



**N O T H I N G  
I S S A C R E D**

Books by Salleh Ben Joned

*Sajak-Sajak Saleh: Poems Sacred and Profane  
As I Please*

# NOTHING IS SACRED

Salleh Ben Joned



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*For Aton, Anna, Hawa and Adam.  
Always.*



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## Preface

This collection of essays and columns is very much like my first, *As I Please* (1988), the reprint of which will be published later this year. This compilation, majority of which are my AIP columns not included in the first book, also contains articles written in the mid-80s, and one written during my student days in Tasmania (see Epilogue: What's the Matter with Malchin). Yes, I was a 'big-mouth' even then.

The title I have chosen for this book, *Nothing Is Sacred*, is by courtesy of a *Sasterawan Negara* (National Laureate) who, in a critique of my 1987 bilingual poetry collection *Sajak-sajak Saleh: Poems Sacred and Profane*, wrote: "...to Salleh, nothing is sacred." In the fully positive sense of the phrase, I have taken what was meant to be a negative judgment as a compliment; it is true that to me both as poet and columnist that "nothing is sacred". There is nothing that cannot be looked at from a viewpoint unacceptable to the vast majority in any particular society or culture. This is especially so whether one writes poetry or columns.

There is also another meaning that is beyond the ethical, social, religious and political. The 'nothing' meant now is not always 'nothing'; and this 'nothing' can be sacred. But that is another story.

Salleh Ben Joned  
Subang Jaya  
May 2003



## Acknowledgement

The first person I want thank with all my heart insisted on being nameless. Though I was very tempted to ignore her insistence, I finally decided to respect it. This person was instrumental in ensuring this book saw the light of day, especially in helping to organise the non-filed bits and pieces of articles written over the many years. She is also the kind of friend that I, given my nature, badly needed and still need. To her, I am deeply indebted.

The majority of the pieces in this book are from my As I Please column with the *New Straits Times*. I would like to clearly acknowledge the role played by my then Literary Editor, Mr Kee Thuan Chye who was fully committed to the challenge of testing the parameters – my kind of editor. Thank you. Chye.

To the editors of the original *Men's Review* in which my column B.O.M (Boleh Once a Month) appeared, the editor of *Journal One* which unfortunately didn't last very long, and to Jason Tan, co-editor of *Options/The Edge* – all of you are an adventurous lot, ever willing to find out how far one can go when their straight-talking contributors write on 'sensitive' issues. Grateful thanks for making the time and space. All very precious to a freelance writer.

## Introduction

Salleh began writing *As I Please* with the launch of the Literary Page of the *New Straits Times* in 1991. Taking off from the publication of the first piece, he managed a sustained two-year effort of having the column appear every week. Then he took a break in order to enter into retreat or as he puts it, *khalwat*. (If you only know the meaning of the word as given out by our religious officials, you should check its real meaning by referring to the first piece in this volume 'Confessions of a Literary Columnist'). Salleh continued with the column for another three years with further occasional breaks for *khalwat*. By 1995, *As I Please*, became what he is pleased to describe as more like 'as and when I please'. Eventually, the occasions for 'when' ceased altogether, much to the disappointment of his many readers (amongst whom I count myself) who had looked forward eagerly every Wednesday to what it was that Salleh was pleased to say. But now, we have the consolation of this volume. It brings back to us most of what pleased him to write in those exciting early years of the Literary Page.

If you take Salleh's word for it, he became 'bored' with having his way as he pleased. His readers were certainly not bored with him. His choice as a columnist by the NST's Literary Editor was in fact a shrewd and felicitous one. More than anyone else, Salleh contributed to the rapid success of the page. Readers recognised immediately his wit, ironic humour, biting criticism, the rare capacity to entertain and verbal vigour. Here was a man who had much to say and he said it in a style that made his words bring to the reader his very presence. But if it were only a matter of style, however provocative and highly entertaining *As I Please* was, it would, of course, have turned out to be of passing interest. What it was about would by now be passé, eight years down the road into a new century. But the many things Salleh had to say were then, and still are, important and relevant. Although he appeared to have merely picked quarrels with the *sasterawan* and

*seniman* and language bureaucrats, he wrote out of a real concern, for lack of a better word, over the politics of language.

Should the politics of language be still of concern to us? Indeed it should, for how we use, misuse or abuse language in the public realm has serious though very often not immediately obvious consequences to the conduct of our lives as societies, nations and even civilisations. Language goes to the heart of issues in human life. And the relevance to us? Yes, for we too as people everywhere else have enemies of the word, though thankfully ours are relatively tame. Salleh wrote against all such people. They come in the shape of nationalists with blinkered vision, cultural chauvinists, religious ideologues and yes, even hypocrites, jumpers-on of bandwagons and humbugs. You might say that to categorise such people as 'enemies' seems a bit extreme. Perhaps, but their existence and influence on the body politic like that of diabetes on the physical body is insidious, so much so that we do not see them doing any real harm until the harm has been done, even though that might take a very long time. The harm when it is done will take the form of national divisiveness, or it will take the form of cultural, intellectual, economic or even moral stultification of the nation. And that makes Salleh's writings important and relevant even today.

Salleh was in a unique position to write as he did. In a purely cultural and literary sense, he has the qualifications required for the job. He is firmly rooted in his Malay heritage and feels absolutely secure that he is not going to lose it. At the same time, he has been educated and lived quite a while in, as he says, a *Mat Saleh* country and is widely read in Western literature and has more than a passing interest in and understanding of mystical Sufism. He is, of course, also a poet with a sharp critical sense. Now I have come to say what I have to say with some reluctance. Insidious though it may be (hopefully only to some people), I have to say that he has the advantage of being both a Muslim and a Malay. This places him in a kind of 'special' position that enabled him to raise 'sensitive' issues that he did.

Any Malaysian will understand what I mean. There is also the fact of his integrity, which gave him the moral authority to speak out.

For instance, he could upbraid, as he tells us, a medicine seller turned poet for spouting dangerous chauvinistic nonsense. He could confound a pair of venerable *Sasterawans Negara* with the Big Q about National Literature (spelt with a big NL) raised by an unsuspecting cultural visitor to this country. He could point with undisguised derision to the language bureaucrat whocategorically put in writing that there was not room in Islam for humour. The telling of this is so ironically funny that it can make us forget the dark side of it. But not the case when he tells us of the poet, who without quite realising it herself, revealed the view that Muslims should always take the side of Muslims in a conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims. The rights and wrongs of the matter did not count. Other inanities he spoke out against included the frequent organised public *declamasi* of bad poems or worse, non-poems, and the workshops for teaching uncreative writers how to be creative. There were also the seminars organised and dominated by *sasterawans* and *senimans* who were unaware of their contradictions in their talking about their own works written in Malay on issues wholly of interest to Malays as National Literature without a single non-*Bumi* present as a discussant. Salleh even invented the categories of *Jebat sasterawans* and *Tuah sasterawans*, and it appears to him that the Hang Tuahs are mostly deserving of the honour of being conferred the *Anugerah Sastera Negara* (National Laureate Award). But he adds that being a Hang Tuah is not necessarily a bad thing.

Salleh's writings earned him the distinction of being named a 'cultural apostate'. The *sasterawans* and *senimans* read him as being anti Malay culture and disrespectful to Islam, ascribing unworthy motives to him for writing not so friendly pieces about them. And they found justification for that in his being thoroughly Westernised and having lost his Malays roots (that is, in their eyes) and in his writing in English. The fact that he also wrote in Malay (and still does) apparently did not count. However, if you read the pieces in

this volume as a whole, you will see the clear and shining thread that runs through the best of them is his passionate defence of the integrity of the word. This is language that is not corrupted by being put to the service of literature and other writing in the public realm to propagate or perpetuate narrow unaccommodating religious, racial or cultural ideologies or just social and political attitudes founded on sheer ignorance. You will sense that his cutting irony and derision that are reserved for offending parties, be they writers or bureaucrats or self-appointed guarantors of the purity of the faith, comes from outrage at actions and pronouncements which hint at the possibility of corruption of the word.

Salleh's concern over the integrity of the word is tied up to what his hero, Vaclav Havel, has expressed as 'living in truth'. Salleh's own words describe it best: "This is a mode of being that affirms the humanity and dignity of man, the potential uniqueness of each individual and his life, and the vital necessity of freedom for the survival of his soul and his humanity on this earth." He has learnt from Havel that in a totalitarian system that can be completely undermined by a deliberate and calculated misuse of language. For as Havel says of a totalitarian communist state such as Czechoslovakia, "...language is formalised and ritualised to deprive it of a 'semantic contact with reality' and transformed into a system of ritual that replaces reality with pseudo reality." This critique of language, Salleh avers can "apply to other political subsystems, including a capitalist system such as ours, albeit differently and to a lesser extent." I agree with him.

Have things changed since Salleh wrote as he pleased? Whatever the signs of the times may tell us, I doubt it. For the ideologues of whatever persuasion, enemies of the word and therefore of truth in Havel's broad humane sense will always be with us as they will be with people everywhere else in the world. They may not be as virulent as those that have manifested themselves in other places and in other times. They may even seem like harmless oddballs, tame like house cats or are just lightweight intellectuals. But as long as they

have the propensity (even if latent) to deprive language of 'semantic contact with reality', they are an abiding danger to all of us.

To all of us who understand this, Salleh's writings reminds us to be ever (to borrow a Buddhist term) mindful. To the indifferent, complacent, the ignorant and the confused, it serves in not very obvious ways as a warning and a wake-up call. It is this that makes the pieces gathered in this volume important and of abiding relevance.

And this that gives it permanent value.

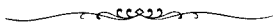
Wong Phui Nam

Kuala Lumpur

May 2003

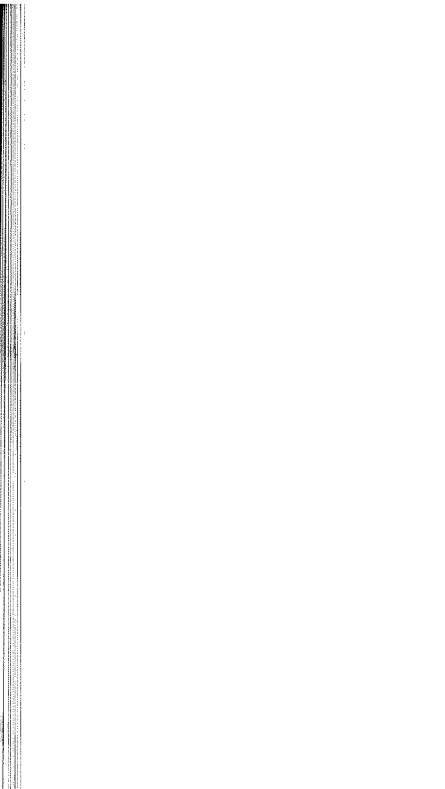
(Malaysian Poet Wong Phui Nam graduated from the University of Malaya in Economics and worked mainly in development finance and merchant banking. Most of the poems he wrote during the sixties first appeared in *Bunga Emas*, an anthology of Malaysian writing published in the United Kingdom in 1963. They were subsequently compiled and published as *How the Hills are Distant* in 1968. In 1989, his second volume *Remembering Grandma and Other Rumours* was published. His third *Ways of Exile*, was published in 1993 followed by his latest *Against his Wilderness* (2000). Wong's poems have also appeared in *Seven Poets*, *The Second Tongue*, *The Flowering Tree*, *Young Commonwealth Poets '65* and *Poems from India, Sri Lanka, Singapore and Malaya*. He was also a literary columnist with his fortnightly 'Other Cadences' in the *New Straits Times* from 1991 to 1996.)





# This Business of Writing





## Confessions of a Literary Columnist

[25th September 1991]

**Hi, folks!** It's quite nice to be back after such a long break. **Six weeks!** Believe me, man, I really needed it. My literary **batteries** badly needed recharging. Six weeks of heavenly **fun**, of indolence sheer and dear. Five of those weeks were **spent** on a remote, tourist-free island off Sulawesi (where **my** pirate ancestors came from). On that Sulawesi island, **I** just lazed around, rediscovering the lost art of indolence, **pure** Malay-style, without guilt or sense of sin. And totally **free** of any taint of things literary – no books, no word-processors, not even paper or pencil, fortunately free of **arty-farty** and bitchy *sasterawans* (creative writers), and **most** certainly no anxious editors breathing deadlines down **my** ultra-sensitive neck.

After Sulawesi, a week on Pulau Besar (Big Island) off **my** home town, sad Old Melaka. On that island of creepy **legends** and tall tales of even taller saints, I was totally **absorbed** in deciphering the mystic meaning of my dirty **navel**, performing a week-long *khalwat* with All-Mighty **God** Himself. Please note that *khalwat* is here used in its **original** sacred sense, not the profane sense meant by our **busybody** religious bureaucrats. In Malaysian usage, the **word** has been corrupted to mean close sexual proximity (**how** close?) with other than your sister or brother, mother or **father**, grandmother or grandfather.

I had my sacred *khalwat* on Pulau Besar in the hope of being granted *barakah* (grace) from God in the form of a literary revelation. The drought in the valleys of my mind had begun to drive me desperate. The *khalwat* was performed on the famous six-metre grave of Saint Somebody or Other, patron spirit of that island. (You might have heard rumours about this saint; Melaka people believe that his curse is behind the mysterious water problem that is still plaguing the Sleepy Hollow.) From my week of *khalwat* on the six-metre tomb (which seemed to have stretched by another metre on my last day on the island), I came back with the vague feeling that I had mysteriously left one foot in the saint's grave (the right, and, I believe, metaphorical one). This sad business of the right foot, however, seems to have been a blessing in disguise. Islam rightly reminds us to be forever alert to the hidden blessings of God in the dreary misfortunes of life. (Christianity, too; just think of Christy Brown and his famous left foot!). I said blessing in disguise because, along with my lonely left foot, I also brought back with me the idea for a promising long bilingual poem to be called 'The Fall of Malacca' (alternative title '1511 and All That').

It's conceived as a patriotic visionary-futuristic mock-epic about Melaka in the glorious decade of the 2020s. And it'll be bursting with the ubiquitous imagery of water. Yes, water. Water, water everywhere in the rest of the country – but in Melaka, not a drop to drink. The poor Melaka folks, young and old, die of thirst; instead of imbibing water, they inhale mysterious fumes. Their bodies stink of B.O. because of the months without *mandi* (bathing); and the only survivors are the bloated ADUNs (State Assemblymen) and Menteriis (ministers) who also stink – but of something else. A nice idea, I thought. And worth trying, especially when one thinks of the total absence of mock-epic or mock-heroic writing as a genre in the

entire history of Malay literature. (Scholars, correct me please if I am wrong.) And, what's more, my idea this time has some hope of being actually realised as a complete and hopefully published work.

What I mean here can perhaps be made clear if my kind reader would graciously tolerate a few words of a personal nature. You see, I am, I must confess, a *hangat-bangat tahi ayam* ('hot-hot-chicken-shit') kind of scribbler, long on dreams and enthusiasm, but short on patience, stamina and the capacity for sheer slogging that true writing usually demands, *vis-a-vis* George Orwell whom I wrote about (on writing as an agonising bout of illness) before I disappeared for my holiday. That – and faith in whatever talent God in his divine inscrutability had accidentally blessed me with. With me, the well-known Latin tag *ars longa vita brevis* (art is long, life is short) really makes its truth felt in my very liver and bowels. With that ancient (rather cynical) wisdom corrupting the liver of my mind, my dream of a literary career has been warped all these years by a secret conflict – conflict between the urge to seize the day for *vita* and the urge to do the same for *ars*. *Carpé diem* in the interest of living rather than scribbling. (Noisy arty-farties don't have this kind of conflict.)

Thanks to this by-no-means uncommon conflict, my much-fantasised literary career of more than two decades (I'm a late developer; didn't get the call till I had turned 30) has been littered with half-formed poetic foetuses, or at best, stillborn literary freaks. If the single unpleasant truth of my literary pretension were to be told, I'd have to admit that too many projects that I dreamt up had turned out to be poor, though happy, prologues to swollen nothings. In my beginnings, were usually my ends. Much too often, between the conception and the realisation, always falls the cursed noonday shadow (call it the shadow of the indolent Malay, if you like).

This time, I have reasonable grounds for thinking that the curse will be broken. The idea of the mock-epic that I brought back from Pulau Besar, unlike most of my other ideas, will be no mere preamble to unfulfilled dreams. *Insya Allah!* And the Tall Saint of Big Island will, no doubt, bless my first patriotic endeavour for my poor beloved Melaka. With my left foot, I'll gently nurse and massage it; if necessary, even kick it into the light of day. Damn the ingrained universal prejudice against everything to do with the left; a prejudice sanctioned by our culture and endorsed by our religions.

Well, that's what I brought back from my week-long *khalwat* on Pulau Besar. What have I brought back from the Sulawesi island? Nothing! Or rather, nothing plus renewal of energy and euphoria to seize the moment for both gutsy living and gusty writing. That, and the few fugitive thoughts on the hazards and temptations of being a columnist, thoughts that somehow clung to my mind when I took off for Sulawesi.

After five months of writing as I please, I discovered that being a weekly columnist can be quite taxing. Especially when the column is supposed to be literary, but meant for non-literary as well as literary people. This is okay if I didn't have the nagging feeling that our literary world is not terribly exciting and much lacking in variety. The central literary issues demanding to be talked about in our country are mostly the same old stale and anachronistic but somehow still debatable issues. And the attitude of most of our writers tends to be piously patriotic and pathetically predictable. All this is compounded by the unspoken assumption of an unwritten contract with the Literary Editor that at least 50 per cent of the column should be inspired by topical local literary issues. And the ones inspired by non-local issues or themes should ideally have some connection, however subtle, with our own world.

The connection may be spelt out or simply left implied.

These factors had made writing as I damn please taxing enough. And my folly in recklessly hinting (quite loudly) that my As I Please (AIP) column would be patriotically provocative made the weekly fun a wearisome task. But what has made AIP really exciting is my initial cocksureness that I could sustain a measure of provocativeness from week to week. It seems that this modest column has over the months built up a certain expectation in the minds of my readers. In itself, this is fine and should spur me to take greater risks by being even more recklessly provocative. (Testing the parameter-perimeter, remember?) But after a few months, this expectation began to feel like a pressure – that of finding topics or issues I can be provocative about. That's why I suddenly decided to go on a holiday and quietly take stock of things. Locks, bolts, stocks, blocks – and barrels, of course.

Now that I'm back in business, I'm haunted by another ghost. That of boredom. Conscious of this ghost, I must constantly remind myself not to sully this column and the memory of George Orwell from whom I had appropriated the title of As I Please. I must remember to take a break from this as-I-please business whenever I suspect that the sound of my voice is pontificating and beginning to bore my readers. *Insyah Allah*. May God the All-Knowing allow me to have the grace to be silent when I have nothing worthwhile to say or when I have mellowed into a pompous bore. I hope you, dear reader, will understand and bear with me, with all my little idiosyncrasies and by-no-means forgivable flaws. Allah bless you all.

## Thinking As I Please about Old George

[30th June 1993]

June 25th was the 90th anniversary of the birth of George Orwell, the author of two of the best known modern political satires, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*. Orwell died of tuberculosis in 1950 at the age of only 47. By a sort of coincidence involving round figures, December 3 this year will see the 50th anniversary of a famous newspaper column Orwell wrote for the leftwing English daily *Tribune*, of which he was the Literary Editor. The name of Orwell's column? As I Please.

I chose the title of Orwell's column for mine because I liked the sound of it and its Orwellian associations: grit, forthrightness, healthy sanity (or common sense, if you like), colloquial vigour, and simple language (simple when the subject is relatively or essentially simple, I mean). The very sound of the phrase threw a certain challenge to me that I couldn't resist. It was the first and only title that immediately came to my mind when I was invited to be a literary columnist for the *New Straits Times*. I'd also secretly hoped that the half-easy-going-half-aggressive, self-confident sound of the phrase "as I please" would prove talismanic for me, and that the ghost of Orwell would turn out to be my guardian spirit of sorts. You might find this hard to believe, but I did feel the need for a guardian spirit when I, in my fool-hardiness, launched into the

uncertain career of a big-mouthed columnist stubbornly committed to calling a *cangkul* a *cangkul* in a country where too many people prefer to call it a spade – sometimes not even that. The nervousness with which I faced my future as a columnist should prove that there was no hubris in my appropriating something associated with a major writer like George Orwell. In other words, I wasn't hoping for some gushy fan to compare me to Master George. In terms of the ideals that motivate the writing, perhaps, yes; but certainly not in talent or sturdiness of integrity. I'm not just being coy here. Well... a little, perhaps.

Orwell's weekly column wasn't literary, though the author did occasionally write on literary matters. The column first appeared in February 1945 and was sustained with almost unflinching regularity for 15 months. (The commitment to the puritan work ethic was one of Orwell's shining virtues.) After a break of almost two years, he resumed the column for another five months. I don't know why the break was so long, but whatever the reason, it certainly couldn't have been anything like mine. Orwell was too much the committed intellectual and politics was such a consuming preoccupation with him. The man himself was so sane, so English (in the best sense of the word, I should quickly add), that I don't think he would go in for silly things like *khalwats* that I tend to do – *kafir-ish khalwats* or not *kafir* wouldn't have mattered to him because he was a solid atheist until the day he died.

(Religious break:

'Ateis? Then ...'

You mean that business of "guardian spirit"?

'Of course!'

Can't have a *kafir* as a guardian spirit *kah*?

'Definitely not! He's not only a *kafir*; he's worse, an *ateis*...'



Oh... But he was a good man, and a good writer. Deeply committed to truth and justice, honest and forthright. He warned us (everyone, not just the English) against ideological terrorism, bureaucratic despotism and institutionalised lies and mediocrity, urged us to be alert to the pervasive corruption of language that reflects intellectual, moral and spiritual corruption. And he cared deeply for mankind, so deep that mankind's perversity and stupidity drove him to the edge of pessimism. Read *Nineteen Eighty-Four*...

'1984? What 1984?')

Sorry for that pious commercial. Now, back to where I was. The whole series of Orwell's AIPs is collected in the third and fourth volumes of his *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters* (Penguin). When I chose the Orwellian title for my own column, I wasn't conscious of any other reasons, apart from what I've told you – reasons that could have given my column a dimension of meaning totally un-Orwellian. Such as the idea of it being written 'as and when I please' (as my suffering but patient Editor put it).

It's more than two years now since my AIP started. (That long! Amazing!) It's the same age as the Literary Page itself, minus the annual *khalwats* that I have been compelled to take. Actually, after this year's unusually lengthy *khalwat*, I'd wanted to stop the column completely. It's not fair on you, dear readers, for me to be so 'unreliable'. There are also other reasons why I thought I should stop. My so-called annual *khalwats* are not entirely motivated by my (deeply personal) need for them in order for the column to maintain a certain minimum of freshness. Writing week in week out for months and even years without extended breaks is simply intolerable to me. Other columnists can; I can't – if for no other reason than the

fear of getting bored, and boring my readers as a result.

What I half-facetiously call *khalwats* are real *khalwats*, in the proper and sacred meaning of that much abused, much blasphemed word – *khalwat* or retreat for spiritual and intellectual renewal, without which I cannot properly function. In my case, these *khalwats* are further made necessary by a certain... let's call it 'congenital disability' that I am prone to every year, which makes me unable to write even crap. I won't bore you with my personal problems; so I'll leave it at that, hoping that you will know what I mean. I thought I should mention it, for I owe you some sort of explanation for my truancies or irregularity of conduct as a columnist.

If my column has lived up to its name (in the non-Orwellian sense), it's by default, not design. And since my suffering readers have, apparently, learnt to live with it, i.e. with my enforced unpredictability, I've decided to change my mind about killing the column. The idea has turned out to be not quite what pleases me and some of my friends. But I should say that the decision to go on is based on an understanding with my editor that from now on, AIP will appear irregularly. That means there might be two or three consecutively in any one month, or just one for an entire month, or perhaps (I pray not), even two months. I'll write when I think I really have something to say that needs saying, or needs to be said plainly and forthrightly. The only thing regular I can promise my readers is that there will be no mealy-mouthed kind of writing in AIP. In other words, AIP will continue, with the blessing of the editor and the management, to test the parameter. And it will continue to endeavour to take up the challenge embodied in the writing of George Orwell, my inspirer and guardian spirit (sorry, *ustaz!*), and to be true to the ideals of freedom and critical integrity he

represents. (O, what hubris! And, just now, he said not hubris!)

Orwell was no 'genius' (whatever that means) – but as distinguished American critic Lionel Trilling interestingly put it, the very fact that Orwell wasn't a genius, certainly not the haunted self-obsessed type, was part of his peculiar strength; a strength that enabled him (to paraphrase Trilling from memory) to confront the world and its institutionalised evil and hyper abstract ideology with little more than his simple, direct, earth-bound, alert intelligence. Orwell was more a writer whose intelligence was exceptionally alert rather than an intellectual – intellectual in the ideologically trendy lefty sense. The latter may be intellectual, but are not always intelligent.

I will now give you a quick sampling of choice bits from Orwell's *Tribune* column. From his AIP of January 21, 1944, he referred to correspondents who "reproach me with being 'negative' and 'always attacking things'." That sounds quite familiar, doesn't it? This is how Orwell justified the alleged negative attitude and tone: "The fact is that we live in a time when causes for rejoicing are not numerous." His AIP of the following week defended an Indian journalist living in England for refusing military service. There was a column that referred to his resignation from the Indian Imperial Police in Burma. The reason given is "to escape not merely from imperialism but from every form of man's domination over man."

From his AIP of Jan 7, 1941, we get this: "Looking through the photographs in the New Year's Honours List I am struck (as usual) by the quite exceptional ugliness and vulgarity of the faces displayed there. It seems to be almost the rule that the kind of person who earns the right to call himself Lord Percy de Falcontowers should look at best like an overfed publican and at worst like a tax collector with a duodenal ulcer." And here's a random

example of his sharp wit when exposing the corruption of language. It comes from the little satire on Stalinism, *Animal Farm*: "All animals are equal but some are more equal than others. Pigs, for example."

I once had a dream in which I was transported to Malaysia in the year 2020. While rushing to squeeze myself into an ultra-modern underground train, I caught a glimpse of an ad: "All models of Proton Saga are equal but some are more equal than others. Like Proton Tuah."

## When Writing is Big Business

[31st July 1991]

Recently, there was a story published in the newspaper about the near-impossibility of writing for a living in this country. The writers interviewed had explained why, and I don't want to go into it again. But the article set me thinking about the general question of Mammon and the Muse – money and creativity.

We can start with Dr Johnson's notorious remark on the subject: "No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money". Boswell, Johnson's biographer, took exception to "that strange opinion" and attributed it to Johnson's "indolent disposition". Dr Johnson was a highly opinionated man and fond of making sweeping generalisations like the one above. He was also, as Boswell said, a rather indolent man, and, on top of that, he was subject to paralysing fits of depression. All that should explain the absolute tone of the remark. But in essence, the remark is not really strange: it has a degree of truth. Serious writing can be an agonising business to many writers. To be engaged on a book can be, in George Orwell's words, like "a long bout of some painful illness". To a writer of this kind, financial consideration can be a vital incentive, especially when he has committed himself to writing as a fulltime occupation. It's a matter of survival, and for some writers, the need to survive can bring out the best in them.

In our country, the idea of serious writing for a decent living is still a dream or a joke. The related question of money as a source of possible moral and aesthetic corruption is even more remote. It will be a long time, if ever, before Mammon can possess the Muse of our serious writers in a big way. The market for books in Bahasa Malaysia is too small – and likely to remain small – for it to happen. In the West, this question has been a concern of serious writers for a long time. With the radical change in the concept and business of publishing in the early Eighties, the problem has acquired a new, even more disturbing dimension. Buyouts and mergers of publishing houses and the consequent drastic decline in the number of small independent companies had brought about the rule of the book world by accountants and 'market people'. Paperback re-sales, movie deals, chain bookstores and the 'projections' of endless growth through them had put new temptations before the author. The hunting of new talents has acquired a new frenzy, and the high-pressure negotiations and deals with big names have turned writing and publishing into a super business.

The amount of money involved in some cases is quite unbelievable. The case of Salman Rushdie is indicative of the new trend. Rushdie's agent, somebody called Andrew Wyle, is apparently one of the sleekest hounds in the high-pressure world of modern publishing. Wyle negotiated an US\$850,000 (about RM2.29m) advance from Viking Penguin for *The Satanic Verses*, threatening to take his prize winning author elsewhere if the publisher proved difficult. The huge advance helped transform Rushdie into a commercial superstar of the writing world, and his novel into hot news rather than serious literature, with the disastrous consequences we all know. The disaster didn't seem to matter very much to agent Wyle. The only thing that mattered to him was the all-important paperback

edition of the bombshell which he insisted the publisher bring out according to the contract. The near certainty that a paperback edition of the novel would only inflame the situation further was brushed aside. Rushdie's status as a commercial superstar (which could only be ensured by a paperback reprint) had to be protected at all costs, especially with a new three-book proposal Wyle and Rushdie had come up with. That three-book proposal was reported to have a US\$14 million (about RM37m) price tag to it! It is revealing of the current situation of publishing that in the internal code of Viking Penguin, agents are referred to as 'Vulture' and 'Buzzard', and *The Satan Verses* as 'pigeon'.

The temptation of big money is too irresistible even for serious writers who claim that artistic integrity is a primary concern. Novelist Philip Roth abandoned his long-time publisher Farrar, Straus and Giroux (a distinguished publisher of quality literature) for a US\$1.8 million (about RM4.8m) three-book contract with a less reputable publisher whose marketing chief actually boasted that "there is no level below which we will not go" in promoting a book. And when the first of the three novels Roth had contracted to write was eventually published, it was promoted in the crudest way possible, violating the spirit of the book. The company's head of consumer publishing division frankly told newsmen: "We wanted to give the book one commercial appeal. We wanted to get across the sexiness of the book and link it to *Portnoy's Complaint*" (Roth's earlier bestseller)."

The pursuit of big money has begun to affect the integrity of one important section of publishing – the editorial department. A recent issue of the American weekly *The New Republic* had a sensational article called 'Roth's Trade: The Sad Decline of American Publishing' exposing the decline in standards of editing in some reputable

publishing houses. At one time, editors played an important role in the shaping of new literary talents. One thinks of people like Maxwell Perkins and what he did for novelists like F. Scott Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe. Editors really edited then, engaging their authors in detailed dialogue and correspondences, helping to bring out the best the writers were capable of with any particular book. These days, according to *The New Republic* article, most editors don't edit very much if they can help it. Top editors in the big publishing houses prefer to spend their time prospecting for new bestsellers, having lunch at expensive restaurants with agents and authors, and coming up with million-dollar three-book proposals, bidding in auctions, and dealing with the powerful marketing and promotions departments. Jason Epstein, the distinguished top editor at Random House, was singled out for having "far too much on his plate to spend time editing any work". Another top editor with another well-known publishing house was accused of farming out "most of the nitty-gritty work to three minions", and of having no compunction in allowing many books which she had not personally edited to bear her *imprimatur*.

Lack of proper editing also means books are allowed to get far too long. Says *The New Republic* article: "Editors have largely abandoned the task of finding the slim book in the unwieldy manuscript, of discovering the sculpture in the raw stone". This is further encouraged by the belief of the Book-of-the-Month Club and chains like B. Dalton that "serious books should be weighty". Among recent examples of such unreadable tomes which could have benefited from drastic intelligent editing are Frederick R. Karl's *William Faulkner: American Writer* (1,200 pages) and a book on the painter Jackson Pollock (934 pages).

It's a good thing in a way that writing and publishing are unlikely to ever become big business in this country.



Our writers and publishers will never face the temptation of Mammon – at least not in a big way. Our concern is very basic: how to make it possible for serious writing to be viable as a full-time occupation. If we can achieve that in our development as a literate book-reading society, we would have achieved something.

## Literary Tuahs and Jebats

[23rd October 1991]

Are there still people who believe in the myth that *orang seni* (literally, artistic folks) are above the vulgar concerns of money and status? I suspect there are. The plain truth, of course, is that artists in relation to money and status are just like most of us. *Orang seni* can be as greedy and status-conscious as *orang biasa* (ordinary folks). In their works, they can be preoccupied with beauty and spirituality, with integrity and moral seriousness detached from vulgar human pursuits. But money is money, status and fame are too often irresistible, all potentially corrupting to writers as they are to ordinary folks. Some writers are aware that they are not saints and don't mind admitting it in public if challenged. Too many, however, prefer to be hypocrites.

There is another kind of writer. This one prefers to make a big thing out of frankness to defy the traditional cliché of the writer by smugly admitting that status, fame, power and money are legitimate pursuits which don't necessarily compromise his art or integrity.

About 15 years ago, the American literary critic and social commentator Norman Podhoretz published a book of confessions called *Making It*. The book's frankness scandalised the romantic idealists and equally romantic hypocrites among pursuers of the American Dream. Gleefully and rather smugly, Podhoretz confessed that as a writer, he had found that material success, power, status

and fame were not only things he didn't feel guilty about but were actually good for his soul as well as his writing.

The number of major artists in the history of world literature who were so preoccupied with their vocation and vision as to have no thoughts of money, awards, status or fame can be counted with the fingers of one hand. (All right, let's make it two hands.) I'm not thinking of those unrecognised potential geniuses – those gems 'purest ray serene' in 'the dark unfathomed caves' of the ocean; those flowers 'born to blush unseen', wasting their sweetness in some squatter slum in Sentul. I mean the published ones, fully embarked on a promising career and blessed with a respectable readership and an adequate bank balance. How many can you name who are really indifferent to the temptations of more money, awards, status and fame? Remember, one of the world's greatest writers, Shakespeare, wasn't one of the spiritual elite. (Sorry, folks, of the Bard, who believe otherwise. I'm afraid Old Will could be as anxious about money, status and things like a coat of arms as the next man.)

Who is the artistic-spiritual elite then? I really have to think hard about this. Kafka and Samuel Beckett perhaps. Emily Dickinson? Emily Bronte? Both the Emilys were enforced recluses who never had to face the temptations of success. Anybody else? I'm beginning to think I was optimistic about the number. Perhaps it's less than the fingers of two hands. I, personally, am far from being an idealist in this matter. I don't think there's anything wrong in writers worrying about having a decent life with decent comforts, enough income for some necessary indulgences, enough savings for their children's education, a bottle of wine once every few days, a good woman (or man) in bed every second day perhaps (you can't expect writers to sublimate their sexual urges all the f— time, can you?). The last two needs are strictly not for the Muslims, of course.

No, there's nothing demeaning or shameful about writers and artists in general being anxious about material comforts or profane pleasures, or worried about the lack of recognition of their talents in the forms of sales or awards. It's when these concerns become so consuming that they affect artistic and moral integrity that they become a possible ethical-aesthetic issue.

Money, money, money. Fame, fame, fame. The bitch goddesses of money and fame can be quite demanding. What about the goddess of envy and bitchiness? As with money and fame, the goddess of bitchiness can be quite insidious in the way she operates and manifests her power. Show me a major artist you know who is above bitchiness. How many can you recall? Not many, I'm sure. Artists can bitch as much as the next bitch, can gossip nasty 'gossips' about their fellow artists. Especially when the latter are in the running for fame and big money and are, therefore, seen as threats to their own chances.

Literary prizes and awards – like the Nobel, the Booker, the Pulitzer, the Bollingen, the Prix Goncourt and so on – can mean an awful lot of money and fame. In the pursuit of money and fame, our *sasterawans* and *senimans* are no exception to the universal rule. The pursuit can make them terribly ordinary, pathetically envious and, therefore, as bitchy as the Bitch Goddess herself.

What about those entrusted with the task of choosing the lucky winners of competitions or even luckier recipients of major awards? Of course, no choice of winners or awards recipients can satisfy everybody. The Nobel Prize, for example, has always generated controversies and strong protests. Imagine giving the Nobel Prize for literature to Winston Churchill! And imagine not giving it to one of the world's acknowledged masters of novel, Tolstoy. The supposed criteria or guidelines for many prizes and awards are sometimes mere formality. Considerations other than

literary quite often interfere with the judging. It is a rare committee which can resist political or social pressure. The 1949 Bollingen Prize Committee, which stuck to its guns in awarding the prize to the controversial poet Ezra Pound despite powerful political pressures and protest, was such a committee.

Even rarer is the writer whose moral or ideological conscience prompts him to reject a prize or award. The leftist French philosopher-novelist Jean-Paul Sartre was such a writer. In 1946, he made small history by rejecting the Nobel Prize. He refused it because, in his view, acceptance might be misconstrued as approval of the capitalist and bourgeois society; this was at the time of the Vietnam War. Those who didn't like Sartre and what he stood for, bitched about his unprecedented refusal, claiming that the real reason was his long-standing grudge against the Nobel Prize Committee for preferring his former mentor, turned literary enemy, Albert Camus, a few years earlier.

One of the best things ever said about the Nobel Prize for literature, and by implication other such prizes, is by the Swedish biographer of the noted Swedish playwright August Strindberg (1849-1912). "The Nobel prize for literature," he said, "is an annual joke. It tends to go to the literary 'lions' as opposed to the dirty 'apes'." Example of a dirty ape? Who else but Strindberg himself! Why dirty ape? Well, that's a long story. American Nobel laureate, novelist Saul Bellow, once described the Pulitzer Prize as good enough only "for the pullets". Did he miss the Pulitzer, Pulitzer, him?

What about our own *Anugerah Sastera Negara* (ASN)? The award means RM30,000 in cash, 30,000 print run of the winner's collected works, first-class medical treatment... anything else? Yes, the chance of being turned into an instant monument, which can mean the slow enfeeblement of whatever creative vitality is left at

time of receiving the award. If there was any vitality in the first place.

The ASN, I think, is for the... certainly not for the lusty Jebats of Malay/Malaysian literature, those wild beasts like Chairil Anwar, if such creatures exist. No chance for a Jebat, however superbly magical his *seni*, however sharply uncompromising his stance, however invigorating his poetic *silat* to both mind and soul. The Hang Tuahs – they are the ones more likely to win hands down.

## Much Ado about Drama

[29th December 1993]

From reading my writings, you wouldn't think that the title *sasterawan* is very precious and much sought-after by scribblers of one kind or another. You wouldn't think so because you don't know that only as *sasterawans*, and not scribblers be considered for awards such as the *Anugerah Sastera Negara*. You also wouldn't think that a distinguished writer and *Sasterawan Negara* could feel so jealous and protective about a mere word that he would think nothing of wasting precious time by writing magazine articles in defence of that word's exclusiveness.

Even more, you wouldn't think that a notable playwright could reject a 'special award' carrying a large sum of money simply because he has doubts about its rationale. Or because he thinks that the 'speciality' of the award is a product of a compromise that denigrates the status of his art as compared with fiction or poetry. The award may be a recognition of his contributions to drama and theatre, but not to *sastera*. He therefore feels that his acceptance of the dubious award would only serve to confirm the prejudice against the very art he practises.

The *Sasterawan Negara* with the funny idea about the exclusory nature of the word *sastera* is our leading novelist and former member of the *Anugerah Sastera* panel, Shahnon Ahmad. And the playwright who didn't think much of the 'special award' is, of course, Noordin Hassan.

Shahnon Ahmad resigned from the panel early this year. It was rumoured at the time that the resignation was connected with his attitude to drama, specifically the decision of the majority of the panel to disagree with him and award the *Anugerah Sastera* to a playwright (Noordin Hassan). Some *sasterawans* seem to believe that Shahnon's opposition to playwrights being considered for the *Anugerah Sastera* was due to his low opinion of drama as an art form. If we go by Shahnon's actual published statements, there is absolutely no basis for this belief. The man may not think that playwrights are really *sasterawans* and therefore eligible for the *Anugerah Sastera*. But he certainly doesn't dismiss drama as a second-rate art form.

In the March 1993 issue of *Mastika*, Shahnon has an article called '*Wajarkah Dramatis Bergelar Sasterawan?*' (Should dramatists be called *sasterawans*?), in which he questions the propriety of calling dramatists *sasterawans*. The word *sasterawan* has no English equivalent. *Sasterawan* in its original Sanskrit means 'an expert in Hindu sacred books'; *sastera*, or, in its fuller form, *kesusasteraan*, means 'Hindu sacred texts'. The closest English equivalent of *sastera/sasterawan* is writing/writer. Shahnon regards drama as a sort of 'hybrid', lacking in semantic purity (*kesahihan makna*) and 'formal wholeness or integrity' (*maruah*) that characterise the novel or poetry. He thinks that the success of a play in the fullest sense of the word (*dalam ertikata yang sebenar-benarnya*) doesn't depend wholly on the playwright, while the success of a novel depends wholly on the novelist, or that of a poem on the poet. A play can only be properly judged in the form of a stage production. Reading the text alone is not enough, as it is with a novel or a poem.

Shahnon doesn't seem to be aware that the Nobel Prize for literature proves otherwise. In the 92 years of its existence, one is struck by the number of dramatists who



have won it – from G.B. Shaw to Wole Soyinka, Luigi Pirandello to Samuel Beckett.

Shahnon asserts that in the interest of safeguarding the *kesahihan* and *maruah* of the concept of drama, no award whatsoever should be given to playwrights. Awards such as *Hadih Sastera Malaysia*, *Anugerah Sastera Malaysia* and others of similar nature which carry the word *sastera* should be closed to playwrights. This doesn't mean that Shahnon is against giving prizes and awards to playwrights. On the contrary, he suggests that we should have awards such as *Hadih Drama Malaysia* or even *Anugerah Drama Negara* which are wholly meant for drama and dramatists. He even says that such awards should have the same status as *Hadih Drama Malaysia* or *Anugerah Sastera Negara*. In other words, they should not be seen as being inferior to the latter.

Shahnon's decision to publish his views on the matter in a magazine, instead of allowing them to circulate around and be distorted in the form of gossip among *sasterawan*, is highly commendable. Given the strength of his views on the matter, he must have felt uncomfortable being on the *Anugerah* panel especially when a playwright was being considered for an award.

We don't know why Shahnon resigned from the *Anugerah* panel. If there was any truth in the rumour that it had to do with his stubborn refusal to grant drama the status of *sastera*, we should commend him for doing what in the circumstance was the only right thing for him to do. To stay on the panel would have meant either clashing with the majority of the other members or keeping silent about what he felt strongly about. It would have been hypocritical of him to pretend that he had no objection to say, playwright Noordin Hassan being given the *Anugerah*.

That Shahnon feels strongly about the business of whether drama is literature or not, is suggested by the

strength of the language he uses in the *Mastika* article. He claims that drama "*sebenarnya hanya satu kaki saja berada dalam gelanggang seni sastra*" (drama is only partially literature), and that "*sebuah skrip umumnya dan biasanya hanya sebuah kerangka dalam makna drama yang sebenar*" (normally a playscript is only a skeleton without the flesh of its full meaning). Because of this, any critical assessment of a playscript "*merupakan satu pencabulan terhadap makna drama itu sendiri*" and also "*satu penghinaan ke atas makna drama yang sebenar*". *Pencabulan* and *kehinaan* are strong words, the kind one would expect a champion of drama, not its denigrator, to use. I wonder what made Shanon talk of *pencabulan* and *kehinaan*. Is he like those *sasterawanish* *sasterawans* who are oversensitive to *kehinaan*, and feel *hina* (insult) even for a form of writing which he himself doesn't practise?

Many of the things Shanon says in his *Mastika* article are quite trite, but expressed in a manner and tone that suggest that they are rare insights. He thinks it necessary to remind us that, unlike a novel or a poem, a play is a collaborative art whose full meaning is only realised on stage. The production of a play involves many artists: director, actors, set designers, lighting men, and other members of the production crew. Because of this, Shanon asserts with surprising obviousness that the success of a play is not the result of one person's effort, unlike the success of a novel or a poem.

It seems to me that our *Sasterawan Negara* labours the obvious in the interest of triviality. What triviality? Well, isn't it rather trivial to be overly concerned about the propriety of categories? About whether a play properly belongs to the category of literature or theatre? Surely the important thing is not that a particular play is awarded a *bahagia sastra* (literary prize), or that a particular playwright is put on a pedestal as a *Sasterawan Negara*.

What is important is the worth of the play: Is it something that we could be proud of? Is its recognition by the literary political establishment something to be lamented or applauded?

As to the playwright himself, the pertinent questions that a *Sasterawan Negara* like Shahnnon Ahmad should ask are: Is he or she worthy of being a *Sasterawan* or *Sasterawati Negara*? Can we expect him/her as a *Sasterawan/Sasterawati Negara* to champion the ideal of artistic integrity, and speak up for writers who suffer from any form of injustice for speaking their mind? Plays or dramas are literary compositions and their importance or lack of importance is not a matter of categories, proper or improper. To protect the *kesahihan* of their *makna* (meaning) or the *maruah* of their *seni* (art), it is not sufficient, as Shahnnon thinks, just to ensure that a *hadiah* or *anugerah* is given only to 'real' *sasterawans* and not to *dramatis* or other 'hybrid' artists. I am afraid our revered *Sasterawan Negara* needs to be reminded that things are not that simple.

## Sting Them, My Anopheles, Sting Them!

[4th December 1991]

I was asked a simple question the other day: how do you tell the genuine from the fake in literature? It's a simple question, yes; but don't think it's always easy to answer. It depends on the particular work under consideration, of course. It's relatively easy when you are dealing with a work which purports to observe generally accepted notions of literary meaning and form. It can be quite difficult when the work in question purports to be radically new in its form and use of language; when it claims to be 'experimental' and demands to be read on its own terms.

If you happen to be a dyed-in-the-wool literary conservative, there is no problem; you'd simply dismiss without a thought any departure from the conventionally meaningful or acceptable. But it can become a problem when you are the sort whose mind is open to new ideas and forms and when you find yourself dealing with a difficult case. The work before you cannot easily be dismissed as a piece of arrant nonsense or a pretentious turd. It has, let us say, enough flashes of stylistic brilliance to grab you, yet on the whole, it seems to hover precariously between meaning and meaninglessness, even by your generous concept of literary sense; or you might feel that the borderline between the genuinely new and the phoney is teasingly thin.

One can say that in such cases, only time can tell. But if you are a critic-reviewer entrusted with the awesome task of pronouncing judgments on new, including avant-garde, works as they appear, or an editor of a literary journal committed to the promotion of the new, you cannot afford to leave it to time; you have to take the risk and make your stand clear. You might think it would be relatively easy if the critic or editor had to deal with works which are not of their own actually pioneering a new language or form, but are part of a new universal wave which advanced minds are raving about. The works could, say, be part of a local attempt to introduce literary innovations or a revolution taking place in another country. In such cases, you might say, the critic or editor is at least not totally in unfamiliar waters; some kind of comparison can be made by him, and there may even be the beginnings of a critical language to help him deal with the new works in question. But even in such a situation, the task of telling the authentically new from fashionable nonsense can be tricky. Even more difficult, perhaps, is to tell if a work that appears to be excitingly avant-garde, challenging you with its flashes of verbal or imagistic brilliance, isn't in reality a clever hoax to test your literary judgment.

In our country, there was a group of poets in the late Fifties known as *Kumpulan Penyair-penyair Kabur* (School of Obscure Poets), the leading lights (lights?) of which were Noor S.I., A.S. Amin and M. Ghazali. These poets attempted to 'Malayanise' the cult of obscurity and irrationality associated with certain strands in Western modernist poetry. There was a heated debate then about the worth or meaningfulness of such poetry. Literary magazines which published the *kabur* stuff were accused by some of mindlessly aping fashionable nonsense from the West. But no one dreamt of suggesting that any of the 'obscure' *penyairs* was the creation of a hoaxer. No, they were serious poets after

a fashion. The idea of playing a literary hoax seems quite unthinkable to our *senimans* and *sasterawans*. Literature is a serious business; you don't indulge in practical jokes and hoaxes even for a worthy purpose.

In the West, there is almost a tradition of literary **hoaxing**. One of the most interesting and quite instructive hoaxes I know of took place in Australia in 1944. This was the notorious 'Ern Malley' hoax perpetrated by two brilliant conservative Australian poets at the expense of the avant-garde movement of the day. The hoax was reportedly featured in many newspapers of the world and *Time* magazine ran a story about it. It was the first, and probably the only time that an 'Australian poet' was given the honour of being treated as hot news by the world media. The perpetrators of the hoax, James McAuley and Harold Stewart, claimed that they were motivated by a disgust with the decay of meaning and craftsmanship in poetry under the influence of certain European and American literary movements, which made a cult of the irrational. The hoax was meant to be more than just a practical joke to ridicule a particular literary fashion or group; it was, they claimed, a serious literary experiment to test the rationale of an aestheticism that claimed to be meaningfully experimental. In the worlds of McAuley, "What we wished to find out was: Can those who write and those who praise this kind of writing tell the real product from consciously and deliberately concocted nonsense?"

What McAuley and Stewart did was to invent an avant-garde Australian poet by the name of Ern Malley who lived a life of obscurity and died leaving his masterpiece unpublished. The whole of Ern Malley's 'tragic life-work', a collection of 'poems' of various lengths, was concocted in one afternoon, with the help of a chance collection of books and magazines that happened to be around, including

(appropriately enough) an American report on the drainage of mosquito breeding grounds. McAuley was the one holding the pen most of the time; he would initiate a train of imagery and Stewart would cut in with some totally unconnected line either off the cuff or lifted at random from one of the stray publications. Judging from the hoaxers' later account of that historic afternoon, the two must have had great fun inventing the first Aussie avant-garde poetic masterpiece. They gave it a suitably portentous title 'The Darkening Ecliptic' and provided it with a pretentious 'Preface and Statement' which purported to explain the aesthetic theory on which the work was based. The hoaxers then dispatched the instant masterpiece to the leading Australian avant-garde magazine of the day, the Adelaide-based *Angry Penguins* (yes, that's the name; I'm not kidding) with a covering letter supposedly written by the dead poet's sister to make the whole thing more convincing.

The editors of the magazine (which included the world-renowned modernist painter Sidney Nolan) published the stuff without the slightest suspicion; if there had been any a simple investigation would have exposed the hoax. The fact that the editors, intelligent literary minds they undoubtedly were, had been hoaxed was not the most amazing thing about the affair. In fact, you might not even think it was terribly amazing, given the fact that the hoaxers had done quite a clever job of it and, that with the kind of poetry they were sending up, it was not always easy for those who admire it to tell the authentic from the faked.

What you might find truly amazing is that some brilliant minds of the time claimed that the Ern Malley stuff was 'poetically authentic' even after it had been exposed as a hoax. One leading English poet and critic, Herbert Read, in a statement defending the editors of *Angry Penguins*, actually claimed that the hoaxers were victims of their own jokes. He meant that the hoaxers, able poets that they were thought

of a different breed, had, in the process of faking the kind of poetry they disliked, released unsuspected poetic energies from their unconscious. In other words, McAuley and Stewart had faked an authentic work of poetry! It's an interesting claim, that one. But seriously, it's not completely nonsensical, if you believe that the springs of poetic creativity lie deep in the unconscious.

But there is a difference between writing a poem at the dictates of the unconscious, like Coleridge with his famous opium-induced 'Kubla Khan', and consciously faking a work in the way McAuley and Stewart did it. The two naughty poets were not even drunk when they created Ern Malley; if they were, Read's point might have had some validity. Harold Stewart made an interesting point about the whole affair: "One of the things it showed was that not only could people not tell the difference between sense and nonsense, but they had lost their sense of humour." If your sense of the absurd is still sharp, wouldn't you laugh off the following sample of Ern's effusions as a joke?:

Swamps, marshes, borrow-pits and other  
Areas of stagnant water serve  
As breeding grounds... Now  
Have I found you, my Anopheles!  
(There is a meaning for the circumspect)  
Come, we will dance sedate quadrilles,  
A pallid polka or a yelping shimmy...  
Look, my Anopheles,  
See how the floor of Heav'n is thick  
Inlaid with patines of etcetera...  
Sting them, sting them, my Anopheles.  
Yes, sting them my Anopheles.

No prizes for correctly guessing from which of the boaxers' sources the opening lines came from.



## Seductiveness of the Satanic

[9th December 1992]

Today I want to talk about the Devil. Or Satan or *Syaitan*. Or demon, Lucifer, Evil Incarnate. Or whatever you like to call him. Or it.

The Devil in the literal, metaphorical or symbolic sense as he appears in literature – that's what I want to talk about. More specifically, I want to talk about the curious fascination that the satanic or the demonic seems to hold for a certain class of writers. Some writers even find it interesting, even compelling, to act the devil's advocate in one form or another.

