Malaysian Literature and Its Future: An Interview with Muhammad Haji Salleh

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Malaysia's best-known bilingual poet, Muhammad Haji Salleh was born on 26 March 1942, in a village called Temerlok, Trong, in British Malaya. Soon after his birth he moved to Sungai Acheh, Penang, where he began schooling in Sungai Acheh School in 1949. On completion of his standard three education, he was chosen to continue his studies in an English medium Anglo-Chinese School, Nibung Tebal. A year later, he moved to Bukit Mertajam, his mother's hometown, and entered High School Bukit Mertajam as a student of Standard (Year) Six. In 1958, Muhammad entered the Malay College, Kuala Kangsar, a prominent institution for the Malay nobility and elites. Upon completion of his Cambridge Secondary School Certificate Education in 1960, he chose to become a school teacher.

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However, after one year of teaching at Trade School, Teluk Air Tawar, Butterworth he voluntarily returned for further studies, because, Muhammad explains in his characteristic Malay candour and humility, "When the results were announced, both my English and Malay language marks were dismally low" ("Decolonization: A Personal Journey" 60).

In 1963, with the Higher School Certificate in hand, Muhammad enrolled in Brinsford Lodge, a Malay Teachers College near Wolverhampton, UK. In 1964, he returned to Malaysia and gave up teaching again for further studies. With a view to pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Literature, either in Malay or in English, he applied to both the University of Malaya (for the study of Malay Literature) and the University of Singapore (for the study of English Literature), but finally decided to enter the English Department at the University of Singapore because he wanted the benefit of being a student of D.J. Enright, a renowned English poet whom he had read at Wolverhampton and who was then the Head of the Department. In 1968, after teaching at several schools in Peninsular Malaysia, Muhammad found employment as a tutor in the Department of English, University of Malaya, working in the meanwhile on a thesis on the history of modern Malay-Indonesian poetry, and obtaining thereafter his Master's degree. In 1970, he went to the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor to study for his Ph.D. on Southeast Asian Literature. He came back in 1973 with the doctoral degree, whereupon he was appointed Lecturer at the Institute of Malay Language, Literature and Culture, at the National University of Malaysia (UKM). In 1978, he was promoted to the rank of Professor in the Department of Malay Letters, UKM, and in 1995 he was appointed the Director of the Institute of Malay World and Civilisation, UKM. From 2000 to 2005, Muhammad was a Professor of Literature at University Science Malaysia, Penang.

Muhammad's writing career began quite early in life. He confesses that he did not start out to be a writer as he did not come from a family of writers, or with a clear literary background, but his interest grew slowly through his encounters with English teachers at school, such as Mr. Mohan Singh at High School Bukit Mertajam, who would encourage students to read widely and show the list of books to read to class, and Mr. Baird, a Scotsman, who was his English teacher at Malay College, Kuala Kangsar, and who impressed him tremendously with his enthusiastic renderings of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Merchant of Venice* (Quayum 3-4). Among his other teachers who inspired him to become a writer were, of course, D.J. Enright at the University of Singapore, whom he acknowledges as his mentor, and the Afro-American poet Robert Hayden, who taught him creative writing at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor (Muhammad, "Decolonization: A Personal Journey" 62, 67).

Muhammad's first piece of writing was a story, written sometime in the 1950s, followed by an essay written for an Essay Writing Competition in the *Utusan Kanak-Kanan*, the children's section of a Malay daily. He was awarded RM (Malaysian currency) 5.00 for this effort. In 1958, while still a student of Form IV (Year 10), he won the Wise and Butler Scholarship for writing essays in Malay and English and for translating an excerpt from English to Malay. His first English language poem was written in 1963, at Wolverhampton, but it was soon followed by poems in the Malay language, as writing in English – albeit a conscious choice – created a sense of guilt in him. This push and pull relationship with the English language, which he was introduced to in school and which occupies (presumably still now) a large space in his sensibility but which, being the colonial langue, he came to see as a source of "othering" and marginalisation of his mother language and culture, remains a dominant element of Muhammad's poetry and imagination. He felt that writing in the English language alone would be tantamount to committing "a sin" ("Decolonization: A Personal Journey" 60), so he decided to follow up on his English poem with poems in Malay.

With this entrenched feeling of, in his own words, "a confirmed linguistic and cultural schizophrenic" (Decolonization: A Personal Journey" 64), Muhammad continued to write in the two languages while in Singapore. In fact, in Singapore, where the emerging dominant language was English, his contact with the English language increased significantly and therefore most of the poems written during this period were from the English side of his fountain.

> *Bukit ditimbuni*, the hill is heightened, says a Malay proverb. I was part of that labour gang to heighten that hill, and the hill was not even my own. And it was from this fertile land that I heightened the English and was continually praised for doing so. English was the predominant language in the University and island, so strong that my Malay receded almost in humiliation. ("Decolonization: A Personal Journey" 64)

Thus ruminates Muhammad in a self-vitriolic passage on his creative efforts during the period. It is during this period, however, that his poems started getting published, first in *Focus*, a university magazine and then in 1965 in an Australian journal, *The Bulletin*, the latter, as Muhammad acknowledges, through the "good offices of Enright" ("On a Journey Homeward" 7).

