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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Malaysian Science Fiction in the Mahathir Era (1981-2003): From "Knowledge Society" to "Lingkungan Teknikal" (Technoenvironments)?

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Abstract

During the first, long tenure of Dr Mahathir Mohamad as Prime Minster of Malaysia (1981-2003), the country embarked on a long-term strategy to achieve the status of a highly developed nation. This "Vision 2020" (*Wawasan 2020*) placed high-technology, especially Information and Computer Technology (ICT) at the centre of the country's transformation, in line with the notions of "Knowledge Society" and "Knowledge Economy." Within the political framework of that period, the government discourse was propagated through government agencies and institutions, including schools, universities, and the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), as well as by the media controlled by or in sympathy of the government. Positive visions of high technology in the future Malaysia were soon to be found in many publications, including in the now booming genre of science fiction for the youth. This article examines several of these textual scientific and technical imaginaries, including the novel *Panrita* by Arena Wati (1993), as well as popular science fiction novels and short stories.

It is found that often the plot centres on the notion of a journey. The youth novels mostly depict a concrete trip to planets and galaxies far away, while in one case, a time-machine brings the juvenile heroes to an early 20th century Malay anti-colonial struggle against the British. In these journeys, the utopian vehicles symbolise Malay/Malaysian agency and competence in science and high technology, being at par with other developed nations. In the award-winning novel *Panrita*, the voyage through these new *Technoenvironments* also encompasses a deep spiritual and religious meaning within Malaysian Islam. Given the great political emphasis on Malay language and culture in this period, de-centring away from the Anglosphere, the question is raised whether in the Malaysian case the English term should be localised, e.g. by the Malay term "lingkungan teknikal", building on previous theoretical contributions in Malay, including that of Sohaimi Abdul Aziz (2013) on "teknoteks" (technotext).

Keywords: Malaysia; technical imaginaries; science fiction; Arena Wati; Panrita

Introduction

After the riots of 1969, the ruling coalition in Malaysia, called National Front (*Barisan Nasional*), embarked on a long-term strategy to lift the Malays out of their (relative) poverty. This was reflected in the various development strategies, beginning with the New Economic Policy (NEP, or: *Dasar Ekonomi Baru, DEB*) launched by Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein in 1971 at the beginning of the Second Malaysia Plan (Tillainathan and Kee Chok Cheong 2016: 56). Sub-sequent periods,

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in line with the following five-year long Malaysia Plans, were called the National Development Policy (1991-2001), National Vision Policy (2001-2010), and the New Economic Model (2011-2020).[1] Tillainathan and Kee Chok Cheong (2016) periodise these post-1969 years differently, indicating that the early NEP years lasted from the launch in 1971 through 1986, when the government was forced to alter its economic policy mix after the sharp recession of 1985/86. Accordingly, the next period, from 1987 to the Asian Financial Crisis (AFC) 1997/98 ("between two crises", 2016: 59), was marked by ownership liberalisation and privatisation programs and saw a boost in export-oriented manufacturing. For the post-AFC period, Tillainathan and Kee Chok Cheong (2016: 63-66) note that the earlier strong growth rates never returned, partly because of more international competition for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from countries with lower wages (such as Vietnam or Indonesia), partly because of a quality problem in the Malaysian Higher Education system. They link this problem to the NEP-inherent positive discrimination for Malays in state universities. Tillainathan and Kee Chok Cheong (2016: 63) also build on the criticism of the previous generation of Malaysian economists, including Gomez and Jomo (1999), who had highlighted 'state-government-party collusion' and crony-capitalism as a problem in the privatisation policies.

This critical assessment from the field of economic studies views the positive discrimination strategy for Malays and other Bumiputera since the launch of the NEP in 1971 as the main reason for the numerous economic problems Malaysia has experienced since, and indirectly advocates a non-race-based approach to economic development. If we focus, however, on the pro-NEP discourse of the period in order to understand the imaginaries constructed and disseminated for the new cultural roles of Malays, one important source is Mahathir Mohamad's much-quoted book *The Malay dilemma* (1970). In it, he argues that the social and economic situation of the Malays can only be improved if they leave their social and economic niches by changing their cultural horizons through education. In other words, a restructuring of the "Plural Society" of Malaysia, to borrow Furnivall's term here,[2] would necessarily include a mental revolution of the Malays. Logically, for the NEP to succeed, education for the Malays played a key role (Matheson Hooker 2000: 309). An indication is that the portfolio of the Minister of Education (often merged with that of the Minister of Higher Education) has been deemed so important that almost all Malaysian Prime Ministers[3] since 1969/70 had been previously Minister of Education, as Table 1 illustrates.

Table 1. Ministers of Education who became Prime Ministers of Malaysia[4]

Name	Minister of Education	Prime Minister
Abdul Razak Hussein	1952–1957	1970–1976
Hussein Onn	1970–1973	1976–1981
Dr Mahathir Mohamad	1974–1978	1981–2003, 2018–2020
Abdullah Ahmad Badawi	1984–1986	2003–2009
Anwar Ibrahim	1986–1991	2022-
Najib Razak	1995–1999	2009–2018
Muhiyiddin Yassin	2009–2015	2020–2021

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Development_Policy, and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wawasan_2020, both accessed 17 January 2024.

[2] For a discussion of Furnivall's concept of "Plural Society" from a more contemporary perspective, cf. Lee Hock Guan (2009).

[3] The only exception is Ismail Sabri Yaakob, Prime Minister from 2021 through 2022.

[4] Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minister_of_Education_(Malaysia) and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prime_Minister_of_Malaysia, accessed 17 January 2021. In most periods, the portfolios of the Ministry and Education and the Ministry of Higher Education were merged. Exceptions are the years 2004-2013, 2015-2018, 2020-2022, where the houses were separated.