The literary expression of the 'devil's' point of view can range from the 'literal' to the metaphoric/symbolic, the deliberate to the non-deliberate, the conscious to the unconscious. The whole business is very much bound up with the nature of the literary imagination – or at least one dominant kind of literary imagination, the kind that loves the compellingly ambiguous, the ethically dubious, the dangerously vitalistic, the spiritually (but non-religiously) seductive.

I was led to make this the subject of my writing by a conversation I had in the pub the other night. A chap with the mind of a schoolmaster or a *lebai* expressed his dissatisfaction with much of modern (Western) literature; literature should be moral, he said, and there should not be any ambiguity or ambivalence in the way a literary work articulates its ethical point of view. I asked him if he

had read Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. He said he had and found it a "dangerous" book because the author had failed to make his moral stand on the 'satanic character' Kurtz clear.

Those who have read Conrad's novella will remember that its protagonist, Kurtz, is an ambiguous presence in the consciousness of the narrator Captain Marlowe. Kurtz set out into the Congo as a self-consciously progressive and liberal European, a highly respected representative of an imperial power which claims to have a benign civilising mission in Africa. The man is also an artist: he is a painter, a writer, and a musician. But just as the so-called benign mission of his country is a mask for imperial greed and cruelty, Kurtz's liberal idealism is a veneer that hides the bestial in him. Kurtz's success as an agent of the Belgian exploitation of the Congo is the result of unspeakable crimes, unnamable acts of lust (the 'unutterable' adjectives are Conrad's) by means of which he achieves a satanic ascendancy over the natives of his remote station.

The modernist tone of *Heart of Darkness* is suggested by the ambivalence in Marlowe's attitude to the unspeakable-unnamable-unutterable savagery associated with Kurtz and the primitive natives of the jungle over whom he rules. Marlowe takes great pains to stress the satanic savagery of Kurtz's life in the jungle, and narrates it with trenchant irony. But paradoxically, the stronger his stress on the savagery, the more we feel Marlowe's fascination with it, with its dreadful but compelling attraction. *Heart of Darkness* is a key modernist work partly because it takes a characteristically modernist stance towards what we call civilisation, a stance that questions the worth of that civilisation itself, or the price that has to be paid for it.

Noted American critic Lionel Trilling defines the modern element in modernist literature as "the

disenchantment of civilisation with civilisation itself." It is highly significant that the most famous modernist poem, T.S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland', which can be read as a critique of modern civilisation, was written with *Heart of Darkness* in mind; and that Eliot's other famous, suggestively titled, poem, 'The Hollow Men', actually has an epigraph taken from Conrad's novella. Civilisation, because it is based on a repression or renunciation of instinctual energy and freedom, is seen as an elaborate system of bland lies and unhealthy denials.

Kurtz, the artist, for all the savagery that the jungle has let loose in him, comes across as a sort of 'hero of the spirit'; a satanic hero inspired by the kind of philosophy expressed in William Blake's 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell': "Energy is eternal delight". Hero Kurtz, literally as well as symbolically, translates into practice the 'proverbs of Hell' from the same Blake poem: "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom" with "You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough".

From Conrad to Thomas Mann (d. 1955), the theme of 'Civilisation and its Discontents' (the title of Sigmund Freud's seminal work) constitutes a recurring central motif in modernist literature. In the face of such a powerful and spiritually 'subversive' writing, the schoolmaster-*lebai's* insistence on the socially useful moral purpose of literature ('moral' in the conventional and 'repressive' sense) is... well, it could only be felt by the spirited as spiritually inadequate and simplistic.

The 'satanic' (here used in its non-theological sense) can seduce the imagination of a writer without his being conscious of it, even in spite of his conscious intention when writing. John Milton wrote his epic *Paradise Lost* to "justify the ways of God to man" – but God and the good are rather bland and boring in that poem and Satan is so

much more alive and interesting as a character that it has been rightly said that the poet was of "the Devil's party" without realising it.

The schoolmaster-*lebai* would, of course, say that that's exactly the point – evil is so seductive that one must be doubly and constantly vigilant against its terrible power. The irreligious would say that's a pious cliché, but perhaps it's something we should think about when we read Conrad, Gide, Lawrence, Mann and all the rest of that infidel tribe.

I suppose it has to be admitted that modern Western literature is dangerous stuff. It's not meant for the spiritually weak. 'Spiritually weak' here have two meanings: religious and non-religious or irreligious. For those who are spiritually strong in the religious sense, modernist literature presents no problem. But then they are not the kind who would read it anyway. The rare ones who do, no doubt, read such satanic stuff to test the strength of their faith, much like acting the devil's advocate. The others, those who are spiritually dead in the nonreligious sense, also won't have any problem with modernist literature. They can read Conrad, Lawrence or Mann and, in their way, 'enjoy' the stuff – but the reading won't make any difference to their lives. They are like the majority of those students who study English Literature in the universities. They read those supposedly spiritually 'subversive' books, pass the exams, get a good job in advertising, get married, have children and two cars (at least), and live out their lives as contented suburbanites in Subang Jaya till the day they die, all to the deadening tune of "We are the hollow men/  
We are the stuffed men". They die appealing to those satanic spirits who, like 'Mistah Kurtz', "have crossed/  
With direct eyes, to death's other kingdom" – appealing them to "Remember us – if at all – not as lost/  
Violent souls, but only/  
As the hollow men/  
The stuffed men".

Lionel Trilling rightly describes modernist literature as uniquely and intensely spiritual. "It has," he says, "the special intensity of concern with the spiritual life which Hegel noted when he spoke of the great modern phenomenon of the secularisation of spirituality."

The great question, as I've said, has to do with the nature of civilisation itself. The anti-Western religious fundamentalists would, no doubt, correct me immediately. "No," they would say, "the problem is not civilisation itself, but the infidel Western civilisation." Perhaps. But I feel that those who are not afraid to think (the kind of thinking that involves the imagination), and to follow their thinking where it leads them, will think otherwise - that things are not as simple as claimed by the piously complacent or the complacently pious. Certainly when it involves the literary imagination, nothing is simple or innocent.

## Tricky Art of Being a D.A.

[23rd December 1992]

In 1981, a novella about the most notorious devil of the 20th Century was published and caused quite a scandal among a certain class of readers in the West. Titled *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*, it is by the famous literary critic George Steiner. The A.H. of the title is Adolf Hitler.

Now, Steiner, a polyglot European Jew who is one of the most brilliant critics in English, is well known for his writings on the phenomenon of Nazism and its effect on language and literature, especially German. And his deep, almost obsessive, preoccupation with the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews and what it implied for Western civilisation, has coloured much of his output as a writer.

Before I talk about Steiner's controversial novella, I want to say a few words about the phenomenon of modern European literature that liberal humanists have found very curious and disturbing. The phenomenon is the attraction that some major, even great European writers, intellectuals and philosophers felt for the 'demonic' anti-democratic ideology of fascism – in its Italian, German, or Spanish form. Ezra Pound, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, Luigi Pirandello, Ernst Junger, Martin Heidegger – these are some of the major writers and thinkers who were, in varying degrees and in different ways, attracted to fascism. These writers found fascism attractive for a number of reasons; chiefly because they thought that fascism offered

political solutions to the ills of modern technological civilisation.

Most of these writers were reactionary traditionalists or romantic reactionaries, who hated modern bourgeois society and the liberal capitalist democracy it upholds. Nostalgic for the times when society was 'organically hierarchical, 'spiritually ordered' (whatever that means) everyone in his/her proper place, with poets and writers having a meaningful role to play, they hungered for a modern leader with a vision they could empathise with and a will to realise that vision.

They thought Hitler, Mussolini and Franco were such leaders. They apparently thought (in the case of Yeats, for a spell at least) that those demagogues would free modern European man from the slowly deadening clutches of decadent bourgeois democracy and lead him to the paradise of a truly ordered society. The attraction these writers felt for the charismatic fascist leaders and their blood-drenched rhetoric also reflected their ambiguous relation with conventional morality and their fascination with the amoral values of vitalism; to them, Hitler and Mussolini embodied the forces of life, of the blood, which promised a return to the masculine and aristocratic values of the heroic age. With a number of these writers, the hatred of liberal bourgeois democracy was synonymous with hatred of the Jews who were alleged to have brought the virus of bourgeois materialism into European society.

There is something about the artistic imagination that can lead the writer into morally dubious territories. That Conrad chose to make the demonic protagonist of *Heart of Darkness* an artist is surely significant. Remember, even Hitler was in his small neurotic way an artist, a fact acknowledged by the German novelist Thomas Mann who once called the Nazi devil "Brother Hitler". Coming from

Mann, who is noted for his special brand of irony, the phrase is probably ironical; still, it is quite revealing.

The case of Thomas Mann himself is very interesting. Early in his career as a writer, he was a vocal supporter of German militaristic nationalism and very suspicious of democracy. The concept of Hitler's Third Reich seemed to appeal to his imagination; he called it a "synthesis of power and spirit." Note the word "spirit"; what was lacking in German leadership of the time, it was implied, was "spirit" (the German word *Geist* is more evocative). When Hitler's National Socialist (Nazi) party got into power, Mann got more than he wanted of the much-vaunted *Geist* or found that it was not quite what he had dreamt of. Disgusted with Nazism, he left his beloved country to live the life of an exile, first in Switzerland, then in America.

In exile, Mann wrote what I think is probably his most powerful and difficult novel, *Doctor Faustus* (1947). Very briefly, the novel, a reworking of the famous Faust legend in modern terms, is about a composer, Adrian Leverkühn (the name means 'to live audaciously'), who 'sold his soul' to the Devil in return for 24 years of musical genius. The tragic story of Leverkühn is told against the background of the history of modern Germany up to the Second World War and the defeat of the country by the Allied Powers. No, 'background' is not quite the right word, for the story of the composer of genius asks to be read as an allegory of the fate of modern Germany. For Germany under Hitler too could be said to have 'sold her soul to the Devil'. Mann's story of the modern Faust is told by a narrator who represents the world of normality and bourgeois decency, who yet finds the protagonist and his involvement with the demonic compellingly fascinating. His attitude to the latter is, in fact, quite ambivalent; in some ways not unlike Marlowe's towards the satanic Kurtz in *Heart of*



*Darkness*. The ambivalence of the narrator, I think, reflects that of the author.

Mann had always been obsessed with the antinomy of art and (bourgeois) life, spirit and the ethical imperative, or Geist and 'democracy'. And the antinomy is always expressed in a manner and tone which are highly ambivalent. In many of his writings, the practice of art is associated with disease or the demonic, and the artist, as a type, is pictured as a very equivocal figure. In the words of the Devil to Leverkühn: "The artist is the brother of the criminal and the madman".

Now, you would think that such a notion of the artist as a morally equivocal figure would not be corroborated by the work of someone like George Steiner – especially when the subject of the work is a devil called Adolf Hitler. This Jewish writer so haunted by the memory of the Holocaust, you would think, is a most unlikely person to write a book that presents this devil in any other way but totally repugnant, whose racist rhetoric as anything but a satanic concoction of lies and perversions that no sane man would entertain even for a moment.

And yet *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*, which was turned into a stage play by Christopher Hampton (thus making it even more amenable to public controversy), has upset, even angered, many Jews who, until the book, had had nothing but admiration for Steiner. What had gone wrong?

First, a brief account of the novella. The story takes off from the premise that Hitler didn't die in the bunker; he escaped from the fires of Berlin and found refuge in the Amazon jungle. A group of dedicated Jews track him to his lair. They are supposed to bring him back to Israel where he would be tried *a la* Eichmann, but they decide to try him on the edge of the Amazon jungle themselves. Both the novella and the play end with a long speech of

defence by Hitler. It is this speech (in the London production, lasting 20 minutes, according to one report) that has angered a lot of Jews.

It seems that in writing *The Portage*, Steiner was seduced by the idea of acting the devil's advocate – and the idea misfired. Steiner has made evil in the form of the devil called A.H. so seductively eloquent in its co-mingling of truths or half-truths and lies, logic and fallacies, that there must be readers who cannot help but be provoked into considering Hitler's arguments as at least something to be rationally considered. These readers need not be anti-Semitic; to the anti-Semites, the words that Steiner has put into Hitler's mouth would, of course, be more than welcome. True, Hitler's lengthy concluding speech is preceded early in the novella by the long lament on the Holocaust by Lieber, the man in charge of the mission to bring the aged Fuhrer to justice. But Lieber's lament, however moving, is only a remote echo in the mind of the reader or audience at the end of the novella/play because Hitler is given the final say and a devilishly seductive one, too.

I don't think it's fair to say of Steiner that, like Milton, he's of 'the Devil's party' without knowing it. I suspect what made Steiner write *The Portage* the way he did is his profound pessimism about human civilisation. In his obsessive meditations on the Holocaust, he seems to suggest that it wasn't a relapse from civilisation into barbarism, but a disease of civilisation itself. And since the basis of civilisation is language, in language itself is found the possibility of both good and evil. That's why evil could use language the way Steiner has made his A.H. use it, the way the historical Hitler used and corrupted the German language to seduce almost an entire nation into (at least tolerating) a carefully programmed act of unparalleled barbarism.

Steiner's dark view of civilisation and of man's relentless quest for knowledge that is the driving force of that civilisation, could perhaps be seen as another, though uniquely pessimistic, expression of the defining theme of modernist literature that I talked about earlier. Remember it? Remember Trilling's line: the disenchantment of civilisation with civilisation itself? Perhaps the Devil thrives on such disenchantments. Perhaps.

## 'Cincai' and 'Canggih' all the Way

[12th January 1994]

It was a use of words that an alert observer would call ambiguous, if not confusing. A political scientist would probably call it skillfully ambiguous. Thus, the Deputy Prime Minister's statement on the language issue after a meeting with members of the *Kongres Cendekiawan Melayu* (KCM), or Congress of Malay Intellectuals, last Friday. "I have explained (to the KCM delegation)," said Anwar, "that while existing policy with regard to the use of the National Language will be continued, there will also be *greater emphasis* on English." (My italics.)

Some people wouldn't consider "greater emphasis" the same as allowing the use of English as the medium of instruction in the limited area specified. "Emphasis" (in the *Utusan Malaysia*, the words were "*memberi perhatian dan penekanan*") would merely suggest that the generally accepted status of English as an important second language would be given a fuller practical meaning, and that more strenuous efforts be made and more effective methods used to ensure that our students acquire a better command of the language.

I wouldn't have thought that Anwar's words of assurance would satisfy those Malay nationalists who had earlier opposed the limited return of English as announced

by the Prime Minister on Dec 27 and reconfirmed after last Saturday's meeting of the Umno Supreme Council. I don't know whether those words of Anwar as quoted in the *New Straits Times* (Jan 8) reflect what he actually said to the Malay intellectuals at the two-hour closed-door meeting. If so, it's good news that the delegation of anxious intellectuals, including the President of Gapena, were "satisfied with Anwar's assurance that there would not be any change to the Government's Policy." This must mean that they've dropped their earlier opposition to the Government's move. 'Move' is, I think, a more accurate word here than "change of policy", however slight or peripheral that alleged change may be. The decision to allow a return to English for the limited area specified was probably meant to be taken (though Dr Mahathir didn't say so) as a stop-gap measure – that is, English would be used until there are enough lecturers fully qualified to teach science and technology in BM, and enough text and reference books on those technical subjects have been competently translated into BM. I hope the reported acceptance by the KCM of the Government's assurance would be followed by similar acceptance by other groups, academic and intellectual. But it is just a hope, probably without much basis.

The curious case of the KCM aside, I've been led to believe that in my earlier writing on the issue, I'd underestimated the resistance to the Government's move. This was after learning that my passing reference to the group of UKM lecturers who wrote a letter to *New Straits Times* was not quite accurate. One of the signatories to the letter told me I was wrong in saying that those lecturers were "not opposed" to the apparent 'policy shift'. (He did acknowledge, however, that I can't really be blamed for the error; due to editorial cuts, the letter was not crystal clear on the issue and could easily be read the

way I read it.) It seems that there are not a few academics and intellectuals who either remain suspicious of the Government's intention or are simply opposed to the return to English, temporary or otherwise, for the teaching of science and technology.

Take the *Utusan Malaysia* columnist and ISIS Fellow, Rustam A. Sani. This highly vocal scholar feared that what was described by the *New Straits Times* writer who interviewed him as a "peripheral adjustment in the language policy" was perhaps "the beginning of more". And he badly wondered if it didn't signify that "the cultural programme that came with the national language policy has failed", and that "the Malay language cannot cope with progress". (*NST*, Jan 2). In his *Utusan* column of Jan 3, Rustam elaborated on this question of double "failure". It's an interesting piece and quite passionately argued. And I must admit that, though I'd taken this son of a noted nationalist to task in my earlier writings for his unfair attitude to our English-language writers as expressed in the same column, I found his article last week strangely quite moving. Yes, I did say "moving".

You see, I am not 'anti-Malay' as some sasterawans think. (How can I be when I write in both Malay and English?) It's just that I am not ideologically rigid about language and national identity, and very much an incorrigible pluralist in cultural matters. I consider it a privilege, not an ideological shortcoming, for our nation to be bilingual. Other countries not so well-blessed and not sentimental about their native languages must envy us. I don't suppose it's any good to tell Rustam Sani that the Government's "peripheral adjustment" to the language policy is not necessarily "the beginning of something more". But I'd still like to share with him my modest thoughts about some of the reasons for the apparent "failure" of the project of modernising Bahasa Malaysia, of transforming

it into a language fit for a nation striving to be fully developed and industrialised by the year 2020. (I won't say anything about the other "failure", that of the "cultural programme that came with the National Language policy". This is because the "cultural programme" Rustam referred to is not something that I, as a pluralist, would endorse.)

First, let me say it loud and clear that I agree with Rustam that the apparent "failure" of the project of modernising our country through the Malay language is not due to any inherent fault of that language. Yes, *Saudara Rustam*, I agree with you that the failure is "our failure", not that of the language (*kegagalan ini adalah kegagalan kita, bukan kegagalan Bahasa Melayu*). Having agreed with Rustam on this general point, I must now say where and how "we" have failed. Since the "we" here includes bilingualists like me, I'd of course dismiss any contention that one of the reasons for the "failure" is the continued widespread use of English. I believe we can be bilingual and at the same time committed to the modernisation of Bahasa Malaysia.

Now, why has the modernisation of Bahasa Malaysia for the purpose of making it a fit medium of instruction in science and technology failed? For reason of space, I'll only deal with this failure as it is manifested in the vital project of translation and, to a much lesser extent, as it is manifested in the current fate of the Malay language in the hands of Malay academics and writers themselves. I'll say it bluntly: the translation project has largely failed because incompetent people without proper training qualifications and experience, have been chosen to do most of the translations. This is made worse by sheer bureaucratic short-sightedness and incompetence that have made the realisation of the vital project incredibly slow – so slow that three-and-a-half decades after independence our university libraries can only boast a very, very tiny

percentage of text and reference books in Bahasa Malaysia. And of that tiny percentage, not a few are hopeless, either inaccurate or simply unreadable, because they are so badly translated.

The responsibility for this lies mainly with the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, since it is the body entrusted with the translation project. I'd describe the approach to this project – that is, the attitude behind it – as *cincai* (a Malay word of Chinese origin meaning: casual, done in a shoddy manner and readily accepted, however shoddy). This attitude, as we all know, is typically Malaysian, if not Malay. Now, this *cincai* attitude goes very well with another tendency of our academics, intellectuals and *sasterawans*. And that is the tendency to corrupt that very language whose honour they are so noisily concerned with. They are so easily seduced and befuddled by the sound of new words and jargon of English origin or old Malay words refurbished for flashy rhetorical purposes, that they end up by making Malay so ugly or unreadable or both. When these academic corrupters of the Malay language or their pupils do translation, God help us! If the original English is barely readable (as in books or academic articles on the latest in Western literary or sociological theory, or philosophy of science), they make the translation worse than unreadable.

To use a refurbished old Malay word, they are so desperate in wanting to sound *canggih* (sophisticated) that they don't realise that they sound awful and don't make much sense. Ironically enough, the word *canggih*, which is so popular now (Rustam has *moden dan canggih* in that column of his), used to mean the opposite of what it means now. *Kamus Dewan* (1984 edition), terribly out of date obviously, has only one entry. What is it? Believe it or not, that single entry says *canggih* means *terlalu banyak bercakap* (talks too much, or, in one word, bullshit). That's a characteristic of intellectuals and politicians, isn't it?



Someone who knows Javanese told me that in that language, it means or used to mean gaudy (like having too much cheap make-up). In Wilkinson's Malay-English Dictionary (1903), there's no *canggih*; but there's *chenggeh*, which must be a northern dialect variation of *canggih*. The meaning? 'Affected, dandified'. Now, isn't that very interesting?

So, scribblers and bullshitters of Malaysia, unite! In one homogeneous voice, be *canggih* and *cincai* all the way to the year 2020. You have nothing to lose but your brains.

## Dilemma of a Writer

[5th August 1992]

I want to talk about a would-be Malaysian writer (the 'would-be' qualifies both the 'Malaysian' and the 'writer') who feels he is caught on the horns of a dilemma. I know him and his works (the published and the unpublished) well enough to probe into his spiritual, cultural and social condition with some confidence. This man is something of an outsider (an 'in' word that I can't help using in this case). Because the literary outsider is virtually an unknown animal in the community into which he was born, he might be dismissed as a freak without general interest as a social and literary phenomenon. Perhaps, though I personally believe his case is not that freakish. I hope my probing into his condition will illuminate something bigger than the problem of just one mind, one writer.

To get to the *hati* of the matter in this case is not easy. His being an outsider is not the consequence of a simple rejection of some of his society's dominant values. There are other factors that complicate the problem. For a start, the values of his society that he rejects are full of contradictions. And what's worse, the very identity of that society itself is somewhat of a problem.

This society is anything but solid and stable. It lacks basic unity and cohesiveness. The sense of belonging, of being truly bound by a common destiny and of instinctive

loyalty that goes with it, is subject to conflicting pressures: the internal and the external, the conscious and the unconscious, the obvious and the not-so-obvious. If the etymological root of the word 'society' (Latin *socius*, meaning companion) is recalled, then there is more than one society within the larger reality conveniently called the Malaysian society. Our would-be Malaysian writer may not be a terribly representative figure, but the condition he is in and what he has made of that condition is by no means unique to him. And that condition tells us something about the peculiarities of our society and the dilemmas they make a writer of his kind face.

But why the epithet 'would-be'? 'Would-be' writer because he is not much of one if you consider what he has actually published, or managed to get a publisher to publish. At the age of 50, he has had only one modest book of poems published, although that was not entirely his fault. Not many publishers in the country would touch his stuff; certainly not the leading government-based publisher which specialises in bringing out material which satisfies its linguistic condition and conforms to its spoken and unspoken ideology.

He does, however, have a decent mound of manuscripts, in various stages of readiness, or chaos, with varying prospects of finding a publisher willing to take what small risks their publication might entail. Much of this stuff involves the intertwined themes of race and religion, approached from a point of view that would most probably be considered heretical.

He is a 'would-be' Malaysian writer because he is idealistic or naive enough to believe that it's desirable to try to give a real meaning to the word 'Malaysian', to explore, affirm and celebrate the sense of that entity in his writing, despite its identity being problematical. The 'would-be' here is positive, a yearning of the spirit; not a

pretence or an act motivated by expediency – political, professional, monetary or whatnot.

And there is nothing programmatic or ideological about this yearning, this dream. Given the multi-ethnic reality of our society, it is a simple and natural expression of his sense of what life is all about, and of what being human really involves. It is also a yearning for the common truths of life – and for the basic freedom and spirit of tolerance, without which these truths, these realities, cannot flourish.

To this 'would-be' Malaysian writer, the essence of life is variety; openness to every concrete possibility of being, to a plurality of passions and expressions. That means a distrust of ritualistic pieties and atavistic sentiments, both of which demand uniformity that can only result in a closure of the mind and the spirit, or a retreat into the mentality of cave dwellers.

Our writer is a Malay Malaysian. His Malayness is his birthright, his Malaysianness his dream. He sees no reason why being one should exclude the other. To him, it seems not impossible for the larger entity to be affirmed through the smaller; in fact, it is the only way for such affirmation to be meaningful. The general can only be real if it is rooted in the particular, the universal in the local, the abstract in the existential. His fellow *Melayus* (or *Bumiputeras*, a term he is not quite comfortable with), especially the *sasterawans* among them, have questioned the purity of his 'Melayuness'. His Western education – nay, his high regard for certain dubious European writers and thinkers, and his years among the *Mat Salehs* have made him a cultural apostate. And he seems to revel in his apostasy, as the stance he has adopted towards the society of *sasterawans* since his return to this country amply shows. All this has never bothered him, least of all, the doubts about the purity of his 'Melayuness'. He is in fact glad that the Malay mentality and sensibility he has inherited have

been sullied by foreign influence. That's how it should be; in certain things, impurity is better than purity. I can imagine him saying: "I'm sullied; therefore, I am. *Alhamdulillah!*"

Fine. Now, where is the dilemma I talked of at the beginning of this piece? Is it a real dilemma, bearing in mind that the word is often used in this country as a synonym for a simple problem or difficulty? I think our man is in genuine dilemma, meaning that as a writer, he is faced with two alternative courses of action, each of which is likely to produce unsatisfactory results. He is bilingual, comfortable in both Malay and English. One part of him, the part that is in touch with his buried ancestral memory, wants to do his serious writing (poetry, especially) in the language he imbibed with his mother's milk. The other part wants to do it in the *lingua franca* of the world, which also happens to be the *lingua franca* of the middle class in his society. This is not just because English would give him access to a wider audience; it is also because he feels that for certain things (matters unorthodox or allegedly heretical, for example), English is in some ways a better (and safer) medium.

When he returned to his country after a decade Down Under, one of the first things he did was to recover his lost intimacy with his mother tongue. He started writing poetry in Malay and contributing literary articles to the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka's literary magazines. One of the senior editors at DBP was liberal enough to encourage him, and continued for some time to do so despite complaints that both his attitudes and style of writing were not quite Malay, certainly not 'sasterawanish'.

One of the complainers said to the editor, "That guy has no notion of linguistic good manners (*adab and adat*); he writes just like the way he talks!" Our man was glad that his colloquial Malay style was noticed and took the

complaint as a compliment. This was because one of the first things he noticed after a long separation from Malay was how artificial and ugly in syntax and vocabulary his beloved mother tongue had become in the hands of the Malay literary critics, and how big the gap that separated its written from its spoken form.

The ugly Malay of the pompous *kritikus* (literary critics) and academics went along very well with the advance of plain speaking on certain sensitive matters. Here, it is perhaps worth mentioning that one of the very first writings in Malay our man did was a playful satire on *kritikus* at seminars called '*Tabiyat al-Absurdam*'. Needless to say, the thing was never published. It was much too 'vulgar' and showed 'no proper respect' for the solemn verbal masturbation of the *sasterawans*. *Tabiyat* did, however, circulate underground in stenciled form (the author's first *samizdat*, as it were). Those who are interested to read it may go to the Universiti Malaya library. The then librarian had the foresight to see that the thing, despite its playfulness, was a basically serious effort and therefore worth preserving for posterity.

So, our man wrote in Malay, relishing unashamedly the recovered intimacy with its earthiness, its colloquial energy and economy. He continued to do this on and off for some years. He also wrote in English. He stuck to writing in the two languages despite the conviction that the chances of his producing a major work in any of the languages were not very good if he constantly switched from one to the other.

And, by this, delving further into the realm of a 'would-be' Malaysian writer.

## Breaking the Ethnic Code

[26th August 1992]

For a bilingual writer, the question of audience is quite complex. What kind of public (or publics) is he writing for? And does he really reach it (or them)? If he writes in Malay, the overwhelming bulk of his readership is likely to be Malay. This is because not too many non-Malays, I suspect, read books in the National Language unless they are school or university texts. If he writes in English, he'll have a multi-ethnic readership. That's good. But that readership is largely limited to the middle class. That's not so good.

The question of audience here is closely related to that of subject matter and the way it is approached. In this country, as we all know, there are too many subjects which are taboo. If the subjects in themselves are not taboo, then certain approaches to them or manner of treatment, are. This is complicated further by a tacit general assumption that certain things may be said or said in a certain way in English but not in Malay. And if those things said in English involve the sensitive issues of race and religion, and are approached in a way that departs from the accepted assumptions, then the writer can be seen to be betraying some group interests or other, or breaking some unspoken ethnic code of expression.

In this country, it doesn't take much for a writer to be labeled 'renegade', 'heretic' or 'apostate'. We have only to recall the furore over Kassim Ahmad's book on the *Hadith*

and its subsequent banning a few years ago. Or, to cite a literary example, Kassim's own poem '*Sidang Rub*' (Assembly of Souls) which was blatantly exploited against the author by his political enemies during the time of Tun Razak. The poem was pronounced to be the work of an apostate or an atheist simply because of a line, "*Tuhan sudah mati*" (God is dead), that was brutally ripped out of its context and erroneously declared to be expressive of the poet's own views.

On matters involving race and religion – the two being inseparable when we talk about the Malays – it is difficult for a Malay writing in Malay for an essentially Malay audience to be truly liberated in his thinking and writing. I said 'liberated', meaning much more than just the ability to be critical. We have had Malays who wrote books which were highly critical of their race but not quite liberated from certain assumptions about fundamental matters, about what can be questioned and what cannot be when it comes to the intertwined subjects of race and religion.

If we do get a Malay writer who is truly liberated in this sense, and able and willing to express his liberated thinking in Malay, the chances of his writing finding a publisher are very small, especially if he already has a reputation of being scandalously Westernised and therefore un-Malay, and on top of that outrageously outspoken too. If he does find a publisher, it is very likely that the Malay-Muslim reader's perception of his writing will be seriously distorted by his public image, preconceptions about him or about the Western civilisation that is supposed to have disastrously influenced his thinking and sensibility. If he resorts to English to express his liberated thinking, he won't reach the bulk of the audience which he really wants to reach. He may not mind allegations that in saying what he says in the way he says it, he has broken the unspoken ethnic code or is pandering to the alleged prejudices of the



English-speaking non-*Bumis*; but the knowledge that his audience is largely limited to those who, on certain matters, already think like him, is something else.

Thus, the dilemma of this 'would-be' Malaysian writer. The publication and reception of his one published book of poems highlighted this dilemma, and it did so in a neat way because it is a bilingual volume. I won't say anything about the quality of the poems as poems (I'm too close to the writer and too much in accord with him to be objective). But I'll give you some idea of the matter and manner of the book. A number of the poems, directly or indirectly, deal with themes of race and religion in a way that most Malays would consider heretical. A few even treat this highly sensitive subject with a playful satirical irony (a vice the author had picked up from his Western education) that can make him vulnerable to the charge of '*menghina bangsa dan agama*' ('insult race and religion'). *Hina* is the usual Malay word for blasphemy, and since it is also the word for insult, it's much stronger in connotation than the English blasphemy.

I can confidently say on behalf of this writer that nothing is further from his intention than to '*menghina bangsa dan agama*'. This applies to both his creative writings and his newspaper articles. That there are Malay writers who seem to persist in seeing him as an insulter of his race and religion really distresses him. Most of these writers seem to have a shallow and closed notion of literature, and are incapable of truly understanding that a certain kind of heterodoxy is an essential part of the very breath or spirit of the unshackled imagination. What I mean by 'heterodoxy' here is lucidly and suggestively explained by the Mexican poet Octavio Paz (see article: 'The Other Voice'); and I'd claim that such heterodoxy of imagination is not totally alien to even Islamic literature.

Mention of Octavio Paz reminds me of a pronounced

peculiarity of many of our Malay writers. They love to drop names of notable modern Western writers like Paz, giving the impression that they are well-read, sophisticated and 'with-it'. But one often doubts that they have actually read the works of these writers. Or, if they have, one doubts that they really appreciate the kind of imagination that produced those modernist works – an imagination so well described by Paz as being simultaneously “heretical and devout”, capable of placing “contrary or divergent realities in relationship”, of seeking and often finding “hidden resemblances”.

It is the limiting orthodoxy of the typical contemporary Malay writer's imagination that makes him incapable of truly breaking away from perceptions that are bound by rigid pieties, either racial or religious in character. The former makes him blind to the virtues of cultural plurality within a nation such as ours; the latter makes him unwilling to accord value to or even reject, implicitly or otherwise, expressions of the sacred or the spiritual other than what is sanctified by their own religion – thus the ignorant habit of dismissing Western civilisation in toto, including its literature, as “secular”. This blindness and ignorance also mean an inability on his part to see and articulate in his works the “hidden resemblances” among “contrary or divergent realities” – be those realities racial, cultural, mythic, or religious.

Now, back to our writer and his dilemma. His one published book of poems came out about four years ago. From the feedback he has received over the years, he suspects that more non-Malays than Malays had bought the book. And most of the former are not literate enough in Malay and therefore could really read only the English part of the book. The book was apparently found to be so shocking (*dasyat* was one of the words used) that it left the usually vociferous and highly shockable *kritikus*

(critics) mute with disbelief. There was not a single review of the book in the Malay papers or literary magazines; and it is not surprising that one of the reviews in the English press was by a bilingual Malay writer known for her open-mindedness.

But being bilingual is no guarantee of liberated thinking. I say this because there is another bilingual Malay writer, a poet and professor of Malay literature, whose comments on our man's poetry in an English-language academic journal show a narrowness of perception not different in kind from what is described above. After saying that the appearance of our man's book was for "the Malaysian literary scene... the most traumatic of experiences" (traumatic, mind you! Wow!), and after mumbling about "sacrilege", "*kurang ajar*" and so on, the professor concludes categorically that to our 'apostate' poet "nothing is sacred, neither family nor religion nor the moralistic myths" – and no doubt, race too. What professorial hogwash! Only a mind with a rigidly orthodox understanding of what is truly sacred could spew it. You see how easy it is to shock the Malays! Or even to traumatise professorial minds among them until they can't read poetry like that of our poets intelligently.

Now, as to the identity of this would-be Malaysian writer, I'm afraid I cannot reveal it. He is such an intimate presence in my life that to reveal his name would make me liable to the charge of promoting his interests. The fact that I've avoided actually praising him doesn't make me any less liable. Such an allegedly PR job would no doubt be considered almost as unethical as promoting my own self. Not that I'm always averse to self-promotion, mind you; it's just that I'd like to show now and again that I can be a true Malay by practising, even for a moment, the unique and noble ideal of my race – the ideal of *rendah diri* or self-depreciation.

## Blessed Cursor

[24th April 1991]

I have always been a late developer – in some things. These mostly have to do with mastering the simple practical art of getting things done or earning a living. In many cases, the slowness to adapt has to do with phobia or distrust of technology. There has always been a little mouse of a Luddite in me. And this mouse can be quite sentimental, the sentimentality fed by too much reading of back-to-nature romantic stuff. The mind here, controlled by the mouse, is well-informed about feelings and all that, but hopelessly ignorant about the things that make the modern world move.

But it's better late than never. Recently, the revelation came to me like a flash of lightning. The PC, I belatedly discovered, is a wondrous invention, not at all what the myth says it is, that it's bad for 'creativity'.

All this I have my wife to thank for. She hit upon the novel idea of giving a present to her husband for making himself unemployed; she bought me a PC a few days after I quit my job. Not wanting to be more of a burden than I already was, I forced myself to play with the thing. And, lo and behold, the miracle of miracles started to dance on the screen! Not least of the miracles was the very fact of my getting the hang of the machine fast enough to create (create?) those miracles on the screen. My fear that without the preparatory little rituals associated with the old ways of writing, I would have writer's block turned out to be

unfounded. You know, the rituals designed to induce inspiration, or delaying the moment of dread that inspiration might not come – such as sharpening a pencil, or even a heap of them with near sensuous slowness; taking it real easy when slipping the paper into the typewriter; or devising inventive little ways of stopping the paper flapping about when using a portable in the open air (Hemingway used clothes-pegs). Now with this new machine, I only have to devise new rituals appropriate to it.

I didn't and still don't know how the bloody thing works. The computer as a machine remains a mystery to me. And my computer vocabulary doesn't go much beyond 'hardware'. I have been using the machine quite blindly, almost instinctively, like the proverbial lady who drives a car without a clue of what a carburetor is or for. So far I've been pleasantly stimulated and horribly frustrated by manic turns, shouting with delight one minute and screaming obscenities at the ultra-sensitive thing the next. (In the throes of creativity, my excitable fingers tend to brush the wrong keys and suddenly the screen goes blank! And, not being a natural word-hoarder, I have, of course, forgotten to 'save' what I have painfully crafted.) But whatever the frustrations, this machine is a real boon. Now I can finish the damned novel that has been torturing me much sooner than I had dared hope.

Am I now a PC addict, one of many one keeps bumping into these high-tech days? Yes, in a sense – and no, too. And the no is by no means a mousy no. I have seen with my own eyes what being hooked on the PC can do to people so as not to have any reservations about it. The thing is both a blessing and a curse. The blessings it offers have either been exaggerated or misunderstood; and the curse either underestimated or totally unperceived. When I talk about the curse of the computer, I don't mean what it does to relationships between people; that between

husband and wife, say. This can be very serious, of course, so serious that very soon we will hear of wives or husbands filing divorce proceedings and citing the PC as co-respondent. The hypnotic blinks of the cursor can split up a marriage; I won't be surprised if this has already happened in the West. No, that's not what I am immediately concerned with here. It's the effects on writing, writing in every sense of the word, that I am worried about.

You can start with writing in a literal and limited sense. I mean the act of writing in longhand, with a pen or lead pencil. I know a woman academic who is so addicted to her laptop that not only does the lap of her man no longer excite her, she even writes every personal letter on the damn machine. It must be quite a few years since she last used a pen or pencil. I happen to be literally a scribbler, and am personally fond of the pen and the pencil. Even when I was doing most of my writing on the typewriter, I used the pen a lot (and fountain pen too, not throwaways); certainly when I was writing poems and personal letters. And I still continue to do this despite my new enthrallment to the PC. Without wanting to sound stupidly 'mystical' about it, I think it's quite important that we continue to keep in close touch with the physical act of writing. I even think there is something quite 'sacred' about the art of handwriting. Children of 'calligraphic cultures' which in fact regard the art of writing and calligraphy as 'sacred' – such as Islam – would need no convincing about this.

This kind of regard for the art of handwriting is not to be confused with the rubbish drooled by romantic or atavistic writers who believe that one can't be truly creative with a machine. This is cheap 'mystical' talk that I tend to get impatient with. I remember the British novelist Fay Weldon saying somewhere that she believed "there is some mystical connection between the brain and the actual act of writing in longhand". I, on the other hand, am open

enough to new forms of mysteries and new modes of the 'mystical' to be prepared to believe that there can be "some mystical connection" too between the brain of the creative writer and the 'brain' of the computer. I am sure the guru of magic realism, the Colombian novelist Garcia Marquez, who claimed that his writing output had trebled since he acquired a word processor, would agree with me here. Fay Weldon can continue to be a masochist ('mystically' speaking) with her long-hand. And, at the other extreme, the American novelist who claimed that if she had to give up writing on the computer, she would feel that she "had returned to scraping letters in crude-form on clay tablets"... well, this one should simply be pitied, or dismissed outright for gross, typically American hyperbole.

Let's not deny the marvellous benefits of the computer to the writer, creative or otherwise. The main benefit is, of course, the ease with which editing and rewriting can be done on it. This really takes away drudgery from the task or craft of writing. But let's not forget one simple fact, that you still have to have the ability to write and something to say in your writing. A lot of second and third-rate minds tend to forget this. They are cursed by the illusion that the so-called word processor machine they are hooked to actually 'processes' words and thoughts, magically transforming crap into craft, pulp into poetry, and impoverished thoughts into pearls of wisdom. And this is where the curse of the cursor can affect the reading public. The proliferation of PC addicts now means more would-be 'creative writers' with neither talent nor things to say crowding the overcrowded world of literature: Jackie Collins hijacking the pulp fiction market, and more third-rate academic bores flooding the world of learning with unreadable junk. The 'publish-or-perish' disease will mean they publish and we perish - through sheer boredom.

Perish the thought!

## Those who can't, teach

[25th December 1991]

The quality of teaching at our universities has been much talked about in the papers lately. Early this month, Dr T. Marimuthu, former Universiti Malaya professor of education and now Member of Parliament, was quoted as saying "not all lecturers who have been trained to teach are interesting lecturers; obviously, some lecturers who have not had that training can be interesting too, because the personality element also plays a part".

The fact is that not many lecturers have been trained in the art of teaching; and that very few of them, trained or not, know how to teach. The "personality element" may play a part in the ability or lack of it; but it is not crucial. What is crucial is the 'character' of the mind and whether it is fired by commitment to the vocation or not. The "personality element" can help, but one must be rigorously clear about what constitutes "personality" here. It is often confused with the showy that hides shallowness of mind and lack of real commitment. If that's the kind of "personality element" which makes a lecturer "interesting" and "popular", then he's not just useless like the familiar academic type whose salaried mind knows neither enthusiasm nor style; he's positively dangerous.

When I was in high school, I had an English teacher who wrote poetry (and good poetry, too), was full of enthusiasm for his subject, but the "personality element" in him wasn't terribly striking. His style certainly wasn't



the kind that launched a thousand students to the varsity and beyond. He was, in fact, rather awkward in movement and soft and, at times, even hesitant in speech. But he fired me with enthusiasm for literature, especially poetry, because it was clear that in his subdued way, he himself glowed with a hidden fire. He also had the habit of going beyond the call of examination-oriented duty. When we were supposed to cram the novels of Jane Austen and the poetry of Wordsworth, he would distract and excite us with T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' or Albert Camus' *The Outsider* (neither of which had been sanctified by the curriculum). I found 'Prufrock' so much more fascinating than Wordsworth's leech-gatherer that I nearly failed my HSC English for spending too much time reading off the curriculum.

The "personality element", as I said, can help, especially the sort that doesn't advertise itself too much like that of the stridently non-conformist type of lecturer. You know, the type who loves to turn each lecture into a performance that entertains more than it teaches. I am not saying that having the ability to perform and thereby turn students on is a pedagogical disease. Those who can do so and really teach at the same time can be an asset to an institution, and a boon to the students. (Never mind that the particular institution would rather not have his type around.) And those who can't? They can always... well, just "teach", I suppose; in G.B. Shaw's sense of the word. (Shaw's well-known line goes, "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach.") But, speaking from my own decade-long experience of teaching literature at Universiti Malaya, this kind of lecturer (and I must confess I was a bit inclined that way) can be a hero to a small minority of young souls eager for refreshing breaks from the soporific monotony of campus routine. But he can actually turn the timid or shy majority off.

I remember once turning up for a lecture wearing a sarong, a nice clean one I used to go to the mosque in (except it wasn't a Friday that day). Now, I did that not to draw attention to myself (all right, there was a little of that motive, why should I deny it?); I happened to love wearing a sarong and still do; I go to the supermarket or the movies in my sarong sometimes. I'm just an incorrigible Malay, I suppose – or an honorary Myanmar, considering that the average urban Malays today wouldn't be seen dead in a sarong outside their homes, except, of course, in the mosque or at a funeral. That day in Lecture Theatre F of the Arts Faculty (I remember it quite vividly), my entry in my nice dark purple *kain Samarinda* was greeted by half-suppressed giggles from some of the boys and an embarrassed silence from the rest (most of them girls, Eng. Lit. being a very 'girly' subject). I acted normal (normal?) and went ahead with the scheduled lecture (on William Blake, I remember) as if I was attired in complete conformity with the image of the ideal university lecturer – long-sleeved, immaculately ironed white shirt and tie and academic gown. I gave the lecture in my usual style, moving around a lot, sometimes sitting, even squatting on the long table, sometimes walking up the stairs of the lecture theatre and scattering my subversive pearls of wisdom from the back, over the heads of my beloved students.

That day, I noticed many of the girls seemed too embarrassed even to take down notes. It didn't occur to me until later that they were probably in mortal fear that my sarong would slip off (you know how sarongs, especially the silk-like *Samarinda* sort, tend to drop off just like that unless you hold them up with a belt). Imagine the scandal if my *Samarinda* had betrayed me! Most of the students, as was their wont, had their biros poised expectantly over their virginal notepads. They are great note-takers, our

students; they take down everything, even the jokes. (Can be very useful in the exams, you know; might gain you an extra point or two.) But they were not taking down anything that day. Could it be just because of their anxiety over my precarious sarong? Then I realised I was not actually lecturing but reciting chunks of lines from Blake's 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' (our text for the day) which I knew by heart. I was driven by an overpowering, barely conscious desire to soak their minds and their senses in the mind-expanding, body-expanding music and images of Blake's verse. And they were anxious because there was nothing to take down.

What can we write down? And what's going to happen in that dreaded hell of an exams hall if he gives nothing solid and regurgitable to write down now? You damn long-haired lout! Useless lecturer! My pedagogic conscience heard the cry of their undernourished souls, and I, for a moment, felt a prick of guilt for dereliction of duty. Halfway down the steps of the theatre, I suddenly stopped in my manic tract. With one of the Proverbs of Hell just escaped from my mouth ("Prudence is a rich ugly old maid courted by Incapacity"), I changed my track for a parabolic moment of pedagogic irony and fury to say to the class: "Sorry, boys and girls, I've been too carried away by that Devilish Blake. Here's some solid exam stuff for you to take down. William Blake (and I spelt the name), born 23rd November 1757, at 28 Broad Street, Golden Square, London (where his father made and sold stockings) – and died on 12 August, 1827, at Fountain Court, Strand, London ..."

You wouldn't believe it, the flurry of the bios scratching those virginal pads! When I interrupted the sudden flow of precious information with a half-laughing hiss ("You idiots! You can get that info in any book on Blake in the library!"), those poor undernourished young souls didn't even hear me, so absorbed were they in taking down the revelation

much needed for that Judgment Day. "Sir (the fact that they call their lecturers "Sir" is painfully revealing), Dear Sir, give us this day our daily crumb!" Poor kids!

And who can we blame for all this? The system, of course, yes. But the lecturers themselves must not use the 'the System' as a convenient alibi. They must ask themselves: "If the students have a test to pass, don't we too?" Too many of them, I hate to say, are too complacent in their too-comfortable academic cocoons, heavily protected by a wall of research junk and many-times-recycled seminar papers, to even dream of asking that question. Because they know, deep inside them, that they would most likely fail the test.

# Inspiration, Provocation, Titillation and... Boredom

[10th June 1992]

While I was having my second *khalwat* break, a reader of this column, a certain Venerable Piyasilo, wrote a letter to say, among other things, how much he was missing me. Thank you, Venerable Brother; it's always nice to know one is missed. The letter then went on to reflect at some length on the subject of inspiration. For some unknown but obviously generous reason, the writer dedicated his reflections to your humble self. I thank him for that too. I wondered what inspired Ven. Piyasilo to write such a letter to Ben Joned. Did he think I had a break because I had run out of ideas, or steam? Or provocations, perhaps? (Sometimes one needs provocations in order to be provocative – fruitfully provocative, one hopes.)

That – or some other personal reasons that had caused a sudden expiration of intellectual energy in me? Perhaps he sensed that I had slipped into some slump of the spirit, and wrote the kind letter to cheer me up, to inspire me to resume writing as I pleased? It's also possible that our venerable brother suspected that the break was really due to simple weariness on my part. Or plain boredom. Did I not say, when I wrote after my first *khalwat* break last year, that I'd stop for a while when things were getting boring, or I and my poor suffering readers were getting bored? Boredom ... yes, it's a subject worthy of some

cogitation or speculation. Particularly as it concerns the writer. And since one of the antitheses of boredom is inspiration, I should say something about that, too – and, by so doing, also offer a belated rejoinder to the letter of our venerable friend.

Boredom first. It's quite a fascinating subject, this. In fact, it can be said that one of the subtle ways of overcoming boredom is to meditate on boredom. You'd be surprised at the number of great minds who have suffered from this universal curse and been moved to reflect on it for the benefit of other sufferers. From Roman writers like Petronius (author of *Satyricon*, that ribald satire on Roman decadence, that pungent product of imperial boredom) through Robert Burton (the 16th Century author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*) to Marquis de Sade (surely the most bored of them all – thus, the sadism).

Boredom is not just a total lack of interest or mere apathy. It is an affliction that is actively malignant. Unlike apathy, which is merely a withdrawal from active consciousness, boredom can lead the bored to desperate and destructive acts – such as drinking, drug-taking, turning to religious fanaticism, or running amok to kill boredom. It seems only man, with his highly developed nervous system, is vulnerable to boredom. Animals apparently are incapable of boredom. And morons too. Morons, if they happen to be mechanical rhetoricians of conformity or purveyors of philistine pieties, and revered by the masses as such, can induce boredom in the intelligent by their sheer inability to be bored themselves. Conformity is, of course, synonymous with sameness. A country whose intellectual life is controlled by moronic mullahs and inane intellectuals can be excruciatingly boring. When variety, individuality, creativity, departures from the norm are frowned upon, you get boredom-generating sameness.

That's why life in programmed utopias (read dystopias)

such as the one envisaged by George Orwell in 1984 can be excruciatingly boring. The bored in Orwell's dystopia could only stay passively happy through endless consumption of cheap Victory gin. There is much in our society today that can induce boredom in the critical mind. Ubiquitous slogans, relentless kill-joy rhetoric of provincial politicians and fundamentalist *lebais* (religious elders), TV turd programmes to stave off petty bourgeois boredoms with cheap excitements; easy thrills made *halal* by packaged pieties fundamentally philistine in nature.

Some forms of boredom can be stultifying. If the victim is a writer, it can even be paralysing. Is there an antidote or cure for a writer who is in the grip of paralysing boredom? The Austrian satirist Karl Kraus doesn't think that the true writer and artists in general are vulnerable to boredom. He says: "A philistine is habitually bored and looks for things that won't bore him. An artist may find things boring, but is never bored". An acute remark, that, but the writers I mentioned above remind us of the exceptions to the rule.

The common or philistine form of boredom doesn't take much to be induced. All it needs is an absence of excitements, and the excitements meant here are, of course, those superficial ones. The boredom that afflicts the true writer, on the other hand, is something else. It can be as simple as being the product of some deficiency in the body's chemistry; deficiency that induces depression which in turn induces boredom of a peculiar kind.

Or it can be something spiritual or metaphysical in nature. The latter can induce a sense of emptiness or futility of existence, what Dr Johnson, who was himself in constant dread of it, called the "vacuity of life". What is the antidote for boredom in a writer? If the writer is the non-creative kind, like newspaper columnists, the antidote is simple. Stop scribbling for a while; write or do something

else, with perhaps a *cangkul* instead of a pen or PC. Or, if he is stubborn in wanting to continue scribbling, he can resort to deliberate provocations or some outrageous comments, just to inject some excitement into the intellectual scene; some verbal play or polemical fun for the sake of play and fun.

There is nothing wrong with playfulness and fun in intellectual or artistic matter. Apart from the fact that playfulness can be deceptively serious, it may also be needed sometimes to prevent us from taking ourselves too seriously. After all, as theorised by Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens*, play probably came into existence as an anodyne to the tedium of being *homo faber*. All work and no play...

If the writer is not a mere columnist but a poet, playwright or novelist, what can he do to fight boredom? Not much, really. If the source of the boredom is his social and intellectual environment, he can exile himself. Or he can take drugs, as the American beatniks and counter-culture freaks did. Or he can simply pray for inspiration from heaven. Inspiration can take many forms. It can take the form of religious awakenings; a sudden inspiration to propagate pious platitudes in ones writings. Some of our writers who have turned noisily religious must have gone through some species of boredom resulting from intellectual and artistic bankruptcy. Or the inspiration can take the form of some unexpected *barakah* (grace) from the Muse.

