

**From the Cave of Denial and Discontent, Darkly: Response
to Wong Phui Nam's Review of *An Anthology of
Contemporary Malaysian Literature***

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Mr. Wong Phui Nam takes issue for calling my book, a collection of works written originally in the national language and later translated into English, *An Anthology of Contemporary Malaysian Literature*.

In a recent account, Malaysia recorded one hundred languages spoken within its shores. This is indeed an astounding number of languages. However, we all need a shared language to communicate with each other, and to use in our schools so that we approach knowledge from a common perspective, i.e. a common language. This is the national language.

Thus, it is usually agreed that the national literature is one written in the national language. If an Indian writes poems in Punjabi in Britain, would he be included in an anthology of British national literature? Or a descendant of the Javanese in Holland writing in Indonesian – should his work be included in an anthology of Dutch literature? Should not the national literature of Malaysia be written in Malaysia's national language?

In 1973, an anthology of poems in English, *Seven Poets: Singapore and Malaysia* was published. Of course, there was a corpus of poetry written in Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, Kadazan and Iban by then. They were not included. If I remember it right, Mr. Wong did not write a long paper in protest that these non-English poems by Malaysians and Singaporeans were not included. Is English the national language of Malaysia and Singapore, or for Mr. Wong, is it the only language in which our literature should be written? For him it did not matter if the works in these languages were not included, as long as those in English were represented.

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An Anthology of Contemporary Malaysian Literature is a collection of what critics have considered the best of Malaysian works. Published in 1988 (and republished in 2008), it offers a collection of literary works from the period when Malaysians were rediscovering their identity and their culture, and slouching off the thick shroud of colonial British culture and literature. Their steps might not be as firm as we would like them to be, but they are proud moves that foregrounded the language of the land and its culture.

Mr. Wong has also taken issue that the works included in the *Anthology* are written in the national language; there is a strong whiff of the British, pre-Merdeka slant to this, though we are living in an independent Malaysia 56 years after they had left. But let me say, I do not take issue with Mr. Wong writing in English. It is his right. I too write in English, but will never insist that it is part of Malaysian national literature.

We must let writers speak in their own national language, free from the dictates of the colonial language and its values. These are their voices, and these are the recognised poets, dramatists and novelists in the country. Mr. Wong does not like the selection (he does not seem to like anything) – but unfortunately for him, I do not think like a colonial Englishman nor would I like to be a conduit of English values, as Mr. Wong is doing. I do not judge literary works from the perspective of English literature. Mr. Wong perhaps knows that there are many concepts of literature, literary beauty and function, and what is a good literary language. The literary aesthetics of the Indians, Persians and Chinese are quite different from those of Mr. Wong's masters. To add insult to injury, he seems to know nothing of the history or context of Malaysian literature. He cares little and is still looking at literature from ideas of literature taught by the British in the 1950's. And for him, only English language and literature written in that language are capable of any great achievement.

Perhaps Mr. Wong forgets that the British came as imperialists, and English was used as an instrument of subjugation and of hegemony. It came with the idea that it was the superior language – other languages have no real place, except in trade and transaction, which brought them handsome profits.

It was imperial, forced from above and has never belonged to the country, and not of the land. The biggest language of the country was and is Malay, which was also the lingua franca of Southeast Asia for more than a millennium, and has one of the largest literary corpuses in Asia and beyond.

To me, to choose English and hold on to it leaves an after taste of raw colonialism, especially since the colonisers have left for good. Now it is the turn of Malaysians to choose a language of their own to express their culture, to reflect the nuances of their ways and expressions – which English cannot capture, as it grew in and to serve another culture.

The subtleties of our national language, the intricate nuances of our words, concepts and metaphors, may not be fully captured in English or Japanese or

Spanish. I cannot express *merajuk* or the pent-up anger of *amok* in English, but in Malay they come with myriad connotations, ancient roots and rituals. Or take the word *sirih* which in its original meaning offers a network of practices, ceremonies and hospitalities, which will never be carried by the word *betel*.

English, in its history, we must remember, was a destructive language. It has destroyed hundreds of languages of the American Indians, the Africans, and the Polynesians. I do not wish to be an instrument to further injure ailing languages like Samoan, Tongan, Sioux, Chippewa, hundreds of Niugini, Melanesian and several Australian Aborigine tongues. Neither do I want to be the agent to weaken our national language which we worked so hard to regain and make the language of our independent nation.