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Knowledge Society

The first long tenure of Dr Mahathir Mohamad as Prime Minister (1981-2003) is often called "the Mahathir era".[5] Yet, for the topic of this paper it is also significant that he was Minister of Education (1974-1978, cf. Table 1) and Deputy Prime Minister (1976-1981)[6] before. Mahathir's influence in the field of culture and education could justify the concept of an "extended Mahathir era" (1974-2003), when inspiration about the role of education for the development process, in particular for the Malays in the context of the NEP, came from a vivid national discourse on elements of theories of the "Knowledge Society" and the "Knowledge Economy".[7] These terms were originally coined by Peter Drucker, who was born in Austria in 1909, earned a PhD in law at the University of Frankfurt, before moving to England, where he privately studied economics with John Maynard Keynes, before he finally migrated to America, where he taught management at New York University from 1950-1971.[8] He coined the term "knowledge worker" in 1969 (Drucker 1969). For the related sociological discourse on "knowledge society" and "knowledge economy", as it took place in the 1990s and 2000s in Malaysian government-related think-tanks, Drucker's ideas were, among others, discussed by frequently invited Western sociologists such as Evers (2001) who kept publishing on aspects of that theme throughout the 2000s (Evers 2002, 2003; Evers and Gerke 2004; Evers, Gerke, and Hornidge 2008). His contributions were situated in a context in Malaysia where the theme not only had an academic, but also a political significance since "knowledge society" was a key theme for the modernisation discourse since the Mahathir era. Examples for this wider significance are proceedings from congresses organised by important think-tanks such as the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, ed. (2000), or publications for a wider audience, such as Dakian's book *K-ekonomi pemacu ekonomi di Malaysia* (2007), or numerous articles in Malaysian academic journals, both in English and Malay.[9]

A central part of the Malaysian government's strategy of a "knowledge society" was already formulated in the national vision "Wawasan 2020" (Vision 2020), officially launched by the Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 1991 in a speech at the Malaysian Business Council (Mahathir Mohamad 1991), and then incorporated into the various Malaysia Plans since.

The objective of "Vision 2020" was to accelerate the pace of Malaysian Development, with an annual growth rate of at least 7 percent, so that by 2020, the country whould achieve the status of a fully developed nation. Among the key parts of that strategy was to improve the human capital of the citizens of Malaysia, in particular the ethnic Malays and other Bumiputera, by fully embracing education and science. In this context, a particular emphasis was placed on Information and Computer Technology (ICT) in order to play a relevant role in the relatively new and fast-growing industry related to ICT. In fact, in the meantime, Malaysia has been ranked in the Human Development Index of the United Nations Development Program in the highest category of "very highly developed countries" since 2020 (based on data from 2019).[10] At the same time, Malaysia's exports are now to a large extent based on manufactured goods, such as Integrated Circuits (21 % of the exports in 2017), Office machine parts (4.2 %), Broadcasting equipment (3.6 %), or Semiconductor devices (2.9 %).[11]

[5]This term emerged soon after he left the office of the Prime Minister in 2003 and can be found in almost all scholarly publications on the period 1981-2003.

[6]https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahathir_Mohamad#Rise_to_prominence_(1970%E2%80%931976), accessed 1 August 2025.

[7]For a summary of that discourse as well as a link to international theories on the "Knowledge Society/Knowledge Economy", cf. Evers (2001).

[8]https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Drucker, accessed 2 January, 2025.

[9]The Malaysian online repository McCite, itself an outcome of the related discourse on the "knowledge society" in Malaysia, includes contributions from the 1990s onward. Cf. https://mycite.mohe.gov.my/, last accessed 2 January 2025.

[10]https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/12/650182/un-malaysia-now-very-high-category-human-development, accessed 17 January 2024.

[11]https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Malaysia_Exports_Treemap_2017.svg, accessed 17 January 2024.

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One could therefore argue that, at least according to these mentioned indicators, the "Vision 2020" has accomplished its main objectives, despite the criticism of Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 2023 that Malaysia could have performed better and that his successors as Prime Minister since 2003 had led "good for nothing administrations" and had turned the Vision 2020 dream "to ashes".[12]

"Vision 2020" as a Childhood Memory

For the older generation of Malaysians, whose memories go back to the early 1990s, the imagination of "Vision 2020" is an important part of their memories from a young age. The governments of Malaysia under the various Ministers of Education listed above (Table 1) emphasised strongly on conveying the messages of "Vision 2020", in particular to the youth. The official channels of education and higher education were all engaged in the propaganda of "Vision 2020", as were the media, mostly controlled by the government or closely linked private companies. A key role was also given to the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), the state agency in support of the Malay language, literature, and culture, established in 1956, even before the independence of the Federation of Malaya in 1957.[13] The DBP has funding lines for research, book publications, including youth novels, journals, and magazines. It also aims at improving the international role of the Malay language, among others, with support for the teaching of the Malay language abroad,[14] or by inviting foreign scholars to conduct research on Malay language and literature.

When the "Vision 2020" was launched in 1991, the DBP engaged in numerous supportive activities. This included the organisation of competitions for producing illustrations of a future Malaysia in 2020, e.g., in the DBP magazine *Majalah Dewan Bahasa*, as remembered by the blogger with the pen name nuargto[15] in his online blog dated February 2017, "Wawasan 2020: antara realiti dan fantasi".[16] At that time (according to the author: ca. 1991)[17], the author was a fourth-grade primary school student, and he also remembers other sources of inspiration, such as the magazine *Majalah Kuntum*, published monthly by the privately owned Star Media Group Berhad since 1980, which also engaged in visualisations of the Vision 2020.[18] For the imagination of that futuristic Malaysia, nuargto also names films and comics such as *Back to the Future*[19], *Demolition Man*[20], *Doraemon*[21], *Pendekar Laut*,[22]

[12] www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2023/03/892204/dr-mahathir-blames-pak-lah-and-najib-turning-his-vision-2020-dream, accessed 17 January 2024.

