The Role and Nature of the Ghost in Literature: The Malay World and the West

Rebecca Fanany, PhD

School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Faculty of Arts and Education
Deakin University
Melbourne

rebecca.fanany@deakin.edu.au

Abstract

Ghosts are believed to exist in both the Malay world and the West. Their presence in folk stories, novels, plays, and short stories is a long-standing phenomenon. Their form, characteristics, and relationship with human beings, however, are different in the Malay world and in the West, as is their place in literature. This article considers the way in which ghosts are portrayed in these two very different cultures in both folk literature (cerita rakyat) and formal literature. Examples will be drawn from works in western languages as well as those in Indonesian and Malay, and from the traditional beliefs of both concerning ghosts but will not be limited to ghost stories. Rather, the appearance of ghosts in general literature, as opposed to stories only about ghosts, will be discussed. The role of ghosts in the literature of the respective societies -- the purpose behind their appearance -- as a literary device as well as an expression of culture is also considered.

"He woke up frightened and reached for the matches, and the matches were put into his hand."

The shortest ghost story in the English language, by Anonymous.

Ghosts appear as characters in formal and informal literature from around the world in virtually all languages. While their popularity tends to wax and wane with the tides of literary fashion, their constant presence is a most gratifying state of affairs to the writers of ghost stories as well as to members of the public who wish to be frightened.

What we think of as a ghost, its nature and characteristics, and its role in literature vary from language to language and from culture to culture. The nature of ghosts in the literature of the Malay world and in that of the west with respect to the attributes they display as characters in stories and their function in literature as a
whole differ considerably and are worthy of discussion in the broader context of literature.

The Nature of Ghosts

What ghosts are and how they are thought to behave is a subject on which folk literature, the stories and traditions passed from generation to generation mostly by word of mouth, has a lot to say. Most of us have felt a chill of horror in the night when we happened to remember some story told to us in childhood by a friend or grandparent and recalled by our present environment.

In western folk literature, what a ghost is is quite clear. A ghost is thought to be the disembodied spirit of a person or animal that is now dead but, for some reason, has not left this earthly realm (Briggs, 1971). There are various ideas as to why this might occur. From ancient times, people have felt that an unburied corpse will walk (Pliny Secundus) and, for this reason, many cultures are cautious to ensure proper burial. A serious insult or slight to someone shortly before their demise might provoke a haunting (Briggs, 1971). And those who have died by violence, either at the hand of others or by their own hand, are believed most unlikely to rest easy in their graves. Ghosts are said to take the form they had in life, although often lacking feet, or to have no form at all, appearing as a disembodied sensation of cold or wind.

These ghosts may be divided, then, into two main categories: those who have done wrong while alive and those who suffered from wrongs done to them. Ghosts seeking revenge may be more malevolent, but it is possible for ghosts of evil people to come back to warn mortals of impending danger. This behavior is thought to be a form of penance that will allow them to pass out of their ghostly form and enter their proper spiritual home (Briggs, 1971).

Interestingly, while ghosts are generally agreed upon to be frightening and horrifying, most westerners feel that they pose little physical danger to humans. They are unable to cause actual injury and do most of their dirty work by scaring people or causing them inconvenience by moving objects, hiding things, or generally interfering in their affairs. For this reason, if we are not afraid of ghosts, they are unable to affect us and, it is hoped, will leave us alone. Some ghosts are thought to be bound to certain locations which they cannot leave. They are generally believed to have a poor sense of direction, hence the practice of burying those who died by violence at a crossroad in the hope that their ghost will be confused and unable to find its way back home to bother the living.

Certain individuals are thought to have an affinity for ghosts. Children and teenagers are claimed to be more sensitive to their presence than adults, and it is a well-known rule of thumb that a dog will refuse to enter a room where a ghost is present. Dogs may be especially sensitive to ghosts because they are often said to come back to accompany their former master on his now lonely walks.

Malay folk literature is also well-stocked with a variety of ghosts, spirits, and things supernatural. It is very difficult to determine, however, which of these best coincide with the western idea of the ghost. The Malay hantu, while normally translated as 'ghost,' is usually thought of as some sort of creature in its own right. When asked, many people suggest that hantu is any sort of makhluk gaib (supernatural creature) and has its own existence as such without having had to be alive and then die as its western counterpart must. A sort of hantu orang mati dibunoh has been reported as occurring in folk literature (Skeat, 1965) but does not appear to be a prominent type of ghost. There are ghosts in Malay folk literature whose main occupation is to annoy humans. Orang bunian are thought
to make frightening noises while hantu songkei may dismantle traps and snares set up in its part of the jungle (Skeat, 1965). Hantu kubur are grave demons who prey on the living whenever they can (Hastings, 1971). A large number of other hantu, such as hantu ribut, hantu air, hantu taut, hantu rimba, and hantu berok, are believed to inhabit the earth, and many people state that these ghosts have the ability to do actual harm to humans.