The Venerable Piyasilo in his letter reminded readers of the root of the word *inspiration*, the Latin *inspirare* which means to breath into, i.e. to inspire. It's good to remind ourselves of this, in particular of the fact that the word spirit is from the Latin *spiritus* meaning breath, courage, vigour or life itself. Note, particularly, courage and life. Inspiration in matters of the arts is defined by Webster's as "any stimulus to creative thought or action". The word is also used in matters religious where it means



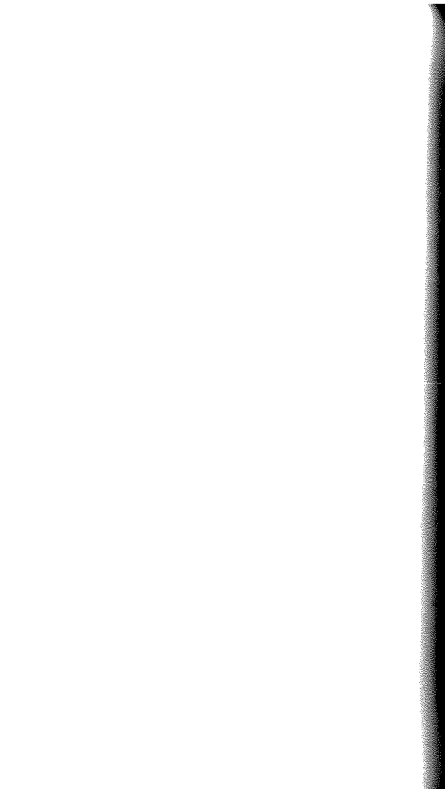
a divine influence upon human beings resulting in speech, writing or action experienced by prophets, saints or martyrs. Inspiration in the writing of poetry and fiction has been beautifully described by Vladimir Nabokov of *Lolita* fame, one of the few modern writers old-fashioned enough to believe in inspiration. He describes the stirrings of inspiration as "a prefatory glow, not unlike some benign variety of the aura before an epileptic attack... As it spreads, it banishes all awareness of physical discomfort..." Several stages later, the writer forefeels what he is going to write, the forefeeling defined as "an instant vision turning into rapid speech".

In a small way (O, what modesty!), I can claim to have had such an experience, though I'd admit that not many of the poems I have written were truly inspired in this sense. And I must confess that my most recent experience of being in near-epileptic throes of inspiration was the writing of a poem that I was actually commissioned to write. The money was quite substantial by Malaysian standards. A friend who thought well of the poem expressed surprise that I could write poetry on commission. To him, it smacked of literary whoredom. I myself was surprised, but wished that more of such acts of whoring, in which all the organs and needs of the body and spirit are in perfect harmony, would happen in future. Honest mercenary opportunism mysteriously aided by the goddess of inspiration – that's a rare thing indeed. I suppose whoring, like inspiration, can take many forms and impulses too.

Can a humble columnist hope for inspiration to free himself from the grip of boredom? Why not, I suppose. It's always possible that some highly influential bore in the establishment will unwittingly inspire the humble columnist to write by provoking the latter with some boring, insufferable pieties. The possibility of that happening will always save the columnist from becoming a bore. Hopefully.



# Poets & Patriots



## Poetry Makes Nothing Happen

[15th January 1992]

The Marxist Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid has a poem in dialect called 'Second Hymn to Lenin'. Here are some lines from it that I think are worth pondering on:

Ah, Lenin, you were richt. But I'm a poet  
(And you c'ud make allowance for that!)  
Aimin' at mair than you aimed at  
Tho' yours comes first, I know it.

Lenin, the type of revolutionary-ideologue driven by an utopian vision of a just society and committed to a programme of immediate action towards the realisation of that ideal, is here contrasted with the figure of the poet. The poet may be sympathetic with the ideals of the ideologue, as MacDiarmid certainly was with Lenin's. But he is a poet, and as a poet, he "aims at more" than the ideologue or politician aims at. MacDiarmid admits Lenin's "comes first" because he is humanly realistic enough to know that though man doesn't live by bread alone, without bread there is no life. But he also asks Lenin to understand the poet, to "make allowance" for his aims, aims informed by the knowledge that man doesn't live by bread alone.

The politician has his vision; the poet has his. And the two don't always coincide. There have been exceptions, of

course; but when the vision of the politician is fed by that of the poet in the mind of one person (call him/her a poet-politician, if you like), the latter usually ends up by being swallowed up by the former. The nature of politics makes sure of that. That's the usual fate of the poet-politician. What about that of the political poet?

In the history of world literature, there have been very few poets whose poetry could survive "the contagion of the world's slow stain" (Shelley, 'Adonis') or "the contagion of the throng". The Irish poet William Butler Yeats is one of the few in the English-speaking world. All of his good political poems were good as poetry because the poet in him could hold in perfect or near-perfect tension the truth of politics and the truth of art. Yeats could be ambivalent or ambiguous when his fellow Irish nationalists would expect him to be otherwise. Have a look at his great poem 'Easter 1916', a poem which ostensibly celebrates the martyrdom of the rebels against British colonial rule on Easter Day 1916. The very refrain of the poem, "All changed, changed utterly:/ A terrible beauty is born", tolls in its oxymoron ("terrible beauty") the cost of that act of rebellion.

And the cost meant here was much more than the lives of those young men, those flowers of Irish youth (three of whom were themselves poets) who took over the Dublin General Post Office in the name of an insulted nation and were later executed by a firing squad. No, the cost involved was much more than that. The spirit of nationalism and patriotism can be a necessary, even a beautiful thing, but it can so easily be made quite ugly by the slow contagion of mob fanaticism.

Hearts with one purpose alone  
Through summer and winter seem  
Enchanted to a stone  
To trouble the living stream

There you are: the stone of fanaticism contrasted to the living stream of life in all its fecundity, variety and contradictions. "Too long a sacrifice/Can make a stone of the heart". Yes, and how often has that happened in the history of nations against nations, peoples against peoples, man against man. Ireland's long history of factional violence and hatred and religious fanaticism had left its marks on the greatest English-language poet of the 20th Century. And one of these marks is evident in the poet's distrust of politics as it impinged on poetry, a distrust that became more pronounced as Yeats bloomed into the second crazy youth of his old age. The distrust or scepticism had been with him from early on. The short minor poem 'On Being Asked For a War Poem', written in his middle age, expresses this scepticism with commendable forthrightness laced with wry irony:

I think it better in times like these  
A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth  
We have no gift to set a statesman right;  
He has had enough of meddling who can please  
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,  
Or an old man upon a winter's night.

It is a common belief that poets and writers as a tribe are blessed with the power of perception denied to ordinary mortals. There may be some truth in this if we are talking about the ambiguous realities of the heart, the mysteries of human motives and dreams. But if we are talking about the hard realities of politics, I think poets and writers can be as stupid and dangerously ignorant as anybody else. Not many of them deserve the Shelleyian appellation of "unacknowledged legislators of the world" – certainly not the world of politics. Western literature of the 1930s was quite notorious with poets and writers who allowed their

art to be used for causes (both radical and reactionary) in a way that makes one seriously doubt their intelligence. In some cases, like those German writers seduced by the malignant millenarianism of Nazism, one doubts even their humanity.

“Ninety-nine per cent of the people in the world are fools,” said Thornton Wilder, “and the rest of us are in great danger of contagion.” Most poets and writers would assume that they belong by definition to that one per cent. How deluded they are! Considering all this, I can’t help being sympathetic with poets and writers who, knowing their own limitations, prefer to devote their art to the pleasing of a “young girl in the indolence of her youth” or “an old man upon a winter’s night”. I get bored by the demands of ideologues and intellectuals that poets and novelists must be committed to a cause, preferably, of course, a radical one – leftish socialism or reactionary nationalism.

They throng seminar halls and issue calls that *senimans* and *sasterawans* wake up to their national duty. They hold *kongres sastera* and issue resolutions, grabbing the headlines with their mob passion. While in a quiet room somewhere, the true and wiser poet is holding his own private congress with his muse, grabbing the fleeting moments of life’s beauty with his purely personal passion. I am not saying that poets and writers should not be interested in politics. Far from it. What I am saying is that the poet as poet, when he is answering the call of his muse, has no obligation to be political – unless, of course, the muse decides to be political. As a poet, he has as much right as the toddy tapper as a toddy tapper to be indifferent to politics.

I think this was what K. Das was trying to say in his response to my ‘Big Q’ (see article: ‘The Dialogue That Never Was’ and ‘Dialogue Between the Deaf and Dumb’).

Uncharacteristically of him, he didn't say it clearly enough, and the phrasing of his argument was more absolutist and misleadingly clear-cut than, I think, he intended. But what he really meant was suggested in more than one place; in rhetorical questions such as this, for example: "Isn't the artist the only visionary without encumbrances?"

Back to our toddy tapper and poet. The toddy tapper is also a citizen of a democratic State; and as a citizen he is morally and humanly obliged to be interested in what the politicians are doing to his country and his future. The same would apply to the poet or writer. I'm sure that K. Das, a highly political pen-pusher himself, wouldn't disagree with that. Poets and writers can even be expected to use their verbal skill and their position in society (if they have any) to educate the political consciousness of their fellow citizens. BUT verbal skill here doesn't necessarily mean the creative kind, the kind that obeys only the dictates of the muse. Poets and writers can write newspaper articles to alert their readers to the dangers of chauvinism, say, or make statements denouncing fanaticism or racism expressed by a fellow writer. In his poetry or novels, he must have the right to write on whatever subject he, or rather his muse, pleases. Especially if he is a poet of the sceptical kind who doesn't think much of poetry or novels as a weapon of political or social struggle.

W.H. Auden in his elegy on W.B. Yeats is such a sceptical poet. He says of Yeats:

...physical decay,  
Yourself; mad Ireland hurt you into poetry,  
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,  
For poetry makes nothing happen...

Poetry makes nothing happen? In the immediate sense and in the world of politics, it rarely does, if ever – and



even when it does, what “happens” is an internal matter, a happening in the heart and the soul, the process being so subtle and slow to the point of being almost unperceivable or untranslatable into immediate action. Therein lies the mystery of poetry, of art. And its ultimate worth and justification as well as its uselessness in the quantitative practical sense – the kind of sense valued by bureaucratic moralists, ideologues and politicians.

## For King and Country

[20th November 1991]

One bitterly cold winter night in early Sixties, in remote Hobart, capital city of Tasmania, I got literally thrown out of a pub for opening my big mouth on what turned out to be a highly sensitive subject. The exact nature of my offence? Insulting Australia fair (the country, not its national anthem).

At least that was the judgment of the huge hunk of a bouncer whose deep sense patriotism I had offended. He didn't even deign to grant me the dubious benefit of the kangaroo court. He simply 'kangarooed' me himself, the R.S.L. (Return Servicemen League) badge on his jacket lapel being authority enough for that summary act of publican patriotism.

Publican, not republican; Aussieland in those days was still tied to Mother-England's apron strings with all the attendant neuroses that dependency engendered. It's a state of 'mental colonialism' appropriate to an insecure country founded initially as a dumping ground for convicted pickpockets, sheep stealers, highwaymen, and Irish would be revolutionaries. This mental colonialism had persisted into the Twenties and beyond, despite what had happened in the First World War in which thousands of diggers (slang for trench-digging Aussie soldiers) were killed in the trenches of Gallipoli for the greater glory of the British Empire. The persistence of this embarrassing mental slavery had inspired an architect-writer, Robin Boyd, to dub it so

memorably as the "cultural cringe". Appropriate enough, the phrase first announced its entry into Aussie intellectual usage in a book about Australian architecture (or lack of it) called *The Australian Ugliness*.

Was I guilty of the offence for which I was thrown into the street? Me, a beneficiary of the Australian Government's generosity in the form of the now-defunct Colombo Plan Scholarship! The answer is both yes and no. Yes, because I did appear to have insulted Australia. And to compound the insult with injury, I chose to commit it in the lounge of the pub. That put my crime beyond the pale of forgiveness, simply because of the presence of all those allegedly genteel ladies (who, in those sexually segregated days, were themselves tolerated only in the lounge). The diggers and cobbers felt condescendingly protective of their fair folk – almost in the very same breath or gesture with which they, being MCP many of them, would insult the selfhood of those Sheilas (Aussie slang for women).

I'd also say 'No' to the charge of insulting Australia because the words that so offended the R.S.L. patriot weren't mine but those of one of Australia's best and much-respected poets, A.D. Hope. The poem, called simply 'Australia', had become one of the most notorious poems about Australia by an Australian poet. It first burst into point in 1939, scandalising the complacent cultural elite of the country, especially its literary sub-elite, the left wing of which was noisy with their aggressive slogan: 'Temper democratic, bias Australian'. (This lot appeared to have freed itself from the apron strings of Mother England, but substituting the cultural cringe with another of their own. This one was a 'cringe' towards an abstract universalist, but in reality, imperialist anti-spiritual ideology called Marxism or Communism.)

Over the years, the notoriety of Hope's poem, in the poet's own words to me, had "pursued" him "like a bad smell". Why? Well, listen to this extract:

They call her a young country, but they lie:  
She is the last of lands the emptiest,  
A woman beyond her change of life, of breast  
Still tender but within the womb is dry

That evening, I had jumped on the bar stool and, brazenly swilling a few precious drops of the "pure sardonic draught" (Hope's) that had fecundated the satiric mind of Australia's best satirist, I gave the most reckless performance of my reckless youth. I can still recall the shameless fervour with which I thundered and hissed Hope's offensive lines into the astounded faces of the pub's regulars – R.S.L. diggers, honest clerks, good suburban cobbers all, whose beery patriotism was well defined by a line in a landmark Australian play titled *The One Day of the Year*: "I'm a bloody Australian and I'm bloody proud of being a bloody Australian."

And I wasn't merely reciting; I was drunk enough to dare to mangle Hope's superb lines by peppering my recital with my insufferable running commentary (a sort of non-commercial breaks), thus squeezing salaciously sadistic pleasures out of such bitter juicy lines as these:

And her five cities like five teeming sores,  
Each drains her: a vast parasite robber stale  
Where second-hand Europeans pullulate  
Timidly on the edge of alien shores.

(Non-commercial break here: "Want to know what 'pullulate' means, cobber? Let me tell you...."). That ringing

verse (nothing can beat the iambic pentameter, either in the form of rhyming couplet, i.e. with AA rhymes, or, as in Hope's poem, with ABBA rhyme scheme) – yes, that ringing verse recklessly modulating, in my half-drunken eloquence, into the quieter, but no less brutal wit of another Australian poet, blessed with Hope's sense of sardonic, patriotism:

Meanwhile as you'd expect,  
Their arts are poor  
As if dust had leaked into their brains  
And made a kind of dry-rot at the core.

That's from a lengthy satire called 'The True Discovery of Australia' by James McAuley, my own professor and a close friend of Hope. Neither A.D. Hope, who is now in his 80s and a much respected Grand Old Man of Australian letters with even an OBE to his name, nor the late James McAuley, who died almost 15 years ago, have disowned the allegedly anti-patriotic poems of their past. And there is no reason for them to do so, for either literary or moral-political reasons (as W.H. Auden did with certain poems of his leftist youth). Hope and McAuley must have remained proud, or at least were not ashamed, of their sardonic vision of their country and fellow Australians. I say this because (1) the poems are both bloody good of their kinds; (2) the fiercely sardonic but still essentially positive and anti-philistine stance remained quintessentially theirs into their later careers as poets; (3) if both poems were read as they should be read, they would be found to be not really anti or even unpatriotic. Hope's 'Australia' even ends with a conciliating verse:

Yet there are some like me turn gladly home  
From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find  
The Arabian desert of the human mind,  
Hoping, if still from the deserts the prophets come...

And the cynicism of McAuley's 'The True Discovery of Australia' is balanced by the moving affirmation of 'Envoy', written in the same period:

And I am fitted to that land as the soul is to the body,  
I know its contractions, waste, and sprawling indolence;  
They are in me and its triumphs are my own,  
Hard-won in the thin and bitter years without pretence.

I would insist that both Hope and McAuley are patriots in the best sense. This is so despite their fiercely sardonic tone and the terrible things said in them about the poets' own country and fellow Australians – things considered a gross insult by R.S.L stalwarts and the cultural nationalists among the Australian readers and fellow writers. Poets of Hope's and McAuley's breed could never write to order in one form or another. I certainly can't imagine either of them as a poet laureate of Australia Fair without seeing an impishly sardonic glint in their alert poetic eye if they were asked to write something noisily patriotic or jingoistic.

But 'writing to order' can take subtle forms – such as of insidious pressure that try to get you at your most vulnerable, the kind of pressures vocally or tacitly endorsed by your own fellow writers. All of them? The vast majority in any particular situation, I'd say. And quite often, most of these writers probably cannot even be accused of selling their *seni* and their *sastera* short because they don't even know what artistic conscience means, of how absolutely vital it is that the autonomy of their *seni* should be defended. Philistinism is the greatest enemy of any art anywhere; it becomes fatally dangerous when it assumes, chameleon-like, the unsuspected guise of its opposite, of something which is so easily, in fact often is, mistaken for real art.

The true poet, and by extension any imaginative writer, must be willing to face the risk of being branded anti-this

or anti-that, especially of being anti- the interests of his/her country and his/her own people. He/she must maintain the long view all the time, and make himself/herself constantly alert to philistinism in its many guises. To the seducers of sensibility, those rhetorical rapists of *rasa* or insidious subverters of intelligence, the true poet can be disturbingly ambiguous or even provocatively ambivalent about those pieties they ritually invoke for the supposed good of all.

I can imagine these earnest and sentimental patriots branding my kind of poet as renegade or traitor for throwing remarks like that infamous one of Alexander Pushkin, the great poet much loved by generations of Russians. "Of course, I despise my country from head to foot, but it makes me furious when a foreigner shares my feelings."

And Lin Yutang's famous gut-based definition of true patriotism (or of eating; take your pick) would be dismissed as facetious or worse: "What is patriotism but the love of the good things we ate in our childhood?" Which for a Melaka Malay like me would, of course, be *sambal belacan* and *cincalok*.

Against this type of patriot with his righteously mean mentality, the writer with a finer sense of life-affirming patriotism and loyalty can be helpless. With this awareness in mind, I'd like to conclude with some marvellous lines from McAuley's 'The True Discovery of Australia':

Knowledge is regarded with suspicion  
Culture to them is a policeman's beat;  
Who, having learnt to bully honest whores,  
Is let out on the Muses for a treat.

So, my fellow Malaysians all, let's put some real, truly generous meaning into the sacred word of our common selfhood: Merdeka. Merdeka!

## 'The Other Voice'

[22nd January 1992]

The poet qua poet is under no obligation to be political, though as a citizen, he is morally obliged to be interested in politics. The 'politics' I mean is in its narrow sense, the sense we all mean when we use the word to refer to the conduct of government, conflict of parties and ideologies, the struggle for power, and that sort of thing. The word can be extended to embrace the public realm in general, an extension justified by the root word for politics, the Greek *polis* which means city.

If we have 'politics' in the extended sense in mind, my view of the relationship between poets and politics is a bit more complicated. I suppose I would say that the poet qua poet is still under no obligation to engage with 'politics' even in this extended sense. The key word is 'obligation'; he is under no obligation to enter the public realm as poet, but if he chose not to do so, it is unlikely that his work would attain the status of major art. It has to be stressed, however, that poetry has many ways of entering the public realm. And the public realm he enters might even seem remote from the current concerns of the public he writes for; it might not on the surface be 'political' even in the extended sense.

The major poet is an artist with a vision. Now, 'vision' is a word often used rather vaguely. But whatever meaning one gives to it, it must involve the image, the sense of realities, the dreams and terrors of the society, culture or



civilisation of which the poet is part. Visions can be highly personal, but for them to have the quality that can give poetry major significance, they must also be more than personal. They must in some ways and in one sense or another involve concerns affecting an entire society or civilisation; they must involve the image of the *polis* or 'city' and, by extension, be part of mankind's sense of itself. The truism that great poetry and literature must have universal significance should mean this. But precisely because it is a truism, the universality of the significance has been reduced in the common mind to the level of superficial pieties – such as 'the brotherhood of man', the 'universality of love' and that sort of thing. The necessity of the art of poetry has often been argued by invoking rather glibly and vaguely, its 'universal significance'. The glibness and the vagueness, and the sense that the phrase as it is often invoked is just a cliché makes one feel even more the need to define, perhaps even re-define the function of poetry.

Every age feels the need to re-state the defence of poetry. The phrase "defence of poetry" (made famous by Shelley's 1840 essay of that title) is itself very suggestive. If more than 150 years ago, when European society was feeling the impact of the first wave of the Industrial Revolution, Shelley felt the need to make a defence of poetry, how much stronger must be the need to make a similar defence in our post-industrial age, this age of computers and the alleged "end of history" (I refer to Francis Fukuyama's controversial thesis). Such a defence of poetry for our age, as eloquent as Shelley's, has recently been made by the Mexican poet and 1990 Nobel Laureate, Octavio Paz. It can be found in his new collection of essays *The Other Voice: Essays on Modern Poetry* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991).

Octavio Paz is my kind of poet. Ideologically, he is as independent as any writer can be. Although he has done

things approved by the radical left (such as resigning as Mexican Ambassador to India over his government's massacre of students in 1968), he is not its darling – certainly not in recent years. The giants of Latin America's literary left, fellow Mexican Carlos Fuentes and Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez, hate his guts for being an alleged 'turncoat', a neo-conservative. I prefer to see him as a poet who has remained true to his muse, learning over the years to know her in all her ambivalence and compelling mysteries.

Holding on the ancient clew, gift of the Ariadne side of the muse, Paz finds his way out of the labyrinth towards the light that can illuminate us all. And he does this in "impassioned writing with wide horizons, characterized by sensuous intelligence", to quote from the citation of the Nobel Academy. The "wide horizons" refers among other things to his profound awareness of the myths and philosophies of civilisations other than his own (especially of India); an awareness that, by enriching his poetry, has gained for him a truly international audience. And the "sensuous intelligence" referred to by the Nobel citation could only be felt by reading, even in English, poems such as 'The River', 'The Broken Waterjar', the long sequence of prose poems called 'Eagle or Sun?' ('*Aquiloa o sol?*') and the poems written in India gathered in the volume *Eastern Slope* (*Ladera este*), the last imbued with a powerful eroticism born of Paz's fascination with Kali, the creative-destructive goddess of Hinduism. (A good selection of Octavio Paz in translation by various English-language poets and edited by the well-known English poet Charles Tomlinson is available in Penguin).

In his essay, *The Other Voice*, this Mexican poet who is also poet of the world, re-states with characteristic passion and eloquence a defence of poetry that all contemporary poets should attend to. It is a defence by a poet whose voice

is distinctly major, if not great; a poet with a vision informed by both history and what lies beyond history. It is a much-needed statement that would have been endorsed by William Blake (a poet whose influence Paz has acknowledged) and I'd say by William Butler Yeats too, both highly visionary poets blessed with a measure of "sensuous intelligence". The essay contains some critically acute and intelligently balanced observations on the temper and directions of our age, observations that give the line to the trendy lefty's charge that Paz has sold out to capitalism.

However relevant these observations are to my present theme, I have no space to talk about them here; I must confine myself specifically to Paz's defence of poetry as the other necessary voice modern man badly needs. Paz raises once again certain basic questions affecting mankind and the poet's place in the world. He does it in new terms that illuminate our common condition and remind us of our secret but vital needs; needs which we must satisfy if we are to resist the dehumanising pressures of the age and remain fully and vitally human.

I shall now let Paz speak mainly in his own words as translated by Helen Lane. The basic questions he wants to raise again, he says, "appear with the birth of the modern era, and in them lies, like a kernel, the entire history of our time, its chimeras and contradictions, its aberrations and illuminations". They can be summarised by the three words made famous by the French revolution: liberty, equality, fraternity.

"As I see it," says Paz, "the central word of the triad is fraternity. The other two are intermeshed with it. Liberty can exist without equality, and equality without liberty. Liberty, in isolation, makes equality more profound and provokes tyrannies; equality oppresses liberty and in the end destroys it. But fraternity is the nexus that connects them, the virtue that humanises and harmonises them..."

Paz then goes on to suggest the role that poetry can play in giving the idea of fraternity a concretely realised meaning, a meaning that is anything but like the shrill dogooder kind the rhetoricians of commitment drone about. Here I'm compelled to crudely abstract and simplify Paz's finely tuned argument. He says "the uniqueness of realities and dreams rooted more deeply in the past than in the intellectual geometries of the revolutionaries and the conceptual prisons of the utopians." Then, in prose that in its Spanish original must have approached the resonant compactness of poetry, he says so beautifully what I've always believed in: "At one of its extremes, poetry touches the electric border of religious vision. For this reason it has been alternately revolutionary and reactionary. It is not surprising that all its loves have ended in divorce, and its conversions in apostasy. Poetry has continually been a stubborn, intractable heterodoxy. An incessant zigzagging rebellion against doctrines and churches. But at the same time, a no less constant love of humiliated reality, scorning the manipulations of fideism and speculations of rationalism. Poetry: the stone of scandal of modernity."

"Between revolution and religion," Paz goes on, "poetry is the other voice. Its voice is other because it is the voice of passions and visions. It is otherworldly and this worldly... Heretical and devout, innocent and perverted, limpid and murky... of the hermitage and of the corner bar, within hand's reach and always beyond." Thus "fraternity" is served because of poetry's essential heterodoxy - a heterodoxy inseparable from the "operative mode of poetic thought" itself, which is "imagining", and imagination here essentially consists of "the ability to place contrary or divergent realities in relationship... to seek, and often find, hidden resemblances".

Paz has absorbed very well the vision of his master Blake, especially the Blake of *The Marriage of Heaven and*

*Hell*. And it is, I believe, in the spirit of Blake that the Nobel Laureate makes the affirmation and defence of poetry that our *sasterawans* could do well to try to understand. "Poetry", he testifies, "exercises our imagination, teaches us to recognise differences and discover similarities... Each poem is a practical lesson in harmony and concord."

## Of Poets who 'Adore Explosions'

[6th March 1991]

I think it is better in times like these  
A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth  
We have no gift to set a statesman right;  
He has had enough of meddling who can please  
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,  
Or an old man upon a winter's night.

– W. B. Yeats, 'On Being Asked For a War Poem'.

The lines come from a poet who in his time had written a few war poems himself. Yeats, in fact was the poet of the Irish Rebellion against the British and of the bitter protracted Civil War that followed, early this century. The poems of his inspired by those two traumatic events in the modern history of his country, are among the greatest political poems in English.

Was it un-Yeatsian modesty (another name for realism) that prompted Yeats to say that "poets have no gift to set a statesman right"? Or was it simple scepticism, perhaps even cynicism, born of bitter disenchantment with politicians who kept plunging mankind into one war after another?

Politicians have no time to listen to poets, even if they speak the same language (Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia, for example). Especially politicians like President Bush or President Saddam Hussein. Can you imagine Bush in the

midst of the blinding fury of Desert Storm, or Saddam in the grip of the delirium of The Mother of All Wars even for a moment recalling what some silly (i.e. idealistic) poet wrote on war and peace?

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer.  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...  
– W. B Yeats, ‘The Second Coming’

There were moments in the Gulf War which threatened to be an acting-out of the apocalyptic vision of ‘The Second Coming’. Even as Kuwait was liberated and the Iraqis were retreating, the US-led coalition forces seemed determined not to let Saddam get off so easily. And from what we know of Saddam, terrible things might yet be in store for the people of the Gulf, and, perhaps, of the entire Middle East. One can’t help thinking of those missiles fitted with chemical war-heads waiting in some bunker below the new Hanging Garden of Babylon for the God-inspired signal from Iraq’s new Nebuchadnezzar, his back now against the crumbling wall and the man not incapable of taking as much as he can with him down into the gulf of damnation. Possessed by “the delirium of the brave” (Yeats again) and the “passionate intensity” of “the worst” (‘The Second Coming’), the Babylonian Beast of old, “its hour come round at last”, is grimly slouching towards Baghdad to be reborn – perhaps only to die? The defiant death of a holy martyr, no doubt.

“*Tantum religio patuit saudere malorum*” (so many evils have religions inspired), said the Roman epic poet Lucretius. The reverse, I’d say, would be true: So many (false) religions has evil inspired. Never in the history of Islam has the banner of *jihad* been so freely and merrily

bandied around in the Desert Storm by every Taufiq, Dawood and Harith. How do we expect the poet to react to events like the Gulf War? ('Poet' is here used to mean, like the German word *Dichter*, a creative writer as well as poet in the limited sense.) Remember, in the mythology of many cultures, the poet is a much revered figure regarded as a repository of ancient and inspired wisdom.

Another modern poet who, in his younger days, wrote a lot on political themes – W.H. Auden – has an even more outrageous comment on the subject of poets and politics. The author of one of the best-loved celebrations of the struggles of the anti-Fascist Spanish Republicans in the Thirties, later disowned that poem, and pontificated that "all poets adore explosions, thunderstorms, tornadoes, ruins, scenes of spectacular carnage. The poetic imagination is not at all a desirable quality in a statesman." Even a moron would want to quarrel with the sweepingly senile "all poets"; but there is a sense in which the statement contains an element of truth – at least, at the level of the unconscious.

The 'true poet', I suspect, is or can be a dangerous animal; 'true' is here used to suggest 'poet' in the archaic or atavistic sense. This sort of poet doesn't actually have to produce poetry in the sense normally understood; he may act out his 'poetic self' in forms of military action, say. Saddam Hussein, with his frenzied obsession with reliving the glories of mythic Babylon and stepping into the war chariot of Nebuchadnezzar or Hammurabi, might just be such a 'poet'. Now, we are not here directly concerned with 'poets' of the calibre of Saddam Hussein; it's the other sort of romantic poets and writers who wield a pen that we must consider in the light of Auden's pronouncement.

These writers, like our own prolific *Ustaz* Ashaari Muhammad, who has just come out with a fiery instant



book called *Perang Teluk: Islam Akan Kembali Gemilang*, get easily turned on by the rallying cries of *jihad*, or “Islamic unity” (it doesn’t really matter to them who is doing the rallying or the unifying, and with what motives). They churn out rhetoric worthy of the hack journalist or paid propagandist. Babylon O Babylon! Burn, baby, burn! *Allahu Akbar!* If they are not actually beating the war drums, they encourage the holy hysteria by their Manichean rhetoric, grossly simplifying political realities, as in the current Gulf War, by painting the other side as the Devil’s and their co-religionists as the helpless innocents being raped by the infidel’s war machines.

Thus, our *Sasterawan Negara* and premier novelist Shahnnon Ahmad in his column in *Utusan Malaysia* (Feb 23, 1991): “*Renungilah bagaimana sebuah negara besar sedang menghancurkan sebuah negara yang kecil yang tidak berkeupayaan apa-apa selain semangat. Renungilah kekejaman yang sedang dilagangkan oleh Amerika dengan seribu cara dan sejuta alat yang kejam-kejam belaka ... Renungilah bagaimana kotornya Bush hendak membunuh jiwa dan roh Islam kita...*” (“Just think of the fact that a powerful country is destroying a small one that has nothing other than the spirit to fight. Think of the cruelty that the United States is resorting to by using thousands of means that are totally cruel.... Think of how dirty, Bush can be in his determination to kill the soul and spirit of Islam...”)

Only a mind clouded by ideological cant could see Saddam’s high-powered military state as “small and helpless, without anything but the mere spirit of resistance.” As to the “*sejuta alat yang kejam-kejam*”, doesn’t our Datuk Professor know what everyone knows that his Great Champion of Islam has mostly used those “*alat*” (including chemical weapons) not on the Zionists or other infidels, but on his own people and fellow Muslims, the Kurds? And has the Datuk forgotten what Saddam did to the

Iranians? "*Jiwa dan roh Islam*" indeed! They "have no gifts to set a statesman right", yes. Especially when the alleged statesman isn't a real statesman but a crazy charismatic demagogue.

But what they – the true poets of the more sober tribe – can do, is to set ordinary mortals, like you and I, "right" – right in our perception of things and events in the political world. They can use their poetic eloquence to get to our hearts and remind us of our common humanity, and they can help us see political realities without illusions. The poets that our ever-crazy world desperately needs are the non-ideological ones, the integrity of whose craft impels them to see man and the world in all their ambivalence, ambiguities, complexities and contradictions. Truth and justice, they know, are very seldom, if ever, the monopoly of one group. Fired by that kind of wisdom and by the controlled energy that goes with craftsmanship, these poets can alert those among us, who haven't lost the habit of reading poetry, to the hollowness of politic slogans, battle cries and newspaper headlines.

Language, dear reader (if I may echo the words of the Austrian author of a mammoth 'unstageable' play called *The Last Days of Mankind*), has become a "universal whore" that poets and writers must make a virgin once again. Poets and writers with the necessary integrity and skill to purify the tongue of the tribe, to echo the words of T.S. Eliot, are very much in the minority in any age and society.

It so happens that even the much 'Saddamised' Iraq has such a poet, one Abdul Wahab al-Bayati, who has written a powerful and bitter 'Lament' on the great betrayal by Arab leaders and intellectuals (see article: Gulf between Poetry and Essays of Hacks). Would you like to listen to the bitterness of the betrayed?

## Gulf between Poetry and Essays of Hacks

[13th March 1991]

I am not terribly familiar with contemporary Iraqi literature, so I don't even know whether the poet whose work I am going to talk about today, Abdul Wahab al-Bayati, is still alive and writing I wonder what he feels about the Saddam adventure. The evidence of the 'Lament for the June Sun' (written in the immediate aftermath of the Six-Day Arab-Israel War in 1967 and published in 1968) suggests that he wouldn't have been easily seduced by the *jihad* rhetoric of Saddam, especially with the memory of the disastrously futile and wasteful eight-year war with Iran, still painfully fresh in the mind.

Still, the English-educated Baghdad-born al-Bayati, according to the skimpy biographical information available to me, was at one time a leftist journalist, held Communist views, and considered himself an adherent of the 'socialist realism' school of writing. Being a staunch opponent of the Iraqi monarchy, he was a hunted man for many years and had to live the life of an exile in one country after another. The overthrow of the monarchy in the revolution of 1958 brought him back to his homeland. The new revolutionary regime appointed him cultural attaché to the Iraqi Embassy in Moscow. He later quit this job and taught at the Asian People's University in Moscow. It seems that the revolutionary successors to the despotic

regime of Prime Minister Nuri Said weren't much to his liking.

Al-Bayati's mother was a Kurd, and recalling the vicious repressions of rebellious Kurdistan by successive revolutionary military dictatorships (especially Saddam Hussein's), one shouldn't wonder if al-Bayati became a bitter, disenchanted man, the bitterness and disenchantment acting as the motor that fires the powerful 'Lament for the June Sun'. (The lines I'll be quoting below are from an English version of the poem by Desmond Stewart.)

In 1967, there was the disastrous Six-Day War. Until just over a week ago, there was the equally disastrous Six-Week War (to the day!). A Six-Month War, next time? If Saddam survives in power, there might be.

What's particularly worth noticing about al-Bayati's remarkable poem (our trendy Third World apologists, ritualistic radicals, *jihad*-jingoists, and compulsive anti-American rhetoricians, please take note) is the savage lampooning of the big-mouthed intellectuals of the Arabic world. They specialize in swatting at flies in "the cafe of the East" (ranging from Cairo's air-conditioned equivalents of the European cafe to the proletarian *chaikhanas* of Baghdad). They sport "the mask of life in history's garbage can, aping men". Being prisoners of the Arabic language, which I am told can be a superb medium for the sheer rhetorical flourish and heated hyperbole, they become master conjurers of grandiose fantasies and collective delusions. In their own noisy way, they thrive on "the passionate intensity" of "the worst" that Yeats refers to in 'The Second Coming'. These professional rhetoricians are the indispensable drum-beaters for the equally big-mouthed politicians, their egos almost Pharaonic in proportions.

Al-Bayati sees these so-called leaders as "peacocks strutting the halls where pride is dead", while:

The essays of obedient hacks  
Staining pages  
Staining the shoes of the powerful  
With the blood of truth...

No alibis are entertained for the shameful disaster of the June 67; no futile anti-Zionist rhetoric or anti-American rage, but a hard look at the cloudy hearts and minds of the Arab elite.

Contrast this to the long *puisi* by Anis Sabirin which *Berita Minggu* (March 3, 1991) gave a whole page to and printed in big type. Anis, in the Sixties, was one of our better woman poets; it is sad to me to note that she has succumbed to the blinkered view of the realities of the Gulf War in the name of human compassion. I am, of course, all for the compassion and anger, even when it is expressed in a non-poem that purports to be a poem, which Anis's is. But human compassion for the terrible death of children and old women in the Baghdad bomb shelter on '13 Februari 1991' – the title of the piece – is not terribly persuasive because it is expressed in a way which none too subtly suggests that the brutality is all on infidels. There is not a hint of the brutality of the self-declared champion of Islamic unity. And when this is reinforced by crude rhetorical use of religious references and Islamic imagery (what little imagery there is in the thing), one can't be blamed for thinking that the poet has here abdicated her responsibility as a poet and succumbed to mass emotion amounting to near-hysteria.

Al-Bayati's 'Lament', resisting the pull of mass emotion and self-righteous anger, rises in the second verse to a crescendo of pure bitterness, the bitterness of the betrayed that tugs at the heart.

Why did they leave us in the waste?  
O my God the predatory birds!  
We pull on the tatters of our dead and weep without  
shame  
No rag for our nakedness is left by the June sun  
Why do they leave us to the dogs  
Corpses without prayer  
Bearing the murdered nation in one fist and dust in the  
other?  
Don't brush the flies from the wound  
My wound is Job's mouth  
My pain consists in waiting  
My blood seeks vengeance.

The vengeance the voice is seeking may be thought to be against the Infidel Powers behind the "predatory birds" (the Arabic word for 'birds', says Desmond Stewart, has the same consonants as the word for airplanes). But the tone of the poem strongly suggests that the vengeance sought is as much, if not more, against the "peacocks strutting the halls." This is reinforced by the last verse which envisions the "defeat" of the "giant peacocks", a defeat "Quicker than the lightning of a match."

Al-Bayati's 'Lament' should put to shame those *arak*-intoxicated word-whores "swatting at flies" in the cafes of Cairo, Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad... and, I suppose I should add, the even more undernourished 'whores' swatting at *nyamuks* in the canteens of UM or UKM, at the editorial office of *Harakah*, in the *warungs* of Kampung Baru or stalls of Bangsar. And, one mustn't forget, all those *tempurung*-turbaned innocents who queued up at those stalls manned by the recruiting agents of Pas, impatient to sign up into the army of Saddam, the allegedly God-sent 'David' (pardon the Biblical-Jewish analogy) destined to trash that infidel 'Goliath' to kingdom come.

It's hard to resist the rhetoric of *jihad*, the seduction of instant paradise through martyrdom in the burning sun.

(Note: Abdul Wahab al-Bayati died on Aug 3, 1999, of a heart attack in Damascus. He was 73. In 1995, Saddam Hussien's government stripped him of his citizenship after he visited Saudi Arabia to participate in a cultural festival. Al-Bayati, renowned Iraqi poet, had spent half his life in exile which he described as 'tormenting'. "I always dream at night of Iraq," he said in an interview, "and hear its heart beating and smell it's fragrance carried by the wind...")

## Portrait of the Poet as a 'Nenek'

[17th June 1992]

It is often said that the rebel of today is the Establishment of tomorrow; and, similarly, today's outsider is tomorrow's insider. The exceptions to this general rule are quite rare. Recently, I had the pleasure of meeting one of these rarities. She is a *nenek* (grandma) poet from Japan, Kazuko Shiraishi. The name sounds highly suggestive, at least to me. Note the softly purring sibilance of Shiraishi nudged on by the relatively hard thrust of Kazuko. To my inner ear, that combination reflects what I perceived as a happy conjunction of opposites in her personality. The East and the West, the soft and the hard, the sacred and the profane, the gay and the not-so gay, the outwardly provocative and the secretly shy, the theatrically flashy and the subtly blurred, the surprising openness and the inevitable inscrutability.

My meeting with her was totally unexpected. It happened on the day after I returned from my *khalwat* on that barren island to resume this column. I took that meeting with my favourite Asian woman poet as a sign of some kind, vaguely but strongly suggestive of some unknown source of energy I quite desperately needed then. When I think of this woman now, one particular image comes vividly to mind; that of her as a sleeping beauty on who time, ravishing time, had been gentle with. Lucky



Kazuko Shiraishi, herself ravishing in her own relaxed unaging sensuality. She is 61. I know she has a daughter who's approaching 40, but forgot to ask whether she had any *cucus* (grandchildren).

What's so remarkable about a 61-year-old woman poet, you might ask. Well, because for a start she doesn't look her age (she looks 20 years younger); neither does she behave like one, dress like one, talk like one. And as for her being a poet, she may or may not look or behave like one, depending on what your idea of a poet, especially an Asian woman poet, is. Our *sasterawans* (here I go again), not knowing anything about her, would most probably assume she is a nightclub hostess or a slut of Nighttown. And when told that she is a poet, they would probably think that everything about her is unbecoming of an Eastern lady poet. Too much makeup *lah*, too forward *lah*, dressed like a young whore *lah*. This *lah*, that *lah*. Did I say she's a sleeping beauty? Yes, and meant it literally too as well as poetically. I can see her now curled up like a buxom Siamese cat on the rattan mat in the corner of my sitting room. In her loose-fitting blouse and striped tight pants, she is a heap of brilliant colours against the glaring light of the noonday sun beyond the window. She always enjoys dressing up, and always in bright colours and patterns. A bit plump she is now – but she carries the extra weight with grace. There has always been something theatrical about her, in the way she moves as well as the way she dresses. And she always likes to wear a hat; it gives her stance a touch of dandyism, but not of the tasteless kind.

Kazuko the buxom Japanese Siamese cat likes animals too, perhaps even better than men (or man, perhaps?). She has written many poems on different kinds of animals; one of them is called 'Seven Happy Cats'. Happy cats. Yes. How vividly I see her now, curled up quite snugly on the mat. "I feel drowsy... Got to snatch a bit of sleep...

Just five minutes, ten... I'm sure you won't mind..." And she slides to the floor on "mind", confident in her heart that mine is a house she could immediately feel at home in. There is something hippie-like in her instinctive presumption of fraternity. It was perhaps helped a little by the Tiger we shared before lunch (she didn't know until then that Malaysia has beers of her own, all her escorts before I took over for the day being strictly teetotalers).

Everything seemed so casual, that afternoon at my place; so familiar and intimate that I had to remind myself that the woman sleeping in that corner was the one Japanese poet I had always wanted to meet. She was in my house as if she had dropped out of the clear blue sky and landed on my mat. It seems that spontaneity characterises her social presence as much as it does her writing. Kazuko Shiraishi, poet from the Land of the Rising Sun, instinctively makes people (the right ones, at least), who come into the charmed circle of her blessed being, as spontaneous as she is.

She is known to the English-speaking world as the author of a small volume of poems called *Seasons of Sacred Lust* (New Directions, 1978). She was in Malaysia for a few days last month. Since she was on a private visit, the media barely took notice of her presence. She gave a reading and a talk in Penang, then flew to Kuala Lumpur for a couple of days on her way back to Tokyo. In Kuala Lumpur, she was co-opted into a *puisi deklamasi* evening at the City Hall Auditorium, the monthly *Puisi DBKL*. Kazuko seemed less than enthusiastic to be part of that non-event, partly because she is not the *deklamasi* type of poet-performer, but mainly because they couldn't provide her with the kind of music she needed.

She is reputed to be a marvellous performer, and a very hip one too. Perhaps that's still true today, even at her age. In the mid-Sixties and through the Seventies, Kazuko

Shiraishi was the literary sensation of Tokyo, performing her uninhibited poetry to jazz accompaniment in nightclubs, cafes and similar digs. As represented by the selections in *Seasons of Sacred Lust*, her poetry of that period is fecund with startling sexual images that assault the senses with surreal wit and ambiguous passion. It's a poetry of alienation (a cliché, I know, but in this case quite inescapable), and meant to be performed in the full sense of that word (see article: No Sin when the 'Obscene' is not Seen). People who have seen a Kazuko performance couldn't resist superlatives to describe it. Kenneth Rexroth, one of her American translators and a friend of hers, used the phrase "slashing rhythm" to describe her poetry as read by the poet herself. Kazuko's own words are even more suggestive: "Samurai movie voice" – truly Shiraishish, that. Kazuko, the hip woman Samurai, as a social outsider. I rather like that picture of her.

In Penang, Kazuko's reading, though without music, did suggest something of the haunting Japanese melody said to be heard by anyone familiar with Japanese. I myself, totally ignorant of the language but not totally unfamiliar with its sound, could feel moved by that melody; especially when she read the lovely, suggestively mystical poem called 'The Sand Clan', one of her more recent works. The title of the English selection *Seasons of Sacred Lust* comes from one of her poems of the late Sixties. That poem, she told me, is (in the original Japanese) very, very long; thousands of lines, and it took her 10 years to finish. Despite the startlingly stark sexual imagery of that epic sequence, it was awarded a major poetry prize in Japan. Apparently, Japanese devotees of poetry in the late Sixties were more tolerant than one would have expected. This, despite the occasional scandal associated with the apparently or allegedly sex-obsessed Shiraishi.

One particular scandal involved a poem of the *Seasons* period called 'The Man Root'. This one has lines like:

Set the seeds of that God-given penis  
In the thin, small, and very charming voice of Sumiko  
On the end of the line.  
... the penis shooting up day by day  
Flourishes in the heart of the cosmos  
As rigid as a wrecked bus  
... It's spectacular when the cock  
Starts nuzzling the edge of the cosmos...

(I'd better stop, I think, before...)

## When the 'Obscene' is No Sin

[24th June 1991]

I recently quoted a sample of Kazuko Shiraishi's poetry to illustrate her lack of inhibition in the use of sexual imagery. The sample was by no means the most uninhibited of her works, though the poem concerned – 'The Man Root' – was the only one by Shiraishi to have caused a scandal in Japan. Scandals are okay with me (and with Shiraishi too, I'm sure) as long as it doesn't lead to the work being banned, and this particular poem wasn't. I'm not quite sure why 'Man Root' caused a scandal. Could the reason be religious? The reference to God in such a bawdy context could have caused offence. Perhaps, though I doubt it because the idea of God, as Muslims and Christians understand it, is alien to the majority of Japanese.

Whatever the reason for the scandal, it couldn't have been the use of startling sexual imagery. There are other poems of Shiraishi in which the sexual imagery is equally if not more startling, even more obscene (to prudes, that is), but they didn't cause any scandal. Compared to us, the Japanese seem quite tolerant when it comes to sex, both in life and in literature. The association of sex with filth or sin seems alien to them. And it is worth remembering that the primitive Japanese revered fertility among humans as well as in agriculture. And until recent times, according to historians, phallic symbols were common objects of worship

in rural Japan. Something of the old attitudes seems to have survived in the modern Japanese to coexist with a form of puritanism that came later. It is this later puritanism that makes the Japanese at times seem to us creatures of contradiction in matters of sex. They can appear both licentious and puritanical at the same time.

In literature and visual art, however, the Japanese certainly seem more licentious than puritanical. This must reflect something of the reality; the general tolerance to writings that involve sex suggests this. The Japanese positive attitude to sex would probably have made them love Shiraishi's surrealistically transcendent image in 'Man Root' of "the cock... nuzzling the edge of the cosmos". They may, though, have been somewhat puzzled by the comparison in the same poem of the rigid organ to a "wrecked bus". Here, I suspect, Shiraishi with her bizarre wit was counting on her readers taste for such sexual humour; the kind of humour revealed by some of those notorious Japanese erotic and pornographic prints.

Shiraishi may be a poet of alienation, an outsider in relation to modern Japanese society. But she is also in her individual way true to the ancient Japanese in her. Her uninhibited sensuality could be considered a modern manifestation of an old hedonistic morality. I think it's important to stress the native strain in Shiraishi's open attitude to sexuality, however unconventional her poetic style and even certain elements in her perception of sex may be. It is important to stress this because she has been called a Japanese beatnik; "the Allen Ginsberg of Japan" no less. And this perception of her is reinforced by the fact that she is a friend of Ginsberg and her acknowledged heroes include Western writers like Henry Miller and jazz musicians like John Coltrane (the latter she has celebrated in a moving poem).

I can imagine Shiraishi being dismissed by guardians

of Eastern modesty as a poet corrupted by 'Western decadence'. And the fact that she is a woman would no doubt make her 'shamelessness' doubly offensive. It would be stupid of me to deny the influence of Western writings on Shiraishi's poetry. I simply believe that this influence has merged in her art with what she has inherited from her own cultural tradition. Because of the use of stark sexual images in quite a number of her poems, Shiraishi has a reputation of being a very erotic poet. This reputation is still attached to her name despite the fact that her more recent works have little to do with sex. She told me that magazine editors still expect her to contribute 'erotic poems' and are disappointed when she sends them 'non-erotic' ones.

Actually the label 'erotic', even when applied to the poems of her collection *Seasons of Sacred Lust*, is only partially accurate. The presence of sexual images in these poems does not make all of them erotic in the normally understood sense of that word. These images can express some vague but powerful feelings of desolation as well as passion, fear as well as desire, horror as well as exaltation. And some of them are too bizarre to turn you on. The world of *Seasons of Sacred Lust* sometimes strikes the reader as dehumanised, a world of urban nightmares, of "Borgian poison called city". The American poet Kenneth Rexroth, one of her translators, says in his introduction to *Seasons* that "Shiraishi's Tokyo is straight out of Dante's *Inferno*", where lovers "seem only to get together for a moment to realize estrangement", where "music - jazz and rock - and poetry provide something resembling values" and "sex only seems to ease the pain and fear".

Calling Shiraishi's Tokyo Dantesque seems an exaggeration to me. But there is no denying the nightmarish quality of some of the poems. This is graphically evoked

by bizarre images – such as of penises severed by samurai swords, or rats “gnaw(ing) a long thin cock lying on the floor”. The poet talks of the self being “tangled in the spider’s web/Of sheer forgetfulness, sharp ecstasy, brooding manias”. She invites her readers to take time to “just drop in on life/On your way to the graveyard” – to “dive between the sheets” which offer temporary escape from desolation, or, if that’s not possible, to retreat into some private “interior canal” or infiltrate some “intimate city” of the self, some fiercely affirmed private cosmos.

Whenever some affirmation is made or suggested, it sounds almost desperate and somewhat willed:

My dear

I am starting to write a very long letter

I can't see it

Nor can you...

We start to write a very long letter

Start to walk on a very long resolve...

But this long doesn't mean eternity

It is the stretch of human beings

As long as they live

As long as their resolve is moist

A discernible leitmotif linking a number of these poems of “sacred lust” is the paradoxical idea of the eternal instant – such as suggested by phrases and lines like the following: “it’s momentary/its almost eternity”; “For a little while, about as long as forever”; “short pilgrimage/full of fleeting eternity”. I suppose this could be regarded as Shiraishi’s version of the *carpé diem* (seize-the-moment) philosophy. In her case, this philosophy is fed by a sense of estrangement. However opaque and bewilderingly bizarre Shiraishi can be at times, there is no doubt about the pain of her alienation and the strange power of her poetic



response to it. The fact that she can be witty as well helps to make her poems quite a pleasure to read.

Puritans and prudes will, of course, find her obscene and therefore offensive. But I am convinced that she is serious enough a writer not to want to shock for the sake of shocking. You may not like or even agree with her perceptions of life, but you cannot deny her seriousness. What the prudes call obscene in her poems is not something gratuitous; it's necessary to an honest expression of her sense of the dehumanized modern world. There is certainly nothing in it that can deprave or corrupt anyone. Japan seems to have a place for poets like Kazuko Shiraishi. In view of our government's Look East policy, wouldn't it be nice if we were to follow Japan in this respect? But first, we must have poets who have the guts, the honesty and the talent to be a Shiraishi. Do we?

## A 55-year-old Flower-Child Poet

[25th November 1992]

In some ways, I rather envy Roger McGough the English poet here for the Kuala Lumpur World Poetry Reading. I envy especially his ability to live comfortably and travel all over the world on his poetry. Even in the West, there are not that many poets who can do this. Those who one might think can do so, like Seamus Heaney, have to depend on part-time or temporary university jobs or literary journalism to supplement the earnings from their poetry. Or, like Tony Harrison, work in another but related area such as the theatre.

Two of the reasons why McGough can live on his poetry are: (1) he writes the kind of poetry that has popular appeal; (2) he is a performer who can entertain a mass audience, both adult and children, with his style of reading. Why is his poetry popular? McGough has the kind of versifying skill that can produce stuff that sounds simple but not simplistic or thin as poetry – at least not always. He has a casual wit and a colloquial humour that can range from the teasingly macabre to the caustically sceptical, the latter often deceptively light in manner and tone.

