
ISLAM IN *KL NOIR* (2013-2014): NOIR YET ENLIGHTENING

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Abstract

*This paper explores how Malaysian literature in English has always gestured towards religion or religiosity in its narratives, including Islam in noir fiction. Noir fiction that is evolved from crime fiction and is associated with stories of darkness, criminality and violence is found to incorporate Islam in *KL Noir* (2013-2014)—noir anthologies published in Malaysia. In the Western noir tradition, noir fiction is employed to capture the aftermath of the wars with their chaos, gloom, and absurdity. Moving away from such tradition, *KL Noir* is distinctively constructed by darkness that stems from the failure of embracing Islam and the violation of Islamic rules. Therefore, this paper examines how *KL Noir* anthologies incorporate Islam to demonstrate their distinction from the Western noir tradition. Portrayals of Islam as the underlying religious principle imposed in the family shown in “The Runner” and “Victims of Society” are found to be the source of the darkness as they depict violation of Islamic rules and laws. When Islam is not faithfully embraced, it brings consequences that severely affect the noir characters and thus darken atmosphere and ambiguity of the stories, yet at the same time such circumstance sheds the light of how life has been perfectly guided by Islam. Finally, this is how the incorporation of Islam in *KL Noir* functions to be noir yet enlightening.*

Keyword: Islam, noir fiction, noir tradition, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The discourse of English literature in this study adopts the definition of English literature as “literature in English throughout the world” (Madden, 1993, p. 922). Consequently, literary works from Malaysian literature in English (henceforth MLE) are taken into account and analysed to convey the incorporation of Islam in Malaysian noir fiction in English. Despite its marginalized position in Malaysian literature (Holden, 2009, p. 55), MLE “performs a valuable role in its use and appropriation of global resources to serve local ends and aspirations” (Gabriel, 2016, p. 160). This suggests its qualification that the existence of MLE should not be downgraded nor overlooked. The publication of noir anthologies entitled *KL Noir* (2013-2014) concurs with the valuable role of MLE because the anthologies attempt to engage with both global response of publishing city-titled noir fiction and local aspiration of incorporating Islamic content within the noir stories. The former refers to the fact that the publication of *KL Noir* in Malaysia can be seen as a response to the global fame of city-titled noir series such as Akashic’s *Brooklyn Noir* (2004), the first published city-titled noir series and Christopher G. Moore’s *Bangkok Noir* (2011), the first published city titled noir series in Southeast Asian region. Akashic’s *Brooklyn Noir* that is dubbed that “it was not only successful, it spawned a lengthy series of similar anthologies set in varied locations” (Davis, 2010, p. 9) stimulates more publication of similar noir series. More noir stories from different parts of the world are thus available, including Southeast Asian region through *Bangkok Noir* and *KL Noir*. Meanwhile, the latter refers to the local aspiration of *KL Noir* that is implanted by incorporating Islamic content and values in the anthologies. This local aspiration of Islamic values found in *KL Noir* additionally corresponds to the tradition that “Malaysian fiction in English has always gestured towards religion or the religious” (Ng, 2011, p. 1). The Islamic content in *KL Noir* is arguably due to the construction of Islamic value that is ingrained within the social and cultural background of Malaysian society. At this point, the publication of *KL Noir* anthologies appropriately represents the qualification of MLE within the larger trajectory of Malaysian literature. As a result, this study can contribute to the scholarship of MLE as it relays the issue of religion, especially Islam and, at the same time, carries the tradition of MLE i.e. valuable role of locality of Islamic issue.

