

Jaafar Taib: A Biography of Malaysia Versatile Cartoonist

Fatimatuzzaharah Mohd Kidin

Department of Postgraduate Studies, Faculty of Art & Design, UiTM Shah Alam

Email: zaharamk@gmail.com

Muliyadi Mahamood (Prof. Dr.)

Department of Visual Culture Studies, Faculty of Art & Design, UiTM Shah Alam

Email: yadi@salam.uitm.edu.my

Abstract

There are several successful cartoonists in Malaysia and so far the thriving life of Jaafar Taib has not been thoroughly researched and documented. The biography done so far was very brief and only discusses on his works as a cartoonist. Lack of resources on cartoon history itself has made this research crucial because cartoon has become a part of history in Malaysia. It is to enrich the documentation of cartoon art in Malaysia by focusing on the success story of a versatile cartoonist, comic artist, painter and entrepreneur Jaafar Taib. Consideration on the description, analysis, interpretation and judgment in the analysis of his art works as compared to his life journey as a versatile cartoonist are presented in three major eras, namely the formative years, productive years and the new millennium. From these three parts, his artworks will be further dissected based on the technical and aesthetic aspects as well as the literacy of it. Hence, the life of Jaafar Taib as a cartoonist, a painter and an entrepreneur for more than five decades has made him a versatile cartoonist in total. He has successfully maintained the Malaysian identity in his artwork and is considered as the best contribution towards comic industry in Malaysia by receiving awards from Prime Minister of Malaysia. It is hoped that this study will inspire others to document the success stories of other prominent local cartoonists.

Keywords: Jaafar Taib; biography; Malaysia; versatile; cartoonist.

Introduction

Cartoons in Malaysia have existed since before the independence in the 1930s which has its own style related closely to their multicultural society. Appearances of cartoon in newspaper have played an important role in the Malay cultural and political development in this country during the time. The emergence of cartoon art in the 1970s through the establishment of humour magazines by the first cartoon publication company in Malaysia was a phenomenon for comic industry. Considered as the first humour magazine in Malaysia, *Gila-Gila* was published on 1st April 1978 by Creative Enterprise Company that sold out its first issue of 9,000 copies in a week. The concept of this *Gila-Gila* humour magazine is to depict Malaysian identity through its theme, character, story, humour and drawing. *Gila-Gila* was co-founded by significant cartoonists and comic artists Jaafar Taib, Mishar, Zainal Buang Hussein and Azman Yusof.

Gila-Gila magazine has been a trendsetter and inspiration for many cartoonists. According to Mahamood (2015), this magazine has become a reference for other publication of humour magazines and has produced quite a number of well-known cartoonists such as Rossem, Fatah, Don, Rasyid Asmawi, Reggie Lee, Long, Zamriabu, Tazidi, Cabai, Aman, Ujang, Nan, Bor, Zunar, Juragan, Lee Inas, Nudin, Imuda, Kerengge, Aza, Rosman and Aloy (2015: p.150).

However in Malaysia, versatile cartoonists are rarely heard of or have not been widely exposed. Thus, Jaafar Taib who was among the company co-founders has shown his credibility in technique, working discipline that he was known for and succeeds in elevating the profession of cartoonist. It has been proven through the publication of *Gila-Gila* magazine itself and it has become an inspiration for other cartoon magazines (Mahamood, 2010). Hence, as a prominent among Malaysian cartoonists (Provencher and Lent, 1998) he has taken himself a responsibility to be a mentor in expanding his knowledge and skills to other talented cartoonists who were inspired by his cartoons (Mahamood, 2015).

Method

This study used a qualitative approach and art historical method. The underlying theory on the analysis of the artist background is based on Vasari's theory of art in a cycle as a biographical approach. While for analysing samples of artworks, Feldman's theory is used and summarized as in the research plan. Primary and secondary data will be used in collecting data or information concerning situation, person and problem. When

conducting a research study, it is required to collect all the necessary information pertaining to it. Yet, occasionally the information necessary is by now easily available through so many resources and only requires a simple extraction method.

Findings

Jaafar Taib is the first Malaysian cartoonist that is actively involved in various different fields which are art, science, literature, publication and business. The paper discusses Jaafar Taib's journey as a cartoonist and his active involvement in comic, painting and publication. Information collected from the interview and observation on samples of artworks are being segregated into four sub topics beginning from his background, the formative years of 1960s to 1980s, the productive years of 1980s to 1990s and the new millennium years of 2000s onwards.

A. Background

His birth name is Jaafar Bin Taib and he is widely known as Jaafar Taib. He was born in Alor Gajah, Melaka on July 28, 1952. Since early age, he has been interested in cartoon. After finishing his high school, he migrated to Kuala Lumpur to pursue his passion towards art.