His is a 'non-elitist' poetry in the good sense of the word. Those of our *penyairs* (poets) who aspire to be popular but have no clue as to how to go about achieving the popular touch, being so deadly solemn and boring,

could do well to note his example. Here's something from his earliest book, a group selection called *The Mersey Sound* (Penguin, 1967) which he shared with fellow Liverpool poets Adrian Henry and Brian Patten:

Let me die a youngman's death  
not a clean & in-between  
the sheets holywater death  
not a famous-last-words  
peaceful out of breath death  
When I'm 73  
& in constant good tumour  
may I be mown down at dawn  
by a bright red sports car  
on my way home  
from an allnight party  
... Or when I'm 104  
& banned from the Cavern  
may my mistress  
catching me in bed with her daughter  
& fearing for her son  
cut me up into little pieces  
& throw away every piece but one  
Let me die a youngman's death  
not a free from sin tiptoe in  
candle wax & waning death  
not a curtain drawn by angels borne  
'what a nice way to go' death

Or this from his most recent book, *Defying Gravity*,  
'Five-car Family':

We're a five-car family  
We got what it takes  
Eight thousand cc  
Four different makes

One each for the kids  
I run two  
One for the missus  
When there's shopping to do  
Cars are Japanese of course  
Subaru and Mazda  
And the Nissan that the missus takes  
Nippin down to Asda  
We're a load of noisy parkers  
We never do it neat  
Drive the neighbours crazy  
When we take up half the street  
Unleaded petrol?  
That's gotta be a joke?  
Stepping on the gas we like  
The smoke to make you choke.

To be popular without compromising one's art, at least the kind of art one is good at or cares for as McGough in the main is or does, is not an easy thing. It is even less easy to be able to read or perform one's stuff as entertainingly as McGough can.

I took Roger to my favourite (*halal*) watering hole, a nice quiet old place right in the heart of the city with a courtyard graced by low coconut palms and a lovely barmaid-cum-resident muse with grit and an earthy sense of humour. We drank Tigers, and, in between stretches of casual chat (hardly an interview), Roger entertained me and my muse with funny anecdotes and impromptu readings. One of the poems he read was 'Let Me Die a Youngman's Death' which turned my muse on enough to inspire the visiting troubadour to read a few more. The reading went down well with the afternoon Tigers.

Fifty-five-year-old Roger McGough, physically (pony tail and green-framed glasses and all) and spiritually, is a

true survivor of the Sixties, that heady earthy decade of flower-children which put Liverpool, our troubadour's hometown, on the map. This compatriot and contemporary of the Beatles took poetry to the streets, the pubs and the marketplace, and became a hit. His verse and that of his fellow Liverpool poets resonated far beyond the Mersey. These Mersey troubadours are not great poets but they fulfil a need that 'great poetry' by its very nature seldom can. And what they've achieved should not be looked down upon. And McGough, the popular poet of the people, is not looked down upon by everyone in the English literary establishment.

Philip Larkin and poet laureate Ted Hughes, both liked his stuff, and he has been a Poetry Fellow at more than one university. McGough is a very prolific writer; in three decades of writing he has published more than a dozen books of poetry for adults and quite a few for children. Critics may frown upon his productiveness and wish that he would be more self-critical of the works he chooses to publish. But in my view, many of the poems he publishes are so entertaining that it doesn't really matter if only few of them, if any, survive to be 'classics of English literature'.

McGough told my muse and me a funny anecdote about a reading tour the 'Mersey poets' did in Germany in the late Sixties. Due to some misunderstanding over the phone, the German poster publicising the tour read 'The little poets of England...' instead of 'The Liverpool poets...'. I'm sure Roger won't mind if I call him a 'great little poet', one of the best England has produced.

## Performance Poetry, Anyone?

[19th June 1991]

Poetry has always been very much a minority art in the modern world. One of the many reasons for this has to do with the nature of poetry itself. "All poetry," says Robert Browning, "is difficult to read – the sense of it, anyhow." By "sense", Browning must mean the total poetic meaning, not just what is paraphraseable. And to get the total poetic meaning, one must be educated in the language of poetry. Education here doesn't, of course, necessarily mean formal education.

Attempts to expand the audience for poetry, range from the obvious to the odious, from the innovative to the inane. Public poetry reading is one obvious and popular means of reaching out to a wider audience. One thinks of the charismatic poet Yevtushenko who could attract and enthral thousands of people in a football stadium, or of the no less charismatic Indonesian poet Rendra. Then there are the various attempts to turn poetry into entertainment or performance. These can take the simple form of dramatising poetry, turning it into theatre, or the integrating of poetry reading with other modes of performance or non-verbal forms (music, dance, mime, slides, films). The latter may mean venturing into the area of the experimental.

Poetry reading is quite popular in this country. Apart from the *deklamasi* on the annual *Hari Puisi* which moves from State to State and is well-subsidised by the State Governments, there's *Puisi DBKL*, a monthly poetry

reading organised by the Kuala Lumpur City Hall. The latter seems to be sustained by a core of loyal audience, most of them young people. The quality of the poetry may not be much to talk about, and most of the readers may not be particularly riveting (they tend to overdramatise or declaim, thus *deklamasi* in the contagious Indonesian style with the inevitable Indonesian accent currently typified by the Terengganu poet dramatist Marzuki Ali, the guest for last month's event).

But, whatever reservations one may have about the monthly event, its existence as an alternative form of entertainment in Kuala Lumpur is a good thing. Some of the young couples and *kutus* may blunder into the auditorium for other than literary reasons, but it doesn't matter. Somehow, being exposed to the mere sound of poetry, even if their minds (and hands) may be on other things, could leave a mark. If only the event were not so solemn as such events tend to be in this country. But our *sasterawans* (writers) being what they are – a tribe of solemn, sentimental *senimans* (artistic folks) – it is difficult for them to break away from the ingrained tendency to associate poetry, in fact, all *seni* (the arts), with solemnity. Poetry as performance – in the form of 'theatre' or pseudo-theatre, or of multi-media event – has been attempted a few times in this country. Of what I have seen, only one was truly memorable (I shall come back to this later) and none could be considered really 'experimental' in nature, with the possible exception of Ghafar Ibrahim's *Tak Tun Tak Tun*, a sort of one-man theatre of apparently 'meaningless' monosyllables accompanied by primitive instruments, its seemingly endless variations not always interesting.

'Experimental' is a word I tend to be rather careful of using in connection with the arts. I certainly wouldn't use it to describe a 'performance poetry' event that I saw in Singapore recently, although that was how it was described

by both the organisers and a local critic who reviewed it. Called Free Verse and generously sponsored by ICI Asia Pacific, it was held at the Substation, a new charming cultural centre with a small auditorium and a cosy courtyard. The Artistic Statement in the lavish programme says: "What we hope to explore is the process by which the written word in poetry may be fused, juxtaposed and complimented (sic) by the distinctly different elements and grammars of theatrical performance." The faulty grammar of this rather pretentious statement itself betrays a certain confusion in the conception of the show. To juxtapose verse with the "different elements and grammars" of other art forms such as music, dance, slides, and computer graphics, may reinforce the verse and give it an added dimension of meaning or power. Poetry in this case remains the primary thing, the other art forms merely complementing and reinforcing it. For this to work, the poetry must be good.

Unfortunately, the poems that were chosen for the 10 items of the show were pretty mediocre – with the partial exception of the mildly witty piece called 'Sita's Complaint' which was accompanied by an Indian classical dancer who interpreted the poem in terms of hand movements and gestures. (One poem I couldn't judge because it was in Mandarin; but the contorted, agonising movements of the dancers gave me an idea of what it was all about). There was a kind of literalness in the way the poems were accompanied by dance and other visual elements. The marriage of the verbal and the visual was predictable and, given the mediocrity of most of the poems, generally dreary. One item called 'Colours' had three girls and a man dressed in red, blue, yellow and green making facial expressions and bodily gestures which were excruciatingly banal, not much more suggestive than the projected slides that also accompanied it. The poem was bad enough; the speaking of it made it worse.



What about the so-called fusion? 'Fusion' is a fashionable word in the arts scene, especially music. But what exactly is meant by 'fusing' poetry with the "different elements and grammars" of other art forms? The creation of "a unique and entirely new mode of expression", as the press release of the show put it? I for one couldn't see the slightest sign of the "new mode". Given the quality of the poetry, the more critical members of the audience could certainly have done with a bit of the "new mode", of genuine 'fusion'. Personally, I am not too sure about all this 'fusion' business. If the poetry is really good, there's always the danger of its being swallowed up in the 'fusion'. If it is not very good, there is, however, the hope that it might benefit from the attempt.

In the performance of poetry generally, there is a fallacy that the poems must be simple to the point of being simplistic, sentimental and inane for the performance to be effective. I think it is an insult to the audience – and to poetry – to think so. It is based on a misunderstanding of the nature and power of poetry and the receptivity of the audience to it. T.S. Eliot once said somewhere, that the stirrings in your bowels that you feel on reading a difficult or obscure poem with strong rhythmic power or imagery, is the beginning of understanding. People who want to do 'performance poetry' should bear that in mind and not confine themselves to 'simple poems', though, of course, I am all for genuinely simple (but good) poems too.

About a year ago, an event was held at Sulaiman Court in Kuala Lumpur which received little publicity and no reviews in the press. It was held for three nights and the audience turnout was good. It was called *Teb, Kopi and Puisi*. Not all the readings were marvellous, but one poem, a rather lengthy ballad called 'Balada Mat Solo' (about an amok) was 'performed' powerfully by the experienced actor Rahim Razali. What Rahim did was to

get into a trance and mime the poem (which was read on tape) in terms of *silat* movements and suggestive facial expressions; shadows were used to reinforce Rahim's *silat* interpretation of the poem.

The most amazing thing about that performance was the fact that quite a number of *kutus* actually stayed on to watch and listen with entranced expression on their faces. It was amazing because the poem was not exactly an easy one to understand on first reading. The *kutus* were obviously responding to it with their gut. And that was the beginning of understanding.

## Lady Godiva Rides Again

[3rd July 1991]

Plagiarism in general and in literature in particular has always intrigued me not so much as a moral but as a psychological phenomenon. This can take many forms, from the charmingly innocent to the tortuously artful. Recently, a case of literary plagiarism of the innocent variety (but still calculating in its own way) made news in Singapore. This case is interesting for a number of reasons.

A Singapore citizen but Malaysian by birth, the plagiarist is a curious woman whose motive in plagiarising seems different from other such cases I've come across. She is the kind of plagiarist that only a developing country obsessed with the cult of programmed 'cultural development' could spawn, but with a touch that could only be called charmingly Singaporean in its innocence. Anna Wang is her name. A venture capital consultant (whatever that is), Miss Wang (age unknown) suddenly developed a yearning to be an author; and not any kind of author too – a poet no less. Her sudden yearning must have been inspired by Premier Goh Chok Tong's historic speech a few months ago announcing the republic's entry into a new post-Lee, post-puritan era.

Singaporeans, said Premier Goh so memorably, had finally discovered fun, and that fun was good for business. "We have got to find new ways of expressing ourselves," said Goh. He stressed that this fun business had to be pursued very seriously (typically Singaporean, this), in every

department of life. The new Premier would like in particular to shed the country's reputation as a cultural desert, and to see Singaporeans develop "three-dimensional personalities" who will contribute to a "culturally vibrant society" and ensure "more bubbles in the Singapore champagne."

Anna Wang took the Premier's call quite seriously. She decided to create some bubbles in the Singapore's literary champagne. She popped into news and instant celebrity by publishing at her own expense a book of verse called *A-MUSING* 69. The title of the book announces the spirit of the new era. Being an adventurous venture capitalist or whatever, Miss Wang showed shrewd business sense: she knew how to have fun with the idea of poetry and make it good business at the same time. In short, she knew how to turn poetry into money, including other people's poetry. Several pieces in the book are studded with lines from the works of other poets – ranging from Wordsworth to Singapore's own Lee Tzu Pheng. What could be more shrewd (but innocent too in Wang's winning way) than recycling other people's efforts, passing them as your own? That's the essence of capitalism, isn't it?

Anna Wang (the pun on the Malay word for money in her surname must have been written in the stars), thus proved that there is money in poetry and poetry in money (that's plagiarised, by the way). A 108-page book costing S\$40 hardback (\$15 paperback), it was launched in a style befitting the spirit of the new Singapore – bubbly with titillating cheeky neo-hedonism that must, no doubt, have raised a few eyebrows as well as the sale of the book. The invitation card to the book launch, according to a report in the *Straits Times*, featured a painting of a nude woman. And the launching cake (yes, there was a cake, too) had the naked horse-riding Lady Godiva in icing whose face apparently bore a striking resemblance to the author of *A-MUSING* 69. That must have been some book launch!

Anna Wang, judging from a big photograph of her in the *Straits Times*, appears to be quite a buxomly sexy woman. "I am not a lady of literature," she was quoted as saying, with a defensiveness curiously innocent and artful at the same time. "I'm writing as a layman." Layman, indeed! As a line from one of her piquant poetic emissions has it: "Truth shows best naked and unfixd." Her maiden effort (to coin an original phrase) in poetry production for the new Singapore of Premier Goh is revealing in many ways. I mean this quite seriously, for I see Anna Wang as the Muse of the Go-Getting Republic (no offence, I hope, to real Singapore poets like Lee Tzu Pheng).

All the way with Premier Goh! Appropriately enough, Miss Wang has a piece called 'Changing of the Guards', about the Premiership transition. YES, Anna Wang could be seen as the Muse of Goh's Singapore where even fun has to be approached with Singaporean seriousness, culture with calculating innocence, and artistic expression by 3-D citizens is encouraged in the name of solemnly invoked civic consciousness, regimented neighbourly spirit and programmed consideration for others. The fact that Anna Wang's poetic plagiarism is curiously innocent and based on a very limited acquaintance with the original literature is itself symptomatic. "If I could reproduce such beautiful verses," she was quoted as saying after she was exposed, "I could make them so simple that ordinary people can enjoy them." And she went on to ask, "If the phrases are so appropriate, why can't I use them?" What do you say to such disarming innocence from such a sexy lady? I'd be tempted to say "Yes, lady, why not, indeed! Plagiarise me too if you like. Please!"

Where did she come across those "beautiful verses"? In the case of Lee Tzu Pheng's poem 'Singapore River', a whole chunk of which was lifted with minor reversals of syntax, Miss Wang didn't read the original poem but came

across it in a newspaper article on the Singapore River where the Tzu Pheng poem was quoted. Miss Wang is an avid newspaper reader (and no doubt of *Reader's Digest* and women's magazines too); she wrote the poems in *A-MUSING* 69 at the rate of about one poem per day. I wonder whether the lines she lifted from Wordsworth and other familiar classics were from the same sort of secondary sources too. (She said she loved "copying the style of the Elizabethan poets", but when asked which ones, she could name only Shakespeare).

And note the motive that inspired her plagiarism: "To make them (the lifted verses) so simple that ordinary people can enjoy them." Well, isn't that a laudable attempt by a good 3-D Singaporean to share copyrighted poetic gems with his/her fellow citizens? And, in the process, help make Singapore a "culturally vibrant society" and the champagne of Singapore popular poetry bubbling with good feeling and earnest fun? The phenomenon of Anna Wang, as I said, is something that only a developing country could produce. It gives the universal disease of plagiarism in literature a 'Third World twist'. It is neither the creative 'plagiarism' of the T.S. Eliot kind (in which lifted lines are transformed and given new life by the modernist context) nor the ethically questionable plagiarism of the S.T. Coleridge type. It is plagiarism motivated by 'good intentions', very disarming in its civic innocence, and in her case quite 'Singaporean'.

Should people like Anna Wang be encouraged? Well, the stern literary moralist in me would say: plagiarism is plagiarism, with or without the 'Third World twist'. We may be amused by *A-MUSING* 69, and titillated by Anna Wang as Lady Godiva in puritanical Singapore. But, finally, I suppose people like her must be sent to Coventry. But will she be?

I doubt it. People generally tend to be rather forgiving

of plagiarists. This has been shown time and again in the history of Western literature. After the initial shock and murmurs of moral indignation, the crime is forgotten. And if the writers involved are figures with an established reputation, scholars and critics who consider themselves guardians of that reputation will lean over backwards to explain or rationalise away the plagiarism. (Coleridge and Edgar Allan Poe are among the famous examples of writers who survived the incriminating charge of serious plagiarism).

If Anna Nobody gets sent to Coventry (which, as I've said, is highly unlikely), she'll be in desperate need of the protection of Lady Godiva, the patroness of Coventry itself. That icing nude riding the horse on the launching cake – it must have been inspired by an unconscious fear of being caught with her skirts down.

## Usman Awang – Malaysia's 'Lucky' Poet

[21st September 1986]

Usman Awang is unquestionably Malaysia's best-known and most respected poet, sanctified with the *Anugerah Sasterawan Negara* by the Government and an honorary Doctor of Letters by the University of Malaya. That's not a bad achievement for someone who started as a mere *mata-mata* and whose formal education didn't go beyond primary school.

Recently, his third and most important collection of poems, the bilingual *Salam Benua/Greetings to the Continent* (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1982), was reprinted. (Reprinted without corrections, I should add; errors, not too many but still irritating have surfaced from the printing.) *Salam Benua* is obviously meant to be a collection of Usman's best poems up to the Seventies. Half of it consists of works from his first two volumes which he considers worth preserving. The reprinting of the book, therefore, gives us an opportunity to re-evaluate the achievement of this lucky poet.

Lucky poet? I am not exactly thinking here of the *mata-mata* who became a *Sasterawan Negara*. The phrase is really an allusion to a famous remark of the Scottish socialist poet, Hugh MacDiarmid. "Our principal writers," said Mr Diarmid, "have nearly all been fortunate in escaping regular education." Usman Awang too, can be



said to have been almost similarly lucky. Whatever strengths he has as a poet are partly due to the hard, irregular school of life that he went through, and partly to the fact that the poetic sensibility he drew in with his mother's milk had escaped 'contamination' by formal Westernised education.

To have got where he is, is not the only remarkable thing about this poet. Equally remarkable is the fact that although he is deeply Malay in his sensibility and very proud of his racial heritage, he is also one of the most Malaysian in spirit. Poems like *Anak Jiran Tionghua*, *Suasana*, and the May 13-inspired *Kambing Hitam*, have endeared him to non-Malay readers. It is the rare ability of this Malay-educated poet to speak across communal and language barriers as well as his concern for the poor and the betrayed that make him the nearest thing we have to a people's poet.

Usman's achievement can be said to transcend mere poetic considerations. The social message of his verse is as important, if not more so, as the poetry itself. And the role he played in literary movements was vital to the shaping of his image as the people's poet. He was one of the most influential leaders of Asas 50 which had 'Art for the Sake of Society' as its fighting slogan.

Usman's reputation as a poet (and I mean POET, not literary personality) might seem surprising to an outsider who has only his three, rather slim, collections of poems and two verse plays to judge by. Considering that he has been writing for more than three decades, his output can't be said to be very impressive – in terms of both quantity and, if judged by the highest standards, the number of really good poems among them. Even *Salam Bemua*, which is supposed to be a collection of his best poems to date, is a very uneven volume. The selection could certainly have been a bit more rigorous; some of the things in it are really

ephemeral (like *500 Merdeka*), and should not have been included. But then the superb poet, who wrote the powerfully sardonic *Pak Utih 2* or the stirringly erotic *Kekasih*, wants to be remembered as a spokesperson of the people on almost every conceivable occasion, and insists that we take the likes of *500 Merdeka* as poetry too. 'Poetry for the Sake of Society', of course.

His famous *nom de plume* – or rather *nom de guerre* of the Fifties – *Tongkat Waran* (police baton), is in this respect quite revealing. It's brutally unlike the Sanskrit-sloshed pseudonyms much preferred by the *sasterawan* softies of Malay literature – including Usman himself at one stage, when he fancied the self consciously poetic *Atma Jiwa* as one of his several masks, alongside *Tongkat Waran*.

*Tongkat Waran* represents the masculine side of Usman, and it is this, I believe, which saves him from one of his two worst enemies as a poet – sentimentality. It doesn't, however, always save him from the other enemy – superficiality. *Tongkat Waran* may be masculine, but it can also suggest impatience with poverty. Poetry to a *Tongkat Waran* can become a mere luxury that impedes the directness and urgency of the message. If Usman's superficiality is the result of his political impatience, his sentimentality is, in part, due to his excessive love for the seductive euphony of the Malay language. There is in Usman, I suspect, a bit of the 'sentimental Malay' to whom the verbalism of sentiments comes somewhat too easily.

When the true poet in him is speaking, he can be strikingly good. He may not impress you with the depth of his perception or his angle of vision (as Latiff Mohidin does with his), but his simple virtues, when fully realised, have produced memorable poetry. His strengths lie notably in his ability to express common feelings in a euphorically suggestive line, (e.g. *Betapa suramnya cahaya dalam*

*keredupan mata meminta*) or in a language distinguished by colloquial vigour. Clichés can thus acquire a degree of freshness in his verse. This is one of the major reasons why Usman is not an easy poet to translate.

Take that much-lived early poem *Ke Makam Bonda* (At Mother's Grave). If you don't know Malay and read the translation on the facing page in *Salam Benua*, you'll wonder why this poem is so highly regarded, not only by the common reader but also by the critics. Like many of the other translations in the book, 'At Mother's Grave' suffers from the ponderous and deadly literalism. The style of *Ke Makam Bonda* (1955), especially its poeticisms and mechanical *pantun*-like rhythm, may sound dated and artificial to the modernist ear. But if approached on its own terms – that is if we allow ourselves to be open to its ritual-like movement and the affirmative naivety of its music – the poem will give us an entry into the world of Malay *rasa* as mediated through the sensibility (i.e. *rasa*) of Usman Awang.

Dr Lloyd Fernando, in an article on Usman, rightly points out that *rasa* in his poetry has an almost metaphysical quality. In the words of the poem *Kelopak Rasa*, it is an *anugerah keramat* (sacred gift), something impersonal and pervasive. *Rasa*, in this sense, informs and universalises Usman's passion both as a love poet and as a poet-spokesperson of the poor and the betrayed. Surprisingly, the lover in Usman is not as prominent in his poetry as the popular notion of him would have it. In the whole of *Salam Benua*, there is only one real love poem, the beautiful and erotic *Kekasih* (Beloved).

The phenomenon of sexual love has rarely been celebrated in modern Malay poetry with such fervour and reverence, with such cosmic resonance as in Usman's *Kekasih*. The entire universe – from the foams and the moons – participates in the ritual of desire and love. The

poet can range effortlessly from the cosmic to the concretely erotic, in effect uniting the two in one experience: "*akan ku jolok bulan gerhana/ menjadi lampu/ menyulubi rindu.*" (I won't dare translate that one).

*Salam Benua* is heavily dominated by poems of social and political comment, the kind of poems very vulnerable to the disease of rhetoric. The sentiments in all of them are fine, yes; but the poetry, in a number of cases, tends to be thin and one-dimensional.

Usman's social and political poems present an even greater challenge to the translator than his personal ones. If the translator is not careful, what in Malay comes close to being hackneyed but is not quite so, may sound pretty awful in English. Like this: "the fluttering flags of co-existence fly with it" for *bersih bulunya mengibarkan panji hidup bersama* (from the well known poem on the spirit of universal brotherhood, *Merpati Putih, Jelajahilah Dunia Ini*). Co-existence, indeed! The word has been so badly mauled by politicians and journalists that it should not be allowed to appear in a poem, unless in a satire.

When Usman manages to get away from the glib rhetoric of humanitarianism, he can be a good, even superb, public poet. This is clearly shown by the two poems on *Pak Utih*, the archetypal poor Malay peasant betrayed by his leaders and the political system. Conveniently enough, these two poems can be taken as representative of the best of early and later Usman. The first *Pak Utih* piece (1954) is fairly typical of his early and middle work – *pantun*-based in its structure and rhythm, but already breaking towards a more flexible form. *Pak Utih 2* (1975) is, for the most part, in free verse. The two poems demonstrate that when Usman's humanitarian concerns are grounded in a sharpness of perception as well as deep feelings, and expressed in vigorous colloquial language, the result can be very striking.

*Pak Utih 2* is to me one of the best poems on the subject I have read. It is fiercely sardonic, and in part phantasmagoria in imagery. The deeply-felt concern for the victims of crazy capitalism who are betrayed by their loud-mouthed self-regarding leaders is, in this poem, given an adequate objective correlative. The language has unusual energy and, in parts, is satirically concrete. There is even an aptly mocking allusion to religion. The poem ends with a menacing vision of sharpened parangs, a promise of blood-bath by the betrayed and the injured. And this is caught in a striking parody of well-known children's rhyme:

*Timang tinggi-tinggi  
parang sudah asah  
alang-alang mandi  
biar sampai basah.*

It's an ominous variation on another parody earlier in the poem:

*Timang tinggi-tinggi  
dapur tak berasap  
bila besar nanti  
duduk dalam lokap.*

In the late Seventies, Usman started writing light satirical poems which make fun of the absurdities of mindless development. These poems reveal a side of the poet which had been mainly suppressed in the Fifties and Sixties. Unfortunately, he did not write very many of them. Included in *Salam Benua* is the mildly salacious *Surat Dari Masyarakat Burung Kepada Datuk Bandar*. A far better satire than the *Burung* piece, *Bagaimana Kalau?* (What If?) is unfortunately not. This one is a hilarious, nicely bawdy, satirical fantasy on the risks of urban living and

social success. Wryly mock-apocalyptic in tone, it visualises the fast-developing city of Kuala Lumpur transformed into a minor hell by the over-regulated chaos in the infrastructure and machinery of bureaucracy.

When I was first shown these pieces by Usman, I couldn't resist help wishing that the satirist in him had been let out sooner, or at least, been allowed to control some of the excesses of the rhetorician and sentimentalist.

Usman, I am told, is at the moment busy on an epic on the Malay race. A huge undertaking, that one – and, no doubt, meant to be the crowning achievement of his career. I wish our *Sasterawan Negara* all the best on his epic flight – so full of temptations and danger – and hope that the light-hearted satirist he has let loose won't be tucked away again and smothered in the heavy garb of the National Bard.

## Latiff Mohidin's Line of Energy

[10th July 1988]

"Energy is Eternal Delight," says the English poet-painter William Blake in 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell'. In his own way, Malaysian poet-painter Latiff Mohidin fully affirms in his art the truth of Blake's delightful line.

He was full of quiet delight one late afternoon recently, as we were sitting and talking and sipping our *teh tarik* near the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP). I hadn't seen him for almost two years and suddenly, there he was, floating on a stream of monologue, discoursing pithily on the hidden energies of his art. He is currently the Dewan's resident writer and for the past few months has been engaged on a book. Not poetry, but something rather unusual for him - part theoretical speculation, part autobiographical case study on the nature of creative energy. The book is threatening to become two, even three volumes. And that for Latiff, known for his verbal parsimony, is certainly extraordinary. It seems that writing about energy has suddenly made him verbally exuberant. The DBP committee wanted him to write a book on "*proses kreativiti*". That's the only condition of his appointment as resident writer. Since it guarantees his *periuk nasi*, Latiff agreed. The hours of work are his to determine, and he is provided with an air-conditioned office and limitless supply of paper.

As Latiff was telling me about “the line of energy”, “the energy of the line”, drops, lines and cobwebs of light, he wove strands of meditation around a subject that no writer in this country has really written on – at least, not in the concretely searching way that Latiff’s book promises to be.

He plans to follow the big theme through a number of interwoven lines in his life as a painter and poet up to the late Sixties. Many of the sketches that led to the famous *Pago-Pago* paintings have been preserved and will be interwoven in the book with extracts from his travel journal as well as meditations on the art of poetry – from the *pepatah* (traditional sayings) to the modern *sajak*. The *Pago-Pago* sketches will play a crucial part in the book. “The creative process,” said Latiff, “is laid bare best in the sketch.” The artist is most relaxed when he is sketching, and, therefore, reveals more of his mind and soul.

*Garis Tenaga* (The Line of Energy) is the proposed title. It appears that writing the book is turning out to be a concrete demonstration of what the book itself is about. Latiff is going back not only to documents in his creative life, but also to memories, dreams, and myths. He is following half-forgotten shapes and patterns (e.g. the bamboo shoots that eventually merged into the *Pago-Pago* forms), visible scratches and invisible filaments, secret threads and subconscious links through the labyrinth of memory and creativity. The artist leads the line and is, in turn, led by the line. That describes the creative process as Latiff understands it. It also apparently describes the process of writing the book. The line of energy is in the energy of the line. Energy is eternal delight.

I am a sucker when it comes to energy. *Jimatkan Tenaga!* The Lembaga Letrik Negara (National Electricity Board) has the global energy crisis to worry about. But artists – poets and painters, dancers and dramatists,



musicians and magicians, and the rest of the subversive tribe – are not energy-savers. Strictly speaking, they don't even harness energy. They live it, they celebrate it, they make love to it, they are it. Politicians and cultural demagogues, with their own perverted form of energy, are suspicious of it – the energy, that is the artist.

In his book, Latiff will have a chapter titled *Garis Merintang* (The Lines of Obstruction). What he has in mind are the obstacles to creative freedom – from constricting concepts to clichés and slogans. Politicians and cultural demagogues, and academic critics too, always want the artist to toe the line – either ideological or conceptual – but the stubborn artist prefers to follow his own inner line. Politicians and demagogues talk of discipline, but the artist has his own entirely different sense of discipline. To the true artist, the line that reveals his creative energy and its origin in the realms of the dark is also the line that shapes that energy.

She is Ariadne with the clew  
By which her princely lover may explore  
The labyrinth of memory, and subdue  
The deep-resounding Minotaur.  
He, with the trophy, guided by the thread,  
Emerges from the maze into the sun,  
Deliverer from tribute paid to dread.

– James McAuley, 'The Muse'

Latiff Mohidin, for the first time in his life, is detaching himself, sort of, from his art, to look at the mysteries of its process. His Ariadne is guiding him and he, in turn, becomes our Ariadne, guiding us with the help of the thread through the labyrinth of creativity into the light of knowledge. Or, at least, a glimpse of it. "From the maze into the sun." And through the mediation of art, we might

have the courage – and the energy – to stare at the sun with lidless eyes.

Those familiar with Latiff's marvellously shaped poems – typically short, thematically pregnant, the imagery sharp and haunting – will have some idea of the kind of discipline that goes into the etching and crafting of the line. Quiet energy throbs in the ordering of the words. The ordering is as precise and pregnant as a finished sketch; a sketch that contains, within its linear-verbal grip, the fullness of the poet's vision. Much like the brilliant crescent in the sky cradles the shadow of the full moon in the grip of its horn. The painter is truly in the poet.

*garis lengkung  
mencakar langit mendung  
ku lepaskan naga  
bertakhta di atasnya...*

(a curving line  
etched on the lowering sky  
I release a dragon  
that sits triumphantly on the arc...)

That's quite simple, and the lines are certainly not from one of Latiff's best poem. But the naga is 'real'; it is not something forced on the curving line of his poetic vision. The *naga*, like the *serigala* (wolf) of other poems, is among the creatures of Latiff's labyrinth (not all of them are so forbidding); creatures released, controlled, but not tamed, by the fine thread of his art. From the *naga* on the curve of the cosmos, Latiff can move effortlessly to the tiny red ants on the crescent of a woman's eyebrow:

*kau lihat bagaimana  
ku sapu alismu  
dengan manisan  
ku lihat bagaimana  
semut mabuk  
di lengkung alismu  
beriringan...*

(observe how I brush  
your eyebrows  
with honey  
see how the ants dance  
in drunken frenzy  
keeping to the curve  
of the crescent)

Or to the mysterious night visitors on the contour of  
the lover's waist:

*mereka bertemu di sini  
di lereng pinggangmu  
untuk menyaksikan  
tarian asyikmu  
tarian mautku*

(they meet here  
along the contour of your waist  
to silently witness  
your dance of desire  
my dance of death)

You read these lines, and think of his paintings – from  
the frozen, bursting, haunting organic energy of the  
early *Pago-Pago* series to the equally haunting, bursting  
meditative power of *Mindscape*. The *Mindscape* and

*Langkawi* series before it, might puzzle us (the way he goes on and on playing endless variations on the "same form", as someone moaned), but there is no doubting the disciplined stubborn nature of the artist's obsession. I still wonder what Ariadnetic thread he was following, and through what labyrinth, when he did those two series. Some of the things he brought out into the sun gripped me, some left me indifferent, others were simply puzzling. But I am prepared to believe that Latiff had delivered himself – and hopefully us – from "tribute paid to dread" when he produced *Langkawi* and *Mindscape* in the face of general bewilderment, if not sheer indifference.

The line of energy is in the energy of the line. The man is mysteriously modest, yet always quietly confident in what he's doing. Somewhat mysteriously perhaps, I too am confident that the book he is working on will turn out to be a revelation, not only of his mind and imagination, but also of the deep mysteries of creativity itself. He is no longer the scuffy, stinking 'hippy' he was when I was seeing a lot of him, almost a dozen years ago. He now appears to be comfortably ensconced in the nest of domesticity. But whatever appearance might suggest, I don't for a moment believe that Latiff has lost the life line that his Adriane gave him many years ago – the line that took him to the dimmed splendours of Angkor, the bloody turbulence of the Mekong, the gay decadence of Berlin, the pit of Kintamani, the beautiful summer madness of New York Bowery; the line whose vibrations still make him hear the wheels of his private train meeting his private ship at the back of his private dwelling (read his poem *Suara*).

You can't discipline with the saving line of art if you have nothing to discipline. Like the middle-aged, middle-class fellow who thinks he is disenchanted when he was never enchanted in the first place. To be enchanted, you need energy, just as you need it to enchant.

Energy is from the Greek *energos*, meaning 'active; at work.' And it means just that: work. Latiff, in his middle age now and still very much enchanted, is working very hard with his Ariadne in that air-conditioned room in Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. The drops and lines of light on the glass that shields him from the noise and dirt of Kuala Lumpur, reflect in their eternal recurrence the secret energies of his solitude.

## Poets, Fanatics and Fundamentalists

[4th November 1992]

A friend of mine came to the house for a *nasi lemak* lunch on Deepavali day. She is a Malaysian of Indian origin, but a Catholic, not a Hindu. My Malay neighbours, however, didn't know this and were clearly surprised to see her coming to my house on Deepavali day. They obviously assumed she was a Hindu.

It was an ignorant and not an uncommon assumption, of course. In this country you don't automatically associate a member of any particular race with any particular religion unless he or she is a Malay. The Malays are unique in having their religious identity determined for them on the basis of their race; an identity even defined in the countries constitution. In the whole world, so far as I know, only the Jews are anything like the Malays in this respect. My fellow Malays, I know, won't like this 'Jewish connection', especially those who, ultra-prescient about Zionist conspiracies in the most unlikely of places, hate to be reminded that the Jews and Muslims share quite a few things in their religious heritage.

What is pertinent in this business of the Malays' religious identity is profession of faith, not really actual practice – or even belief. That's why if a Malay ceases to believe in his inherited religion and becomes an apostate, he would, if he is wise and doesn't want any trouble from

the *syariah* bureaucrats, keep quiet about it – that is if he wants to retain official recognition of his Malay identity.

The friend who came to my house is a church-going Catholic, but her deep faith in her inherited religion doesn't make her totally reject the claims of other faiths. Not at all. She is far too intelligent to believe that any one religion has a monopoly of truth. The fact that she is a student and genuine lover of literature, to whom the poetry and the novels she reads have a bearing on life, especially her own, makes it extremely unlikely that she will ever become a narrow-minded believer or a fanatic.

Writers, especially poets, are usually the people we can, or should be able to, count on to liberate us from the constrictions of rigid orthodoxies, or protect us from their treacherous temptations. If the poet is truly religious and informed enough about other faiths, he is not likely to dismiss the claims of the latter out of hand. If he is, in one sense or another, inclined towards mysticism, or at least familiar with the mystical traditions of the world's major religions, he would concede that Truth or God is truly one, though there is more than one path to It. He would recognise the truth of the Persian Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi's saying that there are many lamps but only one Light. The Moorish Sufi Muhyi-ddin Ibn Arabi expresses the same idea even more compellingly in his *Fusus al-Hikam* (The Bezels of Wisdom): "In praising that which he believes, the believer praises his own soul; it is because of that that he condemns other beliefs than his own. If he were just, he would not do it; only he who is fixed on a certain particular adoration is necessarily ignorant (of the intrinsic truth of other beliefs ..."

Ibn Arabi then quotes fellow Sufi Abu-l-Qasim Al-Junayd of Baghdad: "If he understood the sense of the words of Al-Junayd – 'The colour of water is the colour of its receptacle' – he would admit the validity of all beliefs,

and he would recognise God in every form and in every belief." Poets, true poets whether they write in verse or prose, are especially needed in times like the present. To echo a line from a poem by the Russian poet Boris Pasternak, "Now is the time of Pharisees". (For those who don't know, a Pharisee – *pharisaios* in Greek, from the Hebrew *parush* meaning separated – was a member of an ancient Jewish sect that rigidly observed the written law.) The present is indeed "the time of Pharisees", and poets are sorely needed to protect us from their exclusionist rhetoric laced with the poison of their pharisaic breath.

One such poet is the Australian James McAuley whom I'd introduced to my Catholic friend. It so happened that on the day she came to my house for lunch, she had with her the cassette recording of a radio programme on McAuley that I'd lent her. The cassette includes readings of his own poems by the poet himself as well as an extended interview with him. The programme was recorded by the ABC a few weeks before McAuley died in 1976, and broadcast more than once after his death. McAuley was a Catholic convert who died, in the arms of the Church. Shortly before he died he wrote 'A Small Testament', a highly interesting and very revealing affirmation of his faith in the Catholic religion, quite unusual in its spirit of openness to other faiths. This was published soon after his death in the monthly magazine he founded and edited, *Quadrant* (the Australian equivalent of the more famous English monthly *Encounter*).

McAuley, who was also Professor of English at the University of Tasmania (and a very unusual and stimulating teacher he was too), was a very complex man. A conservative in both literature (strict forms in poetry and all that) and politics (anti-communist and all that), he was noted, even notorious for his plain speaking on matters sacred to left-wing intellectuals and writers. Many of his



ideas were quite unfashionable, and he was much detested by both literary lefties and academic blokes and bores. Because of all this he was a much-misunderstood man, especially by you-know-who. He is generally acknowledged, by some quite reluctantly, as a major Australian poet. That, however, didn't stop his ideological opponents and enemies from calling him all kinds of things: "Catholic reactionary", "fanatical cold-war warrior", even "fascist pig".

I had the privilege of knowing him personally (he was my teacher), and can say quite confidently that he was an awfully decent man, truly generous, and a brilliant and witty mind. He was the main perpetrator of the notorious 'Ern Malley' literary hoax (see article: Sting Them, My Anopheles, Sting Them!). And I concur with those unbiased and perceptive critics who consider him a bloody good poet. As I've said, McAuley died a believer. But as the poems he wrote in the last few years of his life as well as the 'Small Testament' referred to earlier indicate, the believer in him was certainly no cosy Catholic. To his last moment, he acknowledged his bafflements before the essential inscrutability of God, and there was no trace of the arrogant exclusory believer in both the poet and the man. In a sense, and in his very McAuleian manner, he was not incapable of the essential 'heterodoxy' and of hearing and articulating 'the other voice' that the Mexican poet Octavio Paz believes is inseparable from the poetic imagination. I said 'McAuleian' because he was a self-confessed anti-modernist in poetry (he published a book of provocative essays called *The End of Modernity*).

One of the poems he wrote shortly before his death is 'Explicit', published in his own well-crafted handwriting in *Quadrant* not long after his death. This is how it goes:

So the word has come at last:  
The argument of arms is past.  
Fully tested I've been found  
Fit to join the underground.  
No worse age has ever been –  
Murderous, lying, and obscene;  
Devils worked while gods connived:  
Somehow the human has survived.  
Why these horrors must be so  
I never could pretend to know:  
It isn't I, dear Lord, who can  
Justify your ways to man.  
Soon I'll understand it all,  
Or cease to wonder: so my small  
Spark will blaze intensely bright,  
Or go out in an endless night.  
Welcome now to bread and wine:  
Creature comfort, heavenly sign.  
Winter will grow dark and cold  
Before the wattle turns to gold

Note, in particular, the very unMiltonian admission of his human limitations and sheer bewilderment in the face of the apparent contradictions between the idea of a merciful God and the “murderous” and “obscene... horrors” of human existence in this world. (John Milton, with the confidence of a faith unclouded by uncertainty, states in no uncertain terms that his epic *Paradise Lost* will, with the help of his “heavenly Muse... assert eternal providence... And justify the ways of God to men.”)

It is McAuley's unMiltonian lack of arrogance that accounts for the openness of spirit that informs his very moving “small testament”. Those who labelled him “an arrogant and fanatical Catholic reactionary” should make themselves read it, and read it with care. Note in particular

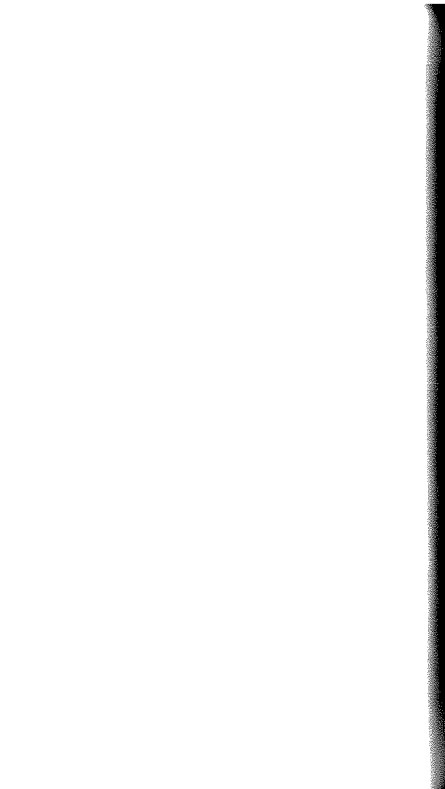
these sentences: "In more cheerful mood, I take comfort from one great development in Catholic understanding of its own doctrine: the growth of a genuine ecumenism and universality. Theologians made slow and painful progress to this open view. What initially stood in the way was the harsh abrupt text in St Mark: 'He who believes and is baptised will be saved; he who does not will be condemned...'. It was not really until this century that theologians finally won through to a more tolerable position: "The visible body of the Church does not at all define the invisible body of those who in all ages can and will be saved by the free operation of the Holy Spirit."

The 'Testament' ends with this wonderful conclusion: "It is of course Christian belief that it is by Christ alone that the mass of mankind are saved, whatever their formal relation to the visible Church. Pagans and unbelievers may regard it as an impertinence to be enlisted as honorary Catholics. I regard it as amusing, beautiful and consoling that the real Mystical Body of Christ would, if we could view it with God's eyes, look so different from the categories we employ and the lines of division we make."

My dear teacher, wherever you are now, I hope you won't regard it as an impertinence on my part that I, a Muslim and a believer after my own sullied fashion, regard you as an 'honorary Muslim', just as you regard me as an 'honorary Catholic'. May the one and only God bless your soul. Amen.



Saudara Sasterawan



## New Step Towards 'Abandoning Stupidity'

[8th May 1991]

It was the morning of Labour Day. When I walked into the small auditorium of Balai Berita, half an hour after the thing had started, someone was singing a folksy song. Something about "*Bersyukurlah kita... Buka langkah baru... tinggalkan kebodohan...*" ("We should be grateful to God... Take a new step... abandon stupidity...") was gently wafting over the heads of the audience. "That sounds like a good beginning," I said to myself, as I sat on the only empty chair left. Especially that bit about "abandon stupidity"). I liked that. Especially on the morning of Labour Day.

Then, after a nice short speech by the *Berita Harian* Group Editor, Haji Ahmad Nazri, the *Dialog Sastera* (Literary Dialogue) began. *Sasterawan Negara* (National Laureate) A. Samad Said and the Head of the Literary Unit of the *Berita Harian*, Dino S.S. were the two members of the panel. The object of this dialogue was apparently to discuss the role of newspapers like the *Berita Harian* and *Berita Minggu* in the fostering of our literature. Like many such meetings, a lot of time was wasted by young would-be writers complaining about trivial things, or even (believe it or not) making meandering, pontificating little speeches, "*Saya tak pandai bercakap, tapi ...*" ("I'm not a good speaker but...").

But a few things that needed to be said did get said, though nothing conclusive in terms of resolutions was arrived at. Which was just as well, for we are famous for making resolutions and not doing anything about them. In any case, it was, I assumed, not the purpose of the dialogue to make resolutions. It was a simple get-together to exchange views – and complaints. As for the taking of a “new step” and the call to “abandon stupidity”, let’s hope something of it, a trace even, has been left in the minds of those present to haunt them every time they sit down to write or send a *sajak* (poem) or a *cerpen* (short story) to the much-harassed Literary Editor of *Berita Harian*.

Said Haji Ahmad Nazri, “*Kat atas meja bertimbun sajak, tiga kaki, empat kaki tingginya!*” (“On the desk, there is a heap of poems, three feet, four feet high!”). The problem with this country is that we are not short of writers. We have too many of them. Every Taib, Din and Harun is a scribbler; everyone can spout *puisi* (poetry) and loves to *deklamasi* (declaim) it. Most of them don’t read poetry; they declaim it in the standard style taught them by Indonesian poetasters on whom they slavishly model themselves, including affecting the Indonesian accent.

Newspapers have always played a crucial role in the fostering of writing in this country. Think of the importance of the *Utusan Melayu* in the rise of the modern nationalist-oriented Malay literature in the Forties and Fifties. Remember editors like Usman Awang, A. Samad Ismail and the others. The *Berita Harian* today is continuing in that vital role alongside the *Utusan Malaysia*. A. Samad Said, himself a former distinguished editor with the *Berita Harian* who did much for promoting writers in the Sixties and Seventies with the other older Samad solidly behind him, had a number of things to say of his personal experience as editor. No big revelations or anything like that; just simple reminders and plain advice.

One of the topics much discussed that morning, though the discussion didn't really get anywhere, was how to improve the quality of the poetry and short stories and literary articles that come every day in lorry loads to Balai Berita. The usual suggestions came up: *bengkel* (workshops), more seminars, and, of course, more prizes. Haji Ahmad Nazri said that more money would be put aside to send experts, or so-called experts, to conduct workshops all over the country. Theoretically, there is nothing wrong with this much-tried idea. The problem, I think, has to do with the choice of 'experts' and the method used in the conduct of the workshops. Prizes? The *Sasterawan Negara* on the panel said what I would have said: we have more than enough prizes already. I would add that they haven't really helped improve the quality of writing very much. As for seminars – well, the less said about this peculiar Malaysian passion the better.

*Berita Harian*, Haji Ahmad Nazri whispered to the expectant crowd, had in the pipeline a plan for a literary supplement *a la* Televideo. A murmur of near-orgasmic satisfaction greeted the privileged announcement. A literary supplement? More sloshy *sajak* by passionately patriotic *pemuisi* (a new word for poet, this one), more over-circumcised *cerpens* by juiceless *cerpenis*. There was much talk and giggling about *kendur* (limp) and *tegang* (erect) in writing that morning, and more inanelly pompous *kritikan* by undernourished *kritikus*.

God help us! A literary supplement is a fine thing. But how do we ensure that it doesn't become a 'Literary Televideo', that's the question.



## No Joking Please, It May Be Anti-Islam

[10th July 1991]

My 'guru', German dramatist Bertolt Brecht, has a wonderful line about the importance of humour: "To live in a country without a sense of humour is unbearable; but it is even more unbearable in a country when you need a sense of humour." When I think of the reactions produced by my light-hearted or ironic remarks about some 'sensitive' subject or other – and we all know what a 'sensitive' people we are – I blush for my dear country.

I am a patriot, you see. I feel angry when my incorrigible 'jokiness' provokes a stare of disapproval, and my irrepressible love of irony greeted by dumb misunderstanding or pious paranoia. My gut-based patriotism doesn't like the idea that we might be a tribe of humourless *ulus* (bumpkins). Is this an 'unbearable' country to live in? In the first Brechtian sense?

When you think of the fanatic fundamentalists, puritans, chauvinists and other bumpkins like them, you almost want to despair; there are enough around to overwhelm you with their foul, solemnly self-righteous breath. You really need a satanic sense of humour to bear with these kill-joys. But the 'true' Malaysians, with their irrepressible 'Malaysian' humour, rough and tolerant, often sceptical, sometimes even refreshingly cynical, still dominate.

Thank God.

If you doubt it, ask Lat, ask Sri Delima, Johan (he with his weekly Bag of sparkling Marbles) – and also don't forget the *jaga keretas*, the *kutus*, the *nasi-lemak makciks*, taxi-driver *pakciks*, the *kueh nyonyas* and *kedai-kopi* wits, the toothless betel-lipsticked *neneks* and the *moyangs*. What about the writers? I mean the *sasterawans*, those 'creative' people who write *puisi*, *cerpens*, *nobels*, dramas; those *pemuisis*, *cerpenises*, *pelirits*, *nobelises*? As these lovely *istilahs* (terms) suggest, my question is mainly confined to the literature written in the National Language.

Nearly two decades of observing them, albeit as an 'outsider' (so I have been described), has made me feel more than persuaded that our contemporary *sasterawans* are a solemn, pompous, humourless lot. That's a harsh thing to say perhaps, and it's not funny; but I'll stand by it. There are, of course, exceptions – striking exceptions, some of them. But in general, my observation holds and, if that makes any difference, it is shared by not a few people (mainly non-*sasterawans*, of course). The typical *sasterawan* takes himself and his *seni* so, so seriously; he tends to confuse solemnity with seriousness (genuine unselfconscious seriousness which can go with surface levity), and pomposity with breadth or depth of knowledge. If you want to see how the typical *sasterawan* carries himself, go to a literary seminar, especially a seminar on the function or responsibility of the writer, or on national identity in literature, or better still, religion and literature. The deadly solemnity of the typical seminar can be quite excruciating. Like the hypocrite who protests his religious piety too much, so does our *sasterawan* or *seniman* with his artistic piety. You really need a strong sense of humour to bear with him. He invites parody.

And it is quite revealing that the dominance of this type is such that the art of parody itself is almost unknown

in modern Malay literature. If you parody him and his style, he won't even understand, let alone laugh. The ability to laugh at oneself, which to me is a sign of true wisdom, is totally alien to our *sasterawan*. Very much bound up with this inability to laugh at himself, is the belief he has that certain things are too sacred to make a joke of – among them, his image of the true *sasterawan*, and certain racial and religious pieties. He cannot see that humour is not necessarily negative, nor does it necessarily imply fundamental cynicism.

Humour is a state of mind, a point of view that is based on a healthy realism about life and on a perception of contradictions and inconsistencies. When you make a humorous remark about something, even about 'sacred things', or rather, certain popular and shallow notions of the sacred, it doesn't necessarily mean you are not serious or incapable of reverence for the truly sacred. It depends on the humour. Humorous irreverence for certain things can be motivated by genuine reverence for something more basic or more important; the 'profane' can be a means of exposing the shallowness of certain notions of the sacred or of getting nearer to the probable truth.

Whoever thinks that this kind of thinking betrays the corrupting influence of Western 'secularist' or 'materialistic' values and is totally alien to Eastern thinking, doesn't know what he is talking about. Zen Buddhism, for example, gives a high place to humour and jokes in its philosophy and method of teaching. These Zen jokes are designed to shock the Zen aspirants into true awareness. They also affirm what I have always believed in – that in a philosophy that sees life as a unity, the profane and the sacred, the mundane and the mystical merge. Ordinary categories that separate reality and experience into compartments are ignored. Zen, as I understand it, is also always alert to signs of falsity, stupidity, literal mindedness, pomposity,

hollow solemnity and hypocrisy, quick to mock anything that forgets reality in the name of Reality (with capital R). As R.H. Blyth says in *Oriental Humour*: "Laughter is breaking through the intellectual barriers; at the moment of laughter something is understood". The misplaced solemnity of the typical *sasterawan* can be absolutely ridiculous and, therefore, laughable.

A case involving a TV-drama script of mine is illustrative of this. The story had the last day of *Ramadan* and first day of *Hari Raya* as its setting. There was a lot of innocent laughter and joking by the characters, but nothing that could be considered even remotely sacrilegious. But the religious consultant (who was also a *sasterawan*), whose approval for the script had to be obtained before it could be produced, strongly objected to the humour and laughter. He actually scrawled across the script that "*Islam tidak menggalakan banyak ketawa; Islam lebih menggalakkan banyak menangis*"! (Islam doesn't encourage laughter; Islam encourages a lot of crying.)

Since our solemn *sasterawan* would claim that one cannot be humorous about anything to do with religion because it is alien to Islamic values, let me remind him that classical Islamic literature itself is rich with humour, even about sacred things. Let him dip into the anecdotes of Mulla Nasruddin, or for example, Obeyde Zakani's *The Ethics of the Aristocrats and Other Satirical Works* (14th Century).

Here are a few humorous anecdotes from Zakani to shock our pious *sasterawan*: A preacher said from his pulpit: "When a man dies drunk, he is buried drunk, and he will rise drunk from his grave. A man from Khorasan who was at the foot of the pulpit said: "By God, one bottle of such wine is worth 100 gold coins!"

