

The Poet in the First Winter of Creation

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I first began as a poet.

My first raw and unmusical poems shivered in the cold English air – they were composed in Wolverhampton, in the grey spring of the Midlands, in April 1963, that had just experienced its coldest winter in a hundred years. So the poems floated on melting ice, in a similarly cold English language, a language that I came to know quite well for that was the language of my colonial school's instruction. But that same language had also restructured my mind and my ideas. Fortunately, as a form of sub-conscious rebellion, about three weeks after the first English poems, a poem in Malay, perhaps a bit melancholic, appeared and bloomed in the warming spring.

All first fruits, even from the best orchards, are usually not quite edible, and all trees must learn to flower and bear other fruits, and they all seemed to presuppose gradual steps into artistic maturity. Now, I have gone through the journey for more than 50 years, packaged with the trauma of a literary career – through many broken-down typewriters, carbon papers that easily tore, generations of computer viruses, several operating programmes – from the ancient Wordstar, to the Wordperfect, from the Microsoft to the Open Office. The development of the two languages (especially Malay) that I used created a temporary turmoil in my mind and out of it. But I did carry on writing whatever the circumstance. There seemed to be an unstoppable literary stream that naturally flowed within me, and fortunately it followed a direction almost parallel to my academic one, which had for decades defined my career and *raison d'être*.

I write poems, criticism and have tried my hand at unravelling a theory of Malay literature, explicating it in both Malay and English. However, in the early 1970's I made a conscious decision to stop writing poetry in English, that I came to realise was not only a colonial language but also one that had destroyed many indigenous ones around the world. Many of them are now made extinct. Malay is also being continually challenged by English, and by those who would choose a colonial language over a local/national one.

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But I now use English as a post-colonial instrument, to relay the traditional knowledge and the riches of Malaysian and Indonesian literatures to the world, through essays, books and not least, translation.

I am fated to be a wanderer, not always a romantic one, to travel from one country to another, and then to some others. And after the original infection from the bug of movement and travel I continued to seek it so that I may rejoice in the joy of a natural discovery of nature, humanity and new experiences, especially those that offer differences and artistic joy.

In short, my search is usually for nature and man. I have looked for them in my village, among my colleagues and friends. Also in my travels – in the old cities like Jaipur and Beijing, Machu Picchu and Cairo, in Rome and Antalya.

I have consciously sought the majesty of the forests in Malaysia and Indonesia, and also the underwater world of Sipadan or Bora-bora. Perhaps it is a kind of an unconscious return to a primordial maritime world of the Archipelago, where nature was virgin and untainted, and offers me a peace that is elusive elsewhere. And this nature, I have found, is less cruel and unjust than man or his society, which gives more than what it takes, more mysterious than wishing to explain. I have always been enthralled by the water of coral seas, the leaves as they begin to turn into crinkly gold, snow that envelops the earth and villages, and the skies that entrance me. And as my late professor, D.J. Enright, pointed out, my poems are often inundated by water. I agree that they are often made soggy by the water of the swamp or river, or of the sky or sea.

The world, in short, is a place to inhabit and a place to escape from, a place to find the self and the magic of life itself. If one traverses it one would come to the mountains and the valleys, to gape at the huts and forests, the very home of humankind. Nature is present before our reality and fantasy. The new world is too boisterous for the initial world that I have brought from my childhood. I often find an escape from the clanking noise of machines or the new savages from our new arrogance and insensitivity. I try to erase this so that it would not overwhelm me and destroy the natural quietness that I have been used to.

Yet in nature there is noise of a different kind – music of the finest and grandest kind, solo or in a great orchestra, in sorrow or in chirpy gossips, one which reminds us of our fragility and transience. The rivers rumble and churn their waters, slap the banks or crash against the roots of old and young trees. I often wake up early to await the morning chorus, to listen to the low murmur of the water hen, and the noisy calls of the robin. The twilight descends on the shoots of the trees when river frogs shyly call in melancholic cooing. After the evening prayer the owl hoots to the moon. It is their songs that inspire the Penan *sape* and their forlorn tunes, and the “Seri Mersing” and the “Seri Sarawak.” The world is indeed a bit sad, but this sadness also defines the environment of life itself, which subsequently inspires our traditional and even modern Malaysian poets and thinkers.

The world sprawls before us, so that we may pick from its offerings of metaphors and meanings. It spreads before us numerous examples and analogies, similarities and similes, radiating from a great mirror, which offers us colours and reflection.

I long for occasions that are intense in their meanings; I seek the face, rhythm and soul of experiences, I searched for my own person. I seek out life and its logic and meaning (though often enough I find only absurdities and dark humour).

As a poet I am deeply grateful that I am able in some way to take possession of the verbs and adverbs of the languages, their nuances and connotations, which after a certain length of time, may also carry the voice of my neighbour or brother, their scream of pain or torment and sometime their hoarse laughter.

So my themes enter into the cracks of events and the nest of stories, into the potholes of the river beds and of history.

To write good poems one must be tutored by good poets. One must begin to seek out the great works, models to learn from. I continually read to find all these, and in every good poet of any language there are numerous lessons to be learnt, achievements to be emulated, besides the solace from a world that never stops warring, and the follies of politicians and financial dictators.

A poet who reads widely is in the company of the geniuses of the world. He inherits their achievements. Rumi, Po Chu-I, Shikibu, Neruda, Goethe and the composers of the songs of the Ibans, the pantuns, Ngungi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, Yasunari Kawabata and Kenzaburo Oe and hundreds of others expand his circle of ideas, fineness of description, and the sphere of emotions and their possibilities of narration. And also the possible ways and means of narration. They show the way to the *mot juste*, to the real and the unreal.

Through their language he gets a glimpse of the genius of languages and their voices. The examples of great works, the possibilities of experimentation, the universality of themes, the metaphors of great authors, and not to forget the examples of fine translations, are all there for him to benefit from.