[13] https://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dewan_Bahasa_dan_Pustaka_(Malaysia), accessed 17 January 2024. – cf. also Matheson Hooker (2000: 251) on the background of the establishment of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

[14] An example is the establishment of an international council for Malay (Majlis Antarabangsa Bahasa Melayu, MABIM), established by a decision of the Malaysian Cabinet in 1997. Cf. https://lamanweb.dbp.gov.my/majlis-antarabangsa-bahasa-melayu-mabm/, accessed 17 January 2024.

[15] On his website "Coretan Anuar", the author identifies himself as Muhamad Anuar bin Marsib and presents further biographical information about himself and his family (http://www.coretananuar.com/p/kenali-saya.html, accessed 21 January 2024).

[16] http://www.coretananuar.com/2017/02/wawasan-2020-antara-realiti-dan-fantasi.html, accessed 19 January 2024.

[17] The blog is dated February 2017, and the author writes that 26 years ago, he was at Fourth Grade primary school. The cultural context remembered can therefore be dated as around 1991 (cf. http://www.coretananuar.com/2017/02/wawasan-2020-antara-realiti-dan-fantasi.html, accessed 19 January 2024).

[18] https://ms.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuntum_(majalah), accessed 19 January 2024.

[19] A 1985 American science-fiction film, cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Back_to_the_Future, accessed 19 January 2024.

[20] A 1993 film starring Sylvester Stallone and Wesley Snipes, cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demolition_Man, accessed 19 January 2024.

[21] A Japanese manga series first serialised in December 1969 and published in Malaysia from 1993 through 2017 by Tora Aman, and then by Gempak Starz, cf. https://ms.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doraemon, accessed 19 Jan. 2024.

[22] The first generation of the cartoon series *Pendekar Laut* seems to have been published in the 1990s, as the earliest volume of that series held in a library that participates in WorldCat.org, namely Vol. 9, is dated 1997, available at the State Library of Western Australia (cf. https://search.WorldCat.org/de/title/224004093). Internet searches conducted on 19 January 2024 result in several blogs that feature scans of Vol. 1 of Generation I, however, without reproducing the page that would indicate the publication year (cf. e.g. https://online.fliphtml5.com/oida/dkkm/#p=40, accessed 19 January 2024).

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and "*Dewataraya* (sic)"[23] as important sources of influence. Some of these are Western (i.e. here: American), such as *Back to the Future* or *Demolition Man*,[24] some are Malay translations of Japanese manga, such as *Doraemon*, and others are Malay translations of comics from Hong Kong, such as *Dewata Raya*. According to the records in the State Library of Western Australia, *Pendekar Laut* is in the Malay language, while the author and illustrator have Chinese names, namely Yat Leung Wan and Chi Fai Tang.[25] These diverse transnational cultural horizons in science fiction appear to be typical of the Malay-language youth literature and media available to young Malaysians in the 1990s,[26] indicating that, in this case, Malay language and Malay ethnicity were not necessarily tied to each other. A reason could be that, according to Othman Puteh and Ramli Isin (2003: 263), there was only a limited number of Malay authors active in the genre of science fiction literature in the 1980s.[27] As the government under Mahathir Mohamad emphasised so strongly on science and scientific thinking, especially for the Malays, the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) as state agency in charge of the support of Malay language and literature, reacted by the publication of Malay scientific literature as well as creative science fiction as a means to enhance the critical thinking capacities of Malaysia's youth within the context of the overall development strategy, as the Director-General (*Ketua Pengarah*) of DBP from 1988 to 1993[28], Dato' Haji Jumaat Dato' Haji Mohd. Nor points out in a book chapter on the history of DBP that appeared during his tenure (Jumaat Mohd. Nor 1992: 29). Rubaidin Siwar (1984: 110) dates the first deliberate attempt of the DBP to promote Malay-language science fiction literature as 1980, when the DBP organised a writing competition for science fiction for children. This date would be in line with the concept of an extended Mahathir era, from 1974-2003, when his ideas about the importance of science and technology for Malaysia's development already resonated widely in the country, even before he ascended to the position of Prime Minister in 1981.

This aspect can be investigated further through an inquiry of a sample of Malaysian science fiction books in the Malay language published until the end of the Mahathir era in 2003. My analysis departs from the special collection of Malaysian youth literature in the Malay language[29] at Goethe University Frankfurt. This collection is both "random" and "as comprehensive as possible", as I bought all suitable books in Malay and on Malaysia (i.e. several thousands) available at the Chow Rasta Used

[23]The author appears to refer to the comic series spelled *Dewata Raya*, which seems to originate from Hong Kong (cf. https://m.facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=LegasiManhuaMalaysia&set=a.910505999055875, accessed 19 January 2024). According to WorldCat.org, the National Library of Malaysia has holdings since the year "199?" (https://search.WorldCat.org/de/title/847909547, accessed 19 January 2024), however a search in the OPAC of the National Library of Malaysia does not result in any hits (https://www.pnm.gov.my/index.php/search/results?search=dewata+raya, accessed 19 January 2024).

[24]In fact, Sohaimi Abdul Aziz (2014: 132-142) credits the entire genre of science fiction to a Western trajectory, beginning with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) through Isaac Azimov as author of science fiction short stories (*cereka sains*) from 1939 on, and of science fiction novels from 1950 on.

[25]https://search.WorldCat.org/de/title/224004093, accessed 19 January 2024.

[26]Rubaidin Siwar (1984: 109) also draws attention to media other than printed literature featuring science fiction at that time, including comics, films, and television series such as "Lost in space", Star trek" and "Buck Rogers in the 25th century".

[27]It should be noted, however, that even before World War II, Malay language science fiction novels appeared. This includes the novel *Seteru Dunia* by Muhammad Sallehuddin (1938) that features a fictional German engineer who has selected Singapore as the location for experimenting with a new machine, which unfortunately malfunctions and turns a human into a monkey that then escapes and runs amok in Singapore (Mohd Tani Ahmad, Sarah Sadon, and Suhaimi Haji Muhammad 1988: 444). The short story "Terbang ke bulan" by Muhammad Sallehuddin (1939), according to the same source, features three German engineers flying to the moon.