There were not many options offered in his hometown regarding art studies and there were not many art schools either. As a matter of fact he came from a not so well-off family that made his life difficult to attend any art school or art class. Due to deepen love for art, he has made a fulfilment to self-taught himself about art. A self-taught study processes that did not consist of just reading from a lot of books, magazines and newspapers but through working experience where he had been faced with critics from a lot of colleagues, art appreciators and art collectors. However, his determination has kept him continue on practicing and took all the criticisms as part of the challenges.

Apart from facing difficulty in his career; he was prospering in his marriage life as he and his wife were blessed with six children; four boys and two girls. The soft-spoken and gangly 63 year old father of six is proud of the support from his family especially since his children are showing interest in painting.

Being a self-thought artist has changed his way of thinking process in making artwork where he is known for his perfectionist attention to detail in producing a quality end product of artwork (Figure 3.1). This is due to



Figure 3.1: Jaafar Taib with his artworks in his studio at Jalan Kuching.

having a quality artwork produced from a quality time spent on in-depth research and a lot of background readings.

B. The Formative Year: 1960s – Early 1980s

1) Cartoonist:

Comic strips entitled ‘Hang Tuah’ which was published in the Malay newspaper of *Berita Harian* in 1980s, a character of Malay hero who was a warrior during Malacca Sultanate under the reign of Sultan Mansur Shah in the 15th century. The comic series of his version is based on Malay folklore of ‘Hang Tuah’ (Figure 3.2). The strip with three panels consists of indoor scenery and outdoor scenery in different places with different situation.

In the strip, various characters play different scenario and the techniques of drawing are detailed which help bring up the mood of the narrative. This version of ‘Hang Tuah’ does not just focus on fighting aspect but also in the context of family institution and living.

2) Painter:

Painting of ‘Pertarungan Hang Tuah dan Hang Jebat’ for example, depicts a duel between fellow friend and companion of Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat, 1982 (Figure 3.3).



Figure 3.2: Comic strip entitled 'Hang Tuah' by Jaafar Taib in *Berita Harian* 22 January 1982 (taken from rudimahmood.wordpress.com).



Figure 3.3: 'Pertarungan Hang Tuah dan Hang Jebat' by Jaafar Taib.

A figure of man with full of Malay dress which shows his face while holding a 'keris' (dagger) was believed to be Hang Tuah and the opposite man was believed to be Hang Jebat who was among comrade to Hang Tuah during studying Malay martial art of *silat* with Aria Putra, a renowned *silat* guru. Hang Jebat who had suffered from misunderstood and miscommunication upon hearing his best friend, Hang Tuah was being executed by the order of the Sultan without prior investigation, has took a revenged towards Sultan while they were in the palace. However, the Sultan was able to escape and saved. Then Hang Tuah came to the palace to stop his friend, Hang Jebat who he believed was a traitor to Sultan and need to be executed by the order of the Sultan. Message that Jaafar Taib tried to deliver is learning history through images can be done instead of reading text book.

3) *Entrepreneur:*

In 1976 Jaafar Taib decided to make and published his own comics. And he officially made it and founded the Creative Enterprise Sdn. Bhd. in early 1978 (Figure 3.4). The company was situated in Jalan Pantai Baru, Kuala Lumpur and later moved to Bangsar Utama, Kuala Lumpur.



Figure 3.4: Creative Enterprise's logo.

In fact he is now the managing director and head of the creative department cum editor of Creative Enterprise Sdn. Bhd. The company began as a small publishing company with the tagline of "*Lambang Penerbitan Bermutu*". Products of the company were focused on comic, humour magazine and Malay novel. Jaafar with others cartoonist which are Mishar, Azman Yusof and Zainal Buang Hussein were cooperated together in creating the '*Gila-Gila*' humour magazine as a replication of *Mad* magazine from the United States of America (USA). It had been published on April 1st in 1978 due to the lack of reading material for entertainment especially in Malay language.

C. The Productive Years: 1980s – Early 1990s

1) *Cartoonist:*

In the sub series where the caption ‘Adakah anda menyesal kalau...’ (Will you regret if...) (Figure 3.5) on the top of the panel, act as a possibility question and the caption below was the answers while the characters supported the overall of the answer. However the messages also are very cynical to Malay society, typically among workers who are living in the city.



Figure 3.5: ‘A piece of comic strip in ‘Adakah anda menyesal kalau..’

A remarkable piece of artwork by Jaafar Taib in making a criticism, focused on working people with a small scale salary. In Malay culture, being humble in doing something was an Islamic ethic, practicing in preventing from being a profligate person in the context of extravagant used of money. People who are a spendthrift person are nothing more than like a devil’s brothers and the devils themselves are hugely disobey to their own God (QS [17] Al Isra’: 27). And so this is a lesson addressed for Malays who have disobeyed the religion.

2) *Painter:*

Series of “The Red-Jungle Fowl” was an effort in recording habitation of jungle fowl. The beauty of their life activity is being captured by camera and sketch first before making its details with colouring process. For him what he saw was from a character to scenery, he captured and presents it in the form of painting like in “The Red-Jungle Fowl 7”, (1998) (Figure 3.6).