Muhammad's first volume of poetry, *Sajak-sajak Pendatang* (*Poems of the Outsider*), was published in the Malay language in 1973, the year he came back from the US with a doctoral degree. His long absence from home made him feel like an outsider and he wanted to disburden this feeling of alienation from his soul by reinstating, consciously cultivating, as well as articulating his imagination in his mother language. This was also a way of recouping

and revitalising his roots, and becoming aware of who he actually was as an individual and as a poet. Muhammad won the National Literary Prize for this volume, which obviously came as a boon and a significant moral boost for the young poet. However, 1973 marks an important milestone in Muhammad's poetic career for another reason as well. This is the year that he decided not to continue writing poetry in English anymore, although he chose to continue writing his critical works in English and even translate his Malay poems and those by others into this language. Muhammad explains this decision in the following words:

> Though in the United States I almost lost Malay, as English was the dominant language, the crisis within me had grown to a point that I had to choose a language for my poems, or I would be condemned to commuting between them. Thus I stopped writing poems in English, and made time to express thoughts and ideas almost entirely in Malay. ("Decolonization: A Personal Journey" 68)

Perhaps it is worth noting here that although Muhammad justifies the issue of his language choice from a personal point of view, the political developments in the country may have contributed to his decision, consciously or unconsciously. Malaya became independent in 1957, and for the first ten years of independence both English and Malay were recognised as official languages. In 1967, however, a new Language Act was passed in the Malaysian Parliament that elevated Malay to the sole official and national language of the country. In 1971, following the crisis of 13 May 1969 in which riots broke out between the major races in the country in the wake of national elections, the Government took further measures to bolster the position of the Malay language, and introduced an amendment in the act in 1971 which prohibited Malaysians from questioning the status of Malay or Bahasa Malaysia as the national language. These steps were taken in order to build bridges between and unify the races into one harmonious nation, sharing a common language, as was the case of many European and several postcolonial nations. Muhammad is a strong advocate of this policy of nation formation, in which all the Malaysian races are expected to embrace and rally around the Malay language:

> I gave up the colonial language to write in the national language. For the time being I would like to see writers contribute their talents to a literature in this [Malay] language…. That will solve the problem. Writers should have a sense of roots, national identity and pride in their language. Says Camus, "My language is my motherland." ("On a Journey Homeward" 12)

1975 saw the publication of his second volume of poetry, again in the Malay language, *Perjalanan Si Tenggang II*, for which he was awarded the National Literary Prize for the second time, as well as the Australian Cultural Award. The book was translated by the author himself and published as *The Travel Journals of Si Tenggang II* in 1979. The volume uses the legend of Si Tenggang, the prodigal, rebellious son in Malay-Indonesian folklore, as a metaphor to illustrate the life and circumstance of the poet himself. In the original story, Si Tenggang rejects his poor, ugly parents and goes out to the world only to return to his native village a few years later as Captain of a ship and with a beautiful wife; because of his disdain for his own people and culture, he is turned into a stone by his mother's curse. Muhammad gives a positive twist to the story by suggesting that all the intellectual and cultural resources that he has gathered during his journey and absence from his homeland will only help to enrich his mother culture and connect his homeland to the rest of the world. Thus, his arrival, unlike that of his forbear, is a constructive act and an expression of love and allegiance for his people and culture. In the lead poem of the volume, "si tenggang's homecoming," Muhammad explains this idea in the following conciliatory words for his homeland:

> but look,
> i have brought myself home,
> seasoned by faith,
> broadened by land and languages,
> i am no longer afraid of the oceans
> or the differences between people.
> no longer easily snared
> by words or ideas.
> ….
> look, i am just like you,
> still malay,
> sensitive to what
> i believe is good.
> and more ready to understand
> than my brothers.
> the contents of these boats are yours too,
> because i have returned. (*Rowing Down Two Rivers* 234)

This is Muhammad's definition of the New Malay whose one eye is cast upon the native culture, while the other keeps meandering from culture to culture to cull and gather what might aid and augment the local culture. This bifurcation of sensibility and rejection of monologism will, he believes, bring a new synergy and dynamism in the people and life of the nation, as he himself has benefited from this duality or multiplicity in his sensibility acquired through his intimacy with other lands and cultures. This

hyphenated and symbiotic outlook of local and global, tradition and modernisation, one and many, is particularly relevant to Muhammad's writing and imagination.

Muhammad's third volume of poetry, and his only poetic work written entirely and originally in the English language, *Time and Its People*, was published in 1978. Knowing that he made a conscious decision not to write poetry in English anymore in 1973, we have to conclude that the poems in this collection were written during his student years in Singapore, Malaysia or the US. Many of the poems in the volume are personal and autobiographical as Muhammad's poems generally tend to be. Often they narrate humdrum experiences of the poet in a rural or urban setting that have little bearing on the larger aspects of life and society, but that are intensely important to him as they affect and modulate his perception and understanding of life as a whole, and of himself as both a Malay and a human being. Here is one, entitled "words":

> words began this –
> tedious promises,
> lies that held together
> the false sentence.
> between pain and lies
> i once chose to hear sweet words
> for they gave
> breath between cries. (*Rowing Down Two Rivers* 173)

Behind these simple words, we feel the strong emotions of love and deception experienced by the speaker who was once drawn into a relationship by false words that brought sorrow but, ironically, also some respite in an otherwise sorrowful and agonising life. Simple as the poem may be, it touches the heart and forces one to examine the power of language and the intricate nature of human relationships.