Furthermore, the incorporation of Islam in *KL Noir* that has not been much discussed in the scholarship of noir studies is arguably proposed as the novelty of this study. In the Western

noir tradition, noir fiction evolves from crime fiction and is commonly associated with stories of darkness, criminality and violence. This genre was historically employed to capture the aftermath of the wars i.e. World War I, World War II, and even Cold War (Horsley, 2009; Jenkins, 1996; Gorrara, 2003; Mayer & McDonnell, 2007; Salerno, 2007; Panek, 2010; Wilson, 2018). The interconnected association of noir fiction and the aftermath of the wars confirms that the genre has dealt with “darker in content” fiction by providing stories that reveal “the darker sides of mankind”, particularly under the influence of the post-war effects (Breu, 2005). Consequently, noir fiction is characterized by its noir aesthetics such as absurdity, gloom, despair and chaos. Based on the noir stories included in *KL Noir*, the anthologies evidently both conform to the abovementioned noir aesthetics and move away from such tradition as well. The conformity is supported by the consistency of presenting darkness of criminality and violence in *KL Noir*, yet the inclusion of Islamic values in *KL Noir* verifies the distinct modification of *KL Noir* to move away from the tradition of noir genre. In fact, the inclusion of Islam in *KL Noir* illuminates the distinct construction of darkness in the anthologies. *KL Noir* is distinctively constructed by darkness that stems from the failure of embracing Islam and the violation of Islamic rules.

Finally, focusing on the aspect of engaging Islam as the indication to move away from the Western noir tradition, this paper aims at deciphering how *KL Noir* anthologies incorporate Islam to demonstrate their distinction from the Western noir tradition. To meet the objective of this study, I argue that imposition of Islamic value and principle in the family as narrated in “The Runner” and “Victims of Society” escalates the construction of darkness in these noir stories. In addition, portrayals of Islamic principles being transgressed and their formidable consequences contribute to the darkness of the noir works. They severely affect the noir characters and thus darken the atmosphere of the stories, yet at the same time such circumstance sheds the light of how life has been perfectly guided by Islam. In the end, the imposition of Islam, its transgression and its consequences are seemingly depicted to be darkening and obscuring, yet actually they leave an important message of how Islam enlightens the life of its believers when the Islamic value and principles are being strictly obeyed.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study highlights the incorporation of Islam in *KL Noir* anthologies to support the contention that *KL Noir* is distinctively different from the Western noir tradition. Taken from the anthologies of *KL Noir*, two noir short stories are examined by employing qualitative method through context-oriented approach. The qualitative method allows two short stories chosen from *KL Noir* anthologies, namely “The Runner” and “Victims of Society”, to be taken as the source of data. Their words, utterances, events found in the short stories are analysed to support the contention of this paper. Meanwhile, the context-oriented approach is applied in this study because the approach “does not regard literary texts as self-contained, independent works of art but try to place them within a larger context such as history, social and political background, literary genre, nationality or gender” (Klarer, 1999, p. 91). In other words, the approach is in line with what this study aims at e.g. examining *KL Noir* and its relation to Islam and Malaysian society. The text of *KL Noir* anthologies, particularly “The Runner” and “Victims of Society”, is qualitatively examined by placing *KL Noir* within the larger context of social background of Malaysian society that is constructed by the religiosity of Islamic value and principle. Finally, “The Runner” and “Victims of Society” are also scrutinized within the context of literary history of Western noir tradition. This is purposefully done to reveal the distinction of darkness in *KL Noir* and Western noir tradition.

ISLAM IN *KL NOIR*: IMPOSITION, TRANSGRESSION, AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

The contention that the incorporation of Islam in *KL Noir* makes the anthologies distinctively different from the Western noir tradition is further answered by how Islam is portrayed in “The Runner” and “Victims of Society”. In these noir stories, Islam is narrated to be imposed to and transgressed by the noir protagonists; accordingly, imposition and transgression of Islamic values darken and obscure the atmosphere of the stories. The darkness even escalates when severe consequences occur after the transgression of Islamic principles. The darkness that is prevalent due to these circumstances related to Islam, its imposition, its transgression and the consequences of transgressing Islam is identified as the distinctive noir

aesthetic that is absent and thus cannot be found in the Western noir tradition. Imposition and transgression of Islam that are followed by severe consequences of transgressing of Islam can be identified as 'the moving away' aspect of *KL Noir* because they are inevitably contextualized with the Islamic values and principles ingrained in the Malaysian society. To provide an in-depth analysis, the discussion of Islam in *KL Noir* is going to be divided into two parts: the first part is Imposition and Transgression of Islam in "The Runner" and "Victims of Society", and the second part is Transgression of Islam and Its Consequences in "The Runner" and "Victims of Society": Noir yet Enlightening.