Malay folk literature tells that people with special knowledge and abilities are able to see and sometimes command ghosts. Dukun or bomoh may be able to control certain kinds of ghosts and are said to be able to use information obtained from ghosts for the benefit of those who come to consult them (Skeat, 1965). Some are claimed to have a siluman, a ghost tiger, that does their bidding.

The Appearance of Ghosts in Literature

Ghosts have appeared in literature in the west since ancient times. Greek writings that have come down to us say that Socrates was said to have a personal daimon who warned him when he was about to make a wrong decision. The Romans had stories about good ghosts, numina, as well as about the ghosts of evil men, lemures, who wandered the earth at night and made mischief. The poet Seneca had ghosts deliver the prologue in his plays Agamemnon and Thyestes. Petronius' Satyricon and Apuleius' The Golden Ass contain inset ghost stories (Cuddon, 1993). Chaucer told of ghosts in his Canterbury Tales. Perhaps the most famous ghosts in western literature are those created by William Shakespeare. The ghost of Hamlet's father who will speak only to Hamlet is 'doomed for a certain term to walk the night' (1.5.10). Shakespeare has him tell Hamlet of the wrong done him while alive. The Bard put a ghost into Macbeth as well where Banquo, after his death, appears to Macbeth in a horrifying form only Macbeth can see.

The Gothic Novel, of which The Castle of Otranto by Horace Walpole (1764) is considered the first, popularized ghosts in mainstream literature. By the 19th century, most prominent writers of the age had tried their hand at ghost stories, and 'penny dreadfuls', inexpensive horror stories, were all the rage. Washington Irving (The Legend of Sleepy Hollow), Sir Walter Scott (Wandering Willie's Tale, The Tapestried Chamber), Edgar Allen Poe (Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque), Charles Dickens (A Christmas Carol), Wilkie Collins (After Dark), Sheridan Le Fanu (The Ghosts and the Bone-Setter), Robert Louis Stevenson (Thrawn Janet), Rudyard Kipling (By Word of Mouth), Conan Doyle (The Brown Hand), Ambrose Bierce (The Moonlit Road), O. Henry (The Furnished Room), and Henry James (The Romance of Certain Old Clothes) all contributed to the genre. Ghost stories remain popular today and have spread to the big and small screen with movies such as 'Topper' and the recent 'Ghost' featuring Demi Moore, and television programs like 'The Ghost and Mrs. Muir', 'Caspar the Friendly Ghost' and 'Ghost Dad'.

While approximately 89% of ghost stories have been written in the English

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1 The lemur takes its name from these Roman ghosts. It was given this name perhaps for its ability to move quickly and disappear in the jungle, its nocturnal habits, and its spectral appearance. Its name also shows the prevalence of ghosts in people's thoughts, even those of scientists in their quest for objective knowledge.
language (Cuddon, 1993), some notable examples have been produced in non-English-speaking Europe. Kleist's *Das Bettelweib von Locarno* (The Beggar Woman of Locarno), Hoffmann's *Das Majorat* (The Entail), and Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades* are among them.

While a great many prominent western writers have produced ghost stories, it is very difficult to find a ghost in the formal literature of the Malay world. Inexpensive thriller novels called *roman picisan* were very popular in both Indonesia and Malaysia during the 1940's and 50's (Hamdani, 1988). Many of these contained strong supernatural elements and ghosts as characters. Perhaps because these stories were not seen as having any particular literary value (Hamdani, 1988), *roman picisan* of this period are now unfortunately hard to find. One author of the time, Riyono Pratikto of Indonesia, who is considered to have been a more skilled writer than many of his contemporaries in the genre, did write several stories in which ghosts appear. In *Si Rangka* (The Skeleton) the ghost of a dead friend comes to visit. Someone is possessed by the spirits of those killed in war in *Api* (Fire). And in *Pencaharian yang Djujur* (An Honest Search), a workman is employed by a family only he can see and finds himself in trouble when he tries to spend the money he has been paid. According to HB Jassin (1985), Pratikto was strongly influenced by writers like Edgar Allen Poe which may account for his portrayal of ghosts as entities similar to those found in western literature.

While ghosts as such are not common in the literature of the Malay world, magic and the supernatural do occur. Local beliefs about the supernatural have figured in legends like *Putri Saadong* (Hamdani, 1988). Writers such as Marah Rusli (*Sitti Nurbayati*), Shahnun Ahmad (*Srengenge*), Korrie Layun Rampan (*Upacara*), and Mochtar Lubis (*Harimau! Harimau!*) have incorporated folk ideas about magic (*guna-guna, sihir*), phantoms (*siluman*), mystic places (*tempat keramat*), evil spirits and devils (*iblis*) into novels about other things.