[28]https://dbp.gov.my/senarai-pengarah-ketua-pengarah-dbp/ (accessed 31 July 2025).

[29]Youth novels, including science fiction youth novels, can be easily identified because they are mostly thin books in a smaller format, up to approximately 150 pages, which can easily be read by a teenage audience, e.g. at secondary school level. In contrast, Malaysian science fiction novels for an older audience are usually much more voluminous, e.g. Nurul Izwazi Mohd Nor (2010).

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Book Market in George Town, Penang, in 2009 for the collection in Frankfurt.[30] In total, these are 15 books, of which five are not listed in the Malaysian Academic Library Union Catalogue MALCat, which in turn features 52 books from 1973 through 2001 for the search term "cereka sains" (science fiction) and related searches, many of which are not in Frankfurt. For instance, 26 books by Zailiani Taslim, published in 1986 and 1987 by Uni-Text in Petaling Jaya, are only documented at the library of Universiti Utara Malaysia.[31] That means that the sample in Frankfurt is not representative of the entirety of Malay science fiction literature from Malaysia in the Mahathir era; it is, however, good enough for a qualitative analysis. The following books with a science fiction[32] topic are physically accessible and hence covered here. For Malaysian readers with access to the Malaysian inter-library borrowing system, Table 2 also contains the academic libraries in Malaysia where the respective publication is located.[33]

Table 2. Sample of science fiction youth novels from the Mahathir era, 1981-2003

Year	Author	Title	Publisher	Old library stamp	Theme	MALCat: also available at
1979	Rubaidin Siwar	Spektra 2000	Kuala Lumpur: Macmillan	Perpustakaan SM J.K. Chung Hwa Confucian P. Pinang	Space travel	Universiti Sains Malaysia
1982	Ilias Haji Zaidi	Melancong ke planet Teratai	Kuala Lumpur: Fargoes	Perpustakaan SM J.K. Chung Hwa Confucian P. Pinang	Space travel	Universiti Sains Malaysia
1985[34]	M. Ariffin Siri	Mendaratlah plasma hijau	Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka	na	4 short stories, various themes	Universiti Malaya, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
1986	Sulaiman Zakaria[35]	Alam dimensi	Kuala Lumpur: Hasratpelajar	Perbadanan Perpustakaan Awam Pulau Pinang	Space travel	na
1986	Rubaidin Siwar	Gelombang IQ	Kuala Lumpur: Berita	Perpustakaan SM J.K. Chung Hwa Confucian P. Pinang	12 short stories, various themes	na
1986	Rubaidin Siwar	Destinasi Andromeda	Kuala Lumpur: Berita	na	Space travel	Universiti Malaya, Universiti Teknologi Mara
1987	Abdul Ahmad	Pelarian ke angkasa	Kuala Lumpur: "K" Publishing & Distribution	na	Space travel	Universiti Sains Malaysia

(*Continued*)

[30]In total, the Malaysia collection in Frankfurt holds more than 10,000 items (personal information by the librarian Holger Warnk, January 2025), with a great emphasis on Malay language, literature, history and culture due to the acquisition of the Kratz collection in 2011 (Graf 2015).

[31]MALCat search on 30 July 2025 for the keyword "*cereka sains*" (science fiction).

[32]Cf. for comparison Rosnani Md Zain and Nik Rafidah Nik Muhamad Affendi (2019) for an analysis of Malaysian science fiction novels from 2012 through 2017.

[33]Other libraries in Malaysia, such as the various state libraries for general audiences, or school libraries, are not included here.

[34]Second ed., first ed. 1977.

[35]Dewi Nasa Widiyarti is named as the illustrator.

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Table 2. (*Continued.*)

Year	Author	Title	Publisher	Old library stamp	Theme	MALCat: also available at
1988[36]	Kamariah Yusof, ed.	Planet Hampagas	Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka	na	10 short stories, various themes	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Malaya, Universiti Sains Malaysia
1989	Fitri Azrin	Andora dari Marikh	Petaling Jaya: Penerbit Pan Earth	na	Space travel/U.F.O.	na
1991	Ghazali Ngah Azia	Odisi ke planet Epsilon	Kuala Lumpur: Berita	na	Space travel	na
1991	Masrul Hazian et al.	GXTM II	Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka	Perpustakaan SM J.K. Chung Hwa Confucian P. Pinang	3 short stories[37]	Universiti Malaya, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Utara Malaysia
1993	Muhammad Jaafar Darwis	Serangan Mosquinion	Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka	Yayasan Bina Ilmu Pulau Pinang	10 short stories, various themes	Universiti Malaya, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Universiti Teknologi Mara, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
1994	Azlan Ali	Zon Alpa	Klang: Eastview Publications	na	Space travel	Universiti Malaysia Sabah
1994	Samsul A. Hamid	xxx	Kuala Lumpur: Edusystem	na	Time machine	Universiti Sains Malaysia
1996	Haniza Hashim	Tamu dari planet Edonis	Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka	na	Space travel	na

As Table 2 demonstrates, the genre of science fiction existed in Malaysian youth novels already prior to the period from 1981 to 2003, when Dr Mahathir Mohamad was Prime Minister of Malaysia. For instance, the book by M. Ariffin Siri[38], *Mendaratlah plasma hijau* (1985), was first published in 1977 by the State Agency for Malay Language and Culture, the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, under the umbrella of the Malaysian Ministry of Education (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia). This is possibly

[36]Third ed., first ed. 1986.

[37]Winners of the Science Fiction Writing Competition for secondary schools, organised by the Ministry of Education in conjunction with The Malaysian Scientific Organization, 1989. The Malay name for this organization on the back cover is Persatuan Ahli-Ahli Sains Malaysia. For that organization, cf. https://mymsa.org.my/, accessed 19 January 2024.