Another one: Sheikh Sharaf al-Din Daragazi asked Muwlanaz Azud al-Din, "Where has God mentioned the

clergy in the *Quran*?" "Next to the learned," said Muwlanaz Azud, "where He says: Are the learned and the ignorant equals?"

And another: A certain person arrived at a graveyard and saw a very long grave. He inquired whose grave it was. They said: "It is the grave of the Prophet Muhammad's flag-bearer. He said, "Have they buried him with his flag?"

One more: A man of the Qadari School (a group of theologians who believed in free will) was travelling in the company of a Magian. The Qadari asked him: "Why don't you become a Muslim, you Magian?" "When God wills it," replied the Magian. "God has already willed it," said the Qadari "but the devil won't let you." "I am with the stronger," said the Magian.

Between the pompous solemnity of the *ustaz-sasterawan* and the life-affirming laughter of the person who truly knows, I much prefer the laughter. Anytime.

## The Dialogue that Never Was

[11th December 1991]

A *dialog sastera* (literary dialogue), or rather what was advertised as one, took place – strictly speaking, didn't – at Sudut Penulis, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, on Dec 3. The writer with whom the *dialog* was supposed to have been conducted was German novelist Uwe Timm, brought to Malaysia by the Goethe Institute. I said the advertised dialogue didn't quite take place because... well, one could, if one wants to be generously understanding to the *sasterawans* present, say that, for example, Malay modesty and traditional timidity (or, if you prefer, clamming-and-clammy courtesy) in the presense of what was presumably perceived to be a highly distinguished foreign guest, clammed up our *sasterawans*.

These *sasterawans* like to claim that the language factor was the real reason. Herr Timm is a more than competent speaker of English, but many in the audience (no, not 'audience'; they were supposed to be fellow dialogists) were presumably far from being so. But there was actually no language problem, because whatever Herr Timm said (in both German and English) was beautifully and accurately translated into Malay by Fraulein Anne Lutgen, professional translator and lecturer in German language at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. There was, though, another factor that, I'd concede, probably helped to clam

up our *sasterawans*. And that was the presence in the audience of a big-mouthed lout of a cultural-racial 'apostate' (so he has often been described in my hearing) who seemed to want to hog the floor. (I didn't quite succeed in finding out what his name was.)

And he would have hogged the floor, I suppose, if the two venerable *Sasterawan Negara* in the front row (Pak Arena Wati and Saudara A. Samad Said) had not checked him. So, for whatever the real reasons, *dialog sastera* with Herr Timm from Munich, Germany, failed to take place. Herr Timm, I hazard to guess, was a little disappointed. The presumed disappointment, however, was hopefully allayed by a generous gift of books to him by the Dewan – a hefty heap of our recent crop of masterpieces, including, I was happy to notice, *Sasterawan Negara* A. Samad Said's *Warkah Dari Eropah* (Epistle from Europe), a unique expensively produced coffee-table volume full of quite revealing photographs of the much-travelled author in various settings and poses in his epoch-making trip through a number of European countries. A precious gift, a personal modern-day *Tuhfat al-Nafis* no less, by a much revered *Sasterawan Negara*, that one; highly eloquent with revelations of the preciousity (no, I mean precious piety) of the modern Malay soul – or rather, the soul of the modern Malay *sasterawan*. I overheard the big-mouthed cynical 'apostate' hissing under his breath: "What a piece of typically *sasterawanish* self-indulgence that coffee-table crap is! No doubt one of the privileges of being a *Sasterawan Negara* – the licence to indulge in ego-trips in the name of National Literature, even if it garishly contradicts the affectation of modesty (that much-trumpeted *Melayu* virtue) this particular *Sasterawan Negara* so conspicuously displays..." The rest of his mumblings I'd rather not quote here.

I can see Herr Timm by his fireplace back in Munich nodding his head in admiration and awe as he goes through

that *Tuhfab* (gift). I hope his coffee table has at least a marble top, if not jade, on which to put and display that souvenir of his Southeast Asian cultural trip, which itself is a souvenir without precedent of a *Sasterawan Negara*'s European trip. This *Sasterawan Negara* had that morning quite a few questions to ask of Herr Timm – how many novels he had written, what their subjects and themes were and so on and so on. When he learnt that two of Herr Timm's six published novels were set in a Third World country, one of them a former colony of Germany, and both apparently highly critical of Germany's former imperialism, our *Sasterawan Negara* wondered if Herr Timm's liberalism was a product of *rasa berdosa* (sinful feeling) allegedly still felt by many present-day German writers over the crimes of Adolph Hitler. I wonder what he thought of Herr Timm's brief and pretty casual-sounding answer: "I don't feel any guilt. Why should I? It all happened before I was even born, or just born."

The other *Sasterawan Negara*, Pak Arena Wati (a venerable Bugis *bulubalang*, this one), at this point got up and leaned against the wall to launch into a lengthy sermon about the irrelevance of guilt here. And, added our *bulubalang*, slowly rolling his words on his ancient tongue like rare pearls of Bugis wisdom to the peoples of the former European colonies such as Malaysians, Hitler in fact performed a service.

What? Service? Hitler? Did I hear right? What service? Hitler's wars, intoned the venerable literary warrior, had ironically liberated the nations of the Third World from Western colonialism. It sounded familiar, this argument: I must have heard it before. But Pak Arena Wati's pronouncement had a different ring to it. I wondered if he had not been mystically granted an epiphany which told him that Hitler's world-shaking and world-transforming wars, all those killing fields, those arenas of apocalyptic



combats between the forces of good and evil, were a divinely-sanctioned necessity for the resurgence of Malay might. Highly interesting epiphany, that. Mysteriously, Herr Timm chose to answer Pak Arena's six-minute sermon with a brutally simple one-liner: "I think the independence of the European colonies would have happened, though at a slower pace, even without the satanic obscenity of Hitler."

After one hour or so of mainly questions directed at the guest, Herr Timm gently reminded the audience of the purpose of the meeting, which was to conduct a dialogue. He then asked if he could ask the audience a question. The question he chose to ask couldn't have been more fitting and questionable at the same time. What was the question? Something about the national literature of this country, its reach, its ideals in relation to the ethnic realities of Malaysia, the extent of participation by non-Malays, the status of the literatures not written in the national language. For a moment, I wondered if Herr Timm had not been warned by his sponsors to keep off 'sensitive' subjects while in this country. If he had been warned, then his question certainly showed that he was no timid *sasterawan*, easily awed by bureaucratic warnings.

Later, I discovered from the surprised Herr Uwe Timm himself that timidity or otherwise, awe or what not, had nothing to do with his asking the simple question. He simply didn't know that that question and others similar in nature were not encouraged from distinguished cultural visitors like him. Well, the question was asked; almost immediately, the big-mouthed 'apostate' got up and said: "I'd like to answer that question. But since we Malays are a very sensitive and courteous people, I'm honour-bound to humbly beg the much-revered *Sasterawan Negara* sitting in front there – either Pak Arena or *Saudara* Samad, or both – to give their answers or comments first."

*Saudara* Samad slowly stood up, turned his head back, and, with the tolerance of true wisdom, sinuously symbolised by his long flowing white beard, smilingly condescended to allow the big-mouthed 'apostate' to give his comments first. (To be continued the weeks and the weeks after...till, after many frank no-holds-barred arguments and counter-arguments have been thoroughly aired, a reasonably honest and truly Malaysian – in the best sense of that word – answers to Herr T's big Q.)

## Dialogue between the Deaf and Dumb

[18th December 1991]

Our *sasterawans* are very fond of holding dialogues, forums and seminars. But not infrequently and almost inevitably, something is held back at these sessions; that something has to do with the Big Q inconveniently raised by German novelist Uwe Timm at a *Dialog Sastera* that was held during his visit to Kuala Lumpur. The Big Q concerns the idea of national literature, its relation to the fact of ethnic plurality and the place of minority languages and literatures in the wider context of national language and literature.

A big-mouthed 'apostate' who happened to be present, let loose what is usually held back at such literary sessions. But before he said his piece, he threw, through an ironic affectation of Malay courtesy and reverence for elders and venerable *senimans*, a challenge to the two *Sasterawan Negara* present (Pak Arena Wati and A. Samad Said). He asked one of them at least to answer Herr Timm's Big Q. A. Samad Said, graciously suggested that the 'apostate' give his comments first. The latter almost snapped back (the lout in him breaking through the mask of reverence), "Don't you chicken out, Sir!"

Samad Said had no choice but to deal with the Big Q. Characteristically, he dealt with it the only way such venerable minds deal with such questions, especially in a situation made somewhat awkward by the presence of

'undesirable elements' – he just waffled his way out of the somewhat tight spot, harping on the complexity of the issue, implying how difficult it can be to explain such things to foreigners.

Pak Arena Wati chose to retreat into his inscrutable Bugis '*wiraism*' (heroism); what went through his venerable mind at that moment I wouldn't dare speculate. The boorish 'apostate' then took the floor. "Just look at the audience today," he began. "How many non-*Bumi* faces can you see?" There was a *New Straits Times* reporter, the fraulein translator, and an official of the Goethe Institute.

"That speaks volumes, Herr Timm."

It did, indeed. But the boorish 'apostate' didn't have the chance to really go into those "volumes" as he pleased because it was approaching lunch time and Herr Timm, fresh from two stimulating weeks in Java, pleaded exhaustion and begged to have the so-called dialogue ended a bit earlier. Allow me, therefore, to go into those "volumes" as I think the anonymous 'apostate' meant – not as I really damn please, but just a little, hoping that my readers will later help me to probe deeper into the question. I'd like to do this because the so-called 'apostate' is a much misunderstood fellow Malaysian whose plain speaking, though admittedly ill-mannered and grossly provocative, does contain some truths of which we should do well to take note – if we care about the future of our children and of our country as a civilised and humane polity.

That familiar detail about the audience at that *Dialog Sastera* to which our boorish friend drew our attention tells us many things. Among them is the delusional nature of such ritualistic *sastera* sessions. The annual *Minggu Sastera* (Literary Week) currently taking place at the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka is one of the biggest of such delusional rituals. Why delusional? Because the *sasterawans* and *kritikuses* gathered for the ritual, almost *Bumi* to a man or

woman (the sprinkle of non-*Bumis* screaming their tokenism), imagine that they are involved in an event of momentous national significance when, in fact, hardly anybody other than themselves and their kind even notice or care; or if they do, they must be distressed by the often ethnic rather than national character of the ritual, despite the frequent use of the word '*nasional*'.

As far as I know, there has not been a serious attempt to invite debate from non-*Bumi* writers writing in the National language and certainly not those writing in English, Chinese or Tamil on the big question of what should ideally constitute National Literature. There has certainly been no attempt to encourage confrontation of the widespread assumption that National Literature equals Malay literature with all the ethnic overtones and undertones that that term carries in the overcharged atmosphere of inter-ethnic relations in this country.

In this connection, I can't resist drawing your attention to a highly revealing or symptomatic recent case that proves my point. In her introduction to the souvenir programme of the recent Pekan Teater at MATIC (Malaysian Tourist Information Centre), Dr Rahmah Bujang, president of TEMA, laments, among other things, the lack of strong "*jiwa keIslaman*" (Islamic spirituality) in many of the plays that participated in the competition. Why "*jiwa keIslaman*", which binds our national drama to Malay ethnicity (since Malay equals Islam) by a sort of law of necessity, and not just "spiritual values" meaning the common positive values that unite all the major religions of this country? The delusiveness of the *sastera* rituals is symptomatic of a wider national delusion. Our *sasterawans*, unable or unwilling to confront what should be confronted, perhaps even deaf to the crying plea that it be confronted, prefer to betray their role as universalist intellectual leaders of society, a role they often brag about since bragging is

their forte, and retreat blithely and wafflingly into '*sasteraistic*' (a close cousin of '*autistic*') rituals.

It's 34 years since Independence. The country has been ours for that long, yet not quite 'ours' in the truest, humanely open sense of the word. That can only be possible when its society, however multi-racial, is felt to be a true community composed of citizens genuinely bound together by common pursuits and dreams. No one with even a nodding acquaintance with history would question the status of Malay as our National Language. But that doesn't mean we can't ask certain questions that are crying to be asked – and dealt with them in a reasonably honest and truly Malaysian spirit. Ponder, dear reader, on the implications of all this.

At the end of the first article I wrote on this subject (the Dialogue that Never Was), I had said that the subject would continue to be dealt with in the following week, and the weeks and weeks after that. That was just a little tease; it's not quite practical for me to allow this issue to be hijacked by one concern, however justified by urgent national needs.

So the ball's in your court now, dear reader and fellow Malaysian. If you have any balls...

## Sasterawans, it's Time to Make Your Stand

[6th January 1992]

National Literature without capital N and L, implying the spirit rather than the letter, a spirit that affirms unity in diversity, and an audience for it that is truly national – that should surely be our ideal. And it was good to know that I wasn't the only *Bumi* voice willing to make itself heard loud and clear on this. You may have read (if you didn't, you should have) a lively response to my challenge on 'The Big Q'. The writer truly has 'balls' despite her gender, and her willingness to prove it should put to shame those (admittedly very few) of our *sasterawans* (you know which gender I mean) who secretly agree with me but have no balls to say so. Thanks, Dr Che Husna. We need more people like you.

I think the time has long been overdue that our writers made their stand known – both the minority who are not cursed by the disease of ethnicity or plain chauvinism, and the majority who are. This should apply to every Malaysian writer, especially the established ones, including our *Sasterawan Negara*. The latter's position of influence and the considerable following they presumably have among young Malays make it imperative that those among them who have not made their stand clear should do so. They should do so especially whenever there is a manifestation of irresponsible chauvinism from any one of them. In

recent years, there have been such disturbing manifestations, and our established *sasterawans* let them pass in silence. And silence, as we all know, can be interpreted as endorsement.

In 1986, there occurred an incident which should have been marked down as a moment of shame in the annals of our literature. Actually, it was an incident that should have been but wasn't perceived as 'an incident' in the sense of being an occurrence that leaves a mark on the public mind as a scandal. This incident that didn't become 'an incident' occurred, appropriately enough, at the open-air concourse of Dayabumi. The occasion was a poetry reading held during the biennial event *Pengucapan Puisi Kuala Lumpur* organised by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. In the audience, there was a sprinkling of invited foreign poets – from Yugoslavia and Australia among them. The incident at the otherwise forgettable event was the reading of a 'poem' called '*Tanah Melayu*' ('Malay Land') by one of the better-known Kuala Lumpur *sasterawans*, the dramatist-actor-poet and one-time pavement medicine-seller Khalid Salleh. This guy, nurtured as a *sasterawan* under the wings of Anak Alam (the now-defunct experiment in semi-bohemian artistic community benignly presided over by poet-painter Latiff Mohidin), had always had a streak of unpredictable atavism.

But knowing that didn't quite prepare me for his aggressively primitive performance that day. In a tone that pushed the shrillness of an already shrill non-poem to its limits, he declaimed what was probably the most inflammatory piece of chauvinistic rhetoric in the history of contemporary Malay poetry. The really remarkable thing about the performance wasn't the fact that it occurred; it wasn't even the fact that it occurred where it did, an occasion graced by the presence of poets from other countries. No, the shamefully remarkable thing about it



was the fact that nobody in the predominantly local, meaning *Bumi*, audience felt disturbed or embarrassed enough to let out a shout of protest. No, forget the shout; there was not even a glimmer of a reaction that could be considered critical in the faces of the audience, which included some distinguished *sasterawans*.

I was on the fringe of the gathering, and standing next to me was a fellow Malaysian writer, a non-*Bumi*. Both of us looked at each other in astonishment – or was it disgust laced with an unspoken dismissal, “There he goes again! Bloody chauvinist!” It was an incident I don’t like to recall, partly because of my own failure to scream in protest. My friend didn’t protest either, and he wasn’t and still isn’t the type who would suffer fools and chauvinist cranks in silence. But my friend’s failure in this occasion was less indefensible than mine; the reasons should be obvious, considering the composition of the gathering and the fact that he was a non-*Bumi*. If I remember rightly, I later tried to justify my failure by saying to myself that the chauvinist didn’t deserve to be taken seriously. But that was pure rationalisation, and I knew it; that’s why personally I don’t like to recall the incident.

I am recalling it now for a number of reasons. The theme of this article, a theme that has been preoccupying me for a number of weeks now, demands that that shameful incident be recalled. And it was not an isolated incident, either. The same *sasterawan*, a couple of years later, attacked one of our leading playwrights, Noordin Hassan, for allegedly selling out to the Chinese in his play *Anak Tanjung*, simply because the play gives a sympathetic treatment of Chinese characters and their relationships to the Malays. This *sasterawan* is not alone in his chauvinism, though his brand of shrill rhetoric is, I think, quite unique (all those years selling *majun* on the streets must have moulded his demagogic style). As a playwright-poet and

actor-director, he has quite a sizeable following in Kuala Lumpur. And he is still very much active, still a voice the *kutus* of Kl. hark to. He can be quite fiery, this guy.

His fiery spirit seems to have elicited admiration from at least one *Sasterawan Negara*. Which one? A. Samad Said. Yes, this *Sasterawan Negara* who is known for his values of moderation, simplicity and reasonableness, has Khalid Salleh as one of the dedicatees of his latest collection of poems, *Balada Hilang Peta* (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1990). Would my readers like to know how Samad Said phrased his dedication? "*Untuk Marzuki, Aziz, Khalid ... – jerit baru yang bara. (Cenderahati Mogok Seni)*" (For Marzuki, Aziz, Khalid ... – new voices, thunderous and fiery. A gift from the heart in commemoration of my literary strike.)

Please don't rush to misunderstand me here; I'm not saying that our *Sasterawan Negara* endorses the peculiar brand of fiery chauvinism thundered by Khalid Salleh and his tribal kind. No; as I've said, Samad Said is a nice man, reasonable and humane in his values. But Samad should know that the "*jerit baru yang bara*" in Khalid Salleh's writing has on a number of occasions emitted poisonous fumes. And, as far as I know, Samad has nowhere distanced himself from those emissions. If he in fact had, he is more than welcome to correct me here. And that chance to correct me would be extended to Khalid himself. If those instances of irresponsible chauvinism were, in fact, aberrations which he has since become ashamed of, he is more than welcome to say so in public. Yes, Saudara Khalid, I'd dearly like to be told that those shameful "*jerit yang bara*" were, in fact, aberrations. I'm sure the fact that this offer or challenge (take your pick) to Khalid and his like is being made in an English-language newspaper will be used against me. (For the information of my readers, it is also being made in tomorrow's *Berita Harian*, so that

the inability or refusal to read the language of 'apostates' and infidels cannot be used as an excuse to ignore this issue.)

I've been hearing rumours of allegations that this column panders to the allegedly anti-*Bumi* prejudices of the English-educated. And to blinkered *Bumis*, the English-educated means mostly the non-*Bumis*; they predictably forget that there is a sizable body of English-educated Malays, not a few of whom are not blinkered and believe that open discussion about things that affect us as a nation is a healthy and necessary thing. The allegation that I am an as-I-please pander doesn't trouble me in the least. It comes from the same primitive mentality as a hysterical letter written in reaction to my piece 'Anti-Islam and all that jazz' some months ago. The writer of that letter, who seemed to think that personal abuse is synonymous with argument (that's why the Literary Editor decided against publishing it), is typical of his kind in his belief that criticism of the *Bumis* should not be made in a language that gives it maximum exposure to the non-*Bumis*. He would much prefer that "we keep it to ourselves" – or better still, sweep it under the damp and rotting *tikar* (mat).

## Mek Melor Launches Her Tales

[12th February 1992]

Virtually the whole family, relations and close friends were there in full force. It was a remarkable display of family solidarity and pride, of high spirit and sheer joy in the occasion. It was as if one of them was getting married, or had just given birth to her first child. It was, in fact, neither. The occasion was the launching of a book. A book of lighthearted stories and sketches about life in a remote Kelantanese village where they all came from. And it was written by one of them.

This "one of them" is a *mek* (Kelantanese term of endearment for women) who is a *mak* (mother). Though she has produced six children, she is a strikingly youthful looking 'matriarch' with a mischievous earthy wit and a healthy sense of irony. And a PhD in chemical engineering too (she is a lecturer at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia). The book she has authored, in English and called *Kelantan Tales*, written in the stolen hours between the cries from the crib and the demands of the lab and lecture hall, is published by a family publishing company headed by her elder brother.

Che Husna Azhari is her name. You probably have never heard of it, unless you have been following the Literary Page. Devotees of the page surely can't forget the author of the most gutsy and high-spirited letter ever written

in response to issues raised in the As I Please column. Remember her? Dr Che Husna Azhari – the lady “with balls” (metaphorically speaking)? Well, this lady, branded a ‘cultural apostate’ by UKM *sasterawans* for preferring to write in English (so she said in that letter), has finally let loose to the parochial world of Malay *sastera* the (illegitimate?) child of her ‘apostasy’ – or cultural ‘miscegenation’, take your pick.

Her first ‘child’. No wonder the launching had the feel of an exuberant family celebration. And what a family too! Fun-loving and refreshingly non-parochial. Mutually supportive of each other, full of family pride but not of themselves as individuals; their love for and pride in each other doesn’t preclude sending each other up, even in public – as was delightfully demonstrated at the launching.

“We’re all cuckoos,” said our *Mek* ‘Apostate’ with an insane grin on her glowing face. But for the person who officially launched the book, the ritual of the launching was an all-in-the-family affair. Her husband was the master of ceremonies. The first speaker was the publisher-brother, Encik Nadzru Azhari. This gentleman from the corporate world gave the most entertaining speech I have ever heard at a book launching. A man of many talents and interests, multi-lingual (Arabic and French as well as English) and truly informed in the literature of classical Islam and its spirit of openness to life, its non-puritanism (something hardly known or acknowledged here), Encik Nadzru entertained the audience with one anecdote after another related to the background of his sister’s stories. He even quoted from Arabic literature to show its healthy mingling of the profane and the sacred, its ability to hold within its generous embrace the pious *ustaz* and the profane boozier (*kutu* pub was Encik Nadzru’s phrase for it).

Melor, their kampung on which Molo, the setting of the stories is based, must be a delightful place, with all

kinds of weirdos from the *imam* to the MP, with seductive hip-swaying *nasi belauk* (or was it *nasi kangkang?*) *meks* and *kapak kecil*-brandishing *gedebers* (hot-blooded amok types) in between. Though in the form of fiction, Encik Nadzru assured us that 80 per cent of the *Kelantan Tales* is true to facts. And *Mek Melor* gives warning in her preface that there are more tales to come. And she gives the warning in characteristic style: "To all others in Melor who find themselves in my book, do not breathe free because I shall write again."

*Kelantan Tales* was officially launched at the Sudut Penulis, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, last Saturday by Professor Datuk Ismail Hussein. Where? Who? Yes, at the Sudut Penulis, and by the president of Gapena, that champion of the purity of National Literature. No, I am not joking; though the author of *Kelantan Tales* herself, this curious *mek* from Melor, this alleged 'cultural apostate', might have been possessed by her jokey mischievous *pelesit* (invisible companion) when she invited the Datuk Professor to do the honours of launching her little book. It was a curious coming together of forces – that launching. And, as expected, the Datuk felt obliged to explain why he was launching a book in English by someone like Che Husna.

Being a scientist, Che Husna's involvement in writing, he said, was something to be welcomed; our literature could do with more people like her. Good. What about the fact that she preferred to write in English instead of the National Language? Well, Gapena was not against writings in English or other languages spoken by Malaysians. They just could not be considered as part of the 'National Literature'; that's all. Having said all that, the Datuk then launched into an attack on the alleged 'campaign' recently conducted in "a literary column of a well-known English daily" to "denigrate" ("*memperburuk-burukkan*") Malay literature and Malay *sasterawans*, and (God forbid!) to

even question the status of Malay as the National Language.

I wonder what the target of that attack, the columnist he didn't name (to do so would no doubt have sullied the occasion), thought of the speech which blatantly distorted his views; views which were, moreover, his own entirely and not part of any "campaign" or conspiracy. I'm sure there are people who can't wait for his response.

But it was good of the Datuk to agree to launch *Kelantan Tales*. It's a book every Malaysian should welcome. Literary purists and language pedants might want to make a big thing out of its small imperfections: those who know English language and literature would probably smile at its formal deficiencies and minor grammatical errors; those who consider themselves guardians of the 'integrity' of National Literature would growl at the fact that it's not in the National Language.

But our *mek* from Melor, I am sure, won't allow herself to be bothered by all these small-minded patriots, pedants and puritans. She has better things to do – such as making good her threat of writing more tales of Molo.

## An Atypical Sasterawan

[22nd December 1992]

Playwright Noordin Hassan, who received the *Anugerah Sastera Negara* last Saturday, is in some ways an atypical *sasterawan*, just as the choice of him as the new *Sasterawan Negara* is an untypical choice.

Noordin is not only the first writer to get the award for a body of works which belongs more to the performing arts than literature; he is also one of the least *sasterawanish*, a word which, I must admit, has acquired a somewhat derogatory connotation in my usage of it in my writings. (Thus the belief of some *sasterawanish sasterawans* that Salleh Ben Joned *menghina sastera/sasterawan Melayu* – i.e. insults Malay writers and literature.) The derogatory connotations are: intellectual provincialism, a tendency to perceive social realities in ethnic rather than national terms, an over-earnest and solemn conception of *sasterawan* as a 'leader and elder' of his/her people (meaning, race again), general humourlessness which goes with the tendency to see him/herself far too seriously without any significant capacity for self-questioning, and healthy scepticism.

Noordin Hassan, in my view, doesn't betray any of these negative *sasterawanish* characteristics. Though very Malay in his sensibilities and manners and in his concern for the future of his fellow Malays, Noordin is truly Malaysian in both his writings and theatre-making. Like another exemplary *Sasterawan Negara*, Usman Awang,



Noordin fruitfully affirms his Malaysianness through his Malayness in both his works and his life. And that has not endeared him to Malay nationalists and chauvinists among the *sasterawans*.

Take, for instance, *Anak Tanjung*, which is one of his best plays. The spirit of Malaysianness, embodied in parts in the treatment of Malay-Chinese relationships and sympathetic portrayal of non-Malay characters, has provoked one chauvinistic *sasterawan* to accuse him of "selling out to the Chinese". This commitment to the fostering of harmony and understanding among Malaysians and, by implication, among human beings generally, is one of the functions of the true *sasterawan* or *seniman* (artist) as Noordin sees him. The word that he uses to identify the proper functions of the writer is the religiously loaded word *ibadah* (the doing of good deeds and rituals as enjoined by the 'writers' religion, in this case, Islam).

Noordin started to be conscious of his theatre as an act of *ibadah* in the Eighties, when for several years in succession he was involved, as scriptwriter and consultant in the pantomimes staged on the occasion of the annual *Quran* reading competition (*musabaqah*) at Stadium Merdeka. (See article: A Question of 'Ibadah').

Now, this talk about *ibadah* might sound dubious to you, and, if I didn't think Noordin a first-rate dramatist, to me too. When a third rate writer talks about *ibadah*, I'd tend to dismiss him because all that ritualistic religious chatter only serves to hide his lack of talent as writer. And, usually, the chatter is fashionable chatter, poured out to the mechanical rhythm of the bandwagon, or rather *kereta lembu* (bullock cart), on which he has jumped in order to be on the safe side of the ideological divide.

Though I didn't think this of Noordin, I wished he had not used the word *ibadah* in connection with theatre, especially at a time of widespread Islamic revivalism. It

gave me the impression that our playwright had felt compelled to swim with the religious tide, to be on the safe side, so to say. The word *ibadah* seemed to be a mere religious slogan designed to endear him to the religious fundamentalists or orthodox Muslims. If this had in fact been the case, it was a fruitless gesture because it didn't save Noordin from being attacked by a fundamentalist for misusing a sacred word to describe an unholy enterprise such as modern theatre. Such theatre to this fundamentalist is nothing but a den of sin. (You know, all those actors and actresses cavorting around so shamelessly, so profanely!)

But my supposition about Noordin's motive for suddenly using the word *ibadah* was denied by him in an interview I had with him the day after he received the *Anugerah*. By *teater ibadah*, Noordin said he meant nothing more than a theatre that fosters healthy moral and religious values, without being didactic or preachy about it. Just as the assertion that his theatre is a sort of act of piety to "the glory of God" (his own words) means nothing more than a theatre that celebrates the holiness of life that is God's precious gift to man. It must be said that the entry of the word *ibadah* into Noordin's talk about his theatre didn't really signal a change of ideological direction or disrupt the continuity of his conception of the form and concerns of his theatre. His *pre-musabaqah* plays were no less a *teater ibadah*, in his sense of the word, than those *post-musabaqah* ones (though in some of the *post-musabaqah* plays, the suggestively religious elements and imagery may be more noticeable).

If this was so, why then did Noordin suddenly feel compelled to use the word *ibadah* instead of the less loaded, less suggestive word 'moral'? He told me it's because his involvement with the *musabaqah* had made him more searchingly conscious of the deeply moral and fundamentally religious concerns of his vocation as playwright. It is not

too difficult to accept Noordin's claim that the word *ibadah* was not really a bandwagon-jumping gesture because in many ways, Noordin as a playwright is very much his own man.

It is important to stress this moral independence of Noordin Hassan especially now that he has come under the patronage of the political establishment. I'm not thinking here only or mainly of the *Anugerah Sastera Negara*. I'm thinking more of the patronage of Noordin by the Finance Minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. The production of Noordin's most recent play, *Sirih Bertepuk, Pinang Menari*, in Penang last year was under the patronage of the Minister. This production was designed to launch what subsequently became the *Gabungan Teater Anak Tanjung* (GTAT), which is now under the patronage of the *Anak Tanjung* Anwar. Under the banner of GTAT, Noordin's play *Anak Tanjung* toured the northern states.

Now, this patronage of Noordin Hassan by the political establishment has made some cynical, sceptical, or simply jealous *sasterawans* believe that the playwright is allowing himself to be 'used' by the powers that be. The *Anugerah Sastera Negara* only serves to 'confirm' the belief of these *sasterawans*. I think the *sasterawans* are quite wrong here. My faith in Noordin as a playwright with integrity was confirmed not long ago by his refusal to accept a special award from the *Anugerah* panel. Noordin turned the award down because he felt that it was a compromise that insulted the art he practises. The monetary worth of the special award was slightly less than that of the *Anugerah Sastera*; this difference was seen by Noordin as signifying the panel's view that theatre, not being *sastera*, was not of the same status as literature.

It's good that the *Anugerah Sastera* is no longer closed to playwrights, and that the panel is no more prejudiced against the art practised by William Shakespeare.

## Neither a Tuah nor a Jebat

[30th October 1991]

In the months preceding the announcement of the new *Sasterawan Negara*, the literary grapevine of Kuala Lumpur buzzed with rumours and speculations. "X is going to get it this time... He should... He's one of our veteran *sasterawan*... They've got to give him the *Anugerah* before he dies..." "NO! It's the turn of the younger generation now. Y should..." "Y is not going to get it. His poetry is marvelous but..."

Prof Muhammad Haji Salleh, the eventual winner, was a strong favourite. Even so, there were those who lobbied against him and they gossiped and bitched like mad. He was too much influenced by the Western Ideas *lah*... he was this *lah* and that *lah*.... In several issues of *Dewan Sastera*, a self-appointed guardian of the purity of Malay-Islamic aesthetics was engaged in *Jihad* (holy war) against the professor. In an excess of enthusiastic piety, he flung the fatal mud of anti-Islam on the latter. That led to a threat of court action which was, however, withdrawn on the publication of an apology by the writer and his publisher, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

The triumph of Malay civility here didn't quite mean the end of the affair. As the expected announcement about the new *Sasterawan Negara* got nearer, the bitching about the professor became more intensive, and towards the end quite desperate. It was put about that Prof Muhammad

was forced to withdraw his court action because he didn't want to jeopardize his chances of getting the award. It was thought that suing DBP, that august institution and guardian of Malay language and literature, would have been a very unwise move. Another *sasterawan* (suspected of being part of a conspiracy) wrote a desperate article in a Bahasa Malaysia newspaper accusing Prof Muhammad of plagiarism. This fellow went through Prof Muhammad's poetry with a fine toothcomb looking for evidence. Typically, the teeth of his comb were so fine as to be invisible; and he hadn't the vaguest notion of what constituted plagiarism. For example, he couldn't even tell the difference between a genuine piece of plagiarism from an ancient work of Muhammad's *Sajak-Sajak Sejarah Melayu* (Poems of the *Malay Annals*), which, as the title declares, is an original sequence based on or inspired by the well known Malay classic.

I myself have no objection to the panel's choice of Prof Muhammad. The man deserves it as much as the previous winner. Whether there are still other writers from the first generation who equally deserve it, is arguable. For example, it can be argued that A. Samad Said deserves it as much as say, Keris Mas, whose claim to the *Anugerah* is, in my opinion, no more impressive than Pak Samad. Muhammad is the first writer from the younger generation to be given the *Anugerah*. Is there someone else who deserves it more than Muhammad? The answer would depend on a number of things.

The guidelines that the panel had to observe in assessing the candidates were obviously one of them. There were three things that the panel has to assess: (1) the literary quality of the candidate's works; (2) the thought and ideas connected with literature contributed by the candidate (this, I suppose, must refer to literary criticism and research and things like seminar participation); (3) the extent of

contribution if any, to the advancement of 'the national literature'. Since the first two are contributions to the advancement of literature, I don't quite know what the last one refers to. The conducting of workshops, perhaps, or the activity of translation?

Muhammad Haji Salleh is a substantial figure in all the three areas. He is a poet, a critic, a translator, a literary scholar and theoretician, as well as a professor of Malay literature. If it is strictly Muhammad's status as a poet that is under consideration, one would argue as I would, that there is a better poet than him from among his generation of writers. And that poet is Latiff Mohidin. But since the quality of the poetry isn't the only consideration, there is no point in arguing Latiff's claim to the *Anugerah* – at least not here. Latiff only writes poetry – and paints. He is not a scholar, a critic, or a literary activist.

The *Anugerah Sasterawan Negara* (ASN) is really meant for the Hang Tuahs of Malay/Malaysian literature; the Jebats have no hope of being considered. The Hang Tuah-Hang Jebat business is a simplification, and based on a very free interpretation of the Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat of Malay romance. But it is, nevertheless, a convenient way of defining types which basically do correspond to reality. As long as one recognises that it's a simplification and allows for certain grey areas, the typology can be useful.

Muhammad isn't a Jebat by a long shot. There has never been a real literary Jebat in the history of Malaysian literature. A Jebat, in my conception of the type, must be more than a rebel against outmoded or petrified literary conventions and forms. My Jebat would rather have his mind and sensibility in a state of creative tension with contemporary society and liberated enough from mere 'Malayness' to want to question directly or indirectly, certain pieties of 'Bumigeoism'. My Jebat, inspired by a

generous conception of life and a true sense of the fellowship of men, would be willing to take risks – risks he would consider essential for the creation of a new ‘poetics of life’. A new poetics of poetry without a new ‘poetics of life’ would be meaningless.

If Muhammad is no Jebat, neither is he a Tuah, in the sense of being totally uncritical in his attitude to conventions, both literary-intellectually and social. But between the extremes of Tuah and Jebat, I’d say he is much closer to the former. The chairman of the *Anugerah* panel, in his statement to the press announcing the choice of Muhammad Haji Salleh, said that the professor’s works “emphasised intellectual rather than emotional values”. What is meant by “intellectual values” here is rather vague. Does it refer to a perceived primacy of thinking in a poet’s works? Or the air of ‘philosophical’ meditation on themes like identity, tradition and modernity, time, modes of perception and so on?

The *Anugerah* chairman went to say that the “propagation of this concept (i.e. the concept of poetry distinguished by “intellectual values”) through (the professor’s) works would assist the process of creating a *dynamic Malay race*” (my italics). I find this statement quite revealing of the unstated assumptions in forming the very idea of the *Anugerah Sastera*. Muhammad’s intellectuality as a poet seems to be a matter of pride to the Malay race. There is no reference to Malaysian nation and Muhammad seems to be viewed as a Malay rather than a Malaysian poet and scholar. The mention of ‘national literature’ in the guidelines struck me as rather perfunctory.

This perception of the poet is not without justification in his poetry and other writings. Muhammad’s first two collections of poems, significantly titled *Sajak-Sajak Pendatang* and *Buku Perjalanan Si Tenggang II*, announced

two of his preoccupations: the alienation of the poet as an outsider (*pendatang*) and the return of the poet as a rebellious son to his cultural and racial roots (*Si Tenggang* in the title of the second book is the name of the archetypal rebellious son in Malay mythology).

Personally, I've always thought that Muhammad, who started off as an English language poet but later switched to his mother tongue, was over-defensive and solemnly self-conscious about the alleged alienation. This is certainly true of his early books, especially the second one in which we get lines like these from the key poem, '*pulang si tenggang*' (the return of *tenggang*):

*lihat, aku seperti kau juga,  
masih melayu  
sensitif pada apa  
yang kupercayaibai...*

*bersopansantun, menghormati  
manusia dan kehidupan.*

("look, I'm no different from you/still a Malay/ sensitive to whatever I believe to be good... courteous, respectful/of both life and my fellow man.")

The mono-tonal self-consciousness of this poem is almost embarrassing, especially that bit which advertises his precious courtesy (the Malays like to boast that they are a courteous people). I'd have thought that if the reality or priority of your ethnic identity is questioned or challenged, you don't, if you are a poet (and unfortunately the type who would worry about such things,) respond by protesting too much. I wouldn't say in a self-defensive way that the identity is still in fact essentially intact; you just show it in the language you use and the sensibility exercised in that language. I have nothing against the



search for roots and all that; in my own way, I too feel the need for roots. I am sympathetic with Muhammad's affirmation of his 'Malayness'; in my own way, I too sometimes like to affirm my 'Malayness' and have fun doing so.

But a poet, especially one who like Muhammad sees himself as a 'leader' of his society, should be able to claim the best of his race and through the best, not in spite of it, reach for a wider ideal. Muhammad does claim the best of his race, yes, but one could ask: does he try enough to reach for that wider ideal through the best of his 'Malayness'? In some ways, I feel that Professor Muhammad is basically 'one of them', i.e. some of his reflexes are essentially not different from those of the typical *sasterawan* – for all his advanced Western education, the much-advertised travelling that is supposed to have opened up his mind, his initial sense of alienation, his self-declared *kurang-ajar* stance, and so on.

And it is not without significance he followed the pointless habit of the vast majority of Malay poet's in his preference for the lower case, *a la* e.e. cummings. But, unlike the American poet's typographical oddity, that of our Malay poets has no intelligible purpose. Muhammad's persona as the modern Tenggara capable of creative Jebat-like *kurang ajar* stance is, to me, not terribly convincing. It is even less convincing than the ideologically different but also Jebat-like stance claimed by Usman Awang.

All things considered, I'd say that the choice of Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh as our new *Sasterawan Negara* was very fitting and, therefore, not surprising.

## Literary 'Makan Angin'

[21st October 1992]

I first learnt about the Malaysian Literature Week or *Minggu Sastera Malaysia* in London (Sept 14-19) not from the papers, but from a British Council brochure announcing forthcoming events for the last quarter of 1992. This was later confirmed (sort of) by a report I read of Tan Sri Zain Azraai's speech opening the *Minggu Sastera* at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Tan Sri Zain was the patron of the week. The British Council brochure said something about 'Malaysian literature'. And the initial press kit apparently said the same: 'Malaysian literature week'.

Had somebody or other at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (the main organising body of the event) suddenly become amnesiac or schizoid? Calling the event 'Malaysian' instead of 'Melayu', contradictory to what has happened to our National Language, changed from the agreed term 'Bahasa Malaysia' to 'Bahasa Melayu'? The official souvenir programme says: *Minggu Sastera Malaysia, London, 1992/ Malaysian Literature Week. Theme: Sastera Melayu Sebagai Warga Sastera Dunia!* Malay Literature and the World.

This, once again, and more pessimism-induced as far as I am concerned, should alert us to a very serious danger. That unless we start trying to think and feel 'Malaysian'... Well... The pessimist in me (pessimist, not cynic, please) thinks that it's time we stopped pretending that there is such a thing as a Malaysian literature – i.e. literature or

literatures written by Malaysians, for Malaysians and about Malaysians. I say this because pretending won't make the 'beast' go away – and recognition of the unpleasant reality might –just might – prevent... Well, what can one bloody say!

According to an interview with *Sasterawan Negara* Datuk Usman Awang (*Berita Harian*, Oct 3, 1992), "*Dewan Bahasa ... (diminta) membuat bedah-siasat atau penilaian semula Minggu Sastera Malaysia di London ... agar program itu benar-benar bermanfaat jika mahu diadakan lagi pada masa depan.*

"*Abang harap DBP memandang serius perkara ini agar program yang murni itu tidak menjadi program makan angin ... Perkara itu telah disuarakan dalam majlis baca puisi di London dan akan memanjangkannya kepada Ketua Pengarah DBP, Datuk Jumaat Mohd Noor, untuk tindakan lanjut. "Abang harap program itu dapat menemukan abang serta penyair lain dengan penyair atau pengarang besar dari Afrika, Amerika Latin, Palestin, selain Eropah sendiri. Kita ingin belajar dan bertukar-tukar pendapat dengan mereka, tetapi hampa kerana kebanyakan yang diundang termasuk sarjana sastera adalah orang yang sama. Muka lama yang sering diundang atau kerap datang ke Malaysia."* ("I appeal to Dewan Bahasa to conduct a post-mortem or reassessment of the Malaysian Literature Week in London... so that such events will really be of benefit if we are going to have it again in future. I hope DBP views this matter with seriousness so that such a noble programme will not be exploited as an excuse for participants to have a good time in London ... I have raised this matter in London and will bring it up at greater length with the Director of DBP for further action. I was hoping this programme would have given me the opportunity to meet major writers and poets from Africa, Latin America, Palestine, and Europe itself. We would have liked to learn from and exchange

ideas with them, but I was disappointed because most of those actually invited, including literary scholars, were the same people who had time and again been invited and had often visited Malaysia.”)

Apparently, about 80 per cent of the audience that saw *Matinya Seorang Pahlawan* (Usman Awang's marvellous play that was staged for the occasion) were Malaysians. Interestingly enough (and this is truly revealing in quite a critical way), the feelings expressed by the Datuk *penyair* were supported by the poet whom I regard as Malaysia's greatest contemporary poet. Who? None other than our *saudara* Latiff Mohidin.

In the same paper, *Berita Harian*, on the same day, Saudara Latiff said: “*Mungkinkah dengan mengadakan persembahan teater, baca puisi atau pameran buku dan lukisan karya seniman tempatan di Malaysia Hall, London, kita boleh bermegah bahawa karya sastera atau seni kita sudah mencapai tahap antarabangsa?*” (“Is it possible that with the staging of a play, poetry reading or book and art exhibitions by local artists at Malaysia Hall, London, we can feel proud that our literature and art have achieved an international standard?”)

Occasions such as the *Minggu Sastera* are not necessarily the best way to promote our literature. The best way (this is how I read Latiff) of promoting our literature or literatures is to exert as much effort as possible (writing is really hard work real writing at least) towards realising each writer's dream of producing a significant work of social, spiritual and general human relevance.

## Yes to BM and English

[25th November 1992]

Last week, Pena (the national writers union) held a one-day seminar at the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka on the theme 'The Role of Language in Nation Building'. The seminar was somewhat unusual in that most of the speakers were people from the corporate world. They included a banker, a gentleman from the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange, an advertising lady executive, and a representative of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Only one *sasterawan* was in the list, Kassim Ahmad (an untypical *sasterawan*, anyway), and he didn't give a paper but participated in a forum that concluded the seminar proper. When I saw the list of participants, I said to myself: Now, this one should be different. Unlike the usual *sasterawan-dominated* seminars, this one won't be lost in the fumes of endless chatter about the *maruah* (honour) of the nation (or race?), and other *sasterawanish* obsessions. This seminar should get down to the nitty-gritty to confront the problems that still seem to check the widespread use of the national language in the private sector, not to raise basic issues that had long been settled.

The composition of the seminar wasn't really surprising. Pena is now headed by Datuk Ahmad Sebi Abu Bakar, a successful corporate man and writer, who was elected

president early this year. The election of the Datuk signalled the entry in a crucial way of the corporate presence into the literary sector, an event enthusiastically welcomed by some, less by others (the latter being the incorrigible sceptics or cynics, of course, who cannot but see the marriage of the corporate sector with the literary as 'unholy'; I personally don't see why this should necessarily be so).

The business of language and nation building is quite complex and complicated, especially the question of the place of English in relation to the national language. I've discussed the issue more than once in my writings. Each time, it seemed the stand I took was either misunderstood or presented in a distorted manner to the non English-reading Malay public by the guardians of the *maruah* (honour) or *semangat kebangsaan Melayu*. The misunderstanding or distortion seemed to be inevitable every time someone took a pragmatic stand and defended the place of English in our country. Having a favourable attitude to English meant lack of pride in the national language, if not silent unpatriotic resistance to its widespread use, especially in the private and corporate sectors. If even the Prime Minister himself could be misunderstood by a leading Malay daily, what more people like me?

'People like me' means English-educated Malays, especially those educated in *Mat Salleh* countries. But there are more than one kind of English-educated Malays: those who are bilingual in speech, thinking, writing – and love-making; those who are mainly English speaking and speak Malay only to their servants, drivers and caddies; those (admittedly a very small minority) who cannot or can hardly speak their own mother tongue and if compelled by circumstance to do so would have to take lessons in it. The existence of these different groups of English-educated

Malays doesn't seem to make any difference to the noisy nationalists when it comes to labeling or categorising Malay defenders of English. They are lumped together as middle-class cultural renegades or apostates. The fact that people like me write in both languages is not proof enough of my loyalty to Malay.

The ironic thing is that even among the noisy nationalists there are English-educated (or semi-English-educated) persons who would slip into English, whether consciously or unconsciously, especially when speaking on intellectual matters to another English-educated fellow Malay. I don't want to name names, but I can tell you I know a number of nationalist literary politicians and academics (some of them quite well-known, and all of them *bumigeois*) who do this. It seems that despite all the noise they make about the purity of their national souls they cannot resist, unconsciously or consciously, the snob appeal of the language of the former colonial masters. This is a kind of hypocrisy, if not schizophrenia. It is less honourable than the attitude of those hotel waiters, 7-Eleven shop assistants and employees of fast food restaurants, who speak to their guests or customers in English almost all the time, as if they were all tourists. These people are not hypocrites; they are just simple minds bedazzled by the bourgeois lifestyle who think that it is expected of them to speak in English and feel quite sophisticated doing so - "Is that all, sir?"; "Thank you, sir." To be fair to these people, it should also be said that they often speak in English because the milieu they work in is dominated by people who speak English a lot. And since their job is to please their customers, they find themselves speaking in English quite naturally, although they know that their customers would understand them perfectly if they stick to Malay.

Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, in his speech opening the Pena seminar, reiterated the importance of English as a second language, but reminded corporate and private sector leaders of their social responsibility in helping to extend and improve the use of the national language in their sectors. That the use of the national language in these sectors is very limited, and that even that limited use is unsatisfactory in terms of quality were frankly acknowledged by a number of the speakers at the seminar. Improving the quality of Bahasa Malaysia used in the private and corporate sectors is the least difficult of the problems. What is really difficult is the creation of an environment that will motivate these people to use the language spontaneously, without directives from above. Employees can be directed to use the national language in all business correspondence within the country, but they can't be forced to speak the language to customers or clients, or among themselves.

I personally have always believed that in matters of language, compulsion (legal or semi-legal) can be used only in certain areas. And even in those areas there are sub-areas where it would be madness to use compulsion in whatever form. Take our national schools, for example: I've noticed that in schools where the pupils are ethnically mixed, English is often the language used outside the classrooms, certainly when the conversation is among non-Malays and quite often that between Malays and non-Malays. Is this something that is so reprehensible that steps must be taken to stop it? My answer would be a resounding No.

David Chua, deputy secretary general of the Association of Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry, said in his paper that one of the reasons why Bahasa Malaysia is so little used in the private and corporate sectors is the fact that the generation who were educated under the national



education system, now in their 30s, have not yet ascended to the positions of power and influence in those sectors. Perhaps; but I personally doubt it. I think when the present under-40s become corporate leaders, as quite a few of them already are, English will still be their main language of communication.

The plain fact is we are a linguistically plural society with English as a very widely used second language among middle-class Malaysians. And the present widespread use of English will continue as long as we are exposed to information signals in English from overseas. There is not much that the Government can legitimately do about this essentially healthy exposure, as long as it remains wisely deaf to the demands of regressive elements in our society; those elements who would want it to resort to non-democratic methods to preserve the purity of the 'national culture'.

Chua also attributed the limited use of Bahasa Malaysia in the private and corporate sectors to the confusion caused by the constant and sometimes conflicting changes in policies regarding the language – the question of spelling, the business of *Bahasa Baku* and all that jazz. The worst confusion of all was caused by the sudden irrational change of the name for our national language from Bahasa Malaysia to Bahasa Melayu. Why, after more than three decades of independence, it was thought necessary to make the change, God knows. But one can't blame those who see in the change a disturbing sign of regression, because a non-ethnic term that had served us well for so long was suddenly dropped for one loaded with divisive connotations.

Since, as far as I know, there has been no ministerial pronouncement on the change, I'll stick to good old Bahasa Malaysia. If it was good enough for the founding fathers of the nation, it's good enough for me. I notice that I'm

not alone in my preference; the veteran journalist, writer and nationalist Pak Samad Ismail still uses the name Bahasa Malaysia in his *Berita Harian* column *Bila Saub Dilabuh*. Good on you, Pak Samad!

## Week of Unusual Activity

[2nd June 1993]

A visitor to Kuala Lumpur this week would be forgiven for thinking that the local literary scene is remarkably active. A conjunction of three literary events in one week is certainly something to take note of in a place like Kuala Lumpur.

At the shopping complex Lot 10, a first ever Literary Week involving local writers in English is being held. Not very far from the city, on Pentas Terapung (Floating Stage), Tasik Raja Lumu, Shah Alam, the grand annual affair *Hari Sastera*, organised by Gapena, will kick off this Friday. On the last day of *Hari Sastera* (June 7), another literary event, a seminar on the teaching of literature will begin at Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (UPM).

So much organised literary activity in one week (more or less) must be a sign of something good. The fact that the Lot 10 event clashes with *Hari Sastera*, however, is a bit unfortunate. Though it is pure coincidence, not something planned by any group, the timing of the former (and of the UPM seminar) may be misinterpreted by certain quarters. Although a coincidence, this unfortunate clash of events does prove something regrettable about our literary world – or worlds. It shows how little communication there is between the English-language writers and their Bahasa Malaysia brothers.

The Lot 10 event is an all-English affair. This is so not for reason of exclusiveness. Being an attempt to gather for

the first time Kuala Lumpur English-language writers for the purpose of giving them better exposure to the public, it cannot afford to be too ambitious. The event has to depend on the efforts of individuals, without the backing of any organisation, such as a writers' union or government institution. The only support it gets is, of course, from Lot 10 and its co-sponsors. Although an all-English affair, the Lot 10 Literary Week involves multi-ethnic writers who are all deeply conscious of themselves as Malaysians. To show that the event is not an exclusive affair, and that the sense of being Malaysian is paramount, a veteran nationalist and *sasterawan*, Tan Sri A. Samad Ismail, was invited to do the honours of launching the event. Pak Samad's ready acceptance of the invitation gladdened the hearts of the writers involved in the event. What made them even happier was hearing the things said by Pak Samad in his speech last Saturday.

Pak Samad acknowledged that "an unhealthy sense of ethnicity still divides our people (Malays still write about Malays, the Chinese about the Chinese, and so on). Because of this, writers in English, multi-ethnic as they are, are uniquely placed to help us transcend the ethnic barriers and create a better sense of nationality." This is a view that I thoroughly share, as I have said a number of times in my writings. In what ways can writers in English help create a better sense of nationality? They can do so, said Pak Samad, by, among other things, helping to "liberalise our values, improve our perception of each other by questioning racial stereotypes, make us truly feel the sense of being Malaysian united by common dreams, and at the same time make us positively and creatively aware that we are part of a wider world." Pak Samad, while blessing the Lot 10 event, also sounded a word of warning and concluded his speech with a "small advice" to the English-language writers. Referring to the stereotyped perception of English-language writers as "elitist, perhaps even neo-

colonial", he said that, although he personally didn't think that the charge of elitism is true of all or most of these writers, he had to admit that "they do have a problem which Bahasa Malaysia writers by and large don't have to face". That problem has to do with the social status and reach of the English language, which makes it difficult for the English-language writers to "resist or escape from the elitist trap". This problem cannot be denied, and our English-language writers must think hard about it.

