenomenon in the country and that it, just like the *penglipurlara*, will lose its momentum is akin to ignoring the experience of the individual and community as a whole. Perhaps the presence and development of spoken word poetry in this country serve as an encouraging reminder that despite the politics of our literature and the literature of our politics, there are still spaces for conversations about what being a Malaysian really means. If human connection is the aim, then finding roots to hold on to do so is a step forward towards the right direction. At the end of it all, perhaps our concerns should not only be about ensuring that these traditional and contemporary practices survive in the long run, but rather that our stories do instead.

³⁰⁶ Fiona Hanley, Tami Gader and Irene Noy, 'Conversing "trina cheile"', in *Corporeality and Culture: Bodies in Movement*, ed. by Karin Sellberg, Lena Wanggren and Kamillea Aghtan, (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 9-20 (p. 13).

Appendix

PRE-INTERVIEW - INFORMATION SHEET

A Research Project Investigating the Role and Contributions of the Artist to the Spoken Word Poetry Scene in Kuala Lumpur.

Introduction

I would like to invite you to participate in this project, which is concerned with your role as a spoken word poet and your contributions to the scene.

Why am I doing the project?

The project is part of my PhD dissertation at the University of Nottingham (Malaysia). It is hoped that the project could provide useful information for academics, students and the public about the history, definition and development of spoken word poetry in the Klang Valley through the eyes of its practitioners.

What will you have to do if you agree to take part?

Complete, sign and return the consent form so that I know you are interested.

1. We will arrange a time to meet, which is convenient for you and in your own home if that is appropriate.
2. There will be one, single interview with myself during which I will ask you a set of questions pertaining to your involvement in spoken word poetry. The interview is expected to last no longer than half an hour and is a one-off event.
3. When I have completed the study I will produce a summary of the findings which I will be more than happy to send you if you are interested.

How much of your time will the participation involve?

One interview will take an average of 60 minutes.

What are the advantages of taking part?

You may find the project beneficial and enjoy answering questions about the things you do for and within the spoken word community as well as your beliefs about it. Once the study is finished it could provide information about spoken word poetry, which is useful to interested individuals and groups.

Are there any disadvantages of taking part?

It could be that you are not comfortable talking about your role and contributions as a spoken word poet.

Do you have to take part in the study?

No, your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. You have been approached as an active member of spoken word poetry scene with a view that you might be interested in taking part, this does not mean you have to.

If you do not wish to take part you do not have to give a reason and you will not be contacted again. Similarly, if you do agree to participate you are free to withdraw at any time during the project if you change our mind.

What happens now?

If you are interested in taking part in the study, you are asked to complete the attached consent form and return it to me via e-mail (scanned attachment) or in person. Once I have received the form, I will contact you so we can arrange to meet at a time that is convenient for you. I can then visit and hold the short interview.

If you decide you would rather not participate in this study, you need not return the consent form to me. Simply ignore this letter and no further contact will be made.

Researcher:

Nur Sheena Binti Baharudin

Postgraduate Student

School of English, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences

University of Nottingham Malaysia

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Summary of Interviews

Definitions

Certain qualities can be summarised and highlighted, from the interviews gathered, as listed below:

- a) Poetry written for the stage / audience
 - b) Conversational / Natural speech
 - c) Storytelling
 - d) Honest
 - e) Versatile
 - f) Engaging
 - g) Outright / Direct
 - h) Audience oriented
-
1. Jack Malik: Spoken word is the technique or method of delivery that resembles natural speech. It is different from stylised performances of recitation. Poems that we speak out. Conversational.
 2. Dhabitah Zainal: Poetry that is written to be performed on stage and shared with everyone else as opposed to stage poetry, poems that are designed to be read.
 3. Elaine Foster: Contemporary term used for poetry (written in poetic verses) written for the stage. Not to be confused with oral storytelling but used differently. Both are stories.
 4. Alana Azlan: Raw and *honest* forms of poetry. A conversation with the audience and oneself, speaking thoughts out loud, beautiful way of expressing. Characteristics: versatile, incorporate different languages, music to complement, turn it into rap (poetry).
 5. Azam Rais: A type of poetry written for performance. Written differently. The words and the perspective offered to entice an audience.

6. Illya Foster: Two-way communication. Exchanging messages, cultural values, ideas. Oral narrative / storytelling. Social poetry as opposed to page poetry. Engaging.
7. Yohanna Yusrinal: Style of poem written for the stage, to perform and be heard. It has to be outright (to the metaphors and imagery) and can't go as layered as a written poem.
8. Jamal Raslan Abdul Jalil:
 - Representation: Represent something, that's when you know where it comes from, the nuances, the ideology, style
 - Relevance: Something that comes from you, relatability (audience), connects – acknowledged by the audience. In the performance, then people will invest a bit more time to find out more. Honoring your writing. How focused they are. By way of poetic devices. Feel like they are a part of it. A strong reaction/response (disagree or agree)
 - Resonance: A new awareness of the said topic.
 - Summary: written for the stage.