Some of the poems also tend to teach and moralise, and even deal with polemical issues – as all poetry should, in Muhammad's view. In an interview with the Philippine writer F. Sionil Jose, Muhammad explains, "[Poetry] should teach – literally, I mean. So works are moralistic. But why not? I'm sure that to a great extent Shakespeare was moralistic" (46). In the same interview, he further comments,

> Malaysian writers tend to be politicised and get involved in the politics of the country…. I don't mind writers being political…. Writers should be political in a wider sense: concerned with human survival and dignity, economic well-being, and freedom. These are the kinds of politics writers should be involved in. (48)

Here is an extract from his poem "why should not young men be mad," in which the poet's moral and political interests converge to provide a scathing criticism of the politically powerful in Malaysia, who are, in his view, overly deceptive, dishonest, despotic and vain:

> why should not young men be bitter
> being cold and dead in the land
> of machiavelli's mind,
> ….
> why should not young men howl
> being cut by the logic of another's trick
> or reasons of persons
> come to top without our consent,
> cheated of our future,
> heads pushed into books
> and other people's values
> just to prove another's worth.
> why should not young men go away
> from this country of the scheming old,
> from wars fought by old men's tempers
> from fat exploiter's money or the honey
> of persuasion of their women.
> the young should live
> body, mind and soul. (*Times and Its People* 33)

Since the publication of *Time and Its People*, Muhammad has published nine other volumes of poetry, all in the Malay language. Some select poems from these volumes have been translated and put together by him in a collection entitled *Rowing Down Two Rivers*, published in 2000. Muhammad has received numerous awards for his poetry over the years, in addition to the ones mentioned earlier. These include the ASEAN Literary Award for Poetry in 1977, The Malaysian National Award for Literary Contribution (National Laureate) in 1991, the SEA Writer Award in 1997, the MASTERA (Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei Literary Award) in 2000 and The Malaysian Premier Literary Award in 2002. He has also been awarded several Fellowships and visiting positions to work and teach at institutions in the US, Japan and Europe. Muhammad was on a Fulbright Exchange Programme to teach and research at the North Carolina State University in 1977, on a Fulbright Fellowship as Asian Scholar-in-Residence at the University of Michigan in 1981-82, and on a Fulbright Senior Fellowship at the State University of California, Berkeley, in 1992-93. He was Chair of the Malay Studies Programme at the University of Leiden, the Netherlands in 1993-94, Visiting Professor at the University of Hamburg, Germany, in 1994, and Writer-in-

Residence at the University of Leiden in 2005. Moreover, Muhammad received a Volkswagen Foundation Grant for researching on the theory of Malay Literature in 1986-88, as well as a British Council Research and Visiting Award for researching on the antecedents of Malay criticism in 1989-91 and the Japan Foundation Grant for Artists in 1997. Muhammad also went on a Fellowship to the Harvard-Yenching Institute, Harvard University, in 2006-7.

In addition to being a poet, Muhammad is a well-known translator, who has translated and published works from Malay into English and from English into Malay. Some of his own works translated from Malay into English have been cited earlier. His other translated works in English include *Selections from Contemporary Malaysian Poetry* (1997) and *The Puppeteer's Wayang: A Selection of Modern Malaysian Poetry* (1992). He is also the editor and a translator of two anthologies of Malaysian writing: *An Anthology of Contemporary Malaysian Literature* (1988) and *Emas Tempawan, Burnished Gold: An Anthology of Malaysian Poetry* (2004). Moreover, he has translated the Malay classic from the nineteenth century, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. His translations into Malay include Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (*Teori Kesusasteraan: Satu Pengenalan*) in 1988, *Poems of Octavio Paz* (*Puisi Octavio Paz*) in 1990, Yukio Mishima's *Spring Snow* (*Salju Musim Bunga*) in 1990, and Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems* in 2004. Muhammad was the Chairman of the Translators' Group between 1975 and 1978; Founder-President of the Translators' Association of Malaysia, 1978-81; President of the Malay Studies Association of Malaysia, 1980-82; Member of the Panel of Judges for the Malaysian National Literary Awards, 1981-91; and Chairman of the Comparative Study section of the Southeast Asian Literary Hero Project of the UNESCO Malay Culture Programme, 1982-83. He is currently an Adjunct Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM).[3]

This interview was conducted in Prof. Muhammad's office room at the Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, IIUM, on 18 September 2018. It has since been transcribed, revised and edited to bring it to a publishable form. The interview covers a wide spectrum of issues, ranging from Muhammad's creative and personal life, to the importance of translation and the future of Malaysian literature with the country's changing political circumstance. It also investigates Muhammad's views on Malay culture, the unique aspects of Malay and Malaysianess, the role of the writer in shaping the Malaysian national identity, the relationship between history and literature, Muhammad's views about English and Malaysian writings in

[3] An earlier draft of this biographical introduction on Muhammad Haji Salleh was published in *The Literay Encyclopaedia*, UK.

the English language and his advice for budding writers in Malaysia and especially those in the Malay language.

The interview further delves into Muhammad's creative process, how travelling has benefitted his poetic growth, his impression of the Arab writers and the relationship between literature and religion; how Muhammad negotiates between his creative and critical self, how to improve the standing of literature and especially the National Laureates in the New Malaysia, what awards mean to him and, finally, what he is writing now and what are his future plans as a poet and Malaysia's leading literary elderstatesman.

Please tell us about Malaysian literature generally. What makes it unique as a literary tradition in your view?

This is, indeed, a huge question, and Malaysian literature is also in the process of developing into a tradition. What is clear is that we have Malay literature; Malay literature uses the Malay language and what is interesting is that this Malay literature is not only composed and enjoyed in the Peninsula but also in the distant Eastern islands of the Archipelago – in Ambon, Manado, Minangkabau, Bengkulu and even in Aceh. Aceh has its own language but it traditionally uses Malay as its literary medium. The spread of the Malay language is very extensive. We have some evidence of the verse form, the *pantun*, in Sri Lanka and as far as Holland and South Africa. To the south of Australia too, in the Christmas and Cocos Islands, Malay is spoken. So, it is not spoken merely in the Malaysian territory, but Archipelago-wide and beyond. Malay as a language of literature is very old, and over the centuries it has produced great works, among them, *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (The Epic of Hang Tuah), *Sulalat al-Salatin* (Malay Annals), while the most widespread would be the *pantun* and the *syair*. Thus the impact of the language (which was, and is the lingua franca of the Archipelago) is felt in these islands, some countries of Asia as it were, plus one country in Africa and another in Europe.