The holding of the Literary Week at Lot 10 itself can be taken as a confirmation of the charge of "elitism". The shopping mall, one of the more expensive ones in Kuala Lumpur, is after all very much a middle-class or even upper-middle-class place. I personally, a member of the middle class myself, can learn to live with the fact that English-language writing in Malaysia is inevitably a middle-class affair. But writing by members of the middle class for the middle class doesn't or shouldn't mean "elitism", a word which is often used too loosely. A writer who is a member of the middle class, economically, is not necessarily bourgeois in his values. As Vladimir Nabokov said somewhere, bourgeois is a state of mind or a matter of values, not of the bank balance or the area of residence. Malaysians writing in English for a middle-class audience can help enlarge the consciousness of that audience. They can make their readers aware of themselves as Malaysians not only in the sense of transcending the ethnic and religious barriers, but also the social and economic ones. These readers can be 'educated' to truly and sympathetically regard not only those belonging to other ethnic groups as Malaysians and fellow human beings, but also those who are of their own ethnic group but less fortunate than themselves economically and socially.

Pak Samad's "small advice" to our English-language writers is also very timely. It has to do with the virtual

absence of communication between English-language writers and those writing in Bahasa Malaysia. He made a plea to the former to "show more interest in what is produced by the latter". If the Bahasa Malaysia writers don't read their English-language fellow writers, it must be remembered that they are handicapped by language, and that very few of Malaysian writings in English have been translated into Bahasa Malaysia. English-language writers don't or shouldn't suffer from the language handicap; and even if they do (like those of the older generation), there are English translations of the works of many of the leading Bahasa Malaysia writers. Showing an interest in Bahasa Malaysia writings can also mean writing about them by English-language writers who are also critics. Pak Samad also touched on this in his speech, making the pertinent point that in this kind of attempt to bridge the gap separating the two groups, "there must be good faith and openness of mind, and tolerance of forthright criticism or simple difference of opinion".

He went on to add an important point that all writer-critics from both sides of the divide should bear in mind. They must "take care", said Pak Samad, "to inform themselves thoroughly about what the other side are trying to do, and about the formal and cultural-moral values that shape their works". Pak Samad's point about the need for "good faith and openness of mind, and tolerance of forthright criticism" should also be given special attention, especially by Bahasa Malaysia writers.

If there is this good faith and tolerance, we won't get the kind of paranoid or ultrasensitive reaction as that shown by a columnist in a Bahasa Malaysia daily about two months ago. This columnist wrote that "*beberapa orang pengkritik seperti Salleh Joned dan Wong Phui Nam melancarkan serangan yang seru terhadap beberapa sasterawan Melayu*". To say that what Wong and I write

constitutes a "fierce" (*seru*) calculated "attack" on Malay *sasterawans* seems to suggest a kind of paranoia, or, if not that, a deliberate distortion of what we have been trying to do. But writers like this columnist aside, there have been encouraging signs lately that not all *sasterawans* are so suspicious of us. The willingness of Pak Samad Ismail to launch the Lot 10 Literary Week, and the presence at the Sunday session of *Sasterawan Negara* A. Samad Said and poet T. Alias Taib makes us more hopeful that relations between the English-language writers and their Bahasa Malaysia brothers will improve in the future.

## Malay Writers and Bosnia

[31st August 1994]

Just before I left the country in April, Pena (the National Writers' Association) was busy organising something big on the issue of Bosnia. The Badan Bertindak Bosnia (Bosnia Action Front) was subsequently formed which organised a huge rally at Stadium Merdeka last May. I was told that Chandra Muzaffar, who was one of the speakers at the rally, reminded BBB that in order to be effective it should communicate with human rights groups in Europe and USA. I wonder if Chandra's advice has been heeded. I was also told that Rahim Razali, who was the MC of the rally, reminded the Stadium Merdeka crowd that the spirit they showed should be kept alive "not just for the Bosnia issue but on all other injustices committed in the world". I compliment Rahim for saying what needed to be said.

I don't know if our *sasterawans* and *cendikiawans* are aware that many American and European writers are pro-Bosnia, and that they are so because in the former Yugoslavia what is (or was) a harmonious multi-ethnic and secular democracy is under threat of extinction. The world has been repeatedly told, by anti-interventionists as well as by Serbian propagandists, that the Bosnian war is a resurfacing of ancient hatred. Perhaps in a sense it is; but only a deliberately orchestrated frenzy fuelled by the demagogic rhetoric of ideological fanatics could make this 'ancient hatred' resurface among a people so



closely integrated for generations as the Bosnians. The ethnic harmony of Bosnian society before the war was grounded not only in a healthy acceptance of cultural pluralism but also in the widespread practice of intermarriage. In Sarajevo, 60 per cent of the marriages were between people from different religious backgrounds. The reality of this integration has been passionately affirmed by the noted Bosnian Muslim journalist Zlatko Dizdarevic.

Questioning even the very term 'ethnic conflict', Dizdarevic says: "For us Bosnians (this description) makes no sense at all. Even the idea of tolerance makes little sense, because tolerance can only come between differing or conflicting groups. How can I, born a Muslim in Belgrade and married to a Bosnian woman of Serbian origin, even discuss the idea of tolerance?"

The cultural pluralism of Sarajevo is very much bound up with its cosmopolitanism as a European city. Did our *sasterawans* and *cendikiawans* know that Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic applauded the 'Europe Begins in Sarajevo' campaign slogan of the French intellectuals in the recent European Parliamentary election? Izetbegovic was here only being true to the tradition of multi-cultural cosmopolitanism of Bosnia, especially Sarajevo. The irony is that Serbia, which is more alien to Western Europe than Bosnia because of its Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Slavic chauvinism, should claim to be the defender of European-Christian civilisation against Islamic fundamentalism allegedly embodied in Izetbegovic's Bosnia. The fact that Izetbegovic once wrote a thesis on the Islamic state and that his party has a few fundamentalists among its members has been exploited by Serbian propaganda aimed at the West. It is conveniently forgotten that Izetbegovic always stressed the pluralist intentions of his presidency. Commentators are generally agreed on the

essential liberalism and humanity of Izerbegovic. The trouble with him, as pointed out by Misha Glenny in 'The Fall of Yugoslavia', is that he encouraged the formation of a democracy "based not on political or economic interest but on national groups". This short-sightedness undermines his commitment to cultural pluralism. (This is not unlike the policy of our own Barisan government whose pluralist intentions are undermined by ethnic-based party politics).

I have a strong impression that, like the Serbs, most of our *sasterawans* and *cendikiawans* think of the Bosnian war as a clash of two irreconcilable civilisations: Islam versus infidelity (Christian or secular Europe, the two being interchangeable with our Malay writers). To them, the Bosnia that is under threat is not the pluralist democracy the world knows and values, but an outpost of Islam in infidel Europe; that's why the Islamic world should rush to its help.

The coincidence of the Malay-Muslim intellectuals' perception of the Bosnian war with the image projected for the West by Serbian propaganda is sadly ironical. I wonder what the attitude of our Bosnia champions would have been if the situation in the former Yugoslavia had been the reverse: that it's the Muslims who were conducting 'ethnic cleansing' against the Serbs, supported, in defiance of the United Nations by, say, Turkey (whose Imperial Ottoman government, incidentally, committed its own 'genocide' of a million Armenian Christians in Turkish Armenia in 1915). Had that been the situation, would our writers have been as capable as many Western writers of transcending religious or cultural affiliations and as vocal about 'genocide'? Frankly, I doubt it. I wouldn't be surprised if many of our *sasterawans* and *cendikiawans* had allowed their sense of religious fraternity to dictate their attitude; perhaps not to actually support the aggression

and genocide (though I can imagine a few who would), but to remain quiet about it.

Do not think that writers cannot be seduced by nationalist propaganda even to the extent of justifying genocide. There are ultranationalist Serbian writers obsessed with the chauvinist dream of Greater Serbia who have been seduced into supporting Serbian aggression and, directly or indirectly, justifying 'ethnic cleansing'. (Gapena with its 'harmless' dream of Greater '*Dunia Melayu-Islam*' should note this). Notable among them is one Dobrica Cosic, novelist and historian, who, together with some like-minded academics from the Serbian Academy of Sciences, had been responsible for a notorious document called The Memorandum. This memorandum, according to Glenny, "prepared the ideological ground for Milosevic" and convinced him that the ultra-nationalist dream of Greater Serbia was actively endorsed by Serbian intellectuals. Another Serbian writer obsessed with the dangerous gospel of Greater Serbia and vociferously antipathetic towards Muslims and other non-Serbs is novelist Vuk Draskovic, the leader of the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO).

Serbian literary propagandists have even exploited the name and works of Yugoslavia's only Nobel laureate, Ivo Andric (1892-1975), whose major historical novel *The Bridge on the Drina* (1945) is seen by the Serbs primarily as a testimony to the suffering of their ancestors under the Ottoman Turks. The irony is that this writer, who is so worshipped by the Serbs, is a Croat (an ethnic group as much hated by the Serbs as the Bosnian Muslims) and whose concept of national identity included the Muslims because it was based on language, not religion or narrow ethnicity. The name of this language is, unfortunately, Serbo-Croat; it's understandable if Bosnians, finding it difficult to utter the word today, would rather refer to it simply as 'the mother tongue'.

Not all Serbian writers and intellectuals, however, are chauvinists. Even in Serbia, there are quite a few who are outspoken in their criticism of the Milosevic-Karadzic policy of 'ethnic cleansing', especially those around the Belgrade magazine *Vreme* (Time), led by the noted liberal and human rights lawyer Srda Popovic.

The traditional liberalism of at least part of the Belgrade intelligentsia has not yet been consumed by the crazy ideology of Greater Serbia. In Bosnia itself, despite the shattering experience of the past 28 months of seeing former Bosnian neighbours suddenly becoming 'ethnic-cleansing' Serbs, the sense of being one people bound by generations of shared experience, language and dreams seems not to have been totally destroyed among the writers – at least in cities like Sarajevo.

Zlatko Dizdarevic, in the same statement quoted above, assured the world that "amongst us in Sarajevo, who had never considered the possibility of (ethnic) divisions, nothing has changed. Even now... journalists of all the different nationalities of Bosnia – Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats, Jews, and Muslims – continue to work together". This is truly amazing because if there was one event that could justify cynicism about human brotherhood even among people of the same stock, it's the Bosnian war.

But don't allow ourselves, particularly we in Malaysia, to take comfort from Dizdarevic's assurance here. We Malaysians should rather take note of the grim lesson that this war could have for us. I am not trying to exaggerate the parallels between Bosnia and our country, but it's worth our while to ponder on the possible lesson of this war. Bosnia is a tragic case study of how religion can be dangerously used to serve ethnic nationalism. If it can happen in Bosnia where cultural pluralism and ethnic harmony had for generations been interwoven into the fabric of the national life, where there was a large class of

educated and secularised people who knew of the danger of ethnic-religious chauvinism, it can certainly happen here. We have our own tribe of ethnic nationalists who are ever ready to exploit religion, a religion which is seen as part of the very definition of that nationality. And these ethnic nationalists, influential writers and intellectuals among them, are certainly no enthusiasts of cultural pluralism.

The Bosnian war has been compared by some writers to the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s. There are a few parallels between the two events, but only one really touches the heart of the matter. This one has never been suggested before because it's a 'parallel' of a poetic and allegorical kind. It's suggested by a story oftentold in the bar or around a camp fire at the height of the Spanish war. Briefly, the story tells that after the Creation, the nations of the world, envious of Spain for being blessed by God with rich soil, smiling sun, and beautiful sensuous women, formed a deputation to place their grievance before the Almighty Himself. God considered the matter and agreed that Spain was good, resembling that Eden of which the world had proved itself unworthy. After thinking a bit, He said: "What I have created I will not destroy, but to show you that I will not favour this country beyond any other, I will grant the right in perpetuity to my Enemy the Devil that he may give to Spain her governments."

I don't know much about the soil of Bosnia and I doubt the sun there could be called 'smiling'. As for the women, I've yet to find out. But Allah the All Mighty had blessed Bosnia with something even more scarce than smiling sun, rich soil and sensuous women. Allah had blessed the country with a humorously harmonious, tolerant, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural cosmopolitan society; a blessing wondrously suggested by the mellifluous sound of the name of its premier city and guardian of its

**soul** – Sarajevo. The blessed state was too good to last. Under pressure from the deputation of envious nations, Allah felt compelled to give the Devil the right to do what he liked to the poor country. I hope Allah has not given that right in perpetuity.

## A State of 'Minda'

[2nd September 1992]

Have you, dear reader, ever experienced the rather rare distemper known as literary nausea? I have. Literary nausea, at least in my own experience of it, can sometimes be accompanied by diarrhoea, which is not entirely or necessarily verbal in form. The nausea and the diarrhoea can both be good and bad. Bad, because they make you suffer bodily and mentally; good, because as someone once said: "The maladies of the body may prove medicines to the mind." And, I'd like to add, to the soul too.

The nausea I experience, though not quite 'Sartreian' in character (whatever that means), can be quite 'Sallehian' in the strange, rather elusive sense of vacuity or nothingness it generates in my sense of my own being. Strange, because the sense of vacuity can make me feel good, like the feeling you get after a particularly satisfying act of shitting. It can also make you feel not so good because the discharge of the foul stuff from the bowels of your intellect doesn't really purge it of all impurities. Speaking of myself, to ensure complete, or near-complete, purging I need to retreat periodically to my *khalwat* cave. Thus, the disappearing acts I'm forced to resort to now and again, leaving readers of 'As I Please' wondering if I had been spirited by some unkind agents of the state to Pulau Jerejak.

Excessive consumption of trendy literary or arty-farty

stuff, like most excesses, can be bad for the body and soul. Especially the stuff that is locally produced. This nausea that's making me reel with giddiness right now, that's making my mental bowels desperately want to purge itself, discharging the slimy, poisoned watery stuff I've been unintentionally inhaling and consuming, was brought on by a malignant form of pollution. Known as *sastera cemar*, its presence is fatally pervasive in our cultural atmosphere. It contains all kinds of foul matter: microscopic and submicroscopic agents of infections that are still being produced by what they call *mindas*. A *minda* is a malignant thing that originates from the infidel West, forcefully 'converted', suitably 'circumcised' to suit local needs, and 'married' to its local equivalent, which unfortunately didn't have a name. The one imported from the West is known, in its original form, as *mind*. All this happened, ironically enough, after Merdeka.

The deformed off-spring of this unholy-holy marriage is *minda*. There are a hell of a lot of *mindas* in our cultural atmosphere. They are supposed to make the air clean, to enable us to breathe purified, progressive and spiritually liberating intelligence; but they are really full of fatal viruses (such as bigotry, intolerance, superstitions, stupidity). Before the unholy-holy marriage, the native something without a name was, certainly, in the days of my father and grandfather, quite refreshingly liberating, though not in the excessive and amoral infidel European sense. (You're romanticising the past, Salleh Ben! Am I? Perhaps – but just a little).

Nauseous, very nauseous. I really feel like scooting to my *khalwat* cave again – this time for good perhaps. But, *alhamdulillah*, our cultural atmosphere is not completely hopeless. There are a few presences in it which can help save us from total despair. One such presence is in my *mind* now, and I'd like to pay tribute to him here. The



heart of my mind, my liver of pleasure, in fact the very bowels of my human nature are whirling, and whirling, and whirling – in harmony with the rhythm of this presence. Gay with a sense of liberating abandon. Sensual, sheer and shameless. His inspirational whirlings subtly, silently subversive, transcending all divisions, all differences; affirming a concord between states contrary, between realities divergent, and between...

(INTERJECTION: Cut the crap, *kawan!* What's all this verbal diarrhea about?)

... between the *haram* and the *halal*, between the *haram* and *Haram*, between gods and God ...

(INTR: What the hell are you going on about!???)

About a dancer, dear reader...

(INTR: What? A dancer? What's that got to do with literature? This is a literary column, man! 'As I Please' doesn't literally mean you can write as you please on anything you please ...)

A dancer, a beautiful youth ... Ah! How his lithe young body beckons you to partake of his offering. Young; only sixteen he is, sweet sixteen; his command of this ancient art that demands the discipline of a yogi is... well, simply marvellous! In my mind, as I summon the picture of him at one particular moment in time, dancing in the cone of light in the centre of the stage, a pair of tiny white moths fluttering in and out of that sacred space he had just carved with his Sivaist-Sufistic vibrating whirling presence, his lean youthful body dripping with the sweat of the gods, of God ...

(INTR: The connection, man! Where's the connection? This is a lit ...)

The connection? What I'm going to celebrate here goes beyond mere literary connection. But don't worry, the lit. tit... Sorry, shit... No, no... The lit. 'it' is in it too. Real lit. stuff, not some dry, dehydrating academic shit.

Yes, only connect... That's precisely the point, my dear suffering reader. Only connect, says the author of *Passage to India*. Only connect...

And our young dancer does connect – affirming the dreams, the vision, in every beat of his heart, every thrust of his body, every flashing of his glance, every sign, every *mudra* of his mind. A whirling series of epiphanies caught in a sequence of stillness at the very heart of his whirls within whirls within whirls...

I'm churning this out (beady sweat of the gods, hopefully), almost immediately after getting home from the Mavin Khoo dance solo at the PJ Civic Centre. The time, right now, as I'm churning and churning words befitting the superb offering of this rare young man, is a few minutes past midnight, Aug 23.

(INTR: The connection, man! Where's the connect...?)

OK... Here's the connection: Mavin Khoo, like his guru Ramli Ibrahim (one of the pioneers of this barrier breaking cultural-spiritual odyssey), is an example, or should be an example to our writers, our *sasterawans* and *senimans* (see article: 'Different Lamps But the Same Light'). Young Mavin, earth-bound, heaven-striving, a vibrantly passionate embodiment of the much-desired spirit of connections and concord.

All kinds of connection; connections that reveal those hidden resemblances perceived by poets; be they poets whose language is the blessed body or poets whose language is the blessed word.

## Different Lamps but the Same Light

[9th September 1992]

Only connect ... Watching Mavin Khoo dance the *Varnam* (literally 'colour', thus the Malay word *warna*), said to be the most challenging dance in the *Bharata Natyam* repertoire (lasting nearly 40 minutes in Mavin's case) – watching Mavin dance the *Varnam* so dazzlingly, the energy of the very universe apparently firing his glowing lean body, making it taut with the presence of the One. Bodysoul, soulsoul seemingly so total in its multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, multi-hued, multi-scented manifestations of universal *bhakti* (devotion). *Bhakti* to Siva Nataraja, lord of the *linga* and the dance, that direful-faced dreaded director of man's destiny, cosmic destroyer and regenerator; locks-matted, lingam-vibrating manifestation of the One and Only... This intercourse between heavenly body and celestial earth in the fabulously glistening body of young Mavin enacts and celebrates the concord between man and man, tribe and tribe, us and they, gods earthly and God transcendent.

If I may suggest something to the *sasterawans* of Malaysia: Meditate, even if only for a moment, a truly focused moment, on the meaning of Mavin, and behind him that of his guru Ramli, and behind Ramli, his guru, and behind Ram's guru... until the last guru of all, the One

and Only Guru. (Remember the meaning of the Sanskrit word 'guru': He who dispels darkness – which, incidentally, was the original title of one of Ramli's works, *Adorations*.)

Sons of Malaysia, both – one half-Chinese, half-Indian; the other Malay; and both united by the *rasa* of the universe; ancient-and-modern, sacred-and-profane in oneness of being. On the wings of dance divine, they transcend man-made barriers; the sheer joy of their dancing dances the dance of the living, of the one in the many – all blessed and inspired by the One-And-Only. Thus is found the secret of Unity, the Hidden Treasure at the heart of the Mystery of mysteries. Malay, Chinese, Indian... Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Buddhist – aren't they mere words, labels, categories? Or so they should be to us if we were truly tuned to the vibrations of the Truth, to the music of the Divine.

*Sasterawans* of Malaysia, consider truly the unity of Truth, of *Tawhid*, and let your God-given imagination truly live in the many-in-the-one, and ultimately in the One-in-the-many; in the very breadth of God-the-Creator-God-the-Destroyer-God-the-Regenerator. Indeed, there is no god but God. Think of Mavin, Guna, and, of course, Ramli behind them. Oneness of Being manifests itself through the vessel of their bodies. Why can't the reality they affirm in the sacred dance of the body be similarly affirmed in the sacred dance of speech? The Word that unites words that divide – my fellow *sasterawans*, we must together meditate on it.

Taste with the bud of our soul the *rasa* of Ramli. And of Mavin. And Guna. See, feel, hear, smell, taste – and think the apparently unthinkable. If only you could see what I can see – in fact, I'm seeing it right at this moment as I'm churning these beads of sweat, sweat of words, words sacred and transcendent. See what? Our Ramli – and Mavin and Guna – dancing the saving dance of Siva

Nataraja, and of the Krishna in all of us, whatever our formal faith may be. If only all Malaysians (Of whatever race, creed, and colour they may be) would join hands and make connections – and like Seri Rama, to win back Sita Dewi, build the fabulous bridge across the strait that divides *rasa* and *rasa*, man and man, gods and God.

And please try to think twice, thrice, a hundred, even a thousand times, before you throw around words like *murtad* (apostate), *kafir* (infidel), *syirik* (polytheism), *munafik* (hypocrite) so indiscriminately, so self-righteously, sanctimoniously – and, may Allah be my witness, so unIslamically.

If what I'm saying here offends your religious convictions, allow yourselves the chance to read and the willingness to open your hearts and minds to the vision of the following little poem. Written by a Muslim generally acknowledged as one of the greatest Sufi poets, Jalaluddin Rumi, the poem is called 'The Song of the Reed':

Hearken to the Reed forlorn,  
Breathing, ever since 'twas torn  
From its rushy bed, a strain  
Of impassioned love and pain.  
The Secret of my Song, though near,  
None can see and none can hear.  
Oh, for a friend to know the Sign,  
And mingle all his soul with mine.  
'Tis the flame of Love that fired me,  
'Tis the wine of Love inspired me.  
Wouldst thou learn how lovers blend,  
Hearken, hearken to the Reed.

(Translated by R.A. Nicholson.)

Our literature needs poets and writers who truly "know the Sign", who can read God's *mudras* (symbolic gestures)

in nature, and truly grasp their real meaning – a meaning that, I feel, could only be understood if the seeker is truly liberated from the constrictions of rigid doctrines and laws. We must all learn to hearken to ‘the Reed’ – the earthly as well as the transcendent.

If we can hear the Reed, we’ll appreciate the truth affirmed by Rumi in another poem, the ‘Masnavi’:

The lamps are different, but the Light is the same:  
It comes from the Beyond...





All the World's a Stage





## 'Budaya Jiwa Bangsa'

[March 2003]

Although Syed Alwi was awarded the *Seniman Negara* late last year for his multiple contributions as an artiste (playwright, theatre and TV drama director actor and theatre director and producer), I am going to talk of him only as a playwright. This award signifies a shift in the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism's concept of what makes a National Artist.

Given the slogan *Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa* (Language is the Soul of the Nation), awarding the *Seniman Negara* to someone who writes as much in English as in Bahasa Malaysia (sorry, I should have said Bahasa Melayu), certainly signifies a change. Many people probably think that this was not surprising, given the fact that the award came after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's announcement of the return to English for the teaching of mathematics and science. To me, it was surprising. The announcement signified a purely utilitarian attitude toward the importance of English. The award of *Seniman Negara* to a bilingual creative writer like Syed Alwi suggested a more open and realistic concept of national culture. It should also make us realise that the slogan *Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa* is not quite accurate. It is closer to the truth to say *Budaya Jiwa Bangsa* (Culture is the Soul of the Nation). Ours being a multi-lingual country, the sense of being Malaysian can be expressed in languages

other than the national language – certainly in the two dominant languages that cross our racial barriers that I am familiar with, Malay and English.

Syed Alwi has had an extensive and varied experience as a drama scriptwriter for both theatre and television. He has written as much in Malay and English, though his first play, *Going North*, was in English (later translated into Malay as *Menuju Utara*). That Syed Alwi has equal command of these two languages in both dramatic forms is unquestionable. His work is certainly a living testimony to the fact that a Malaysian spirit or sense of identity can be expressed in the language of our former colonial masters, which has now become ours as well as, to use the inevitable cliché, a global language. One does not have to write only in Malay to express one's sense and experience of being a Malaysian. I said this when writing about Lloyd Fernando as a novelist. Although Fernando could read and write articles in Malay, he could only do creative writing in English; yet it is unquestionable that his novels are truly Malaysian in their spirit and preoccupations. Syed Alwi expresses both his Malay and Malaysian consciousness in whichever of the two languages he writes.

His award of *Seniman Negara* was certainly overdue. As a playwright, he has written one of the most powerful Malaysian plays, *Tok Perak* (TP), first staged towards the end of 1975. The beautiful structured play about the antics of a medicine seller was first published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) in 1977. This publication led to a court case in which the playwright sued DBP for infringement of copyright when it published and circulated the book before the contract had been signed; in fact, when the contract was still being negotiated. Before taking legal action, Syed Alwi had the decency to ask DBP to publish an apology, which it refused to do. The playwright won the case and the book was withdrawn from circulation.

Then *TP* disappeared from the scene for about three years. In 1981, it re-emerged in the form of a TV movie. *TP* on the telly provoked quite a heated controversy in the press, sparked off by some goon who, taking a phrase in isolation from Tok Perak's opening speech, accused the playwright of impiety for allegedly putting the angels before God Himself in the hierarchy of importance. From what I can remember, those who were critical of the play's preoccupations or the style of Tok Perak's medicine seller rhetoric did not have a clue about the nature of the play and that of the lead character.

In 1985, *TP* the stage play emerged as a book again, this time published by Teks Publishing. "*Tok Perak timbul dengan anu-anunya*" are the first words of the longish opening speech of the hero, charismatic and titillating. *Anu* is slang which the Malays use when they do not want to mention the name of a particular person, thing, characteristic or whatever else – 'do not want to mention' because it is obvious what is being referred to; or when there is a sort of taboo that makes what a particular *anu* refers to unmentionable; or because there are no words that can adequately convey what a particular *anu* being spoken of truly refers to. The last, I think, is the *anu-anu* of Tok Perak, both the character in the play and the play itself.

In *TP*, Syed Alwi tried get into the soul of an individual who moves on the fringe of society, and finds himself suddenly caught in a dilemma, or being pulled in opposite directions – the free life of a man constantly on the move and without ties to family or place; this and the unexpected attraction to the idea of being a normal social man, married and having a family. The resulting situation is quite trying.

The first and last stage productions of *TP* were under the direction of theatre stalwart, Krishen Jit, with the playwright himself in the lead role. It was, in my judgment,

not quite successful in terms of its intention to realise the multi-faceted life of a play by the use of multimedia. *TP* is long overdue for a re-staging, especially after the recent re-staging of an earlier play of Syed Alwi, that superb comedy, one of our very best, *Alang Rentak Seribi (ARS)*. *ARS* was staged at Istana Budaya under the direction of Ahmad Yatim, a well-known theatre veteran who is not an actor and a director, and has been involved in quite a few plays in English as well as those in Malay. The play ran for 10 days. What, for the life of me, I cannot understand is why the production had a rather poor house practically every evening. Press publicity was rather minimal, yes, but I was told by Ahmad Yatim that he did not depend entirely on the media. He had people going around in a number of urban and suburban areas putting leaflets on the production in letter-boxes. Even this extra effort did not help.

What does this mean? Does it have to do with the unfavourable image, among quite a few KI theatre-goers, of the super-grand Istana Budaya (why that feudalistic term 'Istana'?) which seems to be more suited for opera, symphony concerts and musicals than small-scale plays? Or does it have to do, as our *Seniman Negara* himself seems to believe, with the vestige, conscious or unconscious, of colonial condescension towards plays in Bahasa Melayu!

I leave you it to you, dear reader, to come to your own conclusion. I merely want to end by expressing my lament by saying: Poor fellow, my country. You bestowed on one of our leading playwrights and *seniman*, the well-deserved highest award in his field. And yet, the people who ought to support his endeavour and that of stalwarts like Ahmad Yatim, just don't seem to care.

## Language and a Good Play

[10th April 1991]

Theatre stalwart Faridah Merican gets annoyed with people who question her Actors Studio's commitment to English-language plays. I can understand Faridah's annoyance, and sympathise with her and her cronies. "A good play is a good play; it doesn't matter what language it is in."

Yes, indeed, Faridah; you are absolutely right there. But the statement is not as simple or innocent as it sounds, and it raises issues which should be faced honestly, and with due regard to that bogey called 'The Role of the Theatre in National Consciousness'. There is implied in Faridah's statement, whether conscious or not, a judgment on local plays in languages other than English in particular Bahasa Malaysia. The implication is that Actors Studio stages plays in Bahasa. If that implication is wrong, then it can only mean that Actors Studio believes in doing only plays in English. I hope the latter is not the case.

I think our theatre groups, if they have the necessary resources, should ideally do plays that are worth doing, whether they are in the Bahasa or English – or even Chinese and Tamil. I hope Actors Studio and other similar theatre groups believe in this too.

Even Chinese and Tamil? Why not, if you have the resources to do it? We are a multi-lingual nation; why not revel in that variety on the stage? Perhaps even in one play, one production? It's one of my million dreams to write a play (comedy, of course) in which our four major

languages enact the babel of misunderstanding, hidden fears and prejudices. And out of that babel of *bebal-ism* (stupidities), to project a realisable vision of harmony and joy.

This healthy view shouldn't mean – O, how tedious having to keep repeating it! – a lack of a proper regard for the National Language. Priority must, of course, be given to BM. All efforts must be made by dramatists to help enrich the repertoire of decent plays in BM, and by producers and directors to stage those plays.

Why? Not simply for the ideological reason of patriotism and all that. Patriotism or nationalism, though a potentially good subject, is rarely a good reason for writing great drama or literature. More writers should write in the National Language for the good simple reason that that's the language through which they can reach the widest audience.

Metropolitan English language writers, with only KL and PJ (plus Ipoh and Penang, maybe) as their audience, might disagree. For them, English is the best medium for reaching the widest possible audience. They are not wrong if they are content with making theatre solely or largely a middle class affair – a Westernised middle class, too. I don't see why we can't be committed to both the ideal of variety and artistic standards and of national unity and fun through the National Language.

About this business of writing in English – I think there's some snobbery and hypocrisy involved in it that should be confronted. There is a feeling among activists of our vernacular theatre that their English-language counterparts are 'snooty' people who look down on them and their world. This 'snootiness', let's admit it does exist, can take the form of condescension born of the feeling that contemporary Malay drama with some notable exception, is generally mediocre or at best unexciting.

unlike what our neighbours, the Indonesians, who use the same language, have produced.

This condescension is part of a general attitude of the English-educated towards the vernacular-educated, and is a survival from the colonial days. Those who deny its existence are fooling themselves. This condescension, however regrettable, could be claimed to have some justification (at least, it is arguable).

But there is another form which can only be called sheer snobbery – and of the most inane sort too. If the first is elitist, the other is neocolonial or Anglophile in the worst sense of the word. It is often based on ignorance of Malay drama and theatre; and the ignorance is wilful. We don't have far to go for a recent drooling of this attitude.

A pseudo-critic in response to theatre critic Utih's piece on 'The need to nurture English (sic) playwrights' ended up with egg on his face in a pathetic attempt to defend plays in English (*New Sunday Times*, 3 March 1991). At one point, in an unseemly eagerness to justify plays in English, he confuses in one short paragraph the question of writing about non-Malaysian characters "who in their real world speak other tongues" (and here he invokes Shakespeare, mind you – to justify something that nobody has ever questioned) – further confusing this non-issue with the issue of writing in English!

And what is his ideal kind of drama in English? "Frothy and witty situational comedies" of the sort brought in by British Airways (note that he uses 'frothy' in a positive sense). When he went on to pontificate moanfully about the things "missing from so many local efforts – not to denigrate, of course..." (Of course, sir!), the missing elements being "profound messages", "ideas and fervours sweeping the world", "moving moments built up so as to induce 'continental earthquake' feelings...", I gave up on



him. If there were a defender the English-language theatre could do without, it would be this fellow.

Most of our small band of good dramatists who write (or have written) in English would, I am sure, share my repugnance for the kind of mind revealed by the above writer. These dramatics write in English simply because that's the language they are proficient in – the kind of proficiency one needs to do creative writing of any kind. Kee Thuan Chye, for example, wishes that he could write his plays in BM and he feels somewhat guilty that he is unable to. I am sure the same is true of K.S. Maniam.

Granted that one writes in the language one is most competent in, what about writers who are competent in both Bahasa and English? Like Syed Alwi, for example? It seems that many people assume that because Syed Alwi turned to Malay with *Alang Rentak Seribu* in 1973, he has ceased writing in English for the usual reasons connected with “reclaiming one's identity”, “recovering one's roots”, and all that jazz.

The truth of the matter here is otherwise. For a start, Syed Alwi, despite appearance to the contrary, has not stopped writing in English for good. In fact, two or three of his post-*Alang* plays used English in scenes where the writer thought it was more natural for characters in those scenes to speak in English. Further proof that Syed hasn't turned his back on English is his project of doing an English version of *Tok Perak* in May. That and the plan he now has in mind of writing a new play in English. Syed Alwi said he turned to Malay in writing *Alang* because the subject of the play demanded it. As simple as that – and I can't think of a better reason. The subject must always dictate the language – and, of course, the writer's linguistic competence.

Meanwhile, what can be done to increase the stock of plays in the National Language good enough for the

'snooty' English-language theatre people to want to produce or at least watch? One obvious way is to translate, or better still adapt, good well-tested plays from foreign literatures. I have a list of such plays in mind which I am prepared to adapt myself. One of them I've even started adapting – that Irish comic gem, *The Playboy of the Western World*. I'm trying to Malaysianise it, 'convert' and even 'circumcise' it (creatively speaking, of course), and give it a good local habitation and name. Any takers?

## The Fine Art of Head Shrinking

[9th October 1991]

Noordin Hassan's first comedy *Peran* made a strong impression on the more critical and alert members of its audience. One of them in particular, fellow playwright-director Syed Alwi, was actually moved to do something rather uncharacteristic of him; he went around beating the drum of superlative praise for the play. He actually used the word "breakthrough", which I had never heard him use for a local play or production. He really made me regret that I wasn't at the MATIC (Malaysian Tourist Information Centre) theatre to see the live performance, and had to be content with a video recording of it.

But the play is so interesting that even a simple video recording of it can give you some idea of its uniqueness. It's a comedy that creates its own rationale as it develops, taking you into a tantalising territory where the outer laughter meets the inner laughter; where the comic seems at once familiar and not quite familiar. All of this is fed by a thematic concern at once predictable and surprising, graspable and slippery. What thematic concern? Well, if you want me to summarise it for you, I can. But no summary can really be true to the spirit of this comedy. Any summary of the theme must question itself. Just as the comedy of this comedy seems to question itself. Am I playing with words here? And by my verbal play, am I

falsifying Noordin's play, making it complex when it is, in fact, simple? My gut feeling would say 'no' to that.

Admittedly, there are a number of little things in the play that might puzzle you on first viewing; certain details of dialogue and gesture that may seem anomalous, not properly made to cohere with the total movement of meaning by the author perhaps. One needs to study the play more to be certain about them. But whatever conclusion one arrives at, these small things would most probably remain just that – small things that don't really affect the total impact of the play; an impact that shows the presence of an uncommon intelligence and imagination behind it.

*Peran* is the kind of play which demands to be seen more than once, and I'm quite sure repeated viewings would reveal unsuspected meanings within the overall meaning. True to its title (which means 'mask' or 'comic actor'), the play is literally a play, very much conscious of itself, of the fact that it is a play. A play of masks, roles, voices, one blending into another in an almost constant state of comic metamorphosis. And central to all this play of masks and roles is the weird mask-cum-headaddress concealing a skull worn by one of the major characters, Dr Shrinker. When the skull is revealed to the audience with the spotlight focused on it, *Peran* almost becomes a black comedy. *Memento mori*.

What is the theme? What kind of story embodies the theme? Well, there are these six characters – three men and three women. Six characters in search of... well, something. Mental and spiritual health? Perhaps. And the object of this search will or should, when found, release the characters from the disease of vanity, egoism and corruption of one kind or another. So we get sick characters in search of moral-spiritual health. That should make the underlying purpose and meaning of *Peran* sound serious

enough, consistent with the playwright's presumed attitude as spoken by one of the characters – that playwriting and directing is a serious business with a moral purpose, not a self-indulgent activity.

This should be true of comedies, too, for theatre to Noordin isn't or shouldn't be mere entertainment. One of the six characters is actually, or apparently, the guide; he's the psychiatrist or psychoanalyst with a unique method of therapy. Nicknamed Dr Shrinker, he uses shrunken human heads as a means of therapy. Is he sick, too? In such sense as suggested by the claim that has often been made that psychoanalysis is itself the disease which it pretends to cure? I'm not too sure about this. There are indications that seem to suggest the answer is in the affirmative. But this seems to be undermined by the conclusion of the play. My uncertainty here could be due to my own failure of understanding. But it could also be due to the playwright's own failure – failure to control all the various elements of his play in a way that will serve to strengthen or clarify the central theme.

I was talking about six characters looking for something. Actually there's a seventh. But this one isn't quite part of the play. What? You see, this business of Shrinker and would-be shrinks refers to the play-within-the-play. The seventh character isn't part of this play. At least he is not supposed to be. At times, however, he somehow blunders into a level he's not supposed to. That can make it a bit difficult for us to determine his status or function. One may even wonder if the author was conscious of this apparent confusion of dramatic levels, and if he was, what's the purpose. It could perhaps be simply an intrusion of the 'surrealism' that influenced his early plays. Surrealism of sorts which rules all questions of logic as out of place.

This seventh character is a journalist with a bandaged head and armed with a tape recorder and camera. (That

bandaged head will prove significant later). On one level, the journalist seems to represent the audience or the critics. Or even a solo chorus. He sits apart from the six, five of whom are the actors, the sixth being the writer-director of the play-within-the-play. The play-within-the-play consists of a long session of therapy, with the writer-director playing Dr Shrinker, and the other five playing the potentially shrunk, each with his/her own neurosis appropriate to his/her class or profession in society. The character or patient whose problem dominates those of his fellow patients is Tuan Leh (beautifully played by Abu Bakar Omar). To the extent that *Peran* has a coherently worked-out moral, that moral is most lucidly realised in the character of Tuan Leh. Tuan Leh illustrates the dangers of a swollen head which can trick the owner of the head into the realm of egocentric fantasy. From that realm, he can be rudely awakened. The man, who at the beginning is so cocky with his swollen head has to appeal to Dr Shrinker at the end to shrink that head, a head which has brought him nothing but trouble. Heads, swollen and shrunk, play a decisive role in *Peran*. It opens with a wounded head, that of the journalist-critic, and ends with an appeal by the owner of the biggest head to have it shrunk to manageable proportions.

So, the answer to the question on the theme of the play is: don't be big-headed, and don't let things go to your head. In short, have a good head on your shoulders. If you do, God willing, you won't have to see Dr Shrinker. The playwright-director as Dr Shrinker was superbly played by Dato' Shahrum Yub. Yes, that same Dato' Shahrum of the National Museum making, I believe, his first stage appearance. Noordin was truly inspired when he cast the Dato' in that role. And he cast Dato' Shahrum as Dato' Shahrum, not unlike the Dato' Shahrum of Lat's cartoon. Dato' Shahrum playing his public persona playing the

playwright-director playing Dr Shrinker. What a marvellous idea.

It all began when one day Noordin saw a picture of Dato' Shahrum in a newspaper. The picture showed the Dato' wearing a headdress which he had purchased overseas for the Exhibition of Heads and Skulls at the Muzium Negara. It was the same headdress later worn by Dr Shrinker in the play. That expensive property of the museum could have been exploited more effectively.

Talking about heads, one of my favourite moments was when Dr Shrinker picks up a shrunken head and talks into it, thus the shrunken head becomes a cordless phone. It looked like Dato' Shahrum's own improvisation but apparently it was in the script. *Peran* may have some unclarified connections, but the play, as a whole, is highly enjoyable. Whatever its minor flaws, it remains an intelligently conceived and imaginatively realised comedy.

## From Ramli – In The Name of Love

[27th November 1991]

When one has been moaning about the shortage of decent Malaysian plays and Ramli Ibrahim, a dancer and not a playwright till now, unexpectedly appears with such a good offering, one feels compellingly the urge to sing his praises. The offering may be modest in scope but it has power and moments of high comedy as well as pathos. It clearly comes from the same source that produced those memorable dance dramas – ranging from the darkly sensual *Gerhana* to the satirically ebullient *Sutrarasa*.

It seems that we have actress Sabera Shaik to thank for being the unwitting midwife to the birth of this new dramatist in our midst. I must say that the idea of a dancer-choreographer like Ramli as a dramatist is quite exciting. What did Sabera do to make Ramli, whose energy's already heavily committed to dance, take on the writing of plays? Apparently, this is how it happened: Sabera wanted Ramli to direct her in a one-woman play based on Kamala Das's *My Life*, but Ramli found himself writing his own instead. Not one but three one-woman plays – or, to be precise, playlets, each about half-an-hour long. You might wonder what inspired Sabera to turn to Ramli; the guy had never directed a play before. Perhaps Sabera simply thought it would be fun, and the fun might spark off the unexpected. She wanted the unexpected, and



she got it with a vengeance. Instead of Kamala Das, she got Ramli himself. And instead of portraying just one woman, she is now faced with the challenge of portraying in one evening three very different types. But it is a challenge that Sabera, I am sure, is quite equal to.

Ramli as a writer and director of dance dramas had amply demonstrated his acute sense of the dramatic. And the jump from dance dramas to plays, in both the scripting and the directing, proved to be, for him, not that big. It's doubtful though that Ramli would have made the jump if other factors had not helped to push him. For one, there's the problem that his company, Sutra, was facing at the time when Sabera approached him. The defection from the company of one of the best dancers Ramli had nurtured had made him somewhat depressed. As usual with him, every time such problems cropped up, he would retire to Bali, try to relax, think and enjoy himself, thus recovering the energy to recoup his forces and then to return home full of new ideas for a new production.

This time, he went to Bali with Sabera's request in mind, and there found himself playing with an Apple Macintosh belonging to a friend. He came back to Kuala Lumpur with the drafts of two short plays in English, *Deena* and *Sarasa*. Both are about a woman with a strong personality, highly vocal and shamelessly assertive. But their motivations are very different; and they are shameless and assertive in very different ways. The third play, *Mak Su*, was written a couple of months after Ramli's return from Bali, and is in Malay. It's a poignantly nostalgic portrait in semi-documentary form of a *makyong* prima donna in the twilight of her career. The triple bill is advertised under a common title, *In the Name of Love*.

There is more than a hint of ambiguity in that title. Love can have many faces, and in its name, all kinds of things can happen: the wonderful and the not so wonderful,

the healthy and the not so healthy. *Deena* dramatises the sheer love of life, amounting to lust, as symbolized by food and sex. The character that gives this monologue its title is a big cigar-smoking, scotch-loving earth mother with a tremendous appetite for both delicacies and vulgarities. She has a raucous sense of humour and a shattering laughter that is as much defensive as offensive. Larger than life she is, and throbbingly real. "One of those Eurasians of rather obscure pedigree" and widow of a British colonel whom she adored and was adored by, Deena is that rare type who is cosmopolitan without being condescending to the best that local tradition has to offer. (She is a connoisseur of *ayam percik* as well as an ardent fan of the *makyong*). And in her lordly dismissal of the crudity of certain contemporary cultural expressions, she obviously speaks on behalf of her creator. In this monologue, Ramli has quite powerfully captured both the vitality and the pathos of a character caught between nostalgia and commitment to the pleasures of the moment. There is poignancy in the way the memory of her past haunts her; there is also heroism in the way she deals with it. Her instinctive wit is an expression of both desperation and defiance.

Considering that this is his first play, Ramli's fine sense of the dramatic is quite remarkable. This is shown, for example, by the way the central motif of food and its association with both sexuality and mortality is exploited and developed. At the climax of the monologue, Deena's passion for food and skill at making it are counterpointed in her memory with the moment of her husband's gruesome murder by communist terrorists. The setting of the bloody event was the kitchen. As Deena recalls it, she re-enacts in the form of compelling mime what she was doing at that terrible hour, which was kneading the dough for making a Deena loaf ("Nobody bakes bread the way I do"). The

verbal and the visual at this climatic moment acquire a rhythm that matches the mounting frenzy of the act of butchery. And Deena's black humour, functioning as a defence mechanism, acquires its own frenzy too, thus sharpening our sense of the horror that still haunts her.

If *Deena* is a play about a woman consumed by a sheer passion for life, a passion that shows in its desperate humour the simultaneous awareness of life's darker side, *Sarasa* is about the consuming 'love' of a mother for her daughter – a dancer – in whose success the mother sees her own as much as, if not more than, the daughter's. *Sarasa* embodies this overpoweringly possessive and ego-centred 'love' at its most frightening and expresses it with farcical frenzy. The conception of *Sarasa* is based on Ramli's experience of the mothers of his own students. Through this noisy and forever scheming character, he is making a critical comment on the values of a particular type and a particular community. And he does it in a hilarious manner, capturing the absurdity and contradictions of the character with admirable skill. The play has a rapidity of movement and frenzy of rhythm absolutely expressive of the type of mother with which many of us are quite familiar.

Of the three plays, *Sarasa* is probably the one whose character is most accessible to Sabera's natural talents. The one that I think makes the greatest demand on her acting resources is perhaps *Mak Su*. This is partly because of the form of the play; its semi-documentary feel is something that is not easy to do justice to. It is much slower in movement than the other two plays, and its dramatic qualities are more subdued, in keeping with the character and situation of *Mak Su*. This play can be read as a lament on the current sad state of a once dominant theatre form, as well as a tribute to the career of a great actress and singer. It gives us a precious insight into the artistic and socio-cultural milieu of the *makyong* through

Mak Su's vivid, if at times somewhat reluctant, recall of its glorious past. It is fitting that this lament and tribute should come from someone generally acknowledged as one of our best contemporary dancers and choreographers.

## Soul of the 'Keris'

[12th January 1992]

Suasana's new offering, the dance drama *Keris*, choreographed and directed by Azanin Ahmad, will make its debut this Friday. The stark simplicity of the title suggests concretely the perception of the kris that forms Anakin's conception and choreography of the work. This symbol of Malay strength and passion, this curiously designed weapon memorably called by the English poet Tennyson "the cursed Malayan creese,"

The kris is probably the most vicious and also the most erotic of weapons ever designed by man. It's beautifully masculine and feminine at the same time, the strength it symbolises is both physical and spiritual. And the beliefs and legends surrounding its origin and passage through time and history endow it with the aura of the sacred and the mystical. *Keris* as conceived and choreographed by Azanin enacts in terms of movement and sound, form and texture, the mystique of this unique weapon. The dance drama is structured to reflect the symbolic presence and force of the kris in the history of the Malay psyche, culture and polity.

In the beginning is the idea, the whisper of an ancient secret, and the descent of the idea from the realm of the platonic to the haze of the primordial. Then the idea takes form in the forging of the weapon in the furnace of pre-history. The figure of the archetypal warrior as user and defender of the sacred weapon emerges, and he performs

the ritual of its sanctification as the destined talisman of the race. From then on, the kris sinuously forges, cleaves and weaves its talismanic presence through the dance as it did in the myths of the race. Through moments that blaze with meaning and prophecy – the majesty of the kingdom of Melaka, the lightning threat of anarchy in the amok of the rebel Jebat and loyal Tuah's overcoming of that threat, the fall of Melaka to the Portuguese, the flight of a king and his people into the dark primeval jungle with the sacred weapon carried as symbolic torch and talisman, the rebirth of a nation recharged with the energy of old symbolised by a contract between the king in search of a new kingdom and an accommodating tribe of *orang asli* – through all these key moments, the sacred kris defines its force and significance. As it begins, so does it end: with the whispering of the ancient secret, an act of mythical recall as well a confirmation of continuity.

Azanin had planned to do this dance drama about three years ago. She embarked on some research, but only managed to start seriously thinking about how to approach it, and to do further research after the completion of her *Kunang-kunang Gunung Ledang*, produced for RTM television recently and to be put on stage sometime this year. Two major classical dance styles and, of course, the *silat* movement, shape the defining moments of *Keris*. The *makyong* is the dance form Azanin has chosen for the roles she herself will be dancing – that of Dewi Pertiwi, a kind of earth mother whose presence, charged with the energy of the cosmos, hovers over the forging of the sacred weapon and the emergence of the *satria* (warrior) figure, guardian and servant of the kris; that, and the role of the Tok Temong, leader of the aboriginal tribe whose collaboration and blessing enables the new Malay kingdom to be born and the continuity of the Malay line ensured.

And the apotheosis of the kris-blessed power of the

Malay race, manifested in the majesty of the kingdom of Melaka, is graced by the form of the *asyik* dance, one of the most beautiful of Malay classical dances. The major dance form of *makyong* in solo performance by Azanin weaves, together with the dance of the *silat*, a pattern of movement and gestures that suggests the *pamor* of the kris. The *pamor* is the characteristic striations of the kris's blade that form a damascend pattern which has an interesting history and whose significance to the Malay warrior was distinctly sacred, emanating a spiritual power that was clearly perceived as talismanic, even prophetic. Something of the spirit that informs Azanin's conception and of the symbolic and mythical significance of the kris is suggested in the poem I was commissioned to write for the production. Allow me to quote a few lines from it (the full English version in the concrete form dictated by my inspiration is on the poster).

... the forge  
(eye of the tiger burning bright  
in the jungle of the night)  
the forge  
(what the hammer? what the chain?)  
the forge  
furnacefusing  
meltingmerging  
meteoric iron  
into the form  
foreshadowed  
foreshadowing  
of the idea  
archetypal  
tigerish  
true to the idea  
in the loins

of the mind  
of the all  
foreshadowing  
foreshadowed  
in the smithy  
of the soul  
of a race

tigerish  
true  
to the soul of  
the keris  
golden silverish  
multialloyed  
multiveined  
striated  
with memories  
of voices  
ancient-urgent  
ambivalent  
multivalent  
true  
to the  
tiger  
in the mind  
of the all  
to the thumb-  
press  
of the hand  
of the all-  
mighty

I normally don't write poems on commission. But in this case I agreed, partly because I had been quite obsessed with the kris for a long time; I have also written poems



and plays (the latter unpublished) in which it figures as image, symbol or ambiguous presence. The germinating image that dominated my mind after agreeing to accept Azanin's commission was that of the Malay Peninsula, which the ancient Greeks called the Golden Khersonese and land's end. And I saw it as overlapping with and melting and merging into the form of the kris. I felt in the very loins of my imagination the sacred weapon of the Malays thrusting its magic blade into the seas of prophecy just as the Golden Khersonese, our beautiful peninsula, thrust its head into the seas of the archipelago. The kris is a powerfully phallic weapon, and inevitably my heated, perhaps over-fertile, imagination conceived the image of a giant phallus silently thrusting and awesomely bursting with the blessed seeds of a thousand islands:

... keris  
sinuously  
silvering  
silky sleek  
unto the land's end  
thrusting trusting  
golden-khersonese-like  
tiger-true  
lightning lean  
flamed-firmed  
into the seas  
of prophecy  
spirit splurting  
with the seeds  
of a thousand islands...

A simple commission has turned out to be an unexpectedly fruitful collaboration between a successful and established dancer-choreographer and a hitherto

frustrated poet. The writing of the poems (i.e. both the English and Malay versions) was for me quite an unusual, and at times, even weird experience. Not least of the unusual features of that experience was the uncanny coincidence between the epiphanic images of the phallic kris that dictated the shape and substance of my poems and those that shape the structure and texture of Azanin's dance drama, of which I had only a very general notion when I started writing the first (English) version of my poem. They say that if you put a kris (it has to be the right one, of course) close to your ear, you could hear the sound of its soul or *semangat*. The sound I heard when I was writing the poem was like the distant roar of the tiger, remote and ancient yet palpably close. Azanin apparently heard that remote roar too, and it has left its traces on her choreography of *Keris*.