[38]The biographical backgrounds of most authors of science-fiction in this sample are unknown. A rare exception is M. Ariffin Siri (more complete: Mohd. Ariffin Mohd. Siri) who is remembered in a short biographical chapter by Roosfa Hashim in the book *Tokoh-tokoh perbukuan Malaysia* (Md Sidin Ahmad Ishak2011). From this biographical sketch, we can learn that M. Ariffin Siri was an employee at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka for 29 years, beginning as translator of biological books from English to Malay in 1971. His interest in science led him to write several science fiction novels, including *Mendaratlah Plasma Hijau* (in this sample), as well as books and short stories not documented in MALCat nor WorldCat, including *Rahsia Otak Nombor 3* and *Rahsia Selaput Atas Air* (Roosfha Hashim 2011: 128).

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already linked to the programmatic vision of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, who served as Minister of Education from 1974 to 1978.[39] As the book *Spektra 2000* by Rubaidin Siwar (1979) was published by the commercial publishing house Macmillan at about the same time, it appears that science fiction novels were in general a popular genre in Malaysia already in the 1970s, including by employing dates from the distant future, such as the year 2000 to symbolise the futuristic dimension. From a book title such as "Spektra 2000", it is not very far to the name of the long-term development plan of the Mahathir era, "Vision 2020".

In fact, from the sample it is obvious that science fiction youth literature (*cereka sains*) was a frequent genre of Malay fiction in the period 1981-2003, when the views of Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad shaped much of the ideological mainstream of Malaysia. Several were published by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, such as M. Ariffin Siri (1985), Kamariah Yussof, ed. (1988), Masrul Hazian *et al.* (1991), Muhammad Jaafar Darwis (1993), and Haniza Hashim (1996), which demonstrates the commitment of that state agency to the genre. As this also includes the publication of the winning short stories of a science fiction writing competition of the Ministry of Education (Masrul Hazian *et al.*, 1991), it can be safely argued that in the period 1981-2003 both the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka and the Ministry of Education were engaged in a campaign to promote a positive orientation towards science and the future as a time full of possibility among the youth of Malaysia.

The column "Old library stamp" in Table 2 is inspired by approaches from manuscript studies, where also annotations about previous owners matter to discuss a manuscript in its historical context. In the case of this sample of science fiction youth books collected at a used book market in Penang in 2009, it is interesting to see that a number of these Malay-language books were previously at Chinese school libraries, in particular the library of the secondary school "J.K. Chung Hwa Confucian P. Pinang"[40], namely Rubaidin Siwar (1979), Ilias Haji Zaidi (1982), Rubaidin Siwar (1986), and Masrul Hazian *et al.* (1991). This means that these books also served to improve the knowledge of the Malay language among Chinese students. The Yayasan Bina Ilmu Pulau Pinang, the previous owner of the book by Muhammad Jaafar Darwis (1993), has been registered since 1993 as a centre for teaching and training, and it presents itself on its Facebook page as a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) founded to improve the knowledge of society through science.[41] The visual representation on its Malay-language Facebook page shows an emphasis on an ethnically mixed profile, as Chinese, Malay, and Indian staff and/or customers are represented through photographs and in a promotional video.[42] A similar multi-ethnic cultural context among previous owners of Malay-language science fiction youth novels in the sample also applies to the Perbadanan Perpustakaan Awam Pulau Pinang (Public Library of Penang), previous owner of the book by Sulaiman Zakaria (1986). One can therefore safely summarise that the Malay-language science fiction youth novels from the Mahathir era in the sample were popularised by state agencies such as the Dewan Bahasa, yet they also seemed to have resonated widely, including in Chinese and culturally mixed contexts. Apparently, they were so popular that several commercial publishing houses also published numerous books of that genre, as Table 2 documents. Interestingly, these commercial publishing houses were all located in the Klang valley, namely Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya, and Klang, i.e., the metropolitan area in and around Kuala Lumpur. Malaysian science fiction youth literature in the Mahathir era can therefore be associated with a metropolitan readership that was, however, not limited to Greater

[39] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minister_of_Education_(Malaysia) (accessed 28 July 2025).

[40] This school was established in 1904 and is the oldest formal Chinese school in Southeast Asia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chung_Hwa_Confucian_High_School, accessed 30 July 2025). Out of concern for the declining use of the mastery of their mother tongue among the immigrant Chinese, Mandarin was set as the medium of instruction.

[41] https://www.facebook.com/ybipulaupinang?locale=ms_MY (accessed 20 January 2024).

[42] https://www.facebook.com/ybipulaupinang/videos/assalmualaikum-wbtminggu-lepas-pada-hari-ahad-16hb-april-2023-yayasan-bina-ilmu-/441903798154238?locale=ms_MY, accessed 20 January 2024.

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Kuala Lumpur, as the copies in this sample were all collected in Georgetown, Penang.[43] The emphasis on science and engineering in the Mahathir era, associated with the slogan "Vision 2020" (*Wawasan 2020*), came from the national government, and resonated apparently very well with those parts of society that were open towards those narratives of the future, especially in urban areas.

"Vision 2020" and "Project 2020"

As Table 2 demonstrates, almost all of the science fiction youth novels in the sample stories are about space travel, including to such distant (sometimes imaginary) parts of the universe such as Planet Hampagas (Kamariah Yusof 1988), Planet Epsilon (Ghazali Ngah Azia 1991), Planet Teratai[44] (Ilias Haji Zaidi 1982), Planet Edonis (Haniza Hashim 1996), Planet Mars (Fitri Azrin 1989), and the Andromeda galaxy (Rubaidin Siwar 1986). This is in line with the observation by Rubaidin Siwar (1984: 109) that Malay science fiction literature of the period was greatly influenced by international science fiction mediated via comics, films, and TV series such as "Lost in space", "Star trek", and "Buck Rogers in the 25 century", that very often employed space travel as their main plot.