Mr. Wong also quarrels with the quality of the work of writers I have included. May I say that they have also been recognised and acclaimed by our own critics and by foreign scholars and translators for they were able to speak to them and convey a universal meaning and sense. Many have been translated into Thai, Tagalog and Vietnamese, and into German, French, Spanish, Arabic, Russian, Danish, Japanese and Chinese. Dissertations and theses have been written on these writers in Malaysia, Southeast Asia and also in Europe, Australia and the US. These translators and scholars must know and recognise something that Mr. Wong is unable to see or refuses to appreciate. The poems and critical books of the editor of this anthology have been translated into 15 languages and a few Ph.D. dissertations have been written on them or are being written. These translators and scholars cannot all be as wrong as Mr. Wong.

Many of these scholars and translators have conscientiously studied Malaysian history, national language, the literary and political context of the times and have been reading more closely and more appreciatively than Mr. Wong. And many do not judge from a British perspective; therefore, scholars/translators like Harry Aveling and Virginia Hooker (Australians); Monique la-Joubert and Lawrence Metzger (French); Lisbeth Littrup and Vagn Vleng (Danish); Rainer and Beate Carle, Bertolt Damshauer and Werner Kraus (German); Henk Maier, G. L. Koster and A. Teeuw (Dutch); Boris Parnickel and Viktor Porgadev (Russian); Kazuo Oikawa and Miyuki Kosetsu, (Japanese), and Sermsuk Hussain (Thai) have found these works to be unique and appealing to their audiences at home and a larger cross-border readership.

Mr. Wong seems to disagree with the quality of the works included. In my judgment, these poems and stories, plays and criticisms speak from a soul, a sense of belonging and purpose in a country trying to slouch off the colonial shroud. They try to speak on our behalf. They describe our reality.

If truth be told, I do not think that Mr. Wong's poetry has the quality, purpose, commitment, and the sense of identity that these works have eloquently shown. They address the issues of the times, the predicament of the people and celebrate their language. They refresh us with their ways of looking

at life, from minds not colonised and therefore quite free to say and express themselves. They stand on a ground of tradition, pick metaphors from their own times and culture, but also experiment with the new variations and varieties of language. They look back into history and try to use its perspectives and transport their meaning across time. They proclaim to us that there are other ways of looking at the world, that the colonial and the British are emphatically imperial – and are proud of their Malaysian uniqueness.

This is a 1988 anthology of poems, criticism, drama and stories that paint the canvas of post-independence literature. It was suggested that it be republished so that more people would have access to our literary works.

Since then I have gone further to illustrate in *An Introduction to Modern Malaysian Literature* (2009) and *Sea of Rainbows* (2009) how Malaysians have come a long way from the 1980's. Malaysian literature is now written by Ibans, Kadazandusuns and Bajau, Bidayuh and Orang Asli, by Melanaus and also by Chinese as well as Indians. They have brought the riches of their literary traditions into our national literature and given us the rainbows that we are proud of. Jaya Ramba and Douglas Jaga (Iban); Jong Chian Lai and Lim Swee Tin (Chinese); Joseph Selvam and Uthaya Sankar (Indian); Ismail Abbas and Siti Hadiyah (Bajau); Zaini Ozea (Melanau); Jais Sahok (Bidayuh); Amelly Ann Kasing (Kadazandusun); Juri Durabi and Jair Sulai (Sungai), and Raymond Majmumah (Rungus) are not necessarily ethnic Malays, but write well in the national language. They do not come from a background of English, or shrouded by an English frame of mind. They come from their different communities and contribute to Malaysian literature with their own cultural experiences. Consequently their contributions have been much appreciated, and some of their works are studied in Malaysian schools.

The critical essays in the selection are from a corpus of work just finding its feet and issues after more than a hundred years of colonisation. They try to define the unique Malaysian qualities and achievements, and attempt to put writers in their context and times. Mr. Wong's paper does none of this. If his essay/review of this *Anthology* is a reflection of his high standards, then Mr. Wong has failed miserably to show us or our young critics a good example and the way to the future. After reading his piece I am left with an image of him – looking out from a cave of discontent and denial, darkly, and continually whining. He has been sharpening his weapons to battle with writers in the national language and those who try to advance it. In short, he seems to be at war with literature in the national language and also the language itself.

Translation, not only in Malaysia, but throughout Asia, has its own special problems. I struggle all the time to find good renderings. In the 1980's there were not many, and what I have chosen are the best by the best translators in and out of the country. Perhaps with Mr. Wong's mastery of English he may be able to put together another anthology of national literature, not as an

Anglophile, a colonial poet, but from a Malaysian perspective and to celebrate the literary achievements of Malaysians.