

Malaysian Literature and Beyond



(Participants at the one-day symposium on “The State of Malaysian Literature in the 21st Century: An *ASIATIC* Symposium,” on 3 November 2017, organised jointly by Monash University Malaysia and International Islamic University Malaysia: [from left] Dr. Andrew Ng, Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh, Dr. Susan Philip, Professor Sharmani Patricia Gabriel, Dr. Chitra Sankaran, Dr. Angus Whitehead, Dr. Walter Lim, Dr. Boey Kim Cheng, Professor Mohammad A. Quayum and Dr. Bernard Wilson)

Malaysian literature has come a long way since the country’s independence. It has produced several distinguished writers in all its four major languages: Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil. Writers have achieved this success notwithstanding many challenges. For this they deserve our unqualified applause. Perhaps Malaysian literature could have excelled further without these challenges, or had they been addressed by the authorities/relevant bodies in a timely and objective fashion. Moreover, although Malaysian literature has prospered significantly in the post-independence period, the growth has not been equal in all its four languages. This is due to certain socio-political reasons which have fragmented the literary scene largely along ethnic lines, making the writers culturally insular, rather than encompassing, in their imagination.

Perhaps the most formidable challenge experienced by all writers in the country is the lack of readership and, concomitantly, the lack of good publishers. In a literacy report published in 2016, it was stated that “out of 85 per cent of Malaysians who read regularly, 77 per cent preferred newspapers, three per cent

read magazines, three per cent read books and 1.6 per cent read comics” (“Boosting the Reading Habit”). Compared to these figures, in the US, as Malaysia’s Sarawak Minister for Education, Science and Technology, Michael Manyin, explains, “53 per cent of their citizens read fiction and 43 per cent of them read non-fiction books” (“Malaysians not Reading Enough Books”). In a separate study carried out by the Central Connecticut State University, USA, Malaysia was ranked eighth from the bottom in a list of 61 literate countries for its lack of reading habits.

The above statistics indicate why it may not be an easy task to become a writer in Malaysia. Amir Muhammad, a writer himself, sums up the situation trenchantly in his following statement:

Malaysia’s literary scene is not one of the most exciting in the world. The average educated person would rather read stock-market reports than the latest fictional opus. No local writer can boast of a readership that cuts across barriers of ethnicity, language and age. Seen in this context, you might expect a homegrown best-seller to be greeted with joy. Think again. (“Raising a Stink”)

If only 3 percent of the people read books, how many would actually read literary works? If the readership is so small, who will risk publishing the works? No wonder many Malaysian writers have struggled to publish their work over the years, especially at the beginning of their career, and we will never know how many have sacrificed their literary talent to find a career elsewhere only because of lack of publication opportunities. Even a distinguished writer like Muhammad Haji Salleh confesses that without his university position as a professor, which keeps him afloat financially, “[he] would have been dead a long time ago, for reasons of hunger” (“On a Journey Homeward”).

Lack of readership undoubtedly affects all writers, but some are more seriously affected than others. A Malay-language fiction writer would perhaps fare relatively better than one writing, say, poetry in the Tamil language. This is for two reasons. First, for whatever reason, poetry seems to be the least popular of the literary forms,¹ and second, the Tamil language has a fewer speakers in Malaysia, with only 6.2% of the population being of the Indian background, compared to Malay or Bumiputra which forms about 61.7% of the total population (“Malaysia Demographics Profile 2018”). Therefore, although the lack of readership is detrimental to the growth of literature in Malaysia in all its languages, its effect would be felt more acutely by the minority languages.

Literature in minority languages suffer from other adversities as well. Malay is the national language and, concomitantly, literature written in the language is

¹ Research shows that in America the number of people reading poetry has been declining steadily: “In 1992, 17 percent of Americans had read a work of poetry at least once in the past year. 20 years later that number had fallen by more than half, to 6.7 percent” (Ingraham).

considered national literature. This brings certain privileges for the Malay-language writers which are not there for those writing in English, Chinese or Tamil. For example, one can be a National Laureate or get official support only if one writes in Malay. Writings in other languages are considered “sectional” or “aimless” literature that has little bearing on the nation-building process of the country.² Therefore, the establishment wilfully turns a blind eye to all non-Malay writing although it continues to enrich the culture and, in many instances, bring glory to the nation through international reputation. Huzir Sulaiman sums up this demoralising circumstance of the non-Malay language writers in his following caustic remark, “The fact that English doesn’t officially exist means that if you write in English you don’t officially exist” (“Introducing Huzir Sulaiman” 54).