That is Malay literature. Malaysian literature, by definition, would be the literature written in the national language. It is a literature in progress, now being written by not only the majority Malays but also by the Chinese, Indians, Kadazandusuns, Ibans, Bidayuhs, Bajaus and the Aslian (first) peoples. We have many interesting works from East Malaysia, with unique cultural backgrounds and use of language. This is a richness that is also being discovered. Together, all these writings will be the Malaysian literature.

What makes it unique as a literary tradition? This also is a very big question. What I know is that the roots of Malaysian literature are in the fine oral stories, poems, proverbs and customary sayings in all the indeginous

languages and we have 100 in all now in Malaysia, though many are having problems of survival. As I said just now, there are some very important oral and written texts, all very unique contributions to the literary culture.

We have mentioned the *pantun*, which has its roots in Malay poetry. However, in my research I have discovered that about 40 other languages also use this poetic form and about 35 Malay dialects as well. It is not as large as the *haiku* but it goes deep into the cultures of different countries. *Haiku* comes from above and is adopted by some people but it does not go deep into the culture of its users, but the *pantun* does.

Among the imaginative users of the form are the Minangkabau, the Kerinci, the Balinese, the Ambonese, the Minadonese and the Javanese. That is for the *pantun*. As for the *syair*, which is a type of narrative poetry, popular in many areas of the Archipelago, but also in Sumatera and the Peninsula, and we find some singers who still use the form (*syair*) for entertainment and music, for it is a unique art itself, both in Malaysia and Indonesia, especially in the Indonesian province of Riau and its capital Pekanbaru.

We also have the *hikayat,* a narrative form that may be of a long episode or even an epic. The term comes from Arabic and Persian but our *hikayat* have local contents, local heroes and heroines and, in fact, these elements were present before the coming of Islam. However, at present the term is used to mean a collection of oral stories. In addition to the rich oral poetry, *hikayat* has been one of the main Malaysian literary forms since the distant past.

Many of the *hikayat* are also animal tales which really concern human beings. There are also legends and myths and even love potions and the like. These are the main aspects of Malay or Malaysian literature, which we think has its own styles, uniqueness and literary achievements of the authors of old.

However, although Malaysians now know very little of these things – they are stemmed out by the STEM curriculum – they are indeed our own roots, and as I am a writer I also learn from these roots. And if I can add, I am the current president of the Oral Literature Society of Malaysia. We are trying to push for the oral stories to be recorded, to be expanded and taught to children because these stories contain ideas and concepts that are beneficial not only to our own students but also to students and children of other countries because they contain a universal wisdom that may be shared. So, these are among the characteristics of the Malay or Malaysian literature.

How would you define the Malay culture to our international audience? What are its central characteristics that constitute its "Malayness?"

This is also a very big question. I again feel that at the intellectual core of the Malay culture would be literature itself. Besides that, it would be ideas on the philosophy of nature, of the organisation of a society and leadership. How should one organise a society so that it is workable and functionable? We have discussions on this subject in many Malay oral works and manuscripts. Also, on how to rule a country, a *negeri* (state), a village, which are based and supported by the *adat* (laws) in some communities but in others by the numerous customary *peribahasa* (proverbs). So, all these are ideas on what a harmonious society should be like. In the meantime, there are many proverbs on what makes a good individual – how he/she can be a moral person, a caring and contributing individual, one who can share his/her wealth as well as his/her ideas with his/her society and with his/her neighbours.

These customary sayings and stories try to answer questions like: How should we treat our neighbours? How should one treat one's children? How should he/she treat his/her family? All these are in the *peribahasa* and sometimes in the *hikayat* themselves. Thus literature is at the core of culture, the values and how humans perceive life itself. Culture, besides the stories and the values, are also ideas about what we now call the philosophy of a people. Literature is the main vessel for all these – in poetry, in the stories and the *hikayat*.

It is in literature that the philosophy of a people is described, directly or indirectly, and for me the philosophy of the people is the core of culture; in fact, it's the most profound reflection on life.

That is a short answer to a very big question.

Malayness is also a complex and an on-going issue. There is a book called *Contesting Malayness*, which interestingly raises pertinent questions and describes our intellectual anxieties. I might be born a Malay but my father is not Malay, for example. My mother might be a Sundanese, for example, but because they live in Malaysia, we are defined as Malays. So, it is not in the blood, for sure; many clans like the Minangkabau, Mandailing and even Javanese are called Malays. So, it is not blood. It is culture, what language we speak, what customs we practice – that would be central in the idea of Malayness, but I am now not so interested in this Malayness anymore. We need to be Malaysians – and our progress towards this goal, unfortunately, has been very slow, inconsistent and not supported by an education system.

We have had that problem for so long now, but just having Malay blood is not good enough. We should be sharing our achievements and ideas with other people of the world. That should be the Malayness that we should seek, and the Malays are now shouting too loud about their Malayness, but when you talk to them of the country's history and culture, they are not sure they can describe it or list their values for us. So, personally, I am not

interested in the narrow idea of Malayness, for now perhaps we have to think of the Malaysianness.