Imposition and Transgression of Islam in "The Runner" and "Victims of Society"

To contextualize why Islam is incorporated in *KL Noir* and Islam can contribute to the source of darkness of *KL Noir*, this part begins by explaining how Islam is positioned in the Malaysian society. First of all, Islam is adopted as "the official religion of the country and is an integral part of the society" (Hashim & Rahim, 2016, p. 83). The statistic data suggest that 61% of Malaysians are Muslim, and this connects how Islam is practiced by the significant number of Malaysians that eventually construct the social practices in the society. Secondly, Islam in Malaysia is not only recognized as the national religion but also the parameter to define the meaning of being Malay. In the Article 160, page 153 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia mentions that "Malay means a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay customs" (Siti Zubaidah & Hajar, 2016, p. 83). The implementation of this definition frequently invites sensitive issue and debate as Islam is more associated with Malays than any other racial groups in Malaysia. Furthermore, as the official religion, it has been argued that Islam is practiced as "a hegemonic force since it is still in the hands of a central state authority" (Mohamad, 2017, p. 451). At this point, the notion of imposition of Islam in a larger context of Malaysian society occurs, and Islam is practiced to control not only in the larger context of Malaysian society but also in the smaller level of individual and family units. Accordingly, this is how Islam is being ingrained in society that eventually the Islamic principles control and are imposed to Muslim Malaysians.

For Muslim Malaysians, Islam becomes the religious law that is imposed and thus must be obeyed since Islam guides not only their individual life but also the social construction. Portrayals of imposing Islam in "The Runner" and "Victims of Society" are evidently found, and the imposition of Islam is similarly practiced by parents within the smallest unit of the society e.g. family. In the noir story of "The Runner", imposition of Islamic values is done by the father of the family who happens to be "the imam of the local mosque" (Zaini, 2013, p. 15). Although the teaching of Islam is not directly quoted from the Holy Quran, the use of "imam" and "mosque" is adequately significant to suggest that Islam is legit to be taken as the underlying religious law being discussed in the story. Here, the father's position justifies that the teaching of Islam must be imposed by him since he holds both the leader of the mosque and the leader of the family. In other words, his double position allows him to push more pressure to his family to uphold the Islamic principles.

Two instances of Islamic teachings being imposed in this noir story are evident when, first, the father blames the noir protagonist as "I acted so unladylike, so *unMuslimlike*" (Zaini, 2013, p. 15) (emphasis in original) and, second, when the father also enforces his children to "follow my father to the mosque daily for Maghrib" (Zaini, 2013, p. 16). These two instances can be said that they are basic Islamic regulation. Teaching Muslims to truly behave like Muslims and to perform prayers at mosque is commonly acceptable. However, in this story, the notion of imposition is so prevalent because the way the father preaches these Islamic teachings is strict, demanding, and harsh for the sake of his own interest. The fact that what the noir protagonist does has "brought shame to his name" (Zaini, 2013, p. 15) and the worshipping prayers at the mosque is only for certain time, Maghrib time, may imply that the imposition of Islam is not for the purest reason of preserving the Islamic teaching. The underlying reason of imposing the teaching is merely to benefit the father's position in the society since what he cares is his ruined reputation. The punishment after the imposition is also prevalent when once the noir protagonist transgresses them, she is so severely punished that she has to deal with worse circumstances afterwards. Such situation deteriorates further ordeals experienced by the noir protagonist as she eventually involves in drug-dealing business, gets raped and murders her rapist. What happens to the noir protagonist of "The Runner" suggests that imposition of Islam and its

transgression brings massive destruction for her that contributes to the darkness of her life at the end of the day.