Yet, one book in my sample is different, namely *Projek 2020* by Samsuri A. Hamid (1994). The title reminds me of the national "Vision 2020" (*Wawasan 2020*), proclaimed by the Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 1991. The plot in *Projek 2020* concerns a time machine that was developed by the figure of the Malaysian Professor Syimir, who is the director of the laboratory and office of the "National Science Complex" (Kompleks Sains Nasional) erected by the government (1994: 5). As Prof Syimir explains:

> "Pihak Kerajaan telah mengeluarkan belanja yang banyak untuk membiayai kos pembinaan bangunan kompleks sains ini. Bangunan ini juga menjadi lambang kemajuan negara kita yang setanding dengan Jepun, Amerika Syarikat, Perancis dan negara-negara lain dalam bidang sains dan teknologi," beritahu Profesor Syimir kepada Afiq selepas bangunan itu dirasmikan oleh Perdana Menteri dahulu. Pada masa itu, Afiq masi bersekolah di sekolah rendah. (1994: 5).
>
> ["The Government spent big amounts to finance the costs for the construction of the building. This building has become a symbol for the progress of our country, which is at par with Japan, the United States of America, France, and other countries, in the field of science and technology", informed Professor Syimir Afiq at the time when that building was officiated by the Prime Minister. At that time, Afiq was still in primary school].

One of the products constructed in this symbol of the progress of Malaysia is a time machine, based on theories by Albert Einstein (1994: 18-19). As an experiment, Prof Syimir sends Afiq and Rony back in time. However, the machine malfunctions, and the friends are suddenly caught in a historical war between the Malays and the British, where the Malays are being led by the figure of Tuk Janggut[45]. He is in fact a historical figure[46], living between 1853 through 1915 in Kelantan, and features among the celebrated heroes of Malay resistance against the British in the Mahathir era. An example is the children's book *Tok Janggut pejuang rakyat* (Tok Janggut, fighter for the people) by Mahazir Othman (1989) in the series *Siri tokoh sejarah tempatan* (Series of Regional Historical Heroes), published just a few years before *Projek 2020* (1994). At page 110 of the book *Projek 2020*, there is a column entitled

[43] A future study could focus on the question whether school libraries in other parts of Malaysia also carried these or other science fiction novels, including, for instance Muar High School in Muar, Johore, St. Francis Institute in Malacca, or schools in Sabah and Sarawak – and whether there was a cross-influence between them. The Portal Sarawakiana, for instance, lists in its digital collection an anthology of Science Fiction (Mohamad Saleeh Rahamad and Azizul Rahman Abdul, eds.: *Biques legasi: antologi cereka sains*) (Integrate these into the references in a correct form)

[44] *Teratai* is Malay for aquatic plants of the Nelumbo genus (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelumbo, accessed 20 January 2024).

[45] Name variants are: Tuk Janggut and Tok Janggut.

[46] Cf. https://ms.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tok_Janggut, accessed 20 January 2024.

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"Tahukah adik-adik?" (Do you know, children?) that aside from Tuk Janggut there were a number of other regional fighters for independence against British colonialism, including Datuk Bahaman and Mat Kilau (Pahang), Datuk Maharaja Lela (Perak), Dol Said (Negeri Sembilan), Haji Abdul Rahman Limbung (Terengganu), Pendekar Rentap and Sharif Masahor (Sarawak), and Mat Salleh (Sabah). Also, the youth novel *Tok Janggut* by Rosmera was published in the extended Mahathir era (1974-2003), namely in 1977.

As Afiq and Rony find themselves in the middle of the resistance fighting against the British, the story of national resistance against colonialism becomes vivid for the readers, full of tension, and with great reverence for the legendary national heroes. Yet, after the Prime Minister inspects the building again, Prof Syimir re-starts the time machine and brings his grandchildren back from the past. This time, the time machine ends on 1 September 2020 (1994: 104), and as the entire journey ends with a safe return of Afiq and Rony, the media are all reporting in abundance about Prof Syimir and the great success for Malaysian science and engineering. Next time, Professor Syimir declares, the journey will go to the time of Hang Jebat (1994: 106),[47] a legendary hero linked to the Golden Age of the Empire of Malacca before the Portuguese conquest in 1511.[48]

This youth novel *Projek 2020* is therefore not only an ordinary science fiction novel, featuring space travel to far distant stars and planets. Rather, it is linked to the year "2020" as a symbol of Malaysian progress based on science and engineering, and it features the figure of the Prime Minister (*Perdana Menteri*) who is the mastermind behind Malaysia's ambitious development strategy "Vision 2020". This youth novel also combines elements of science fiction with elements of the genres of historical youth novels, as well as anti-colonial, nationalist youth novels. The constructed trajectory spans between selected highlights of the past (regional Malay resistance of the colonial era) and the bright future of "2020", obviously bypassing more problematic phases such as the riots of 1969 mentioned in the beginning of this paper. At the same time, it can be also read as a reference to the tradition of Malay science fiction novels, especially the example set by *Seteru Dunia* by Muhammad Sallehuddin (1938)[49], a Jawi-script book[50] that features a story about a mal-functioning time machine as central plot.[51] Here, a fictional German[52] engineer has selected Singapore as the location for experimenting with a new time-machine, which unfortunately malfunctions and turns a human into a monkey that then escapes and runs amok in Singapore (Mohd Tani Ahmad, Sarah Sadon, and Suhaimi Haji Muhammad 1988: 444).[53] Yet, in *Projek 2020*, the protagonists do not transform into dangerous animals, but rather keep their dignity as human beings fighting for a good cause, which is in this case a bright future for Malaysia due to science and technology being mastered by Malaysian professors.

Elements of Science Fiction in Arena Wati's Novel Panrita

The long and challenging journey to the distant future of "2020" not only inspired Malaysian science fiction youth novels of the Mahathir era (1981-2003). It was also reflected in serious literature

[47] https://ms.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hang_Jebat (accessed 20 January 2024).

[48] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portuguese_Malacca (accessed 20 January 2024).

[49] Spelling as Muhammad Sallehuddin in Mohd Tani Ahmad, Sarah Sadon, and Suhaimi Haji Muhammad, eds. (1988: 444).

[50] According to WorldCat.

[51] MALCat gives the library of Universiti Malaya as the only academic library in Malaysia that holds this book, spelling the author's name as Muhammad Saleh al-Din.

