

Malaysian Queer Literature

Collin Jerome

jcollin@unimas.my

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This article examines Malaysian queer literature (MQL) in terms of what it is, its characteristic elements, and how the way it is written responds to the differential treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) people in Malaysia. The article uses the secondary data analysis method to examine existing resources on MQL to ascertain what it is, its origin, and evolution. The article then applies the analytical method developed by Blackburn, Clark, and Nemeth to examine the elements of MQL in Malaysia's anthologies of queer literature, namely, *Body 2 Body - A Malaysian Queer Anthology* (2009) and *Mata Hati Kita/The Eyes of Our Hearts* (2016). The analysis reveals that MQL is a new literary genre in the Malaysian literary scene and is produced for a number of reasons including to open up avenues of discussion about queer that remains subject to condemnation by the mainstream local society. Two characteristic elements of MQL are identified, namely, the multiple conceptions of sexual and gender identities, and the disruption of sexual and gender norms. The analysis also reveals that MQL is written with these elements in mind as a way to respond to the discriminatory treatment of LGBTQ people in the country. The article has implications for current efforts that seek to use MQL not only to provide readers with the diverse ways of being in the world but also to rethink existing discourses that continue to condemn LGBTQ people on the basis of gender and sexual diversity.

Keywords: queer; LGBTQ; gender; sexuality; literature; Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Literature is such an important part of our lives, not simply because it is used to portray human life and experience, but also because of the 'reality' and 'truth' that it seeks to represent. This is especially true if we consider, for instance, Ryken's (1984) contention on how literature works to portray life, human experience, reality, and truth. Literature, as Ryken (1984) posits:

. . . is concrete and experiential. It uses tangible images to convey the very quality of lived experience. It appeals to our imagination (image-making capacity). . . the subject of literature is human experience - not abstract ideas or propositions, but experience. The knowledge or truth that literature gives us is an awareness of reality or truth as it is actually experienced. (p. 17)

Queer literature functions much in the same way as Ryken's definition, particularly how it portrays the lived experiences and realities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) people. To illustrate this point, we use contemporary LGBTQ literature of the United States as an example. This literary genre addresses a wide range of topics including LGBTQ history and culture, identity politics, and AIDS advocacy, with the aim to enable readers who identify as LGBTQ to "give context and meaning to their experiences" and provide non-identifying LGBTQ readers "insight into experiences and cultures they only barely understand and