And although ghosts are not common in the formal literature of the Malay world, they abound in oral literature and folk stories. In addition to the old tales of ghosts and magic that have been passed down from one generation to the next, a current form of ghost story exists in the Malay world that is at least as interesting because its characters are being developed every day. These are the ghosts of urban legend, as the modern stories that pass from person to person across a nation have been named in the United States. In urban legends of all sorts, the events being related have always been experienced by a friend of a friend of the teller and spread over remarkable distances in much the same form. For example, all over Sumatra, people tell of a faceless man who orders *bakso* from a pushcart vendor and then refuses to pay. When the vendor tries to collect his money, the ghost, for that is what he is, reveals his lack of facial features. In horror, the vendor flees abandoning his pushcart. He turns to the first person he meets for help only to discover he has been found by another faceless ghost and cannot escape. Needless to say, no one has ever met the nameless *bakso* seller or seen the ghosts in question, but the story is told often and everyone seems to know it.

Similarly, it is said to happen that a solitary motorcyclist is flagged down on a lonely road by a pretty girl looking for a ride. If he obliges her by agreeing to take her to the next town, he may suddenly discover she has disappeared just as
they are passing an old graveyard and realize in horror that the girl he picked up was actually a ghost. This is exactly comparable to the hitchhiker ghost in western urban legends, which may, in fact, have been its inspiration.

The Function of Ghosts in Literature

Ghost in western literature are of five basic types. They may be earthbound spirits that cannot rest until they are avenged of a wrong done them. Hamlet's father is a ghost of this type. They may appear as dream apparitions sent with a message or warning to the sleeper. Chaucer's ghost in 'The Nun's Priest's Tale' in The Canterbury Tales is of this type as is the ghost of Caesar who appears to Brutus in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. Ghosts in literature may be an emissary of the devil in disguise. This was a 16th century belief expressed by Hamlet when he asks his father: 'Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd...' (1.4.41) because he is uncertain whether the ghost is really his father or a demon disguised as his father. Or ghosts may be a hallucination in tangible form brought about by guilt or other troubling emotion. This was the case in Macbeth's manifestation of Banquo (111.4). Finally, ghosts in western literature may be comic or melodramatic caricatures of the first type above. They are common in 18th and 19th century Gothic tales and are best exemplified by the three ghosts in Dicken's A Christmas Carol.

The purpose of all five types of ghost in western literature is basically the same. They serve a narrative and plot-driving function. They can act as omniscient narrators who, by virtue of their state of existence, see things that no one mortal can see. They may also be privy to information and knowledge not obtainable by other characters through normal means and serve as a way of making this information known to a reader. And, of course, through their very presence, they may cause other characters to react or behave in a particular way that is necessary to the plot or even be the substance of the plot themselves.

The function of ghosts and the supernatural in the literature of the Malay world is, in most cases, quite different. While ghosts may appear in order to permit a plot to unfold as in the stories of Riyono Pratiko or in roman picisan, this is not their most common usage. Whether a ghost is present as a character or whether human characters experience, fear, or think about magic and the supernatural, it serves as an expression of traditional culture and beliefs. This has been used to great effect by some writers to demonstrate the contrast between traditional ways and customs and the effects of modernization. This is the case in Shahnon Ahmad's Sregenge for example. They may also be used to show the gap that exists between actual reality and people's perceptions of their environment. This occurs in Harimau! Harimau! by Mochtar Lubis where the characters' belief in the supernatural influences their interpretation of events and, at the same time, serves to allow plot development. In other words, the presence of supernatural elements in the literature of the Malay world refers back to older beliefs that contrast with the situation faced by characters in the story. While western ideas of ghosts do, of course, come from old beliefs and ideas, they are not used, nor have they been used, by writers to point up a comparison between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern. And even in the case of the ghosts in the urban legends of the Malay world, it is interesting to note that, though their characteristics match those indicated by traditional beliefs and they are promulgated orally in the method of the village, these ghosts have been quick to latch onto modern technology and provide
a bridge between the familiar stories of old and today's modern way of life.

Conclusion
In both the west and in the Malay world, we are still as fascinated by ghosts as our ancestors were. If we are not writing stories about them, we are talking about them late at night or on lonely roads. While it is not possible to determine whether they really exist as something measurable and quantifiable, it seems plain that ghosts do serve a purpose in literature and occupy a special niche in storytelling. For this reason then, perhaps they do exist, in both the west and in the Malay world, as a manifestation of people's desire to be entertained.

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