Meanwhile in "Victims of Society", imposition of Islam is also found within the family of Haris, the noir protagonist of the story. The Islamic teaching of being good Muslim such as reading Quran and avoiding listening to music is introduced by the parents along with the severe punishment when transgression is done. For instance, when Haris did not obey, his father would "do the walloping and beatings" while condemn him that "*Kau ini anak Setan, Haris*" (emphasis in original) (Gideon, 2014, p. 272). Growing up within the pressure from such imposition of Islam, Haris becomes religiously and socially ill-mannered, temperament, hypocrite, and ambiguous. The thought that "I hate my race. I hate my religion. I hate my parents" suggests the culmination of the imposition of Islamic teachings he has received from his family (Gideon, 2014, p. 274). This expression also justifies the link of race, religion and parents that perpetuates the upsetting aftermath of the imposition of Islam in his life. He is seemingly overwhelmed and irritated because being a Malay means Haris is strictly constructed by the teaching of Islam as the national ideology of the society and his parents' ways of upbringing the family under the ideology of Islamic teaching. He has to endure all of these family pressure and social construction under the name of Islamic values. As a result, the imposition and the transgression he encounters trigger him to commit more transgression and, accordingly drown him in the darkness of life as transgressor of Islamic principles.

Based on the abovementioned portrayals of imposition, the two noir stories similarly display that the imposition of Islam is always followed by transgression of Islam. All noir protagonists who are taught the teaching of Islam inevitably commit transgression by violating what is supposed to be obeyed. The occurrence of their transgression can imply that they cannot follow and comprehend Islam because the Islamic principle is strictly introduced and fully taught under the shadows of punishment. All parents in the noir stories are seemingly arrogant and inconsiderate with the ways they introduce Islam to their young children. Consequently, what comes in return is rejection and rebellion from the children. The worse condition is also shown that they transgress the Islamic values that they learn from their family. At this point, it can be said that the incorporation of Islam in *KL Noir* is done by exposing the negative side of teaching the religious law within the family that is through imposition of Islam. Also, the failure of introducing and teaching Islam with more considerable ways can be underlined as the main reason why imposition and transgression can occur and consequently create darkness of these noir stories.

Furthermore, transgression of Islam found in "The Runner" and "Victims of Society" is frequently followed by severe consequences that contribute to the darkness of these noir stories. The consequences of transgressing Islam here are surprisingly interconnected with the noir elements that commonly found in the tradition of Western noir fiction. At this point, the inseparable connection of transgression of Islam and its consequences with the noir elements can explain that *KL Noir*, represented by "The Runner" and "Victims of Society", maintains its characteristics to be dubbed as noir fiction. In other words, although *KL Noir* incorporates Islam in the anthologies, their noir element still validly concurs with the tradition of noir fiction. This even confirms that *KL Noir* anthologies both conform to the tradition of noir and, at the same time, move away from such tradition.

In "The Runner", after the nameless noir protagonist transgresses the Islamic value taught by her father, she encounters numerous terrible ordeals that can fit to her profile as noir character and characterization that is defined under the Western noir tradition. The day when she declared that "I officially became a criminal" (Zaini, 2013, p. 24) because she sold the drugs is the time that she officiates her status as a self-destructive noir protagonist. Following this step, she keeps ruining herself until she eventually murders her rapist. She cannot save herself from this self-destructive entrapment that will keep coming to her life. As a self-destructive noir protagonist, she fits into the iconic noir protagonist whose characterizations are "self-destructive individuals" (Guzman-Medrano, 2013, p. 15) and "morally ambiguous and unquestionably evil [people]" (Holt, 2006, p. 24). Her morally ambiguous characterization is displayed when she "decided to get even" (Zaini, 2013, p. 33). Here, the moment when she chooses to get her revenge by killing Fazrol is the manifestation of being morally ambiguous as she cannot differentiate how to completely overcome her situation. Settling down one ordeal by murdering other people is clearly done only by someone who is unclear and vague with his/her own mind.