Another challenge for the writers is that Malaysian society is fractured along ethnic lines; it still perpetuates, to put it in Huzir Sulaiman’s words, “colonial divide-and-rule policies” (“Introducing Huzir Sulaiman” 53), fomenting exclusivity, simmering hatred and ethnic chauvinism. Therefore, literature, with some exceptions for those who read or write in English, is also largely ethnically based; writers are often, Cecil Rajendra comments, “too narrowly communal and lack the broad humanistic outlook of great writers such as Rabindranath Tagore and Pablo Neruda...” (ctd. in “Interview with Wong Phui Nam” 78). Race being the chief marker of identity, writers generally choose to write in their respective languages and about their ethnic experiences. Very few writers like to step out of their cultural orbit to appropriate another language³ or “explore the world outside their cocoon” (ctd. in “Interview with Wong Phui Nam” 78). The same is true about the readers as well. Although Malay is the national language, to quote Benedict Anderson, “forcibly imposed by the politically dominant Malays,” it has met with “hostile rejection” from the non-Malay population “who [prefer to] speak either languages of alien origin (China, India) or lingua francas (English)” (viii). Thus it results in a pegging of literature by race, which is so counterproductive to the growth of a holistic national literature mirroring the national life rather than its component parts, that Johan Jafaar, another local literary figure, says in exasperation, “Malaysia will be best remembered for its Twin Towers, its highways or its *orang utans*, but not its writers” (ctd. in “Interview with Wong Phui Nam” 78).

Then, of course, there is the issue of censorship. Malaysia is notorious for its suppression of words, images, or ideas that are seen as “offensive.” In the 2018 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders, Malaysia was

² It was Professor Ismail Hussein who first described literature in “Chinese, Tamil, or English” as “foreign literatures” or “aimless literature” because they were written in “non-indigenous languages” and could not be “understood by all Malaysians” (qtd. in Quayum, “Malaysian Literature in English: Challenges and Prospects in the New Millennium”).

³ Lim Swee Tin (1952-) and Uthaya Sankar SB are outstanding exceptions in this regard. Both are of non-Malay background but write in Bahasa Melayu (or Bahasa Malaysia).

ranked 145 out of 180 countries, behind countries such as Myanmar, Venezuela and South Sudan. On the Freedom in the World index by Freedom House in 2018, graded on a scale of one to seven, with one being the most free and seven being the least, Malaysia obtained four points for both political rights and civil liberties. These are tell-tale signs of how little freedom of imagination and expression writers enjoy in Malaysia. When it comes to “sensitive” issues like race, language and religion, the government seems to be always on a censorship crusade. There are many instances of banning books or calls for ban when the narrative does not suit the taste of those in power. The recent examples of this include the banning of Faisal Tehrani’s novels and the furore that was caused by the publication of Shanon Ahmad’s satirical novel, *Shit* (1998). Playwrights often complain about how they have to obtain a police permit to stage their plays, which may not be always forthcoming if they contain material that are seen as “un-Islamic” or a threat to “national security.” All these create a culture of fear and, in many instances, lead to self-censorship and conformity among the writers. To avoid non-confrontation, or to circumvent government detection, sometimes writers reduce their work to, in Faisal Tehrani’s phrase, “some elitist, esoteric game” (“Raising a Stink”). On the subject of how censorship has impeded the growth of Malaysian drama, Huzir Sulaiman made the following remark in an earlier interview:

... there is no doubt whatsoever that on a national level the contemporary theatre scene is infinitely poorer because writers cannot address so many important subjects in society, such as politics and religion. Socrates said at his trial, ‘The unexamined life is not worth living,’ and calmly went to his death. In refusing to let Malaysians examine their own lives and their own society, the government is essentially robbing the culture of its vitality and its will to live. (“Introducing Huzir Sulaiman” 54)

To scrutinise all these issues and to take stock of the current state of Malaysian literature – how the writers are coping with the challenges I mentioned above and what new directions the literature is taking – we decided to organise a one-day symposium where we invited some of the leading scholars in the field. The outcome is this special issue with seven articles, one review article and two interviews. To compliment the critical items, we have included some sample creative works by two prominent Malaysian writers, Muhammad Haji Salleh (1944-) and Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1944-), one poem by Muhammad and four poems and one short story by Lim.

The thematic focus of this issue is on Malaysian literature but, as per the journal’s tradition, we have also included a general section with one article and one interview. The article in the general section is on the Bangladeshi writer Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), while the interview is with the Muslim-

Australian writer Randa Abdel-Fattah (1979-). In addition, there are eleven book reviews and three poems each by the Australian poet Dennis Haskell (1948-) and the Filipino poet Dinah Roma. Hopefully, the issue will bring some inspiring reading material for everyone in the New Year. Happy New Year 2019 to all our readers!

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