Where are we going from this point onwards? The Malays will always be there, so will the Chinese, so let us share as generously and as openly as possible, because the country cannot go on if we do not come together. As for now, we are not coming together as we should, because the school system has so many types and language media, and lately there is an abundance of private universities and private schools that will continue to separate us. Indonesia has one system, one language; so has Thailand, Myanmar and many other countries in the world. We have so many school systems, we do not, even cannot, speak in the national language to each other; we do not speak good Malay, whether we are Malays or Chinese; there seems to be no pride in being Malaysian in these cultural and linguistic terms. Let's talk of Malaysianness.

How would you react to those Malaysians who seem to have no appreciation for the local literature and yet show profuse admiration for writers of other traditions, such as British or American literature? Do you consider this acceptable? What would you tell them to change their mind and find value in the works of their own writers?

I think Malaysians are among the most colonised of peoples around the world; Indians in India and the Filipinos are in some ways quite similar to us. We are so proud that we can speak English well, we are so proud that we know American and British literature, but we do not know our own, because it is not taught in school and not enough of it is taught in the university to all students. When I was in the English schools, I was taught Shakespeare and Milton and Keats and many others, but now my children do not know Malaysian literature. They do not study Usman Awang's works; perhaps a poem or two poems are introduced, but not more than that. So can we blame them? We are looking at an education system that is lopsided, written or planned by people who are also colonised in their mind and concept of education. There is no pride here, as compared to the Indonesians who are proud of their language and culture. They may not be as rich as we are but they are proud of their own tradition, language and in the many *adat* (customs) that they practice. They have numerous books in their language and I think there is much local content that is compulsory for students to know. But even that is not enough as compared to what the English or the Japanese are doing. Many of us are still good citizens of Great Britain.

On the matter of culture and language, it is important to stress the sciences in our schools. I totally agree but without literature, history and the arts you do not have a sense of your past, culture and identity. You do not

know the contributions of your people to other people, to other languages. You do not know what the great achievements and literary works of your own country are; this is a sad and tragic fact. It should not happen in a country that is proud of itself; a country that knows or has an identity. We are following in the footsteps Singapore, I think; we wanted to be like Singapore all the time.

So that is the issue. We like British and American literature because we are not teaching enough of our own, we are not supporting enough of our writers and literature, and although it is not acceptable, this is what is happening to us and to our system of education.

How could Malaysian literature benefit from the changing political situation in the country? Do you think the inclusive spirit of New Malaysia will be a boon for the writers? Will it gradually remove the barriers among the different creative mediums in the country or will Malaysian literature continue to centre around the national language?

The complex question is: How can Malaysian literature benefit from the changing political situation in the country? First and foremost, I am happy to report that Dr. Maszlee, the new Minister of Education, has been active in giving literature a place in the cultural life of Malaysia, and has defended the interests of literature and culture. Earlier on, Anwar Ibrahim, when he was the Minister of Education, was also a champion of the the literary arts. He put into place some very good projects. However, besdies them, few or no ministers care or even pretend to care, so that is the situation. Now we have moved into a new political era and a changing political situation. Politically yes, it is changing but what about the concept of culture, the country's interest in culture. What about the new minister of culture? The last minister of culture did not know much about culture, but now we have to ask the question: What cultural involvement and experience has the new minister of culture?

What in your view is the best way to form the Malaysian national identity? What should be the writer's role in this?

Again, the school system. How can we have a national identity if we have three, four or five school systems, with different languages, focuses and even loyalties? Besides, Our novels and stories should try to include characters from the different communities or have themes that go beyond just one race. They should be real, like mixed marriages perhaps, living together perhaps, living in the village and sharing in the village life perhaps, but this is not happening now. It will take a long time still, I think. Only if we change the school system, but we will still need to develop the idea of shaed history,

shared country, shared wealth, shared natural resources and even our own practices and behaviours. Then only, I think we can progress towards a Malaysian national identity.

Writers can write this truth, they can do a lot in this matter and if everybody writes to this purpose, I am sure they can bring a lot of changes. It is not possible to have a Malaysian national identity if we do not speak the same language with proficiency and sophistication; if we do not share a sense of history and sense of the past. So change the school system and we'll soon have an inclusive and cohesive national identity.

What should the writert's role be in this matter? Good question! I think we can write works that are inclusive of the different races, tribes and *suku* (clans). Our stories must have Kadazandusun, Malays and O*rang Asli* in them, not just Malays alone.

I do not object to writers writing in their mother tongues, but I think the national language should take precedence.

How would you define "good" literature? Does it have to be necessarily moral, or is contemporary postmodern experimental literature equally worthy for readers?

Good question again. I am not a very religious person, but I think I am a moral person. Good literature in the wider sense of the meaning of good, should stress on the good side of human beings – the good qualities of sharing, tolerance or being kind to each other.

The idea of the moral is, for me, more the ethical, especially in the context of the Malays. Moral is being good and not harming other people or taking away their rights. So, my idea of moral is like trying to develop good relations with other people, not hurting them, being fair to their needs and being just. No corruption, of course. Nepotism, corruption and all these are the real immoral things in my view.

So, being moral is to stress on the goodness, the good qualities and good values of human beings. That is what moral means to me, and literature should be involved in promoting the good qualities of human beings, their great and beneficial achievements. That is good literature – it should help people to be sensitive to each other, to be considerate, to appreciate other peoples' contributions to society and humanity, to highlight the sacrifices and the real heroes and not profiteers and pure moneymakers.