## Children, Watch your Playing!

[23rd February 1992]

It was a show that, in many ways, I quite enjoyed. A lively piece of ensemble acting, beautifully co-ordinated, tantalisingly paced, sharp and precise in its sudden turns and twists, from the present into the past, reality into fantasy and into fantasy within the fantasy, from dream into 'nightmare' and into 'nightmare' within the 'nightmare'.

It was as if the directors had an invisible switchboard with which they kept a tight control on the erratic yet mounting movement of the acting and the frenzied playing within the acting, its constant switching of space-time levels. The imaginative lighting designer and the superb band of musicians on the side, which seemed to be simultaneously involved, physically interacting with and yet was apart from the antics of the actors, both contributed enormously to the show. And the sheer energy of the actors, sustained so superbly for such a long stretch, was a thrill to watch, even if one might grumble about certain isolated points in the acting and style of speaking. And yet...

*3 Children*, it's called, about three young Chinese (two sisters and a brother) haunted by something in their childhood, their minds made giddy by some kiddy semblance of 'Kafkaesque' terrors, small town (and perhaps small-time?) in their resonance. *3 Children*, written by Leow Puay Tin and co-directed by Ong Keng Sen of TheatreWorks Singapore and Krishen Jit of Five Arts Centre Kuala Lumpur, was staged at the Auditorium Dewan Bandaraya from

February 12-15. It was the result of a "cross-cultural confrontation" (Mr Jit's phrase), the latest fruit of a collaboration (as well as "confrontation", that is) between the Singapore and Malaysian theatre groups that goes back to 1968. This one is literally breaking new frontiers because, with the help of MAS and other sponsors, it will be taken to Japan, the first time that has ever happened to a Malaysian play.

3 *Children*. Or was it four? I'm not thinking of the Narrator (the fourth character in the play, who is not a child anyway), because I am not thinking of the characters in the play, though it has very much to do with the play. I wondered whether there wasn't a fourth 'child' in the production. Someone responsible who was/is a 'child' in his/her 'innocence' about the wider implications of words and images, of theatrical gestures and gyrations; a 'child' in his/her apparent blindness to the implications of those images and gestures in an ethnically highly charged society like ours.

Though not a comedy, there was quite a bit of humour in the show, the broad and the biting, the parodic and farcical, the macabre and the hysterical, mixed with the childishly silly and sentimental. It helped to make the play enjoyable, given the fact that the story has no real plot in the conventional sense and its 'episodic' structure is rather loose; its unity provided by the central idea of a dream journey and a search as well as the recurrent images of apparently gratuitous violence of something pervasive that is nagging, teasing or vaguely troubling in the atmosphere. Much of the humour, including or especially the macabre, is the characters' (and perhaps the author's) way of coping or coming to terms with their troubling memories, eruptions from their buried past, both individual and communal. Episodes of childish heartlessness (the children singing a cruel song about a girl), economic helplessness that struck

the children as baffling callousness (a daughter given away), domestic quarrels and seedy scandals (a dirty old man taking advantage of his female tenants) and, of course, the retreats into fantasy common to all children.

But there is one manifestation of macabre humour that I thought was disturbing which not only expresses the 'innocence' of the characters in the play, but reflects the apparent 'innocence' of the writer and the directors as well. No, 'manifestation' is not accurate enough; eruption is perhaps more suggestive of what it is all about. This 'eruption' is from the unconscious of the writer and perhaps of the directors as well. And if this eruption is 'innocent', it is so because it comes from the unconscious. Whether it remains 'innocent' after it had 'erupted' into the text of the play as written by the author and subsequently shaped into the form of performance by the directors, is another matter.

Before I focus on this disturbing 'eruption', let me sketch the milieu of the play. It is that of a working class Malacca Chinese, suffocating in its domestic dreariness, material anxieties and monetary pursuits. It is thick with the presence of inscrutable little gods who induce vague but nagging fears and guilt, and who seem to demand the posture of supplication in the characters. That the play's point of view on all this is basically critical is clear enough. But into this thoroughly Chinese milieu with its very Chinese preoccupations, there suddenly intrudes a scene about a Malay woman who enters a beauty parlour with her husband. The husband goes off, saying that he will come back later to pick up the wife. An accident (presumably) happens; the wife gets electrocuted while getting her hair done. The Chinese hairdressers quickly stuff the body into a sack and hide it upstairs. The husband returns and is told the wife has gone home on her own. Later that night, the hairdressers throw the sack with the body in it into the river.

Now, given the milieu and pervasive preoccupations of the play, the ethnic identity of the couple reinforced by the image of violence make the scene stand out like a sore thumb. Why did the writer choose to make these characters Malay? Why not Chinese, or even better perhaps ethnically unidentified? What exactly is Puay Tin trying to say here? That the Chinese in this little closed world have a phobia about the Malays? Is this scene a dramatic enactment of the children's unconscious phobia towards which the writer preserves a critical distance through her dramatic art?

I really wish I could be sure about this. But given the slippery structure and titillating texture of the play, and the elusiveness and ambiguities they generate, it is hard to be sure. The expected critical distance wasn't perceivable in the dramatic reality of the play. And the way the scene was performed made it even less so: from the parody of the *joget* movement signaling the characters' (i.e. the children's) entry into the roles of the Malay couple whose 'macabre' story they are enacting (a sort of play-within-a-play) – from this to the crude laughter-inducing caricature of the wife's dying agonies in the 'electric chair'. I should stress here that it is not the parody or caricature as such that is disturbing or could be perceived as disturbing, but the context and the nature of the play in which it appears that makes it so.

This scene vaguely puzzled me at the time of watching the performance. It was only on further reflection that certain questions began to trouble me. I don't think I need to stress that I don't have any hang-ups about my Malayness; no silly sensitivity to healthy jokes about Malays (I myself like indulging in such jokes, as much as I like indulging in similarly healthy jokes about Malaysian Chinese, Indians and other races). But if even I could be bothered by this scene, I wonder how the average Malay would have reacted to it. Does the writer in some way 'endorse' what the scene can be taken to imply? Unconsciously perhaps? It can't be,

yet... The question remains unanswered in my mind. The nearest to an answer I could come up with, and that is a willed affirmation of faith in Puay Tin's sense of herself as a playwright, is to say that she intended to embody that expected critical distance but failed.

But what is truly puzzling – in fact “mind-boggling”, to use Mr Jit's own word in his Director's Notes (a word used, ironically, in the context of his ecstatic account of his experience of “cross-cultural confrontation” and international “artistic collaboration” of which *3 Children* was the result) – is the directors' apparent blindness to the possible negative reactions that that scene could produce in Malay members of the audience here. ‘Here’ means Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; not Singapore or Tokyo or Yokohama. Co-director Ong Keng Sen, being a Singaporean and presumably ignorant of Malaysian reality, might be forgiven for this striking lapse in directorial vigilance or sensitivity. But our Mr Jit – well, that's something else.

In his Director's Notes, Mr Jit talks of “the love of theatre” as “the great leveller of cultural bumps and grinds”, and hopes that “some of what we (meaning he and his cross-cultural cronies) have experienced will rub off on you” (“you” meaning we, the Malaysian audience). There was one “bump” Mr Jit didn't even notice in the text of the play and in the production he co-directed. And that “bump” had rubbed sober-minded Malays and perhaps other sensitively intelligent Malaysians the wrong way.

## Heavy Antigone's almost Anti-Anouilh

[1st March 1992]

In Actors Studio's previous big production, *A Man For All Seasons*, Eric Roslee as the Common Man stole the show at the expense of Leslie Dawson as the hero. In the company's latest effort, Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*, another actor playing a supporting role (even smaller, much smaller, than the Common Man) almost 'stole the show'. But this one did it in a very different way from Eric Roslee, and the sense of 'stealing' in this case is not quite the same either. And none of the lead actors really suffered from it.

The 'show stealer' of *Antigone* is that unique Sarawak actor, discovered by Actors Studio and nurtured and moulded by its version of the Method, Ramli Hassan. Ramli played the Messenger with the task of announcing the "news to break (your) heart": the double suicide of Antigone and her lover Haemon. It was Ramli's only scene (other than the prologue when he was revealed as the perfection of statuesque sadness itself, frozen for five minutes by a studied premonition of catastrophe, as eloquent as the column he was leaning against). His only scene, and he had to make the most of it. That he certainly did. Determined to break the heart of the audience, he put on a performance straight out of Malay melodrama, despite its apparent attempt at stylisation. It was quite a struggle to suppress one's urge to giggle.



Actors Studio's *Antigone* wasn't quite Greek tragedy as adapted and formally modernized by Anouilh, but it was in its own Greek way, quite Greek to me. Ramli Hassan's style of delivering – no, milking – his lines would have struck me as obscene if it wasn't laughable. It betrayed the director's questionable grasp of the nature of the play – a grasp that betrayed its spirit as well as its dramaturgy. And it wasn't the only instance of such betrayal. I realise the text is not by Sophocles but something of the Sophoclean spirit informs its dramatic texture however much the *Antigone* myth may have been imbued by Anouilh with a modernist consciousness and formal distancing. And this Sophoclean spirit is evident, among other things, in Anouilh's adherence to the Greek tragic convention of confining all scenes of violence off stage. With that convention governing the tragic thrust of the play, the rhetoric of set dramatic speeches and dialogue assumes a function that challenges the resources of the actor and the director. But the fact that everything hangs on the words of the character and therefore on the speaking skill of the actor, is not a licence for melodramatic indulgence. If milking the audience's sympathy for *Antigone* was the director's intention, it would have been much better for him to have abandoned the off-stage convention concerning violence and enacted the double suicide on stage.

There have been many *Antigones* since Sophocles. A very interesting book has been written by George Steiner on the subject, called *Antigones*. From the beginning, the fascination of the *Antigone* myth (in both the original literal sense of plot or fable and the modern specialized sense of symbolic construct), centering on the conflict at the heart of the story (the *Antigone* versus the *Creon* point of view), has engendered shifting interpretations and emphasis on the meaning and moral claims of the two sides of that conflict. Most versions, according to Steiner's

study, followed Sophocles (as generally interpreted) in making Antigone the undisputed heroine, and Creon her questionable antagonist. Antigone's defiance of Creon's edict against the burial of her brother's body is seen as the heroic assertion of an ethical absolute or sacred transcendent law, and the king's uncompromising edict as an immorality and a sacrilege. By extension, Antigone becomes the voice of individual conscience and Creon that of the tyrannical state; she has our sympathy and he its opposite. But there have been versions which make Creon the object, or an object, of our sympathy. And these versions take their cue from an interpretation of Sophocles which sees Creon as being as much in the right as Antigone. The revisionists made Creon's brutally uncompromising stance in the name of order and continuity morally legitimate. Anouilh's version is arguably revisionist in this sense.

It is interesting to note that Anouilh's play, first produced in 1942 in Nazi-occupied France, was actually passed by the German censors, though it took them some time to arrive at that decision. George Steiner wonders if the sympathetic treatment of Creon in a play "eerily poised between the contrary commitments of its two protagonists" wasn't the reason for that favourable decision. That the Creon of Anouilh is a sympathetic character was confirmed by Patrick Teoh's sensitive playing of the part in the production under review. Teoh sustained a performance that was distinguished by its cool; his lightness of touch, suggesting the character's level-headedness and sober grasp of political realities, contrasted nicely to the sombre and at times strident stance of Anne James's Antigone. Teoh's handling of the final scene, the scene that seems specially designed to win the audience's sympathy for Creon, was just right. I am thinking in particular of the dramatically revealing moment of that famous line to the Page ("Cabinet meeting. Then we had better go along to it."), uttered in

the wake of the triple suicide (that of son Haemon and Queen Eurydice as well as Antigone). Teoh's voice and facial expression, the posture and the very shape of his body, and his gesture and movement as he retreated upstage with his arm on the Page's shoulders, were all eloquent with stoic weariness and subtly suggestive of the tragic.

It seemed that the director, not wanting Creon to steal the audience's sympathy at the expense of Antigone, thought it was necessary to do violence to the delicate balance of the play as Anouilh wrote it. This was most evident in the conduct of the Chorus (played by Faridah Merican), especially in that very scene I just discussed, the scene which was so crucial to the audience's perception of Creon. Creon was mumbling to his Page about the necessary "dirty work" that a ruler like him sometimes had to do. Suddenly the Chorus interjected: "Why should there be any dirty work?" – or words to that effect. The interjection was loud and shrill. It sounded un-Anouilh to me; I didn't think the line was in the text as translated by Lewis Galantieri (the version used in the production). And sure enough, it isn't. It seemed that the director, who wanted so much for Antigone to 'win', couldn't trust the performance to ensure it; he had to add a line of his own and made the Chorus say it in such a crass way. I should have thought there was a subtler way of dramatically questioning Creon's position, and that is by using the art of acting.

Patrick Teoh could have been directed differently; for example, he could have been directed to inject an undercurrent of self-irony in his performance in that final scene. But then it is perhaps a bit too much to expect the director of this production to understand the use of irony in theatre. The word for Actors Studio's production of *Antigone* is, quite simply, heavy-handed. That Patrick Teoh managed to act against this heavy-handedness is a testimony

to his acting talent. What about Anne James? She is a strong actress; her somber, and at times, strident tones were quite in keeping with the character of Antigone as I see it. But her performance wasn't remarkable; she somehow failed to use her resources to the fullest. The stridency, for example, while in character with the 'monomaniac' in Antigone, had little suggestion of the deeper tones of the character's passion. She did a fair job; but for Anne James that's far from being a compliment.

*Antigone*, I think, is best performed in a neutral ambience, in costumes appropriate to it. In this production, the set consisting of white Grecian columns (one of which the tall Rafique Rashid, making his acting debut as the distraught Haemon, nearly knocked down on opening night) was simple and stark enough and, as such, quite in keeping with the spirit of the play. But the costumes – tuxedos and black trench-coats for the male characters and something indefinite for the female – didn't suggest any conceptual coherence or meaning. Lack of conceptual coherence, in fact, characterised this production as a whole. That and the heavy-handedness that went with it made Actors Studio's *Antigone* almost 'anti-Anouilh'. Joe Hasham, the director, a solemnly self-declared specialist in 'serious drama', could do with some lightness of touch.

## Vision of 'Kelas 2020'

[8th July 1992]

As far as I know, Rahim Razali's *Kelas 2020*, staged in Kuala Lumpur in May, is the only play that has been written on the subject of Vision 2020. It's not a very good play and I don't think the author meant it to be a major contribution to Malaysian drama. Nevertheless, the script has some interesting features and is worth talking about in relation to the question of writers and Vision 2020.

Vision 2020 poses a comprehensive list of challenges which, if fully met, will make our society the envy of the world. Just look at the string of adjectives used to describe that future society – united and integrated; psychologically liberated, secure and self-confident; mature and democratic; moral and ethical and imbued with spiritual values; liberal and tolerant; scientific, progressive and innovative; caring and just; prosperous, economically competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient. Aren't they all wonderful? Yes, but if you look closely at the features of that ideal society, you'll see that some of them are quite utopian because the chances of their being realised are not strongly supported by past experience or present realities and trends. There are also possible contradictions between the implications of one objective and those of another. Because of these contradictions, there is a possibility that an objective considered less convenient will be sacrificed in the interest of another considered more politically expedient.

A writer who wants to write about Malaysian society in the year 2020 must have thought deeply about the Vision. He must know history, be critically informed about present realities and be able to imagine what the future is likely to be, considering those realities. He must be clear about his own values and those that are likely to govern the society of the future. He must take care to preserve a critical distance from his subject so that he won't succumb to mindless optimism. He must resist any temptation to sacrifice artistic integrity for the sake of propaganda. Last but certainly not least, he must be able to write.

Writers often tend to be sceptical when it comes to grandiose projections like Vision 2020. They tend to distrust anything that smacks of utopia. They are too conscious of human frailty and the temptations of power to be seduced by futuristic dreams. If they feel compelled to write about such dreams, they are likely to do it in the form of a cautionary tale, warning us against the possible perversions of noble dreams or the sacrifice of humane and democratic values on the altar of material development. Long before Vision 2020 became the talk of the nation, one of our veteran playwrights wrote a play that, had it been written after Vision 2020, could be considered, in some ways, a response to that Vision or something like it. The playwright is Syed Alwi and the play *Desaria* (1978).

*Desaria* is a critical, in part satirical, look at a highly conformist and bureaucratised society of the future. In that society, the supposed interests of the group are placed above everything else. Humane values of old are sacrificed in the interest of efficiency and robust economic development. The author of *Kelas 2020* was in that play. He played the part of a poet caught in the soulless bureaucracy of *Desaria*. It would be interesting to see what he, as a writer of a futuristic play himself, had learnt from *Desaria*, especially the character he played in it.

*Kelas 2020* is about a group of students in the year 2020 rehearsing a play under the direction of their professor. Called *Wawasan Pak Wan*, the play was written by the professor in 1990 and is set in that year. We are not really told what the play-within-the-play is about, other than that the characters all speak in a variety of dialects. But we are told that the professor had twice tried to stage the play in the Nineties but failed. The first time, it was rejected by the Ministry of Culture; the second, because it was banned by the Government. In the course of *Kelas 2020*, we learn that all the challenges of Vision 2020 have been met. "*Segala yang diidamkan sudah kini tercapai,*" says the professor (note the "*segala*").

Malaysia in the year 2020 is a developed nation with all the characteristics envisaged by our present Prime Minister. The people all speak a common language, *bahasa baku*, which is obviously meant to reflect ethnic integration. *Kelas 2020* might appear to be nothing more than a light comedy. It may, therefore, be thought inappropriate to expect it to be what it is not meant to be – a serious look at our society in the year 2020. Perhaps. But there are indications in the play that the author means it to be more than just a frolic.

Taken seriously, the play strikes me as very confused. It has no thematic focus and seems unsure of its own values. The picture of Malaysian society in the year 2020 is not coherently defined, and the play's point of view in relation to that society is equally blurred or uncertain. There are contradictions between what is said and what is done by the characters. For example, the students are all very nationalistic and proud that they are true Malaysians. They are highly critical of Western influence that had corrupted the youth of the 1990s. Yet their vocabulary is studded with unnecessary borrowings from the English language, and they all talk alike. Is the contradiction

Rahim's way of making a critical comment on the self-contradictions of the noisy young nationalists? I don't think so because I suspect the contradictions reflect those of the author himself. Is the fact that they all talk alike a criticism of the conformity of Malaysian society in the year 2020? I doubt it too because as fellow columnist Amir Muhammad pointed out (*Sunday Style*, May 24), all of Rahim's characters talk like that, in his films as well as in his plays.

Amir also made the perceptive comment that part of the problem of the play is the absence of a character we could identify with. The playwright clearly meant the professor to be such a character, but he comes across as a witless hero-worshipper of the father of Vision 2020, who is affectionately referred to as "the doctor". Yet there is something about the professor that seems to suggest that one part of Rahim had a more interesting character in mind, someone who can provide the play with a critical distance and a point of view it badly needs. The professor is shown at one point as being impatient with the attitudes shown by his students, who are all children of Vision 2020; he even expresses nostalgia for the attitudes of the youth of the 1990s. And in his anger with them, he inadvertently explodes into the colourful Kelantanese dialect.

This could be interpreted as an implied criticism of the soulless uniformity of life in the year 2020, a uniformity symbolised by the colourless *babasa baku* spoken by everyone in that society. It could even be read as a plea for cultural pluralism, for something that cannot be fully repressed by artificial means because it is a manifestation of life whose essence is variety. This is an interesting interpretation but unfortunately it is not supported by the rest of the play. I think Rahim has an uncertain grasp of the character of the professor and what he is supposed to



stand for. This could be due to the uncertainty in the author's own values that I mentioned earlier. Either that or as suggested by Amir, Rahim didn't have the courage to pursue to its logical conclusion what he had glimpsed in a moment of artistic insight. This is supported by the fact that the author leaves the content of the play-within-a-play unspecified and gives the most trivial of reasons why it was rejected and later banned.

If *Kelas 2020* is meant to be critical of a soulless and colourless society of the future, the author would have made more of the play-with-in-a-play instead of leaving it without an intelligible thematic purpose. There is, of course, another likely reason why *Kelas 2020* is so unsatisfactory. And that reason is artistic. The author simply didn't have enough dramatic skill to embody what he had glimpsed in the form of a well-developed and thematically unified play.

## Atomic Success, Seriously

[16th June 2001]

After seeing the Straits Theatre Company's *Atomic Jaya* at the Actors Studio Theatre, I hereby solemnly propose that playwright-director Huzir Sulaiman and actress Jo Kukathas both be considered for the Tun Razak Award. I'm quite serious. Only patriotism could have inspired Huzir and Kukathas to make *Atomic Jaya*, a memorably hilarious end-of-millennium hymn to Malaysia Jaya (otherwise known as *Bolebland*)

To make us laugh in the midst of our economic problems – generated by a Western Financial Jewish Conspiracy – and other *celakas* such as the haze (not just that one) is no mean service to the nation. I hear a chorus of dissent: What blasphemy! Such an august award for these *kurang ajar* fellas! Infected by the virus of Western values. No respect for our leaders etc., etc. But what of the much-needed service it offers us of letting us laugh our woes away? And as to making fun of our leaders, well ... it only appears to do so. It's not that certain, you know – not according to Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, to which the main character, narrator/physicist Dr. Mary Yuen, refers in the play. You've heard of Heisenberg, I presume?

This is quite a tricky play. What appears to be, may not be, and yet is. And after all, its making apparent fun of our leaders is in fact the playwright's way of praising our leaders. Praising? Yes, I am serious. Dead serious. Think, what could be more serviceable to the nation in its

present desperate straits than our leaders making themselves so easily laughable, helping the unfortunate and financially anxious chortle at our troubles.

Making one actress play all 12 characters in her magically chameleon way is the playwright-director's and actress's manner of affirming the ideal of true national unity or oneness in diversity. Seriously. Kukathas transforms herself in a split second from a bright physicist into an unbelievably dumb one, into a crook, into a would-be Napoleonic general, into a rhetorically-twisted minister, into a shady contractor, into a curious canteen woman, into an NGO protester – well, into just about every type and race that makes our Malaysia Jaya what it is today. And the way the whole process was enacted in terms of dialogue-within-monologue, body language and the spatial use of the bare stage, with a nice control of pace and rhythm – well, that was quite an achievement!

Kukathas deserves the Tun Razak Award at least, as recent recipient Adibah Amin deserved it. (Adibah, a true Malaysian, deserved it for, according to the citation, her “outstanding contribution to... interracial understanding and harmony...”. What the citation didn't say was that Adibah's concern with interracial understanding was expressed in many ways – one of which was her lament of the decline in our ability or willingness to laugh at ourselves, in the form of healthy ethnic jokes particularly.) On the subject of ethnic jokes, I should warn you that if there are any in Huzir's play (note, I said IF!), you must assume they're not meant as jokes and make sure you don't laugh. Other jokes okay, but not anything ethnic. This warning is meant seriously. Dead seriously.

*Atomic Jaya*, being a highly topical play, is exactly the antidote we need at the present critical juncture in our progress toward the paradise of Vision 2020. What a brilliant idea of the general and the minister in the play to

think of Malaysia making its own atomic bomb as a tourist attraction in anticipation of the Commonwealth Games, as well as to prove our *bolehn* (or bullishness if you like). It would certainly help us out of our present dire economic straits. And how environment-conscious and economically smart of the general to think of testing the bomb in the Bakun Dam area. That way, you kill two inconveniences with just one little bomb. This play is indeed a positively hilarious hymn to our great *bolehland*.

The stirring song of national pride that sounds so familiar and ends the first half of the play is surely meant to elicit an appropriately spirited response. The same goes for the national anthem at the beginning. What better proof of Huzir's unusually profound patriotism can one think of? He created a bit of history by playing the national anthem before a play. The cynic in the audience would no doubt assume there is some mischievous reason behind the idea of playing the national anthem. A few did, the night I saw the play. When the VO said: "Ladies and gentlemen, please rise for the national anthem", those who got the point, rose. I, being superpatriotic, jumped up with alacrity.

The critic could quibble about some elements in the play. At some points, the tiresome critic in me would want to complain about the occasional lapses in the quality of the humour – cheap lines to get easy laughter, for example. The dumb chief physicist, Dr Saiful, on secondment from UKM, is made to correct General Z's description of his status at *Atomic Jaya Sdn Bhd* by saying he was actually on "thirdment" because he was in the third year at his job. And what about this exchange?

Dr Yuen: "But have you done work with fission?"

Dr Saiful: "Just on the weekends. Only *ikan bandaraya* ...."

(What's *ikan bandaraya*? Never heard of it. Never mind-lah! To echo the words of the befuddled Minister

who says "enriched Iranian" instead of enriched uranium: "Don't worry, no need to understand. I also don't understand.") Perhaps the fact that Dr S is an avid follower of TV series 'City of the Rich', which keeps intruding into his mind while other people are talking about enriched uranium and fission, may be a clue to this non-exchange. General Z, so obsessed with being a Malaysian Napoleon that he has become befuddled about so many things, from gender to gamma rays, may also be said to be victim of satirical overkill by the playwright. But since he is a would-be Bonapartean General, it's okay to overkill him. Why not?

*Atomic Jaya*, some may complain, ends not with a bang but with a whimper. After the making of the bomb has been sabotaged by the moral Dr Yuen, the play seems to dissolve into an unsatisfying anti-climax. Note, I said "seems". I couldn't be certain. If you find some of the satirical tricks in the play too obvious, remember Dr Yuen's second rule of story-telling (Huzir's rule, too?): "You can never be too obvious." Yes, in this case certainly Jo K's handling of all those demanding roles made even the obvious deliciously too obvious, just as she could make what seemed satirically exaggerated hilariously acceptable and dramatically appropriate.

If the super-sensitive among you insist on arguing a different interpretation of *Atomic Jaya*, remember the Freud maxim in the programme notes: "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." Thanks, Huzir and especially Jo, for making the smoke so enjoyable!

## A Question of 'Ibadah'

[20th September 1992]

Recently, there was a letter in a Malay daily taking playwright-director Noordin Hassan to task for claiming that his theatre is essentially religious in orientation, a theatre for the purpose of *ibadah* (doing the good deeds enjoined by Islam). Noordin did stress that his understanding of *ibadah* wasn't narrow or rigid.

To the writer of the letter, that was exactly the problem; Noordin's notion of *ibadah* seemed too broad, too loose to be acceptable to pious fundamentalists like him. In any case, said the writer, it was impossible to promote *ibadah* in modern-day theatre. It was too much a nest of sin – all those men and women having fun together on and back stage, and without the *ibadah* too! The writer, in a final insult to Noordin, accused him of actually placing more value on his theatre than religion, implying by the remark that all the talk about theatre as *ibadah* was hypocritical.

Personally, I find the notion of 'theatre as *ibadah*' a dubious proposition. That is if we are talking about real theatre to mean a theatre entertains and stimulates the mind, not one that's primarily interested in *khutbah* (sermon) or propaganda. If a second-rate playwright had made that proposition, I'd dismiss it outright.

But Noordin Hassan is not a second-rate playwright. He has demonstrated, in a number of first-rate works that the artist in him will always ensure that his sheer delight

in theatre-making will not be swamped by pious didacticism. His sense of *ibadah* doesn't turn off hardened lovers of profane theatre like me. In other words, his theatre works as theatre because it takes the form that turns off people like the writer of that letter. This was demonstrated once again by his latest work, *Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari*. First staged in Kuala Lumpur in June, it had a second run in Penang from September 7 to 10. The first production was under the direction of Rohani Yousoff; the second under that of the playwright himself. The cast, however, was the same for both. Both productions were held in conjunction with a special occasion – the Agung's (King's) birthday in the case of the first and a tribute to the playwright himself in the second. And interestingly enough, the themes of the play (the responsibility of the ruler and that of the writer as a guardian of moral-spiritual values) were appropriate to both occasions. The Penang production was the idea of the Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. Both him and Noordin being *anak Tanjung* (sons of Penang), the Minister had for sometime been wanting to honour the playwright for his achievements, thus the citation and the special award to Noordin that accompanied the opening night of the Penang production. The Minister also launched the book of the play (published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka).

*Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari* is a delightful play-within-a-play-within-a-play that has the usual mixture of ingredients we have come to expect from a work of Noordin Hassan. Somewhat modern in its formal self-consciousness, it skillfully uses elements of traditional and folk theatre (notably *bangsawan* and *boria*), and is enlivened by song and dance, satirical humour and light banter by a bunch of characters that range from the comical to the romantic. In keeping with the playwright's commitment to the idea of theatre as *ibadah*, it is also unashamedly didactic

and admits as much through the mouth of the character who obviously represents the playwright: Pak Yatim (played by Abu Bakar Omar) the 'writer' and 'director' of the play-within-the-play who also 'acts' in it. This didacticism, however, is acceptable because the play is so entertaining.

The play-within-the-play is about a king (Sultan Idris Bistari played by Zulkifli Zain) who suddenly decides to go off wandering, leaving his son (Raja Muda Zahiruddin Syah played by Zainal Ariffin Hamid) to rule Indera Mahkota in his absence. The secret object of the exercise is to find out if the son has the qualities of a responsible ruler. The Raja Muda turns out to be a crudely selfish and corrupt ruler who thinks nothing of exploiting the rakyat to satisfy his lust for grandeur. He begins to entertain expansionist ambitions; when he hears that a neighbouring country (Langkapura, ruled by Queen Salbiah) has become rich because of the discovery of gold, he dispatches a mission to that country demanding the hand of the Queen's daughter (Princess Kamaliah played by Ida Nerina) in marriage. If the demand is refused, Langkapura would have to do certain things by way of 'compensation', failing which the country will be invaded. The designs of the Raja Muda are, in the end, defeated by the ingenuity of a humble fisherman's son (Ihsan played by the popular singer Sheqal) and the return of Sultan Idris to claim back the throne.

This rough synopsis doesn't make the storyline of the play sound terribly original, does it? And the sort of things the playwright resorts to in developing the plot (such as the wandering dervish who turns out to be a king in disguise, or the wandering player who is in reality a princess) makes it sound even less original. That the playwright himself knows this is evident from the amusing remark of a character outside the play-within-a-play, the *sarbat* seller. All this, he says, is "king size klise (cliché)".



But it is a measure of Noordin's skill as playwright that he can make good and lively theatre out of well-worn narrative elements such as these.

*Sirih Bertepuk* is not as interesting in form or as complex in theme as Noordin's previous play, that unusual comedy, *Peran*. But it is enjoyable enough and thematically relevant to the times to be well worth seeing. And the way the idea of *Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari* is developed as a metaphor and symbol of moral and social harmony, or of what is morally and spiritually proper and what is not, is subtle and suggestive enough to satisfy the thinking audience.

I saw the play on the opening night, having missed the Kuala Lumpur production in June. It was generally well-acted; Abu Bakar Omar as Pak Yatim and Zainal Ariffin Hamid as the Raja Muda stood out more than the others. And Dr Muhammad Ghouse as the *sarbat* seller, a cameo part tailor-made for him, was his usual amusing self, Turkish *terbus* (fez) and all. The play had a full house every night except the opening, which was for invited guests only. The audience seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed it; its popular form and ingredients made it very accessible to the common folks. I think it would be a very good idea to take it on a country-wide tour. The Kementerian Kebudayaan (Culture Ministry), I suggest, should consider this seriously.

## Ustinov's World of Wit

[9th March 1992]

Sir Peter Ustinov was in Kuala Lumpur early this week. It was the briefest of stopovers; he gave one performance at the Concorde Hotel on Tuesday, and was off again. The dinner show was, not surprisingly, a sell-out. Those who were loaded enough to purchase the \$200-\$280 ticket, or lucky enough to be invited or had enough initiative to invite themselves, had a memorable laughter-filled evening with one of the world's greatest and funniest raconteurs.

The raconteur as one-man theatre – that was what the show was all about. More than two-and-a-half hours of it, and by a 70-year-old actor with an energy that belied his age. Energy in its many forms of expression is the word that comes immediately to mind when one thinks of Ustinov. His imagination is multi-dimensional and naturally seeks expression in a variety of media. Actor, dramatist, theatre director, screen writer, film director, TV and radio personality, novelist, non-fiction writer, opera conductor and master raconteur – quite a list that one. And he has achieved notable successes in some of them.

At a press conference in the morning of the day of the show, he was asked the inevitable question: had he ever wished that he had limited himself to a few of the fields for the sake of a more concentrated achievement? The answer was simple and forthright: why should he? He is obviously the kind of artist whose generosity of spirit and richness of imagination as well as sheer skill cannot be

contained in any one or two forms of expression. Jack of all trades he may be, but is master of quite a few. The man himself strikes one as very affable and essentially tolerant of human foibles, but that doesn't mean he is sparing with his irony. Far from it. Ustinov is one of those rare performing artists who can combine sharp ironic wit with affability and essential tolerance in his intercourse with the public.

This was demonstrated in a small way at the Press conference. He responded to questions which were either inane and time-wasting ("What are the films you have acted in?") or forbiddingly hackneyed ("What is your philosophy of life?") with a gentle put-down wit before kindly consenting to answer them in as brief a way as possible. Gentleness, in fact, can be said to characterise his typical display of wit as a performer. There is no fury, certainly no malice, in his hilarious mimicry of well-known public figures. It's all done in good fun, informed by a wry awareness of the laughable quirks of our common humanity.

This was borne out by his performance at the Concorde. The evening was a sustained display of Ustinov as a master raconteur, regaling the audience with one hilarious anecdote after another from both his private and public lives, mostly the latter. He is a sort of modern day Dr Johnson in his skill and range as raconteur, minus the latter's notorious opinionatedness. It is not surprising that he won an Emmy for Best Performance as Dr Johnson on American TV a few years ago. Ideally, *An Evening With Sir Peter Ustinov*, as the show was billed, should be in a small or medium-sized theatre where the sense of intimacy between performer and audience could be felt. The Concorde Ballroom, with its many thick pillars, was far from ideal. And it was made even less so by the body microphone that Ustinov had to use in order to be heard by people in the far back. The

microphone, moreover, had the habit of drawing attention to itself; it didn't function consistently well, emitting irritating noises which Ustinov either coolly ignored or snubbed with his spontaneous wit.

The first half of the show consisted of the dramatisation of moments and episodes already recorded in his highly readable autobiography *Dear Me*. Those who had read the book must have enjoyed this part of the show even more than those who hadn't; they had the double enjoyment of having an amusing book recalled as well as the new experience of seeing favourite episodes from it brought to life on stage. Ustinov is a portly man who carries his weight quite lightly. With equal lightness, he could slip from one character into another in a bewildering variety of roles. He does his take-offs of people mainly with the voice – from his father, mother and uncle to well-known actors like John Gielgud, Ralph Richardson, Laurence Olivier, and film directors like Michael Curtiz and Mervyn Le Roy.

Facial parodies, gestures and bodily movements are kept to the barest but satirically suggestive minimum. Among my favourites from the first half of the show were his take-offs of a poor naked Gielgud (deprived of his pyjamas by the thoughtless young Ustinov), the absent-minded Michael Curtiz who could barely speak English and was weirdly obsessed with a memory of his native Vienna, and Mervyn Le Roy the not very voluble director who gave Ustinov an inscrutable yet suggestive pointer on how to play Nero in *Qua Vadis* ("Nero is a guy who plays with himself nights").

It would be quite hopeless to try to describe Ustinov's way of doing these take-offs; seeing is believing cannot be truer than in this case. The highlights of the second half of the show were easily his take-offs of Margaret Thatcher (whose mouth, he said, perpetually "puckers in a rosebud

of disapproval”) and Ronald Reagan, the forgetful, folksy geriatric trying to look young. He gave the latter an extended treatment enough to fix him for eternity. Ustinov recalled the former President welcoming Prince Charles and “his lovely Lady David” to a White House dinner and couldn’t resist quipping, “He was probably looking forward to his weekend at Camp Diana.” On another occasion, Ustinov recalled Reagan giving a long geriatric break between the first and second syllable of West German Chancellor Kohl’s Christian name, Hell...mut”; it’s amazing that the latter incident didn’t lead to a diplomatic break between the two partners in Nato.

Ustinov as a raconteur on the public stage is amazing enough. Just imagine what he can be like in a private social gathering with him sitting by the fire with a bottle of port or brandy by his side!

## Defying Reality with Fantasy

[21st November 1992]

In a forlorn dressing room of a deserted run-down little theatre in some Japanese town, a middle-aged actress is acting out a powerful fantasy – a kind of ‘madness’ born of desperate defiance of reality. She is, or believes herself to be, the actress-manager of a traveling troupe whose future is in grave doubt. She knows that the very theatre where she is acting out her fantasy is going to be knocked down to make room for a block of modern flats. In her fantasy, she believes that she and her troupe are preparing for their final performance.

While making up her face and putting on her costume, she talks to a number of imaginary people – members of the troupe, a visitor from a TV station and a rising young TV star who she believes to be her long lost abandoned son. She rehearses the customary speech of welcome to the audience; goes through the lines with a fellow actor, improvises the melodramatic storyline, and rambles on about everything, from her life as an actress and mother to the art of acting itself.

The ominous earth-shaking sound of passing trains, coming from behind the theatre, punctuates her manic monologue. As the monologue mounts towards its climax, her imagination bending reality to meet her deepest dreams, the audience hears the sound of demolition from off-stage, and the voices of the workers shouting: “Hurry up, luv,

you've got to hand over the dressing room! If you don't move out you'll get hurt, you know!" and loud grumbings such as: "She keeps repeating the same old act by herself - doesn't she get tired of it?"

At the climax of her triumphant fantasy, her face plastered with grotesque make-up and her monologue brimming with sheer joy, the theatre collapses all around her. Her ecstatic last word is delivered against the counterpoint of the mounting noise of the demolition. Collapsing screens and falling dust fill the stage as the lights slowly dim.

The play is called *Make-up (Kesho)*, a two-act one-actor piece lasting about an hour-and-a-half, written by one of Japan's most original contemporary playwrights, Inoue Hisashi. Brought here by the Japanese Embassy and Japan Cultural Centre, it was staged at the City Hall Auditorium, Kuala Lumpur, on Nov 14 and 15. *Make-up* is one of the most striking dramatic works on the theme of the theatre and its relation to life that I've seen or read. The production under the direction of Koichi Kimura with Misako Watanabe in the role of the actress-manager Satsuki Yoko was good, very good.

The big stage of the City Hall Auditorium was transformed by the set designer into the constricted space of a theatre dressing room. The room is cluttered with battered trunks, dusty cushions, wigs, costumes and props, and dominated by an invisible mirror downstage left of centre, in front of which Misako Watanabe as the actress-manager Satsuki Yoko acts out her desperate fantasy. The invisible mirror provides Satsuki with her 'real' audience - herself; and beyond it, the fantasy as well as the real audience in the theatre.

The play was performed in its original language with subtitles in English projected on a piece of white cloth stretched above the front of the stage. The subtitles worked

so wonderfully that one had the illusion of actually following the play in Japanese. The monologue is beautifully textured and structured, the language very lively and witty, its humour modulating from the cheerfully coarse to something that suggests an undertone of sadness. The interweaving of the strands of reality and fantasy, and of the apparent reality and 'real' reality, is skilfully done.

The kind of Japanese travelling troupe represented by Satsuki in *Make-up* specialises in popular Kabuki-like period melodrama. (It's not unlike our *bangsawan*.) An evening's programme is usually made up of a number of short plays. The particular item that Satsuki is rehearsing and improvising in her fantasy is a highly popular sentimental melodrama titled *Isaburo's Parting*. It's her "favourite, favourite play". It's about a young man, Isaburo, brought up by a Yakuza whom he assumes is his real father. The Yakuza is attacked by a rival while "the invincible Isaburo" is on his home from a trip. The young man arrives at his putative father's house just in time to learn from the dying old man that he is not his real son. The old man gives him a talisman that was tied around Isaburo's neck when, as a baby, he was abandoned by his mother. With that talisman, he is told to look for his mother who is rumoured to be making a humble living in some distant part of the country. The clue to her identity is a matching talisman in her possession. Isaburo embarks on the search and finds his mother. But because he is a wanted criminal (he had killed a crooked sheriff implicated in the murder of his Yakuza father), and not wanting to involve his mother in his own crime, Isaburo leaves without identifying himself.

Now, in Satsuki's fantasy, the melodrama of the play-within-a-play finds a parallel in her own life. The TV star whom she fantasises as being in the audience and who



later comes backstage to see her, claims to be her son. But unlike what happens in the story of Isaburo, Satsuki's talisman and that of the TV star don't match. Both stories have a more or less unhappy ending.

You may think that this double melodrama with such a clichéd plot is much too much. But don't forget that this is a sophisticated modern play on the theme of theatre and the business of acting; the melodrama is part of its subject, not its form. The formal self-consciousness manifests itself in the self-consciousness of the actor/character's monologue. Thus, after delivering a long dying speech in the play-within-the-play, we get this: "Good grief, what a long speech, bloody unnatural on his deathbed..." (She looks towards stage-left.) "Really? There are a lot of scenes like that in Shakespeare? Uh... Shakespeare... Shakespeare... Ah, him, he's the big shot in the legit theatre, isn't he?"

The double melodrama also serves another purpose: to enable the play to heighten the dramatisation of its central theme of the power of imagination, specifically the actor's will to imagine, to defy reality with her fantasy. Thus Satsuki's spontaneous decision, after discovering that the TV star is not her imagined lost son, to change the evening's programme and do an improvised sequel to *Isaburo's Parting*, this time with a happy ending. The ending of the play-within-the-play is the ending of *Make-up* itself, enacted against the mounting noise of the demolition work, amidst collapsing screens and falling dust.

Misako Watanabe's acting in the quite demanding role of Satsuki Yoko was full of vitality, adding to the rough humour of the language a variety of provocative gestures and businesses. And her direct addresses to the audience (both the imagined and the real Kuala Lumpur one) were humorously inventive. "Drink Livita! Energy! Good for you!... *Terima kasih, Terima kasih!*"

At one point early in the play, she pursued an imaginary pest from the stage into the auditorium, with an insecticide spray in her hand, and found a real (planted) dead cockroach under one of the front seats. Her antics went down really well with the audience, but never at the expense of the play as a basically serious piece of performance.

Misako Watanabe's last words (in English, and not in the script), as the lights slowly dimmed on her crouching figure showered by dust, were: "Don't worry about the dust. It's not what you think. It's good wholesome Chinese herbal medicine..." (or words to that effect). Even the actress's improvised words to the audience were not far from the theme of imagination and reality.

It was a great evening. Thanks to the Japanese Embassy and the Japan Cultural Centre for bringing *Make-up* to Kuala Lumpur. And thanks too for making the show free. *Arigato.*

## Sahara – The Sacred and The Profane

[5th December 1986]

It was a Friday afternoon in Ampang Road, Kuala Lumpur. In the light rain, the traffic was moving very slowly. The refrain of a song from *Sahara Blues* (*jam jam jam trafik jam jam jam*) was running through my head when I noticed a red Mazda RX7 overtaking our car.

“Hey, that’s Sahara Yaakob!” Sure enough, it was her, flitting past like a profane vision on that holy afternoon. Our car managed to force its way alongside the Mazda. I yelled, “*Assalamualaikum, Uztazah!*” She beamed a delightful warm smile and held out her hand. I grabbed it – and in the rain in the middle of traffic jam, I made my first physical contact with Sahara Yaakob. Something I said made her burst into a wild husky laughter, and all my frustration with the Ampang crawl dissolved. As we were approaching the traffic lights, I asked Sahara about the recent, in my view pointless, meeting between the artistes and the *ulamas* (on what was *haram* and *halal* in music). She burst into more laughter, said something quite hilarious – and sped past the lights as they were turning red.

I caught up with her a few weeks later at the Merlin Hotel’s Harlequin Show Palace. It was great to see her in her true element, exquisitely true to form – and in all the inevitable overworked adjectives entertainment writers have showered on her (sensual, sexy, sultry, etc). I am not what

you call a classic nightclub man; but for the sake of Sahara and what she represents, I am always prepared to drop whatever ideological (and financial) qualms I have and enter sanctums I would normally shy away from.

What is so special about Sahara? Well, to succumb to the alliterated seduction of sibilous adjectives, she is spunky; she is a fighter and a survivor. In a world dominated by crude, bureaucratic philanderers on the one hand and cheerless puritans on the other, she never tires of speaking up and fighting for her right to sing and entertain.

“Ada yang panggil *Ustazah Blues!* Sebenarnya Sahara Blues...” (*Ustazah* of the Blues no; Sahara of the Blues, yes). No, Sahara, you are both; you are *Ustazah* Sahara of the Blues. I hear they have quietly banned the title song of her new album over the radio, ostensibly because of the allegedly offensive phrase ‘*Ustazah* Blues’. But banned or not, the inspired wit of *Ustazah* Blues will continue to reverberate over the air of this country – a pleasure-loving country which they are trying to turn into a desert of the spirit. In a sense that my kind of *sufi* would understand, Sahara Yaakob is an ‘*ustazah*’ of the blues. You might think it strange that this sultry nightclub entertainer talks of God, prays whenever she can, and (so her new husband assured me) even performs the *wirid* (recitation of *Quranic* verses after prayer).

But I can see no contradiction between the image of Sahara in a low-cut black dress on stage of the Harlequin and Sahara in the privacy of her room at the Merlin performing the *wirid*. Those who understand these things know that the ecstasy of the one need not contradict the ecstasy of the other; the sacred and profane can bloom in one person. Why should Sahara feel any sin when doing what she, with her blessed gifts, knows best? One afternoon, during a rehearsal for that evening’s show, she told me why she doesn’t.

Between stupendous bouts of *Don't Cry For Me Argentina* and with echoes of her husky rendering of *When a Man Loves a Woman* from the previous night still vibrating in my mind's ear, Sahara recalled her fateful meeting with a Javanese *sufi* a few years ago. At that time, she had just freed herself from her enchantment with the Darul Arqam commune and was plagued by doubts about what she saw as her profane career. The Javanese *sufi* said to her: "God has blessed you with a gift. It's meant to be used; use it, woman! You need not feel sinful as long as your heart is clean."

*Walau besar mana tubuhku  
Walau apa warna rambutku  
Walau apa warna kukuku  
Tiada warna di hatiku*

– Sahara Blues

Yes, sweet Sahara, your heart I believe is clean and in the right place. And God is everywhere – even in Harlequin.

But this woman who has so much to give had to struggle hard and survive repeated obscene obstructions to get where she is now. And even now, although her career seems assured, the air is full of official and unofficial menace that threatens the future of pop music in this country and therefore, the livelihood of people like Sahara. She is not yet 30 but has gone through hell of a lot, ever since she made her debut as a young teenager at the Kowloon Hotel's nightclub in Batu Road. The things she has suffered would have made many other women crack up; and Sahara came near to cracking up a number of times. As an innocent teenager bent on carving out a career as a singer, she became an early victim to con artists and crude philanderers who thought that the little power

they had in the entertainment business was an "open sesame" to every girl's you-know-what.

But Sahara learnt very fast and the defiant spirit that is her birthright soon asserted itself. While others submitted meekly for the sake of their penny dreams, Sahara learnt to say "No!". And her "No!" burst into the 1982 so-called 'RTM sex scandal'. She thought then that courage was enough and that her courage would withstand all attempts to muzzle her. But courage wasn't enough because the kind of battle she had embarked on could not be fought alone. Her fellow singers, who had suffered what she had suffered, buckled under pressure and changed their minds about supporting her all the way.

There were stories of threats of one kind or another – lewd phone calls, mysterious visitors (mad, of course) and the usual letter-wrapped bullets. People high up who had made press statements about investigations suddenly became legalistic – and the whole thing was over like a flash rainstorm that makes the gutters more clogged than before.

But Sahara went on singing in nightclubs here and there. TV appearances and official sponsored concerts were closed to her but she knew how to survive, however hard the going was. One stint she had was on the pleasure boat *The Royal Viking*, cruising the seas of the archipelago. It was while on *The Royal Viking* that Sahara had an experience that was later to change her life quite radically.

Somewhere off Sulawesi, the ship happened upon a boat struggling to keep afloat in a storm. Because Sahara was the only Malay-speaking passenger on board, she was thrust into a crucial role in a rescue operation. She was initially troubled by suspicions and fears of pirates. The newspapers later sensationalised the incident with headlines like 'Singer Rescues Dying Refugees With Her Voice'. But to Sahara, what was most important about the event was the human and moral shock she experienced. The contrast

between the death-haunted refugees (who were illegal immigrants) in the sinking boats and the orgiastic opulence on *Royal Viking*, that floating disc of callous rich fools, made a mark on her consciousness. That experience must have played no small part in her sudden decision to join the Darul Arqam commune. In her own confused way, she was trying to find a semblance of meaning in life.

She put it differently: "I wanted to find out what God was all about. Maybe, with that knowing, I could make sense of the world – its injustices, its absurdities, its bitchiness." She married an Arqam stalwart and joined his harem. Disenchantment came in less than three months. The Arqam people had got her when she was vulnerable, and when she wanted out they, so she claimed, resorted to all kinds of devices and threats to keep her in the fold. Sahara was no ordinary catch for Arqam and it was vital for the commune's image that this '*Jeneral Iblis*' (General Satan), their honorific title for her, was not allowed to turn her backside on them and go back in to the profane world to spill the holy beans. Sahara talked of nightmare, of losing her mind and wanting to kill herself under the wheels of passing cars. The sinister hold of Arqam, she recalled, had to be fought with the powers of a *bomoh*. After she finally managed to free herself, it took her some time before she could resume the vocation for which she was born. Disenchantment with Arqam didn't mean disenchantment with religion and poor Sahara was dogged by doubts about the *halal*-ness of her livelihood. Then she met the Javanese *sufi*.

"Some call me the Tina Turner of Malaysia. Maybe. Others compare me to Dolly Parton for reasons which are too obvious. But I know who I really am. I am Sahara – just plain Sahara. Hot, yes – but certainly not dry." Okay, it's a routine she has been doing at least since the days of her stint with the Furama's Swallow Bar in the 70s, and is

now repeating it every night as the Harlequin. But with her, the routine is given renewed meaning by the energy of her singing, the stubborn recklessness of her earthly spirit.

Zaharah is her real name; down in her passport. Whoever changed Zaharah into Sahara must have been quite inspired. Zaharah in Arabic means flower; and in becoming Sahara this talented singer bloomed into a true flower of the desert. The desert has taught her how to survive and fight back. And she is fighting now – against the threat to energy and joy in the form of the proposed ban on rock music. 'Plain Sahara' is, above all, plain speaking. And she can be dangerous.

The Minister of Culture was wise enough not to take up her challenge to a debate on rock. But not everyone up there is as wise as him. The Vice Chancellor of University Malaya, for example, who thinks he can prove scientifically that rock music is bad on the brain of our youth. He is prepared to take on anybody on the issue, including Sahara. I respectfully advise him to think twice. Sahara has life and energy on her side, and the spunkiness of no ordinary woman. What are the VC's academic abstractions and pious platitudes against all that? I suggest that he take on someone more manageable – the Honorable MP for Rash, Mr Hu Sepang, for example. Try that ardent lone champion of Sahara in Parliament first, and then maybe....

But the VC must not make the mistake of thinking that Mr Hu is a walkover; the man too, has life on his side – that and a dangerously raucous wit. If the VC pulls one of his pious stunts or academic squibs, Mr Hu might just retort with his lethal *'tak payah jawab'*.

Do you think it's worth taking up the VC's challenge, Sahara?



## Ida Nerina – New Talent on Stage

[1st June 1991]

Syed Alwi's light comedy *Di Kampung di Kota* came and went early last month without a fanfare of publicity. The play is going to be given a second run this coming week. Here's a chance for those who missed the first run to see this delightful, unpretentious little comedy, and for the director-playwright to improve on what could still be improved on. The first production had some incongruous features, and the script itself could have been made stronger in its first half with some small suggestive touches that would have prepared you better for the hilarious surprise in the second half. But it was, on the whole, an enjoyable show. Not least of the enjoyment was the pleasure of watching a lovely new talent on our stage.

Ida Nerina, who played the central character of Teh Azah, a young factory worker whose inspired play-acting got her out of a proposed arranged marriage, is not exactly a complete newcomer to acting. But one appearance as a pretty ghost with haunting eyes in a TV drama about two years ago and subsequently, a bit part as Yam in the stage version of *Mat Som*, was the sum of her acting experience before she undertook the role of Teh Azah. And that role is fairly demanding for an inexperienced actress, not only because it is quite a major one, but also because the play is a comedy.