An Effective Spoken Word Poetry Performance

Keywords that are highlighted and repeated by the interviewees are shown below:

1. Dhabitah Zainal
Honesty, emotion, rhymes, wisdom and purpose
2. Elaine Foster
Rhythm, Emotional, Honesty, Performative
3. Melizarani Selvakkumar
Tells a true story, flows with the poet's body, strong use of metaphors, sincerity, descriptive language
4. Jamal Raslan
Communications, Vocals, Body, Articulation
5. Illya Sumanto

Sound, Structure, Imagery, Audience Participation, Choreography

6. Alana Azlan
Honesty, Style, Gusto, Execution, Vulnerability, Diction, Eye Contact/Connection
7. Yohanna Yusrinal
Imagery and Beauty, Reason and Message, Freedom to change poem to message, criticism and feedback
8. Azam Rais
Visuals, Audio, Appearance, Message, Organisation (Marketing)
9. Jack Malik
Experience, natural ability, bravery, reading, patience, influence, awareness, just, mentorship

These keywords revolve around similar ideas and appear to revolve around similar concerns and understanding of the artform. First is honesty or sincerity, second is the delivery i.e. the voice and body, third is stage awareness, fourth is the composition of the poem and fifth is connection with the audience.

Summary of Interviews

For the purpose of accessibility, below is a summary from each conducted interview arranged alphabetically. Some of the summaries are longer than others as they include discussions that are unique from the rest.

1. **Alana Azlan** began performing in 2010 and spent the next 5 years performing and organising events under the now-defunct Lip Movement Poetry collective. She then took a hiatus before returning to the scene with the publication of her first book of poetry in 2017. She has always had a reservation about poetry due to its traditional rules and structure and instead believes that one must write from the heart. As a writer, she is motivated to write for herself and regards it as a cathartic experience especially when connecting to an audience. In terms of the scene's development, she has noticed a declining of quality and general tendency

among the new poets to be more concerned with pleasing the audience rather than ensuring the effectiveness of their works.

2. **Azam Rais** has always placed his focus on bringing spoken word poetry to the mass and believes that the key lies in the staging of its performance. This is why he continuously stresses on the importance of marketing as means to promote the practice. He also believes that poets must see themselves as professional performers armed with a clear message, rather than simply going up on stage and expressing themselves without the standard preparation and discipline practiced by other performing artists.
3. **Illya Sumanto** identifies as a surrealist poet and views poetry as essentially a two-way communication, a privileged platform and a responsibility. In contrast to page poetry, she regards spoken word poetry as a form of social poetry. She believes that spoken word poetry needs to have a narrative as it is important to consider what you want to tell and what you want the audience to take back. In her works, she adds another layer to her poetic stories through the use of underlying subtexts.
4. **Elaine Foster** has been performing spoken word poetry ever since she participated in the Green Slam in 2007/2008 and noted how she distinctively remembers the strong influence of Def Jam Poetry in the slam performances that night. She began performing spoken word poetry because she was in love. Her earlier understanding of spoken word is that it is about urgency, immediacy and it is subversive. It should also be radical and associated with activism. She views the medium of spoken word poetry as very new. The local spoken word poets' choice of topics is different from the other mainstream spoken word communities. While they talk about love and breakups, spoken word usually leans towards social justice, a call to action. Currently, she hasn't been writing or performing that much, but still enjoys it as much as she does teaching

poetry. She loves the idea of how poetry changes the minds and entertains people but ultimately believe that the work has to be beyond entertainment.

Concerning persona, she believes it is not a conscious process for her. She does feel stronger, braver and capable of pushing buttons but is also aware of her purposeful confrontational persona. Her writing process is focused on audience's reaction. On immediacy, she will do certain things that revolve around tension through poetic devices such as metaphors as well as crashing ideas into each other. She begins writing with an idea/subject in mind. Her influences include Jack Kerouac and the Beat Poets, Hip Hop artists like Lauryn Hill, and Shel Silverstein, who she describes as a mixed bag of the whimsical and the gritty. She shares that if she has more courage, she would attempt being a spontaneous poet. Over the years, she has observed a number of changes. These include seeing more groups gathering to perform poetry, more poets reading and performing, the Bahasa poetry communities employing the same kind of performance style if not more western style spoken word features as exemplified by the poet Jack Malik. She believes that spoken word poets who engage with the audience are more raw, honest and direct. She also notices how the Bahasa and English poetry scene cross-fertilise each other. This style has influenced the sub-community of performance scene as observed in the removal of background music so common in the Malay performance community.