We should promote real heroes – sincerely and sensitively. That should also be the core of good literature, and literature should be good, with the great art of writing, crafting a short story, a poem, a novel, a *hikayat* and so on. So, it is stressing the good things of human life plus the art of writing itself, and in Malaysia it will include the *syair* and *pantun,* the novel, the free

verse, the numerous traditional forms and genres and bringing them together.

Literature must communicate; it must speak to the people, readers and listeners. This has been the definition of literature for a long time. It communicates ideas, the beauty of the language and the craft. If it does not communicate, then what is it? It might be beautiful but at the core with something that nobody understands. I think it is difficult to call that literature, but perhaps the product of a mind that is quite pretty but with without much substance. Full stop. No more than that. So, it must speak and communicate, it must tell the story, it must convey the idea to the other side. That has been the idea of literature, not only among Malaysians but all around the world. That is why we are atill reading the literature of the Greeks, because they communicate with their audiences, past and present. So too our old *pantun*, the old *hikayat,* because they tell us something, not only tell, they make us understand our life on earth better; plus the terrain of human emotions and help us appreciate other people. That is what good literature does. It makes you a good human being.

Based on your work Sajak-sajak Sejarah Melayu*, published in 1992, it seems there is a close relationship between literature and history. How does literature reflect history?*

In the traditional definition of literature, history, both the oral and the written, are considered as part of literature. Interestingly, when I was writing *Sajak-sajak Sejarah Melayu,* I was made the head of the Department of Malay Letters, and later the Director of the Institute of Malay Civilizational Studies. Though my studies have often been on Malay literature, my field was comparative literature, with a huge chunk of English. I had to become Malay, culturally and intellectually. I had been overseas for a long time. I have been brought up in the English language and my Malay was less than sophisticated. I knew English literature quite well, so I wanted to come back to Malay literature and culture and write works that delve deep into its mind. One of these exercises was a book of poems, based on a great literary work of the past. *Sejarah Melayu* or *Sulalat al-Salatin*, has always been a central text of Malay civilisation. So I chose different themes discussed in the text and wrote poems on certain episodes, stories or characters. In the *Sajak-sajak Sejarah Melayu*, there are 34 chapters and I wrote about 44 poems on them. These poems are considered by critics as one of my best early collection of poetry.

Fast forward – after discovering some wonderful literary texts, I went on to transcribe them: the *syair* written in Singapore in the second half of 19th century, the *Hikayat Isma Yatim* and now the oldest manuscript of the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. Besides, I am writing poems on the *hikayat*. While I

transcribed the text, my mind roamed to different parts of the story, to the art of storytelling, the characters, the emotions and so on. So, I am again writing these poems like those I did for *Sulalat al-Salatin*. Why am I doing this? Because great literature offers great ideas, great people, great characters, great episodes, incidents and so on. I like great topics and characters for my writing, so while I might not always have great ideas myself, I can share, I can re-word, I can re-develop ideas of the past and that is what I have been doing in *Sajak-sajak Sejarah Melayu* and many others that are not in one book by itself, but all over the place, a lot of it. So, good literature should be relevant across time and history.

As a form of re-interpretation and re-creation, one can re-word, recount and repeat the historical events and after sometime, these re-interpretations may become a source themselves for looking at them.

Of course, there is a reason for this preference for historical themes. Although I have enough poems about myself, about my own experiences, this crossing over to the other side of history allows me to see the more universal aspect of things, what other people have done and to search out their meanings.

In the meantime, I have at least about 2000 published poems. All writers speak about themselves, so do I, but it is more challenging and satisfying to cross over to the universal. One can say that this gives some kind of a balance to my creative work.

You have translated Malaysian, Singaporean, Indonesian and Bruneian poems in Malay into English. What is the importance of translation in literature, especially in a world that is increasingly turning into a global village?

It is important because we share a world. I was the editor-in-chief of *Tenggara: Journal of Southeast Asian Literature* for 25 years but, sadly, it is no longer around. We used to translate Vietnamese or Myanmarese or Thai or Indonesian or Malay works into English. We shared them around Southeast Asia and beyond. Through these translations I think we have come closer, and found that we are indeed closer to them, for we share a lot with them. A lot of *kancil* stories from Mindanao are quite similar to ours. Some *hikayat* of Mindanao are also the ones that we use in Malaysia and Brunei. I also translated from Bruneian into English or Indonesian into English and we know we share the world, and we can understand each other better, ourselves better, if we read these works. Southeast Asia is very rich in its literary tradition and output, but very few people indeed know of them – within or without its borders.

So, the idea is to translate from one language and share them with a wider readership, in a bigger world. We have done them into English. But

we need translations into Mandarin and later Spanish as well, so that we can spread the genius of the region all over. Why should not the Spanish and Latin American people read our good works, as we read the works of Cervantes, Lorca, Marquez and Borges? Why shouldn't the English speaking people read Tun Lanang if we so often read Shakespeare? We have our own achievements too. If we share our excellent prose and poetry, we can show that we are at par with the rest of the world. The old colonial viewpoints have to be reversed, overturned. Anyway, Malay-Indonesian is the fourth or fifth biggest language in the world now.

Please identify a few good translators of Malay literature. Do you think that lack of good translation is an impediment to the promotion of Malay literature internationally?

There are very few translators from Malay to English, but there are more translators from English to Malay. That is true, but into English we must mention the works of Ninot Aziz, who also re-tells, re-creates oral traditional stories into English; what she has done is wonderful. As I have been doing some work of anthologising classical works, I noticed Lalita Sinha as a hardworking translator who tries big works like *Bidasari*, for example.

I also know of non-Malaysians, overseas writers who translate from the Malay. Among them are Russell Johns and Virginia Hooker. Harry Aveling too has been translating from Malay for at least four decades. Now we have to develop a new generation of translators.