[52] The short story "Terbang ke bulan" by Muhammad Sallehuddin (1939), according to the same source, features three German engineers flying to the moon. As is explained on p. 445, the figure of "German engineer" was chosen by the author because in the period before World War 2, German engineering enjoyed a high reputation.

[53] In terms of inspiration, the film *King Kong* which appeared in 1933, might have played a role, as well as H. G. Well's novel *Time Machine* (1895).

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for adult and highly educated readers. A prime example is the novel *Panrita* by Arena Wati (1925-2009)[54], published in 1993 by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. On the cover, the name of the author is rendered with the title "Sasterawan Negara" (Malaysian National Laureate). This title is an award to an outstanding literary author for their contributions to Malay literature and has been awarded since 1981 only fourteen times.[55] Arena Wati (pen name of Muhammad Dahlan Abdul Biang Andi) was awarded in 1988. The title comes with various privileges, including a lifelong publication guarantee with Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.[56]

The plot of *Panrita* is a science fiction-like journey from Earth through various universes, to the destination of *alam roh*, which means in *Panrita* both some concrete 'world of spirits' as well as an abstract 'spiritual world'.[57] Here, the characters are experiencing a dream-like mental condition, a transit before they return to earth. The concept of the multiple worlds appears to be inspired by Islam, yet, in *Panrita*, a lot of creative license is taken since this is a literary work, not a theological treatise. While the complex relationship between Islam and Science Fiction in Malaysia merits an in-depth discussion in separate publications, for the scope of this paper, it is relevant that an important boundary for Malay-Muslim authors of the period engaged in science fiction is expressed by Shahnon Ahmad, awarded with the Malaysian Literary Award in 1982.[58] According to him, science fiction should always keep human beings and their values at the centre of the story, as humans are the highest creatures at the side of God, "makhluk yang tertinggi di sisi Tuhan" (Shahnon Ahmad 1992: 115). In this light, the malfunctioning time machine in the novel *Projek 2020* discussed above appears in a different light: rather than turning Prof. Syimir's grandchildren into monsters, they preserve their dignity as human beings, staying upbeat about the future of Malaysian citizens in "2020".

In *Panrita*, the journey is a spiritual one, and is framed within Islamic settings and reflections, including the pilgrimage to Mecca. Symbolically, it also reflects the impacts of the high-tech journey of Malaysia on spirituality and beliefs on the way towards the proposed state of "Vision 2020". Various elements from science fiction literature of the 1980s and 1990s also feature in *Panrita*, such as computer disquettes, and space travel. At the same, other aspects of world literature and global history are evoked, including the names of Ibnu Batutah, Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus, and Petrarch (1993: 1). As the novel is highly complex, and comprises numerous references to Islamic theology, it is very difficult to translate.[59] It is also very rarely the object of scholarly studies, as neither the Malaysian Academic Library Union Catalog MALCat[60] nor the online repository for journal articles published in Malaysian scholarly journals, MyCite[61], lists scholarly contributions about *Panrita*. One

[54] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arena_Wati, accessed 20 January 2024. - Amanda K. Rath and the author began to translate this novel into English in 2009 as part of a translation project with Institut Terjemahan Negara Malaysia, ITBM (in 2011 renamed as Institut Terjemahan dan Buku Malaysia, ITBM), the State Agency for the translation of important books, established in 1993 (https://ms.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institut_Terjemahan_%26_Buku_Malaysia). Amanda K. Rath and I had numerous discussions about the concepts and imaginaries of *Panrita*, and this section owes her input a lot. – For more information on ITBM, cf. https://www.bharian.com.my/rencana/sastera/2023/04/1085368/itbm-fokus-penterjemahan-tanggung-kerugian-terbit-karya-asli, accessed 24 January 2024.

[55] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malaysian_National_Laureate (accessed 20 January 2024).

[56] Personal communication with Muhammad Haji Salleh, *Sasterawan Negara* of 1991, in 2009.

[57] Also in other publications from Malaysia in the Mahathir era, the spiritual journey through a number of "worlds" is featured, including the journey through four worlds (Muhammad Baihaqi 1999) and through seven worlds (Mohd Isa Selamat 1995). Another interpretation of the journey through four worlds can be found on nuonline, the website of the Nahdlatul Ulama organisation from Indonesia. Accordingly, Kiyai Haji Mu'in Abdurahim explains the four worlds in his interpretation of the Tafsir Jalalain as the *alam dzuriah* (where human beings are still in the womb of their mothers), the *alam dunia*, the *alam arzakh* (alam kubur), and the *alam akirat* (which includes the resurrection and the final judgment).Available at https://www.nu.or.id/daerah/empat-alam-yang-dilalui-manusia-2co8b (accessed 21 January 2024).

[58] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shahnon_Ahmad (accessed 31 July 2025).

[59] It also contains several passages that are very critical of Israel, which might be an echo of a part of the rhetoric of Mahathir Mohamad (Yegar 2006).

[60] https://MALCat.uum.edu.my/kip/Search/Results?lookfor=panrita&type=AllFields (accessed 20 January 2024).

[61] https://mycite.mohe.gov.my/ (accessed 20 January 2024).

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of the rare published scholarly discussions is a short segment about *Panrita* by Mana Sikana in his book about post-modern Malay literature (2004: 134-135). Accordingly, *Panrita* is similar to "historiographic metafiction", as theorised by Linda Hutcheon (1993), as well as in line with "new historicism" (Mana Sikana 2004: 135). Mana Sikana contends that, being confronted with an intertextual "creative encyclopedia", the reader is being carried from ancient Greece to Rome, to the Muslim world and the Malay world, while the main protagonist is searching for perfection (*kesempurnaan*) (Mana Sikana 2004: 134). The ultimate purpose, as Mana Sikana views it, is not a demystification or de-mythology of modernity, but rather a contribution to the development of the nation. History serves as ground for being able to forecast the future. This interpretation is different from a short summary of *Panrita* in the *Ensiklopedia sejarah dan kebudayaan Melayu* (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka 1999: 274), where *Panrita* is merely described as being an "autobiographic novel". If we instead follow Mana Sikana's observation that the intention of *Panrita* is constructive in the sense of a positive contribution to the future development of Malaysia, Shahnon Ahmad's religious postulation that Malay science fiction literature should keep the image of human beings intact, as they are the highest creature at the side of God, appears significant.