Within the Malaysian in English spoken word poetry scene, there is still a tendency to remain navel gazing i.e. talking about yourself because they are new. Due to cultural sensitivities, politics does not help either as observed in most poets' insistence on writing, and performing poems within the same theme of personal expressions. Those who do talk about the more pertinent topics are the ones who have been doing it longer. The idea of spoken word poetry is to respond to issues while keeping it grounded in one own's personal experience. Challenges include censorship and wanting to get the audience's approval. There is also difficulty in receiving feedback i.e. little mentoring and insufficient peer

criticism due to cultural limitations. Because of this, the scene has been stagnant for a while and believes this won't change anytime soon because they haven't been brought up in a culture that encourages them to speak up or have the maturity/knowledge to do so. They have limited understanding of what poetry inside. Instead, they go inwards as it is easier and more common. She wanted to shake things up in the community but believed that she has failed to do so.

5. **Dhabitah Zainal Abidin** was 25 years old at the time of interview and had been actively involved in spoken word poetry for more a year. Her introduction to the scene is via performances by Sheena Baharudin, Rudy Francisco and Sarah Kay. Her general opinion on the scene includes how it was small when it first started and then it became popular, before dying down again. The development is characterised by highs and lows and well as the involvement of new poets. More events now allow spoken word open mics. She is one of the Jack It! co-founders and through If Walls Could Talk, sees the changes in the scene. It is more consistent now than before. She is unsure of the reasons behind the occasional lack of interest, she suggests that it has to do with the limited sized audience as well as publicity. Accessibility is also a possible variable.

At first, she didn't have the intention to pursue spoken word because of stage fright but found relatability with people who listen to poetry. It feels nice to reach out. Page poetry, unlike spoken word poetry, can't get immediate feedback. It is for immediate consumption as it tells the story straight away. For her process, she watches YouTube videos for inspiration and read out her written lines to aide in her memorisation, which she does because of her anxiety. This explains why she focuses more on rhymes in her poems and believes it also makes the performance more dynamic. She is aware of disadvantages of relying on a single tool but there is flexibility in spoken word that one might not have with page poetry. She doesn't have a persona on stage and no performance strategies. She sees spoken word poetry as the same thing as storytelling. They are life stories. She writes about things she knows

and experiences rather for other people's behalf. She believes people tell their life stories through spoken word poetry. Her influences include Sarah Kay for her performance style and Rudy Francisco for his writing style. She has personal challenges that include getting over her self-doubt and feeling that she is not good enough. She addresses these struggles by consulting with her poet friends. She uses her poetry as means to understand herself. Concerning the scene, she observes that it is still going. As of now, the changes are positive despite the challenges. Reasons for the challenges are the fact that it is not financially viable to be full time poets. But she still does it as there is a certain satisfaction in sharing stories and having the platform to do that.

6. **Jack Malik** is aware that spoken word poetry addresses the fact that some are born with the natural inclination to the artform while others will need to acquire more information regarding it. For him, he was aware that he is the latter and made sure to learn as much as possible from appointed mentors. How he sees it, spoken word is a technique and a method of delivery, which is different from poetry recitation. As it is a form of spoken word, thus one needs to be as natural as possible. Spoken word also is about knowing oneself so one must dig deep and, in a way, be equally just not only to them but to the poetry they are performing.
7. **Jamal Raslan Abdul Jalil's** approach to spoken word poetry is structured against the framework of representation, relevance and resonance. He understands that spoken word poetry is written for the stage and is aware of its roots in oral literature. Which is why a spoken word poet, he believes, must strive for relatability and the openness to allow changes not only in oneself but also others. One must honour their writing as well as others. As it is a form of performance, spoken word poetry is about the psychology of communication. It is an expression that involves transferring messages via one's voice and body.

8. **Melizarani Selvakkumar** has been writing since she was six but began performing spoken word poetry six years ago at the time of the interview. She has always been writing stories in some way or another. For her spoken word poetry is simply poetry coming alive from the pages of the book. She sees that spoken word poetry is storytelling and is reminded of her relationship with her grandmother, whose storytelling sessions were essentially a performance. It is a tool that is used to achieve the aim i.e. to tell a story and to tell it well. She considers herself a humanistic poet, the kind that can only write what she truly understands rather than write about issues. She raises the issue with formulaic spoken word performances, where poems are manufactured only to appeal to the audience. This is one of the challenges currently faced by the scene. There is no depth to the scene and that what exists is based on what they are consuming and most of these poets are constantly being validated that there is no space to grow. There needs to be sufficient critical feedback. She believes what is more important is to ask questions such as is there a better way to tell the story, a more effective way to do it.

9. **Yohanna Yusrinal** believes that spoken word poetry has to be immediate and visceral rather than layered like a written poem. As it is a performance, she uses it as a form of catharsis and explores her fears regarding certain subjects. Performing it allows her to reach out as well as reach in. She also believes in the importance of receiving critical feedback and is aware of the cultural limitations that affect such a process. Younger poets tend to write very personal pieces, which in turn makes it a sensitive process to address the flaw of the piece as a detached object from its subject poet. But she also acknowledges that poems are never meant to be perfect. Instead, it is a process of adapting and rewriting and responding to the changes that we see around us.

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