I too have translated my own poems, plus those of modern Malaysian writers. My most demanding work was *Hikayat Hang Tuah*; it is more than 500 pages long. It is very tough and long.

We notice that you are quite active on Facebook. Do you consider the social media generally a help or a hindrance for the writer?

First of all, it is nice to always be in touch with friends, new ideas and projects by local and international writers. I am not a fan of cooking recipes or pictures of sloppy plates! I mostly work at home – this is my way of socialising.

However, at times it is more a hindrance. I was not used to the Facebook but now I can use it to share my own new works and the new works by international writers. I forward postings on literature, the literary art, new translation, new prizes and great achievements. So, I want to share them with friends who are writers in the group, but the problem is that the group is not composed of only writers. I think my Facebook page is very nerdy, and I do not have many friends; I do not talk about my

granddaughter, for example, and of my children, and how many durian trees I have and so on. So it's very nerdy. When other people want to become friends, I am quite reluctant to accept them for fear that they might not like what I include in my account. It is not an easy thing to be bombarded with the translation prizes and the new translated works from China. So, now I am slowly trying to divorce myself from Facebook because sometimes it takes away my very valuable time.

You have expressed strong views in the past about the use of English as a creative medium in a postcolonial society. Have your views changed in any way with the passage of time and especially with the emergence of English as a global lingua franca?

I read world literature in English, my colonial language. But I also use English as an instrument for contesting colonialism or the narrowness of colonialism itself. Meaning, I use English to extend the knowledge of the world of Malaysian and Indonesian literary works. So I use English to bring certain awareness about our literature that was not there, or if it was there, very much coloured by a colonial viewpoint. Some people think this is strange, but I think I am not wrong and I write more now on Malaysian literature in the English language, so that I can help export our literary products.

For example, the University of Malaya has just published my book on the *pantun, Pantun: The Poetry of Passion*. Now I am awaiting permission from publishers for putting together another manuscript, *An Anthology of Traditional Malay Literature*. Both these books are in English but are originally products of the Malay language. Therefore, I am using English in my academic writings and edited anthologies, but I still prefer not to write poetry or other creative works in English.

I have given my time to Malay. English already has so many writers, millions. If I add my little contribution to it, it will not make any difference. However, if I have a little talent and put it to writing in Malay, I might be able to contribute to it substantially. So, I have my priorities, but one of those priorities is no doubt the use of English, only to bring over the products and studies of our literature to readers beyond our borders.

You have mentioned before that you acquired more ideas by travelling. Please explain to us how travelling has helped to enrich your mind and writing. Has it in any way compromised your Malayness?

Good question. I travel to discover the essence of cultures. I do not travel to consume satay in Minangkabau or to look at new fashions in Jakarta or Oxford Street. I travel to find what I call the proofs and the face and heart

of civilisation, the achievements of a people. As I go to Sri Lanka, I find the great temples and the spread of the beautiful paddy fields, well-kept and well-managed. I saw also the tea gardens, lakes, ponds and the beauty of nature. I met the good people too; the writers, the scholars and so on. So, these are the things that I look for when I travel. There is not much of buying of a belt or new shoes or a new *songkok*, it is more to the more permanent products; the literature and its ideas. It is true, I buy woven textiles, made by Sundanese or Ambonese or Laotians, but these I consier as products of ancient art. I am crazy about wood carvings – from around Southeast Asia – and would go through much trouble buying the big pieces like wall panels and doors. I buy old typewriters, *keris* and the betel containers, *tepak sirih.*

Every nation has its own literature, so do the Arab people. Names like Taha Hussein, Najib Mahfuz and Abdul Rahman Munif are prominent internationally. Please tell us if you have any thoughts about these Arab writers or the Arab literary tradition generally.

My knowledge of the Arab people and tradition comes from classical Malay literature. We have learnt a lot from the Syrians, Iraqis and the Moroccans. Sometimes we take things from the Arabs which come through the Persians. In Malaysia, the literary genre known as the *hikayat* itself is a case in point. But it was as much as learning from cultures beyond our borders, but much more of it also comes from the garden of our literary tradition.

Yes, of course, the works of Abu Nawas, which are really Persian and not Arab, but like *One Thousands and One Nights*, it came to Malaysia through the Arabs. Besides that, I know little of the narrative tradition of the modern works. I have read and enjoyed Najib Mahfouz, Mahmoud Darwish, Edward Said, Khalil Gibran, Nawal el-Saadawi and poems by various writers.

I have read some Palestinian poets, most of them very painful but highly accomplished works. I am also angry with the Arabs. How can they not solve their problems? Almost all the Arab countries are at war or in conflict with each other. Is there a religious need to quarrel with the followers of Syiah? We are Muslims; Islam is a religion of peace; yet we are, in practice, not the most peaceful of believers.

When I first read Najib Mahfouz, I was very much struck by his detailed description of life in Cairo. No other writer seems to have reached to the level of detail that he has been able to provide.

My reading of Arab literature is quite limited, sad to say.

Do you think literature should help to promote religious ideas or should it be exclusively for art and culture?

In the Malay tradition, literature has always promoted religious ideas directly or indirectly. *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (The Epic of Hang Tuah) in itself might not be religious, but the idea of a good man, sacrificing for others, being infinitely selfless, is, for me, "religious" in values. So, it is not easy to draw a divide between the religious and the non-religious. However, for me, the arts have always been used to spread the good values that make us good human beings. As these arts were very popular in society and in fact became its medium of thought, they were used to spread the religious thoughts. The *wayang kulit* (shadow play), in Malaysia especially, was used to spread both Hinduism and Islam. So, too, among the Javanese, religious stories were enhanced by literary narration.