In the context of this paper, the Islamic layer of meaning in *Panrita* (1993) might be a good departure point to reflect on the nexus between the project of a transformation of Malay culture, as already expressed in Mahathir Mohamad's *The Malay dilemma* (1970), the role of reason, logic, science and technology, and the continuing rootedness in a religious system of beliefs, which appears to be central to the deep impact of the (extended) Mahathir era on Malay and Malaysian society. Among the many scholars that have contributed to these discussions is notably Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, e.g. in various media publications re-published in the book *Budaya yang tercabar* (2007). Related aspects have been also reflected in the various Days of Literature (*Hari Sastera*) during the (extended) Mahathir era, e.g. as published in Syed Hussein Alatas *et al.* (1984), which represents the papers of the Day of Literature 1978 on the theme of "Malay literature and Islam".[62] However, as the topic is of paramount importance for the discussions of Malaysia's cultural transformation during the (extended) Mahathir era, it cannot be discussed comprehensively in this paper with its limited scope.

As the final point of this paper, I would only focus on an aspect of the Malay discourse on the transformation of Malay culture since the 1970s, namely that it contained an anti-colonial and decolonial gesture, e.g. in the attempt to search for non-Western concepts of science and mathematics. In this context, the numerous publications by Shaharir Mohamad Zain can be seen as exemplary (e.g. Shaharir Mohamad Zain 2018 and ibid., ed., 2021). As he communicated to the author in personal communication, his academic horizon was largely shaped by the change from English to Malay as a medium of instruction in schools and universities, that took place in the 1970s, as an important complementary dimension to the overall NEP strategy.[63] The young generation of Malays should learn about the world of science and technology in Malay language, adding to their new agency. Shaharir Mohamad Zain took this as a life-long inspiration for research on Malay ethnoscience and ethnomathematics, trying to determine pre-colonial units of measurement and of scientific constructs.

Relating these Malay discourses from the 1970s onward to a new English-language term such as "technoenvironments", as proposed by Kurfürst and Padmanabhan (2026, in this volume) could be an interesting venture, provided that the language and reflective gesture of that theoretical discourse is not restricted to English and the Anglosphere only – given the post-colonial language struggle against the dominance of English in parts of Southeast Asia. This poses the question whether "lingkungan teknikal" or a similar term could be of any help for the further discussion of Malay science fiction during the Mahathir era. In this context, it is relevant that already in 2013, Sohaimi Abdul

[62] As the topic is of paramount importance for the discussions of Malaysia's cultural transformation during the (extended) Mahathir era, it cannot be discussed comprehensively in this paper with its limited scope.

[63] Personal communication at Universiti Malaya in 2013.

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Aziz proposed in a Malay-language publication for the field of Malay literature the term "teknoteks" and suggested that the new digital technological possibilities for literary production and criticism, including hypertext, require a theoretical reassessment of pre-digital approaches. In this regard, "technoenvironments" (*lingkungan teknikal*) could be a broader theoretical concept that includes and builds on the literature-centric "teknoteks" (technotext), if it also considers and apprehends previous theoretical concepts published in Malay.

Conclusion

This article traces imaginations of science and technology in Malaysian literature of the so-called Mahathir era (1981-2003). In that period, the Malaysian government pursued the strategy to intensively develop the country's economy in the direction of a "Knowledge Economy", accompanied by a "Knowledge Society". The ultimate objective was to transform Malaysia into a fully developed country by 2020, as formulated in Mahathir's "Vision 2020" (*Wawasan 2020*), which was launched in 1991. This context of a highly ambitious national emphasis on science and technology informed state agencies and institutions such as the Ministry of Education and the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka to launch campaigns in order to popularise science and technology, including through science fiction youth novels, as well as drawing competitions for science fiction cartoons imagining Malaysia by 2020.

As a case study, I analyze a random sample of science fiction youth novels from Malaysia published between 1979 and 2003 and collected by the author at a used book market in Penang in 2009. Obviously, this random sampling can only serve as a first inquiry into the subject.

All of the books are written in Malay, yet, as the former library stamps document, some were also held by Chinese secondary schools, indicating their appeal to young Malaysians of all backgrounds. Most of these novels employ some aspect of space travel as a basic plot, yet one novel is focused on a time machine, namely *Projek 2020* by Samsuri A. Hamid (1994). In this story, where a fictitious Prime Minister is depicted as the mastermind and motor behind Malaysia's success in science and technology, a professor from a national laboratory has developed a time machine and tries it out in an experiment with his grandchildren. However, the time-machine malfunctions, and the grandchildren find themselves amidst the historical fight of a national hero from Kelantan, Tuk Janggut, against the British colonisers, in the late 19th century. The physical resistance in the past is therefore evoked in the illustration of how important the efforts of the current Malaysian government are to make the country a leading power in the field of science and technology, at par with Japan, America, and France.

In addition to the youth novels, Malaysian literature written for adults from the Mahathir era also contains elements of science fiction. In this article, I focus on the novel *Panrita* by the National Laureate Arena Wati from 1993. Just like in many of the youth novels, space travel serves here as plot structure; however, in *Panrita*, that travel to a distant *alam roh* (world of spirits or souls) is combined with elements of the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, as well as religious and philosophical reflections about the journey as a metaphor for life. Written and published amidst the strong emphasis of the Malaysian government on a high-tech journey to the status of a fully developed nation by 2020, *Panrita* can also be seen as part of the conversation about the spiritual and theological dimension of that enormous social and cultural transformation, going beyond the broad connections between "Vision 2020" and the scientific imaginaries in the analyzed youth fiction, including the novel *Projek 2020*.

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