Figure 3.6: “The Red-Jungle Fowl (7)”, Acrylic on canvas, 1998.

Based on this painting, Jaafar Taib has captured the moment of this jungle fowl couple action and movement. The view of them being together was also seen in human life. How human can live together with their partner as a family and it can also be seen in this animal action of showing harmonious living as a family. Moreover, the jungle fowl also has an attitude of caring and being protective to their family.

3) *Entrepreneur:*

Gila-Gila humour magazine has played a very important role in developing the industry of Malaysian cartoon, particularly in Malay language of humour genre; and having sense of Malaysian reader’s taste, since the very first publication in 1978.

Creative Enterprise Sdn. Bhd. has been able to maintain the quality of production starting from the aspect of ‘what to make’; ‘how to make’; and focuses in making it right which are the principles applied each time in making of comic as well as any other products published by the company. The content arrangement in *Gila-Gila* magazines is synchronizing, publishing reading materials that are not only suitable but follow the readers’ taste. The arrangement of comic in *Gila-Gila* magazine is done by putting more thoughts in the sense of conformability for the readers when reading it; interweaving light comic strip after the heavy comic purposely for reader’s eye rest.

The success of the *Gila-Gila* humour magazine, an anthology series of comic strips by Jaafar Taib were published as ‘*Kalau*’ in 1982, followed by another series “Jungle Jokes” in 1991, ‘*Kalau*’ second volume in 1993 and “Jungle Jokes” second volume in 1996 (Figure 3.7).



Figure 3.7: The front covers of anthologies series.

D. The Millenium Year: 2000s Onwards

1) *Cartoonist:*

His courage and effort in elevating Malaysian identity with issues conveyed through his comics and illustrations book have made him as a cartoonist being honoured not just by PEKOMIK (*Persatuan Penggiat Komik Malaysia*) in 2010 (Figure 3.8) but also among the readers as well. He has said that for all these passing years, his efforts are not for his benefit but for all the cartoonists in Malaysia, regardless of their background.

He has contributed to comic industry in Malaysia for almost a decade in documenting animal species that can be found in his comic “Jungle Jokes” which has made him being recognised in comic industry and in turn received awards for two times which were given by the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. The first award is *Kartunis Dedikasi of Tokoh Penggiat Kartun Malaysia 2012*. This award is given by the Prime

Minister for the campaign on Cartoon and Animation of 1 Malaysia on June 24th, 2012 at Pasar Seni, Kuala Lumpur. Then secondly is the 2015 *Kampung Boy* Premier Award which was held in conjunction with Lat's 50th anniversary involvement in cartoons, in Putrajaya on October 12th, 2015.



Figure 3.8: From left, PeKomik Award 2010 for best loose cartoon, *Kartunis Dedikasi Award of Tokoh Penggiat Kartun Malaysia 2012* and *2015 Kampung Boy Premier Award*.

2) *Painter:*

The painting '*Enggang Badak*', was painted by using oil paint colour and on a canvas in 2008 (Figure 3. 9). '*Enggang Badak*' depicts a scene of a bird settled on a tree branch while another bird is flying with view of nature; trees, mountain and some cloudy sky.



Figure 3.9: '*Enggang Badak*', oil on canvas, 2008.

This species is among endangered species being protected under Act of 76/72. It faces many threats, including loss of habitat and was hunted for its meat, feathers and casqued, which can be carved into a decoration. Thus this is why Jaafar Taib painted it for documentation purpose.

3) *Entrepreneur:*

In celebrating the 37 years of publication and over than 700 issues published, the company has made a collaboration with Gallery Petronas in exhibiting the *Gila-Gila* humour magazine as part of the on-going promotion. The exhibition of *Lagi-Lagi Gila-Gila* was held at *Galeri Petronas*, KLCC in Kuala Lumpur, from 15th April 2015 until 15th July 2015 which the opening ceremony was completed by Datuk Mohammad Nor Khalid or Lat, the icon of Malaysian cartoonist (Figure 4.0). It was the first time for this kind of exhibition being collaborated between Creative Enterprise Sdn. Bhd. and *Galeri Petronas*. At the same time, few of the prime comic themes were being printed again and special edition was being published, exclusively sold it at the *Galeri* as a souvenir for visitors and long-time supporting readers.



Figure 4.0: Entrance of exhibition at *Galeri Petronas*, KLCC.

Conclusion

The life of Jaafar Taib as a versatile cartoonist that involves the activities of making comics, paintings and as an entrepreneur has spanned more than five decades. During the time frame he has witnessed the development of Malaysia infrastructure as well as the cartoon industry. He has given back to the society by guiding and continuously inspiring younger generation of cartoonist to never giving up in making comic in the process of creating a

good one. As a matter of fact, he is successful in maintaining the Malaysian identity in his artworks and was considered the best contributor towards comic industry in Malaysia as he has been honoured by significant awards given by the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

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