How could we elevate the status of national laureates in Malaysian society, so that our best writers would be canonised in the national culture and given the respect and recognition from all quarters that they truly deserve?

As I mentioned earlier, literature is no longer really taught in schools, especially in these times of STEM. What is usually done is that, pieces of literary works are used for the study of language-use, and perhaps some characteristics of a story are highlighted. But there is no real opportunity to appreciate literature itself. Without this appreciation, how can national laureates always be given their due? For the past forty years our government has been in love with the sciences and have forgotten the civilising benefits of the arts. So, we are still a long way from the target of giving our writers their due.

I think only the Malay-language newspapers are interested in the national laureates, but the English ones have not proven to be so. I do not know about the Chinese ones. So, not much has been done, and not much respect and recognition until Dr. Maszlee came into the picture. Our writers deserve more because they write about our lives, civilistion, cultures and achievements.

You are a salient poet in the country but also a highly accomplished critic and academic? How did you excel in both the fields which are grounded in different and even contrary skills?

Ah, the eternal conflict and irony! However, I am a well-rounded scatterbrain and a little covetous in my life. I feel that there is so much out there that I may learn and benefit from. My many worlds overlap with one another, exist as shadows of one another. The world of the literary critic is surely shared with that of the poet. Both are central components of literature.

Regarding the academic, I have been a lecturer for 45 years. The academic also works in the mould of a critic. However, I pride myself for writing *The Poetics of Malay Literature*, which is a venture into the Malay ethno-poetics and for us here perhaps the first of its kind. This is theoretical in nature. Also as a byproduct of the literary arts. I also write on some aspects of ethno-philosophy.

For me they are all quite related, especially when they use the same oral or written texts.

Who are your favourite writers locally and internationally? Please tell us briefly why you like them.

I am an old poet – my favorite international poet is Pablo Neruda from Chile. But I must say I am in awe of Shakespeare, Goethe and Rumi. They come from different cultures and contribute to our understanding of life from different perspectives and literary cultures. They bring forth the magic of ideas and experiences and help us to understand their beauty and meaning. Pablo Neruda is the grand old poet who talks to and communicates with his readers. Shakespeare and Goethe latch on to the great issues of human life. Rumi is a lighter, more musical and pithy version of the former two. He so succinctly puts his thoughts in lines which always stay in our memory and conscience.

Locally, I like Baha Zain and Anwar Ridhwan; both of them are modern writers who are helping us to make sense of our Malaysian experiences. They are very preceptive and also employ Malay styles, unknown before this.

Please tell us about your creative process. If a younger writer would like to learn from you and emulate your style, what would be your advice to him or her?

I am a quiet person and I like to be with myself more than with other people. For me, this choice of lifestyle provides with a space for ruminating, thinking, creating, finding words and developing my ideas. I write in *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay Language), and sometimes in English, in buses, trains and airplanes because there I would almost always be alone. In my home too, I am mostly alone, in my study and I am with my computer every day for ten hours or more. I write when I am alone.

As a young man, I read a lot, and by reading I grew. A poet or a novelist needs to grow, as you can be stuck to just one style, but through reading I learnt from the writers from many countries of the world. Last year I published a book entitled *Dunia ialah Sebuah Aksara*, The World is an Alphabet, which contains more than a hundred essays on new and canonical

works from the East and the West. I find sustenance from the great writers and works of the world.

So I would advise young writers to read like crazy – and from as many literary cultures and languages as possible.

When I finish the first drafts of my work, I put them away for a while so that they can ferment. When I feel that they have benefited from the passage of time, I bring them out and edit them again and again.

Now that I have been accused of being an old writer, I have also been tasked with sharing my style of working and writing. Like what I was doing this morning with the students of the English Department at IIUM, and in two days' time, I shall have to go to Kuala Lipis to talk to young writers, hoping that some of them would be interested in what I will have to say.

You are a multi-award winning poet. What do these awards mean to you? Are awards a measure of success for the writer?

It is nice to get awards; most of the time there is no money in it. But that is fine. It is good because it is a kind of recognition. Writers in Malaysia are quite poor really and they do not get much. So, when their awards also include some money, then it helps – buy a new computer, take the grandchildren to a waterpark or a restaurant. Fortunately, I have a pension from my non-literary profession, so it is not a problem. But because I work very hard, it has helped me and other people as well to realise that I have contributed my little bit.

What are you writing now? What other books do you have in plans for the future?

I am now transcribing *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, the oldest version (1758). I have finished all the five hundred pages. In the meantime, I am also editing my translation of *Sulalat al-Salatin.* Besides, I have sent in the manuscript of *An Anthology of Traditional Malay Literature*, and this book is not only a collection of the works produced in Malaysia but also from Bengkulu, Ambon and other islands in the archipelago.

I have finished the first volume of my autobiography (and drafts of two more volumes), and I think I have four or five more to write. (My readers will have to forgive me, I have lived in many countries and travelled to about seventy in all).

In addition, I have essays on *Hang Tuah* in English and on the *Sulalat al-Salatin*. The latter is being published by Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). My new book of poems, *Sebuah Lembah yang Kunamakan Tanah Air* (A Valley I Call My Country), has recently been published by Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM).

As for books for the future, three or four more volumes of the autobiography. My book of *peribahasa* (proverbs) is also being published by USM. This is a new book of proverbs, arranged differently (by themes and subjects) from the ones that we know of and also includes proverbs from other regions where Malay was/is used.

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