Finally, this nameless noir protagonist along with her consequences of transgressing Islam remarkably shapes the darkness of the story while following to the noir tradition.

Similarly, the noir protagonist of "Victims of Society" also undergoes identical consequences after transgressing Islam as it is found in "The Runner". Haris who keeps transgressing the Islamic values in his life is eventually identified as the noir protagonist with moral and religious ambiguity. The fact that he cannot stop transgressing Islam clearly shows his ruined and doomed personality. He exactly knows the religious rules, yet he cannot be clear to decide and stay away from his negative attitudes. His personal thought about his race, religion and parents has clouded his mind and thus blocked his mind to decide which one is wrong and right. At this point, from the perspective of the noir protagonist, Haris definitely conforms to the tradition of noir fiction.

Transgression of Islam and Its Consequences in "The Runner" and "Victims of Society": Noir yet Enlightening

The last point of this paper is to contextualize the incorporation of Islam in *KL Noir* anthologies with the underlying message that Islam in *KL Noir* is both noir and enlightening. The incorporation of Islam in *KL Noir* is manifested by displaying imposition of Islam, transgression of Islam, and the consequences of the transgression. These aspects display the darkening side of Islam in the two noir stories of *KL Noir*. The reason has been previously explained that it is instigated by the failure of teaching Islam using more subtle and considerate ways. As a result, portrayals of Islam, its imposition, and its negativity in *KL Noir* can be confirmed as the source of darkness and noir-ness.

Furthermore, both noir stories display that when Islam is transgressed, its consequences are clearly shown and severely experienced by the noir protagonists. The consequences are so formidable and tough that they escalate the darkness of the noir stories. Accordingly, these consequences are not only constructing the darkness and noir-ness of the stories but also conforming to the characterization of noir protagonists. At this point, the incorporation of Islam in *KL Noir* obviously showcases that Islam as the source of darkness, and thus noir is prevalent, on one hand. On the other hand, when the formable consequences are prudently seen as the result of transgressing Islam, the enlightening side of Islam in *KL Noir* is perceivable. The darkness and the noir-ness found through the transgression of Islam and its consequences is arguably employed to preach the message that Islam enlightens its believers when the Islamic value and principles are being strictly obeyed. In other words, when Islam is transgressed, it becomes darkly daunting and obscuring, yet when these Islamic rules and laws are obeyed, it perfectly guides those who are religiously obedient. Finally, when using this reversed analogy, the instances of self-destructive, morally and religiously ambiguous noir protagonists found in the stories can be seen as solid examples that Islam and its imposition in *KL Noir* are enlightening. What these noir protagonists have done can be taken into account as guidance to avoid encountering the severe consequences of transgressing the Islamic values that is by thoroughly obeying the Islamic teaching.

CONCLUSION

The incorporation of Islam in *KL Noir* anthologies is manifested through the darkening portrayals of how Islamic principles and teachings are poorly taught to young generation within the family. Islam is imposed to them and immediately followed by harsh punishment when being disobeyed. This circumstance triggers further transgression to happen. As a result, the sequence of imposing Islam, transgressing it, and encountering severely horrifying consequences dominates the incorporation of Islam in *KL Noir* and becomes the source of darkness and noir-ness in these noir stories. Additionally, when the horrifying consequences of transgressing of Islam experienced by the noir protagonists are in line with the noir element of the noir protagonist e.g. self-destructive noir protagonist and morally and religiously ambiguous noir protagonist, this finding confirms the noir-ness of the stories that consistently conforms to the tradition of noir fiction. At this point, the noir aspect of the anthologies is established. At last, this study also concludes that the incorporation of Islam showcases the moving away aspect of making noir stories that can be rooted by showing the darkness of imposing religion, in this case Islam. Also, this study concludes that the two stories not only incorporate Islam to portray the darkening aspect but also successfully demonstrate the enlightening side of Islam in *KL Noir*. The former is confirmed by the conformity of the noir protagonists whereas the latter is apparent

from the underlying message of including Islam in noir fiction of Malaysia as the medium of teaching Islam.

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