Ida likes acting because she enjoys the idea of making other people enjoy themselves; she singled that out as the prime motive for her interest in the stage. A lot of actors would make the same claim but not many can communicate to you the feeling that they are really enjoying themselves. That Ida has this ability was quite clear from the way she threw herself into the role of the effervescent Teh Azah. And she is also an intelligent person. She has the mind to grasp what the director wants of her and what the play she is in is all about. The actual translation of intellectual understanding into acting may take time, and may not always be completely satisfying to the director, but at least she has the mind and, what is equally important, is prepared to use it. That she did use it in playing the part of Teh Azah was indicated by the way she resisted whatever temptations she might have had to resort to slapstick gestures and movements.

The part was supposed to have been played by Fauziah Ahmad Daud who had to drop out owing to other commitments. When Ida was approached to take Fauziah's place, there were only 10 days of rehearsals for her to get into the character. For Ida, who is always willing to take risks, however conscious she is of her lack of experience, the offer was something she simply couldn't resist. The idea of working again with Syed Alwi, who directed her in both the TV drama and *Mat Som*, must have been an added attraction. Syed Alwi can be quite tough as a director, and that appealed to Ida who is always eager to learn. Syed Alwi himself believes that Ida has what it takes - which includes the toughness to take rough directing.

One of the pleasant surprises of Ida's playing of Teh Azah could only have been appreciated by those in the audience who knew something of her background. She is 27 and from the age of 14 until a few months ago, had mostly lived in London (school, university and no doubt

just bumming around). And yet there was not a trace of any alienation from her mother tongue in the way she spoke her lines. Anyone who has spent a long period overseas speaking English virtually all the time would appreciate that this was no mean achievement. As somebody who knew her joked after a performance: "Where did you learn the language, Ida?"

What helped her in recovering the naturalness of her Malay speech was her gregariousness offstage with her fellow actors, most of whom are non-English speakers. It was part of the seriousness of her commitment to her undertaking, as well as an expression of her natural gregariousness, that she would spend time between and after rehearsals with her fellow actors to talk about the play or about other things. As an actress, Ida Nerina still has quite a long way to go, and she knows it. I believe she will get there; her enthusiasm, her intelligence and whatever natural acting talents she has, will see her through.

## In Praise of 'Kemban' and 'Kangkang'

[24th November 1993]

We all know that in this country it doesn't take much for a book or a film to cause offence and controversy (usually mindless) and be labelled immoral, decadent, anti-this and anti-that. But the heights of the ridiculous were reached with the reactions from some quarters to the recent film *Perempuan, Isteri dan...?* (Woman, Wife and Whore: it's okay, we can say the full title in English.)

Yes, as those who follow Malay cinema would know by now, we have the Censor Board to thank for those three mysterious dots and the question mark that replaced the last word of the title, *Jalang* (Whore). It seems there are people who think that a simple juxtaposition of the words *isteri* and *jalang* is sacrilegious.

There were other reactions no less ridiculous. Just because the main female character is a *kampung* 'whore', the film was condemned by the guardians of female honour as 'anti-women', presumably Malay women. It's even labelled anti-Malay, apparently, because the picture of *kampung* life it shows is not the kind that the currently much talked-about 'New Malay' would approve of. One entertainment columnist in a Malay daily typically lamented that it had no positive religious message; to this columnist, it seems, a film that doesn't preach a sermon is not a good film.

But condemnations and censorship did not have any adverse effect on the film at the box office. In fact, as is usual in such cases, they only made the public more curious and want to see the film. At least to find out what those mysterious three dots were all about. The film did extremely well all over the country. In Singapore, it ran for a record 71 days. Public curiosity about the film was whipped up by something which, to my knowledge, was quite unprecedented. A leading Malay daily gave it front-page publicity; not once, but twice, maybe three times. In the face of those silly reactions to the film from some quarters, it's highly commendable of the paper to champion it so vigorously. After all, it's not often that a mere film or novel grabs the headlines. The film was a hit not only with the public, but also with some sections of the literati. This is the dream of any film-maker; to make a film which is both a popular and critical success. This is due not only to the performance of Sofia Jane as the wife-whore; but, more importantly, the script and the direction. The film is strong in the areas where most Malay films are terribly weak.

U-Wei Haji Shaari, who wrote the script as well as directed the film, is undoubtedly the most promising film-maker we have today. He has the kind of intelligence that knows how to use the film medium. And he is not only soaked in films (the best of the world's as well as our very few good ones), he is also a man with literary interests and quite well-read, which you can't say of many Malay filmmakers. This is not the place for a proper critical appreciation of the film as film. I'll just say a few words about the script and the direction; the two are, in this case, more than usually inseparable because the scriptwriter is also the director.

*Perempuan* is about a woman (Zaleha) who runs off on her wedding day and is later tracked down in Golok, Thailand, by the man (Amir) she was supposed to marry.

In Golok, Amir shoots her boyfriend (?) and rapes her. Then he rents her out to a pimp for a few miserable dollars. Six months later, Amir reclaims her and, forced to marry her after they are caught for *khalwat*, he takes her back to his *kampung*. The much changed Zaleha, partly out of the desire to take revenge herself on her brutal husband, creates quite a havoc by seducing some of the *kampung* men. In the end, she and one of her lovers (Tapa, the main one), are killed by her husband.

In a number of ways, it's a fine script, with an interesting well-structured story and economical dialogue, though by no means flawless in the way it is developed. The centre of interest is that rare thing – a Malay anti-heroine (Zaleha). She initiates the plot and keeps it going; her antagonist, Amir, mainly reacts to her. Zaleha is an interesting character and well-conceived. The way Sofia Jane plays her gives her a certain ambiguity and a touch of innocence. There's also something mysterious, unexplained, about her and her motivations. This, though, may be more of a flaw in characterisation than a genuine mystery.

*Perempuan* acquired a degree of notoriety because of the character of Zaleha, and the sexually suggestive scenes featuring her. In many scenes, Zaleha wears nothing but a *kemban* (*sarung* tied above the bosom). Apart from the *kemban*, there's of course, the much talked-about *nasi kangkang* scene. *Nasi kangkang* is rice (*nasi*) over which a woman has stood with legs wide apart (*kangkang*). It's apparently a folk belief that, if a woman feeds a man with *nasi kangkang*, she'll have him at her beck and call. What a great idea! In the film, the motive behind Zaleha's *nasi kangkang* is visually reinforced by the noticeable fact that the *kemban* she wears is always a man's *sarung* (*kain pelekat*), never batik. This is another instance of the director-writer's attention to visual detail that serves to suggest meaning.

The *kangkang* scene in *Perempuan* has Zaleha standing over a steaming pot of rice, her *sarung* hitched up her legs, the expression on her face languidly and sinisterly erotic as her exposed vulva slowly absorbs the vapours. The shot is fine; though, I suspect, something in the scene has been cut which would have made it even more powerful. I'm not really complaining here; the fact that the *kangkang* scene is there at all is a small (no, big!) mercy for which we must be eternally grateful. Like the frontal shot of Zaleha airing her crotch by shaking her *sarung* vigorously in front of a fan – another lovely *kangkang* shot! (I can't understand our censors; they cut a harmless word from the title but allowed the two '*kangkangs*' to kick their way through their net! I wonder if this means anything. What I'm sure it does mean is that U-Wei is a director/writer who believes in testing the parameter of permissible.)

*Perempuan* is, among other things, a hymn to the earthy sensuality of women, its glory and its dark mysteries. U-Wei obviously finds the *kemban*, as well as the *nasi kangkang*, highly sensual; so do I. It's a great pity that these days Malay women, even those living in the *kampung*, are discouraged from wearing a *kemban* as freely as they used to.

The moment in the film which gives the director a perfect opportunity to exploit the eroticism of the *kemban* is the river scene showing a group of women, including Zaleha, bathing and washing clothes. This scene is not as good as I know U-Wei is capable of making. Again, I suspect something in this scene had been cut by the censors. The sexually suggestive scenes, it has to be stressed, are not in the film just to titillate the audience. They are meant to suggest that Zaleha's nature has been radically transformed by her traumatic experience in Golok. Trapped in a marriage with a brute like Amir, she could only assert herself through her sexuality.

U-Wei's first feature wholly deserves the popular and critical acclaim that it got. I don't have the space to go into its flaws. And I don't think it really matters here. I'm so grateful that, at long last, we get a film that is consistently intelligent and, on the whole, well-made.



## Waiting for the Spanner

[1st July 1991]

Someone once said that film-making is essentially 80 per cent waiting. He was talking about Hollywood. In Malaysia, the waiting is much, much longer than that. If my experience of the making of the film currently showing, *Bintang Malam*, is anything to go by, I'd say it's at least 200 per cent.

Waiting, waiting, waiting. For the right weather conditions, for the set that is supposed to be ready, for essential props that have somehow disappeared to reappear, for the Assistant Director (a vital man on the set) to finally realise what his job involves, for puffed up little prima donnas to finally wake up to their professional responsibility and show up for the scene, and for a host of other unpredictables.

Waiting, seemingly endless waiting. What did the blind poet say: 'They also serve who only stand and wait'? Well, our suffering actors who have to stand and wait in the terrible heat for three, six, sometimes as long as 10 hours for a one-minute take, perform a 'service' that no award can adequately reward. Fortunately – or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it – our actors are either masochistic, or so desperately in need of 'glamour' (what glamour?), that they can take the suffering which would test even the patience of saints. Either an angelic patience or a satanic sense of humour is needed to survive the

rigours of film-making in this country. The special distinction of film-making in Malaysia is that the worst 'unpredictable' (so predictably 'unpredictable' in the predictable Malaysian style) is the attitude and incompetence of the production crew. This attitude is so frightening in its near total indifference to, or ignorance of, professional commitment, and even of the nature of the job itself, that it is quite amazing films are actually made in this country. Unprofessional mentality, incompetence – and to complete the picture, utter lack of organisation.

On my first day of shooting, I said to Mr Director, "If I were in your shoes, I would walk off the set. You can't direct a film under these conditions." But the director of *Bintang Malam* is a very responsible man; he felt obliged to see the thing through. As this was his first big break as an aspiring film director, he felt he too had to show the patience of an angel. Frankly, I am not sure if that was a good thing. The production realities of our film-making don't really explain why most of the films are bad. There are other glaring factors (bad scripts and indifferent directing being the most obvious), and they account more for the generally poor quality of our films. But, given the complex and expensive mechanism involved, making even a bad film is no mean undertaking. Thus, my amazement that they actually manage to complete the films they undertake to make in this country.

Adman Salleh, the director of *Bintang Malam*, wanted to direct a film so much. He was prepared to take over a project after the original director had to drop out and with it, a crew most of which was not of his choice. The pre-production planning and preparation looked superficially impressive – multicoloured charts and strips of paper, designs and drawings and other things all along the wall of the production office. But as the actual chaos of the shooting revealed, it was all window dressing.

The production manager turned out to be a real mystery. He seemed to have decided to play the unscripted role of an invisible man – and he played it to perfection: he was hardly ever seen on the set. The art director... What art director? And a vital cog in the production team (Adman's own choice, this one) appeared to be so busy playing the *kampung* macho with some silly stray of an aspiring actress that he conveniently forgot he was supposed to help the director.

Here are some memorable moments from the few days of shooting I was personally involved in. At the start of the preparation for the shooting of one scene, it was found out that the costume for the character played by Johan was wrong and too ridiculously over-sized. It made Johan (who is not a big man) look like Charlie Chaplin; and he was supposed to play the part of a sinister drug dealer! Someone had to be sent into town, 10km away, to buy the right costume. And it was about 9.30 at night, and on a Sunday too! Same scene, more problems. An interior shot in a Mercedes had been scheduled; the front passenger seat had to be removed. Would you like to know how long it took them to do the job. Three hours! I didn't know it was that difficult to remove the seat of a car; but then if you don't have the right tools...

Another scene, a week or so later. Another interior night shot was called for. While shooting another scene earlier in the evening elsewhere in town, the director had told his assistant (assistant?) to tell the props people to start removing the accursed seat of the Mercedes in anticipation of the next shoot. Mr Assistant reported back: "They said not to worry. They've done it before. This time it won't take long." Mr Director, his mind fully occupied with the immediate problems of the scene he was shooting, didn't say anything other than murmuring his doubts to himself. Want to know how long it took them to remove

the damn seat the second time around? More than four hours! Incredible? Well, that was what happened. I should know; it was my scene. It was as if the crew had suddenly gone on strike; I, of course, dropped off to sleep and was woken up at about 5.30am for the shoot. More than four hours! Looking for the missing spanner, I suppose.

In this country, they rarely do voice-sync shooting; the equipment needed for it is too expensive. All dialogues have to be dubbed later in the dubbing studio. Dubbing is always a painful business, even with the help of a guide track (reference recording of dialogue made on a tape recorder at the time of the shooting). In the case of *Bintang Malam*, they were pretty casual about this essential reference recording. There were times when they even forgot to do it. And when they did remember to do it, no proper record was kept: details of the date of the shooting, scene number, take number – all this was not written on the cassette tapes! At the dubbing studio one month later, hours had to be spent looking for the relevant tracks. That is if you could find the tapes; and (this is really great) most of the tapes had simply disappeared! Imagine the problem for an actor who has the incorrigible habit of ad-libbing rather freely with every take. And rather lengthy dialogue full of abuse in some cases, too!

One particular moment in the dubbing studio should go down in the annals of Malaysian film-making. It was the final crunch in the making of *Bintang Malam*. As usual, the agony of hunting for the tape was almost as excruciating as the agony of dubbing itself. The particular tape was eventually found. Tracing the exact track wasn't too difficult even without a reference number. But when it was traced, somehow only a portion of the recorded dialogue was found to be on the tape; something else had been taped over it. Want to know what? Some member of the crew playing a casting director interviewing some stray

twit of a would-be actress for some fantasy film of his own!

The crew really seemed to come into their own, showing real professional commitment when the time for *makan* (meals) came. *Makan, makan, makan*. Waiting, waiting, waiting. For makan, if for nothing else.

Orson Welles once said somewhere that film-making needs an army. That's certainly true of Hollywood. Our film-making need is more modest; not even a battalion, not even a squadron, maybe just a platoon, even a squad. But it has to be a well-trained, disciplined and professionally committed bunch of people. Otherwise, God help the Malaysian film! Finas and the so-called Akademi Seni Filem, please take note.

## Varieties of Veiling

[7th November 1992]

Contemporary Malay Cinema (yes, 'Malay' for there's really no 'Malaysian cinema') is probably one of the worst in the world. Forget about the so-called 'art films', the *senimans* and their like. Just confine ourselves to commercial films with mass appeal but fairly intelligently entertaining, have something worthwhile to say, and say it through a reasonably well-told story, technically and aesthetically competent, with a touch of professionalism – and without laughable pretensions.

We have some good actors, competent cameramen and sound technicians, oodles of NEP-generated *Bumi* ringgit looking for investment or other opportunities, and a fairly sizeable audience hungry for entertainment in the form of fun movies. The *Bumi* ringgit, it seems, is not that difficult to attract and channel into movie-making ventures. But this relatively easy availability is not always a blessing for the particular movie venture, because money doesn't always ensure good films – especially if it falls into the wrong hands, just as financial constraints or limited funds don't always mean shoddy films (the works of the Sri Lankan Lester Perries are proof of that).

The same thing is true of the audience factor: we have an audience, but they are so undemanding that half-baked filmmakers into whose hands the *Bumi* ringgit has (not mysteriously) fallen can get away with practically anything

– even with murder – the murder of the dreams of more competent and serious filmmakers. They get away with it to make another expensive shoddy film that will again be inanely applauded. The trouble too often is the absence of good scriptwriters and directors.

With a hope too desperate to be believed, I thus went to see the much-trumpeted *Selubung*: “*Filem Malaysia yang menelan belanja paling mahal sekali – menghampiri RM1,000,000! Sebuah filem yang berani...*” (Okay, the bit about “costing almost a million ringgit”, implying that the film must therefore be good, must be the work of the PR man without the director’s approval. But what about the claim that it’s “a daring film”?)

The director of this self-proclaimed “daring film”, Shuhaimi Baba, is one whose previous works for television (*Maria, Pak Agus*) showed signs of visual intelligence, seriousness (but not ponderousness) of purpose, and comparative lightness of touch to make one dare to hope that *Selubung* would unveil a new Malaysian film talent. Well, is the hope justified?

*Selubung* generally looks quite good. It moves on the whole (meaning there are awkward or jarring moments) fairly well; the cutting is at times crisp when crispness is dictated by the storyline, soft and blurred when the mood demands it. The actors are quite well-cast, with varying degrees of success in the realisation of their roles. The variation in the impact of the performance is due to no fault of the actors; they couldn’t do very much given the limited or flawed opportunities dictated by the script. One of the satisfactions I got out of *Selubung* is watching some new faces who promise bigger things to come: Deanna Yusoff playing the lead, Ida Nerina Hussein in a supporting role, and Harith Iskander of TV3’s *Jangan ketawa* fame, also in a supporting role.

Deanna has a face and posture capable of a soft mobility

of expression which is unusually lovely and touching to watch – that is, when the angle and type of shot is right. But she needs closer directorial vigilance to ensure that the model in her is not allowed to intrude and disrupt the continuity of characterisation. Ida Nerina isn't given enough scenes, or enough well-written scenes, to fully establish her apparent character and realise her clear potential as a screen actress. But there are enough hints to convince me that she could have been really good playing the innocent believer about to fall into the pious lap of a fundamentalist preacher, and even better playing the traumatised victim of the preacher's crazy first wife. Harith Iskander playing (or to be precise, underplaying) the preacher, establishes the sinister cool of the character's piety and dangerous persuasiveness in his very first scene. I can see a good future for the *Jangan Ketawa* comedian as a specialist in this kind of role.

As for the other actors, those who have appeared on the big screen before – none of them were really memorable, with the exception of Liza Othman. M. Nasir as the leading man Kamal and lover of Deanna's Mastura, seemed to have the right approach to his character by underplaying it. But his underplaying isn't always convincingly pitched; there are times when he exudes a hesitancy that seems to be more his own than that of the character he is playing.

Generally well-cast actors who are, on the whole, quite well directed, yes. But – and it's quite a big 'but', – their full potential is betrayed by the unsatisfactory screenplay. There are holes in the storyline and in the development and continuity of characterisation – holes that are quite big that it's amazing they weren't noticed by the director (who wrote the screenplay from a script by Nora Fleming).

The film does in some ways give the impression that Shuhaimi clearly has the makings of a good director. But she needs to be much more vigilant and prepared to do



much more work on her screenplay and to ask herself many times if the characters are satisfactorily delineated, the story well plotted and developed, and whether the theme is clearly in focus, before deciding to start shooting. The flaws in the screenplay especially its lack of focus begins with the title itself. The word *selubung* can have two related meanings: a veil that covers the face and one that covers the whole body. It can also, of course, have a metaphoric meaning: in the newspaper advertisement, the English title is wholly metaphoric – ‘Veil of Life’. Now, what is the title meant to convey? *Selubung* has a stronger connotation than *tudung* (meaning veil covering the face only), though both make you think immediately of the fundamentalist movement in Islam and the implied theme of the here-and-now versus the hereafter.

The opening shots of the film show Brother Musa (Harith) preaching to students on the campus of an Australian university and of E.J. (Ida Nerina), already seduced by the Brother’s rhetoric, on the verge of abandoning her studies and entering Musa’s harem despite the efforts of her close friend Mastura to dissuade her. These shots establish what, at this point, looks like a promising theme – the here-and-now versus the hereafter. (Islam, by the way, doesn’t pose the question in this way; it recognises as legitimate the claims of both this world and the next.)

Now this promising theme, which involves a supporting character in a sub-plot of her own, gets virtually lost in the rest of the film. The subplot of E.J. and Brother Musa, in other words, is not thematically integrated, at least not satisfactorily, with the main plot: the love story of Mastura and the corporate man Kamal, her boss. The fact that this relationship is strengthened by involvement in an ‘Islamic cause’ (a Palestinian aid organisation) may appear to give a link with the subplot; if it does, it’s a very tenuous one

and serves no real thematic function. This is the major flaw of the screenplay; there are many other smaller ones.

The title *Selubung*, in the end, strikes me as only vaguely suggestive – not unlike the veil of smog that blurs the outline of the beautiful Shah Alam mosque from my house. In more or less the same manner, the two symbolic shots of the butterflies that sort-of frame the film are merely beautiful and its meaning not concretely supported by the rest of the film.

It's a great pity that the screenplay is such a shambles – even a greater pity that a theme as urgently pertinent as that hinted at in the beginning of the film is lost because of the film's lack of thematic focus.

## Soufflé for Sentimental Souls

[19th April 1986]

### A dialogue on Rahim Razali's *Tsu-feh-Sofiab*

The scene: The Coliseum Bar

The Speakers: A – an enthusiast; B – a skeptic; C – a drunk

- A: You know, after seeing that beautiful film, I really feel like going to Langkawi. Immediately. What magnificent sunsets, what marvelous beaches! Great cinematography!
- B: And Jacqueline Mitchell too, don't forget. What a sensuous beauty! Even better than the sunsets – and cinematography. It doesn't matter if Jackie sometimes speaks as if she is reading from the script. Being a conscious model does help sometimes.
- A: Don't forget, she's a non-Malay playing a Malay-speaking part. So, if her delivery's a bit stilted at times, it doesn't matter. It's part of the realism of the film.
- B: Like making Tsu Feh and her brother (both English-educated upper class Chinese) speak long stretches of unreal Malay dialogue? People like them don't speak Bahasa among themselves in reality, even if they can. If the film wants to propagate the use of Bahasa, fine. But don't talk to me about realism. Why didn't they

think of subtitles for those scenes? There are only a few of them.

Anyway, I can't blame Jackie for sounding like a reader. What else can you do with the kind of dialogue in the script? Like this, for example: *pergolakan yang tengah melanda pulau yang indah permai ini*. That's *sajak* stuff; people don't talk like that in real life.

(cutting in, slightly tipsy): Are you talking about the flick next door? That... what's it called? So..Sou.. Souffle something?

Tsu Feh-Sofiah, you drunken sod!

Funny title. What's it about?

About a Tsu Feh who becomes Sofiah who fails to live happily ever after.

You mean it's about a sex change?

No *lah*! It's about this beautiful, dedicated Chinese doctor who embraces Islam. She goes to an island for a holiday and finds God instead.

In the arms of a local *cikgu*, to be exact. At least, he's supposed to be a *cikgu*. Nothing he does in the film suggests he is one though. His lifestyle, what he does with his time, suggests he's a playboy on holiday rather than a teacher. He does nothing but fish or ride his motorbike on the beaches – no doubt waiting for cries of help from beautiful potential converts.

Really? That sounds interesting. How do *cikgu* and the pretty doctor meet?

Well, Tsu-Feh is out swimming one fine day. For some mysterious reason – God's hand in it, I'm sure – she finds herself in danger of drowning. Thank God, *Cikgu Nik*'s at hand to save her.

In the nick of time too. Sorry about that sloppy pun. Irresistible, really. You see, the name of the hero is part of the buried symbolism of this film.

You're being facetious again.

- B: No, I'm quite serious – in a way. I agree with you about the drowning scene. It's so obviously staged that something metaphysical must have been intended. God's hand in it, as you said – in the way the scene was scripted and cinematically conceived, I mean. I'm only sorry Rahim Razali (*Cikgu Nik*) couldn't give Jacqueline Mitchell (Tsu Feh) a screen kiss of life after he had taken the trouble to rescue her and landed her on the beach...
- A: But this film is, in fact, a superb film. A milestone in Malaysian cinema. Not only is it beautiful – oh, those lovely shots of sunsets and beaches! – but it's also engaged with the current issues of the moment.
- C: You mean the business of the *Cikgu* saving the life of the beautiful doctor?
- A: No *lah!* Can't you think about anything else? The film is about Islamic fundamentalism as a threat to our peace and harmony. And about the use of fundamentalism by opportunists and subversive elements. You know how current that issue is. The film is very timely. In fact, it's prophetic. Remember, it was made before *Memali*. If that's not an indication of its uniqueness, I don't know...
- C: *Memali!* You mean Rahim Razali saw it coming and has depicted it in this film?
- A: The violence of fanaticism shown in this film is really frightening. It makes you think of *Memali*.
- B: *Memali?* Prophecy? Bull! A couple of comical *Ustaz* (or hoodlums in disguise?) half-heartedly instigating a pathetic handful of *kampung baikies* to stir up trouble over the *halal-haram* business – you call that frightening and prophetic? It's so badly scripted, unconvincingly acted and unimaginatively conceived. The orchestration of the plot and subplots, the editing, the creation of atmosphere, the pace and build-up of tension are all

woefully inadequate. It's so badly done that the film has actually succeeded in creating a comedy out of the potentially tragic. Another thing – religious violence is not new in our society. Remember Batu Pahat? So, why all this talk about prophecy of Memali?

A: But Rahim Razali is an innovator. His films are landmarks. I disagree with you about the treatment of violence in this film. I think it's done with real panaché, and very expressive. Just think of the editing style – very sharp, slick, almost – what's the word? – surrealistic.

B: You don't even know what that word means.

A: The editing is a bit confusing sometimes, I must admit. I'm not even sure what it's all meant to suggest. But it looks smart, sophisticated, artistic. It's very – *ai ya!* – what's the word? – *ava... ava...*

B: Avant garde?

A: Yes. Think of the scene of the *parang* fight between Alwi (Eman Manan) with his gang of ruffians and the restaurant owner. You know, the chap who's accused by those ruffians of using lard in his cooking? The whole episode is truly brilliant. The stylish intercutting alone will guarantee it a place in the history of Malaysian cinema aesthetics. Remember the flashy flashbacks within the intercutting? Now Alwi has a bloody face – all of a sudden; now he doesn't – all of a sudden. That's surrealism, man!

B: Did you notice also that, in the clinic scene half of the characters have their heads chopped off – by the framing? They are standing and talking, but their heads cannot be seen; the camera is on bloody Alwi and his goons. Projection fault? Perhaps. But I hear it happens during other screenings. I won't be surprised if it's deliberate. Another example of Rahimism? Symbolic prophecy of worse violence to come?

A: Come on! Be serious, will you!

B: Seriously, can't you see the gimmicky editing is a mere trick to distract you from the poverty of ideas and imagination? *Matinya Seorang Patriot* did very much the same thing. If editing is, as they say, the heart of cinema art, I wonder what lies inside the heart of *Tsu Feh-Sofiah*.

Many of the intercuttings are pointless, indifferent to the demands of meaning and pace, and at times, simply disorienting. In some cases, they violate simple film grammar – if indeed they're conscious violations – without any intelligible purpose at all.

A few look promising – out of context. I can remember one: the intercutting of Alwi about to strike Jalil with his *parang* with a shot of *Cikgu* Nik playing with his daughter beside the boat, a hammer raised high in his hand. On its own, it's suggestive, but nothing in the development of the sequence and of the whole movie validates it. The expected confrontation between Nik and Alwi never develops. Alwi, in fact, is an aborted character; aborted by melodrama in the interest of a bigger melodrama. (Poor Eman Manan – for all the top billing he gets.)

Alwi's transformation from a goon into a goody is clumsily conceived, poorly developed, abrupt and sentimental. The scene of Alwi and his fellow goons on motorbikes coming to meet Tsu Feh on the beach is simply laughable.

And how did you like the obviously faked sense of ominous suspense that surrounds the Alwi-Tsu Feh scene? Faked sense of ominous is found in a number of the scenes. The most laborious and cliché-ridden is that which surrounds the scene of Tsu Feh drowning.

C: Well, that is some lecture, man! It's all a bit too technical for me. Tell me one simple thing: what has all this violence and fanaticism to do with Tsu Feh and the *Cikgu*?

**A:** You can't expect this loud-mouthed cynic to give you a responsible answer to the question. The film's too subtle for him. His criticisms are a product of a jaundiced view of a major artist.

**C:** Please answer my question!

**A:** Go see the film yourself *lah!* You've only to cross a lane.

**B (to C, ignoring A):** I'll answer your question. What's the connection between the Tsu Feh-*Cikgu* Nik story and the business of violence and fundamentalism? I can't guarantee you I'll get it through – 'cause I'm not really sure myself. I recall the *Cikgu* grumbling about Tsu Feh's searching and finding *kesucian* (purity) amidst all the dissension on the island.

All that *haram* scarum and *kafir-mengkafir* business on the one hand; and on the other, here's this beautiful goddess who finds purity and truth in the arms of the *Cikgu*. Must admit it's not a bad theme – if properly treated as a cinematic experience. But the treatment – that's the question.

Tsu Feh, as you might expect, isn't seriously affected by the ominous atmosphere on the island, or by the petty-minded aggressiveness of the fanatical goons. How can she be – if the whole thing is so comical? Anyway, she's determined to embrace Islam. She knows it's the fulfilment of her destiny. As a little girl, she had witnessed her mother's death. The good woman had died of a heart attack on a beach on the same island. She died almost in the sight of paradise. (That's why Tsu Feh calls it Pulau Mamma). The mother had missed paradise (if she did) only by a few seconds. Tsu Feh is determined that she herself won't miss it.

**C:** The boat to paradise, you mean?

**B:** I meant the sacred formula of salvation – but it's the same thing. *Cikgu* Nik, of course, helps Tsu Feh catch that boat.



- A: What the hell are you talking about? The theme of the film's clear enough: if one's destined to become a Muslim, nothing can stop one. And if there are nasty fanatics, there are also good Muslims. Like *Cikgu Nik*.
- C (to B): You said just now Tsu Feh "fails to live happily ever after". Does that mean she misses the boat after all?
- B: That's what makes this film quite unique. You see, the *Cikgu* and Dr Tsu Feh (now Dr Sofiah) are just enjoying their budding romance – committing *khalwat* all over the island – when she's suddenly abducted by the religious goons. The motivation for the abduction seems rather specious, and the narrative of the sequence and its aftermath rather awkward and maudlin. Anyway, Tsu Feh-Sofiah disappears completely from the film. And the poor *Cikgu* is left alone to weep on the jetty against the beautiful island sunset. The final frames of the film show him taking his last ride on his bike into...?
- C: The sunset.
- B: Of course.
- C: That's a funny way to end a movie. Is he trying to make a Western or what? A chopped-off Western – without the sense of an ending?
- B: It's not one of those open endings with ambiguous implications, mind you. It's an ending that is no ending.
- A: That's an artistic innovation. Can't you see that?
- B: You mean it's the writer-director over-indulging himself, and not knowing how to end the bloody thing within the acceptable time limit? I supposed if this film does well at the box-office, there'll be an excuse for a *Tsu Feh-Sofiah 2*, or even 3.
- C: Who's going to wait one year, or even two, for the second part of this serial. I'm not.
- A: You haven't even seen the first part!

C: And I'm not going to!

B: I think you should – if only to see Jacqueline Mitchell. In the movie, she has another role I haven't told you about. You see, this Tsu Feh is, according to a dream, a kind of goddess come to save the island (*perempuan putih melepak yang dibawa ombak untuk menyelamatkan pulau ini*).

Somehow the beauty-as-saviour theme gets lost in the intricacies of manic intercutting – and completely forgotten. At the 'end' of the film, it's the goddess who needs saving – and the helpless distraught hero, too, it seems. But in a way, the goddess does fulfil her saviour role. She 'saves' the film – for some people at least.

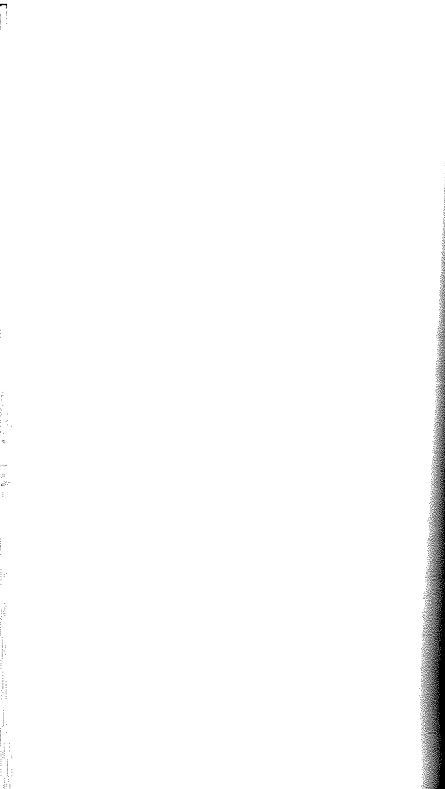
C: Is the nine o'clock show sold out? I'm not going to miss this flick! [As he walks off] Jackie, here I come!

A (to B): Don't you have anything good at all to say about this film?

B: Well, I do, actually. But they don't make any difference to my judgment on the film. Some good bits here and there: a nice shot in this scene, a good idea in that one... But good bits here and there don't make a film – at least not a film with pretensions of being a work of art.

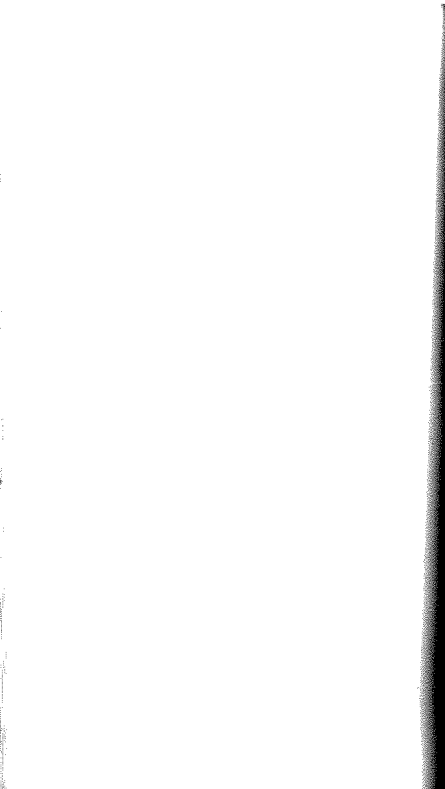
Without a shaping intelligence and imagination, it can easily dissolve into slickness, slackness and rapid self-indulgence. What's acclaimed as a cinematic achievement turns out to be something hollow – puffed up with pretentiousness. Our friend's right. *Tsu Feb-Sofiah* is a soufflé – a soufflé for the sentimental soul.

The director said recently: "I don't give the audience what they want." That apparent commitment to artistic integrity is really a camouflage for Rahimistic self-indulgence. Perhaps Rahim Razali should stick to acting. Acting's his forte – especially if he's directed by someone else.





## Books Well-Read



## The Thrashing that Changed the Novel

[20th March 1991]

One of the fattest single-volume biographies of an author is, no doubt, Richard Ellmann's *James Joyce* (1959; revised ed. 1982). The fattest (almost 600 pages) biography of the humble wife of a great author is, without the slightest doubt, Brenda Maddox's *Nora: A Biography of Nora Joyce* (1988, Minerva Paperback 1989).

There was enough of Nora in Ellmann's riveting biography of the Irish genius to make her an interesting, nay, fascinating presence in her own right, and not just as an appendage of her husband. But the 'enough' wasn't really enough; you wanted to know more. For years I kept hoping that some scholar would do a book on her; I knew she deserved one to herself. When after some years of waiting, no biography came, I started nursing a secret project of my own 'Life of Mrs Nora Joyce nee Barnacle'.

I was then a university academic (sort of). In 1976, I spent my sabbatical in Ireland, visiting Nora's birth place, Galway, as well as Dublin. But I was no scholar (just haven't got the discipline); the project never got anywhere. But it did develop, in a secret garden in my mind, into a fantasy in which I recreated the life of the barely educated convent lass from Galway who ran off to live in sin for many years with an arrogant apostate destined to become one of the world's greatest novelists.

My fantasy life of Nora was, I must confess, a bit overheated in places, the heat having its source in those notorious 'dirty letters' Joyce wrote to his wife (now preserved in the Cornell University library). The fact that Nora's own replies to those extraordinary letters seemed not to have survived only made my fantasy more heated. Now that the much anticipated biography has at last been written, I find my Nora not too different from the 'real' one recreated in Maddox's exhaustive and thoroughly researched book.

It has to be admitted that however interesting Nora was in her own right, what made her life truly unique was of course her being for nearly 30 years the common-law wife of Joyce. They were only married, and for practical not sentimental reasons, 27 years after they sailed out of Ireland together in 1904. It is doubtful Joyce could have realised his grand ambition to change the course of the modern novel if, in his wanderings all over Europe to write *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, he had not been accompanied by Nora Barnacle. ("Barnacle? She'll never leave him!")

Nora was not only his "portable Ireland" (in Maddox's compact phrase); she was also his necessary inspiration and his emotional and domestic mainstay – in short, his wife-'whore'-mother-muse all rolled into one. (The 'whore' in the composite roll is suggested not only by the notorious letters but also by Nora's own tearful remark to a close friend of the couple's: "Jim wants me to go with other men so that he will have something to write about." Joyce was at this time struggling with *Ulysses*, a novel with a cuckold as its anti-hero, and, "in pursuit of the vicarious thrill," says Ms Maddox, "Joyce... hoped that Nora would be strong where he was weak.")

Born in the remote west of Ireland (about which, at the time of her birth in 1884, "Dublin's Anglo-Irish literati were beginning to romanticise, but from which the natives were clamouring to escape"), Nora was refreshingly gutsy

could be intelligently vulgar when the occasion called for it. She was to shock the shocking atheist of Dublin, James Joyce, by her surprising unshockability. Her black-and-white baker father having been thrown out of the house by her mother, she came under the puritanical disapprobation of her maternal uncle. The fierce uncle caught her out one night with the boys and thrashed her with a black-thorn stick. That was the thrashing that helped to change the course of the modern novel, for within one week of being beaten by Uncle Healy, Nora packed her trunk and went to Dublin.

There, working as a barmaid, she crossed the path of the arrogant young apostate, then a regular of Dublin's night-light district, Nighttown. She was only 20 and her burn-haired beauty was enhanced by her "sauntering" walk that had more than a touch of "peasant" arrogance to it. The day they had their first date (June 16, 1904), when the convent lass actually "made a man" of the Nighttown regular, was immortalised by the novelist in *Ulysses* as Bloomsday, the single day on which the action of the big novel takes place. The Joyce-Nora relationship has been either sentimentalised or perverted by romantic complications (the two are the same, really). Nora was no dunce to Joyce's genius; she had not only sturdy commonsense when it came to the business of living, but also a ready and brutal wit. She could see through the myopic genius she was married to and was never awed by him; once she even called him "my simple-minded Jim". But as Joyce's domestic mainstay, she shared his typical Irish weakness (or strength, depending on how you look at it) of being prodigal when they had the money to be so and, of course, suffering penury heroically when they had to.

And Nora had pride to match Joyce's too. When Joyce died in Zurich in 1941, he had, after years of poverty



and public neglect, become quite famous. But the Irish Government still refused to forgive him for his apostasy (political as well as religious). It gave clear indications that it would not welcome the idea of Joyce's body being shipped back to Ireland and buried there. Nora's reaction was characteristic of her, and something her husband would have been proud of. She declared that Ireland, in that case, did not deserve to have any more of Joyce's manuscripts than she could help. And that was exactly what happened; most of Joyce's manuscripts are now in America.

The woman's loyalty to her dead husband went beyond shared pride. It also had an element of fierce integrity to it. At the funeral of Joyce in Zurich, she was approached by a priest and asked if Joyce should not have a Catholic service. "I couldn't do that to him," she said without hesitation.

It has often been observed with some amusement by the critics that this remarkable woman who inspired Molly Bloom (*Ulysses*), Gretta Conroy (*The Dead*), and Anna Livia Plurabelle (*Finnegans Wake*) was never interested enough in her husband's work to even bother to read any of it. Or so it is generally believed. Maddox thinks all this is mere legend. I tend to believe that the 'legend' has some basis in fact. But, as Nora would have said, what difference does it make anyway? Having had to live with a book written by someone that close to you, do you really have to read it from cover to cover?

In any case, there is one book that Nora certainly couldn't have bothered to even try to open. And that is that unreadable novel to end all novels, *Finnegans Wake*, which obsessed Joyce for many years, and which his wife with her earthy cynicism dismissed as "that chopsuey you're writing". Of *Ulysses*, she made a delightfully mocking comment to a close friend of Joyce's: "What do you think, Mr Budgen, of a book with a big fat, horrible married

woman as the heroine?" I can imagine her shattering full-bodied laughter when told that there was a big chunk of her own self in that "big fat, horrible married woman".

Nora Barnacle (O, how that 'Barnacle' grips your manhood!) was the inspiration for some of the most beautiful epiphanies in modern literature. Even her letter-writing idiosyncrasy, her indifference to punctuation, became the inspiration for one of the crucial stylistic devices in that famous chamber-pot monologue of Molly Bloom that brings *Ulysses* to its triumphant end. Dominated by the image of flowing life-giving waters that becomes, before the end of the monologue, Molly's menstrual blood, this rightly famous episode is one of the most hauntingly beautiful and heartening 'Yes-to-life' utterances in all literature.

As Joyce himself described in a letter: The monologue "begins and ends with the female word Yes... It turns like the huge earthball slowly surely and evenly round and round spinning. Its four cardinal points being the female breasts, arse, womb and c— expressed by the words 'because', 'bottom',... 'woman', 'yes'."

Yes, Nora. Yes!

## Salman in the Sea of Stories

[14th June 1991]

Whatever one thinks of Salman Rushdie and the *Satanic* affair, it is quite impossible if one is human and not insensitive to the wonders and the hazards of the imagination, not to be moved by the spirit that produced his first post-*fatwa* work of fiction. A modern tale inspired by the *Arabian Nights* and meant for children and adults, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* was written when the author was in hiding for his life from the long arm of the Ayatollah. It is dedicated to his son Zafar. The acrostic in which the dedication is cast reads:

Z embla, Zenda, Xanadu:  
A ll our dream-worlds may come true.  
F airy lands are fearsome too  
A s I wander far from view  
R ead, and bring me home to you.

The temptation to read this tale of Haroun the story-loving son of Rashid Khalifa the storyteller as some kind of allegory of the author and his bizarre fate is irresistible. "Well, look where stories have landed you now," thunders the ogre of the tale, Khattam-Shud, to little Haroun in his moment of extremity. "You'd have done better to stick to Facts... Stories make trouble..." The words strongly remind

the reader of what Haroun's story-hating neighbour said to Rashid at the beginning of the tale: "Life is not a storybook or a joke shop. All this fun will come to no good. What's the use of stories that aren't even true?" This neighbour, Mr Sengupta, is a miserable worker who is responsible for the disaster in the Khalifa family that gets the plot going. Sengupta runs off with Rashid's wife Soraya: Soraya's disappearance results in the storyteller losing his precious gift. Later in the story, we notice that the ogre Khattam-Shud has quite a few things in common with the miserable clerk. Haters of stories, they bear an uncanny physical resemblance to each other: both are "sticky-thin and whiny-voiced and mingy". (Khattam-Shud, by the way, is Hindustani for The End, and therefore an appropriate name for the Prince of Silence or Foe of Speech).

It is Haroun's attempt to help his father recover his storytelling powers that constitutes the stuff of this tale. The boy's native artfulness enables him to blackmail a Water Genie by the name of Iff (in this punning tale, the name of almost every character or place has significance) to take him to Kahani (Hindustani for story), the Earth's invisible second Moon, where the Sea of Stories is located. They fly to the planet on the back of a magical mechanical bird, Butt the Hoopoe (the Hoopoe is a sacred bird and symbolic spiritual guide in Sufi mythology). On Kahani, a war is about to break out between the Guppies Gupland, who are the guardians of the Sea of Stories and their enemies, the story-hating Chupwalas of Chupland. The Chupwalas are a tribe of shadowy evil creatures, ruled by Khattam-Shud, who live on the dark side of Kahani. They pollute the Sea of Stories with some mysterious poisonous stuff and are determined to plug its source for good. In this war, little Haroun conducts himself like a true hero of old - "There's more to you, Haroun, than meets the

blinking eye." The tribe of story-lovers wins a resounding victory. Rashid regains his storytelling gift, and when the father and son get back home, there's the smiling singing Soraya waiting for them. And so they live happily ever after.

As you would expect of a modern magical tale, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* abounds with imagery and verbal hints that resonate with allegorical suggestions reflecting current as well as autobiographical concerns. Alifbay (Hindustani for alphabet), Haroun's native city, is "the saddest of cities, a city so ruinously sad that it had forgotten its name. It stood by a mournful sea full of glumfish, which were so miserable to eat that they made the people belch with melancholy... In the north of the sad city stood mighty factories in which... sadness was actually manufactured... Black smoke poured out of the chimneys of the sadness factories and hung over the city like bad news."

Rushdie's environmental concerns inspired one of the controlling ideas of this tale, skilfully and suggestively woven into the texture of the narrative to serve the basic allegory about the imagination and the fate of the writer. Although there are times in the course of this highly-inventive story when one feels the writer is a bit over-strenuous (his 'machinery' of invention almost creaks in places, the elaborations of the tale can feel a bit laboured at times), it is on the whole a highly enjoyable magical tale. As usual, Rushdie's verbal exuberance and punning mania as well as his skill at comic characterisation are quite dazzling. Iff the Water Genie, an ancient-looking little fellow with a huge purple turban, baggy silk pajamas gathered at the ankle and a set of full whiskers skyblue in colour, talks like a compulsive walking thesaurus. He is one of several delightful comic inventions that will charm both children and adults. And there's that superb

satirical portrait of the nasty politician, Enooty Buttoo (the name sounds familiar, doesn't it?), a "slick gent in a white bush-shirt with a movie-star smile" to whom Rushdie's storytelling gift is good only so far as it can be exploited to help him win the election.

Turn off the idiot box (that *Chupwala* invention) and read this tale to your children. And to yourself. It might help you to stave off the nightly pollution of the mind that we are all subject to. This book should reaffirm our faith in the wonderful life-giving, life-healing powers of the imagination. Not least of the wonders is the fact that such an exuberant and often funny tale could be written by a writer with a death sentence on his head – and that for writing a book too.

At the time of writing Haroun, Rushdie was thoroughly at sea. But the sea magically became (Praise be to Allah) a Sea of Stories which buoyed up his sinking imagination. The ways of God, and of the imagination, are indeed mysterious.

## Dartingly Good Fun, Innit?

[23rd June 1991]

In the sitting room of a woman's apartment, a man is masturbating to a porno video of the woman herself, "alluringly reduced to two dimensions", especially made by her for his delectation – and humiliation. While in the bathroom, where she has retired to give him privacy, she meditates on death: "dead flower... dead water... dead car... dead cloud... the Death of the Novel... The Death of the Planet. The Death of Love. It was company." The range of her meditation happens to more or less parallel the range of (apparent) concerns of Martin Amis's latest novel. And the woman herself, a 'sex artist' of a unique breed, happens to have the novelist's knack of knowing what will happen next. The big thing that she knows is the exact day of her own death and the identity of the murderer. She knows she is going to be killed on her 35th birthday and the murderer is the man furiously wanking off in her sitting room.

This video-and-wanking scene is part of a plot (and the plot within the plot, in both senses of the word) that Nicola Six is spinning. She is, in fact, collaborating with her supposed future murderer in bringing the plot to its climax – on her own terms. This plot actually involves three people. Or four. Or five? Perhaps even six? The uncertainty, it seems, is part of the intention of this novel whose 'plot' is multi-levelled, leaking from

one level to another, and whose narrative's status is somewhat slippery, constantly sabotaged by something or the other. The whole thing seems like a tease from beginning to end.

In the Nicola plot, two men are immediately involved. One is, of course, our video wanker, Keith Talent, a professional cheat and relentless fornicator with a "tabloid face" and "reptile brain"; he is obsessed with videos and darts, and with making it big as a dart champion on the telly. Talent is easily the biggest triumph of this often funny, sometimes bleak, novel; he is a memorable piece of comic characterisation to whom even, or only, darts can give "sincerity", and whose "innit" is almost metaphysical in its meaninglessness. The other man in the Nicola plot, Guy Clinch, is an aristocrat with a naive heart and an equally naive hunger for love and romance, and whose life is ruled by a believable bitch of a wife and an unbelievable fear of a baby son.

Nicola Six, a jaded woman who seems to be somewhat obsessed with the Death of Love business and determined to prove it, spins her inventive plot with the idea, it seems, of humiliating these two men. Keith she humiliates with the perversities of her videos, the process of humiliation climaxing in a scene in which he is made to wear her knickers as headgear. Guy she humiliates with just the opposite – a pretended adolescent innocence verging on the incredible that titillates the poor man ("I have a confession to make... I'm in love. With you. There's just one thing... I'm a virgin.") till he ends up by lugging a permanent erection across the Atlantic to New England and back.

Who the fourth character in this plot? The narrator of the story himself, Samson Young. An American with a dream of making it big as a writer, Young is in London on a flat-swap with another more successful writer,



Mark Asprey. His dream of writing his big novel is given an unbelievable boost by reality when he stumbles upon his material in a pub where Talent is the dart king and the regulars bear names like God and Shakespeare. All he has to do, Young says, is just to write the novel down – as it happens. And he does it in a constant state of feverish excitement, acutely conscious of his deadline – with his publisher to whom he sends chapters of the ongoing novel as it happens; and with death itself, for Samson Young is terminally ill and will die with the novel. Lucky Samson then is, in his own words, “less a novelist than a queasy cleric, taking down the minutes of real life.” And a faithful cleric, too, full of respect for reality. Or so he claims – or thinks. “I can’t make anything up. It just isn’t me. Man, am I a reliable narrator.” Being a “reliable narrator” doesn’t preclude Young from collaborating with his characters. (Sorry, not characters, but ‘real’ people.) So, he collaborates with and gets sucked in by Nicola (the ultimate black hole herself) who outplots him by provoking an ending that turns out to be a wicked surprise – or ‘cheat’; take your pick. (In this novel of extremities, everybody and everything cheats, not just Keith Talent who cheats even the wind with his wind-cheater; the cheaters themselves get cheated just as burglars get burgled.)

The surprise of the Nicola plot isn’t the last. This is where the fifth character in the plot comes in. Samson Young dies with the suspicion that Mark Asprey, who sometimes seems like his mysterious nemesis, and a tease of a nemesis too, has “set him up”, fixed it all. And, since Mark Asprey shares the same initials as Martin Amis, as the M.A. at the end of the preparatory note to the novel baldly reminds the reader, one wonders where it all ends.

But this novel isn’t mere game. It’s deadly serious.

(Innit?) It's about the Death of Love after all – and what can be more serious than the Death of Love? Other than the death of the planet itself? The whole teasing plot is spun out right “until the last dart strikes home.” The atmosphere is vaguely futuristic dominated by a “low sun”, “dead clouds”, “superbolt” lightning, climaxing in an unprecedented eclipse of the sun.

All this, believe me, is a fair an accurate account of this dartingly good fun of a novel. It is as M.A. wrote it. Man, am I a reliable reviewer.

## Gronowiczing Greta Garbo

[22nd February 1992]

"But, doctor, I have pains in my chest. I have pains in my hands. I have pains in my legs. I often feel faint. What's the matter with me? Something must be wrong." Thus, Garbo to her personal doctor at the height of her career as the mysterious goddess, Sphinx – or, perhaps even further from the real person yet in a sense suggestively close to it – the 'frightened gazelle' of the silent screen. The baffled doctor merely murmured: "I don't know. Maybe if we perform an autopsy, we could find it."

Something strange seems to have happened to Garbo, some kind of malady the virus of which seems to have been produced by the confusion of the elusive, private person of the actress and her manufactured but amazingly haunting, screen image. She died taking the secret of the mystery with her. This biography by Polish-born poet Antoni Gronowicz is, I suppose, a sort of 'autopsy'. In some ways, what the 'autopsy' reveals is quite sad; the sadness, though, is not without some touches of comedy, some of which reflects Garbo's grim (almost) wit (this is rare) or even simple peasant canniness, the latter ranging from the cynical to the sentimentally defensive. The defensive, somewhat sentimental Garbo would say, as she is 'made' to say in this book: "I will remain, to my last day on earth, nothing more than a simple peasant girl." (Garbo was born Greta Lovisa Gustafsson in 1905 to a Swedish

farmer who moved to Stockholm and drank himself to death.) The grimly cynical Garbo who had a very long life, more than half of which was spent in seclusion, would say: "Only one method exists for attaining a long life, and that is old age."

The grimly cynical wit of that utterance is the best one-line commentary on the long, very long, post-Hollywood phase of the Sphinx's existence. Gronowicz claims that the book originally had the blessing of Garbo herself and that the material of the book was patiently gathered over a period of decades through extensive heart-to-heart conversations, not formal interviews. Gronowicz initially had to resort to all kinds of strategies and tricks to make Garbo talk about her past, to reveal her hidden traumas and fears, her hopes and dreams. Although the book carries a note of disclaimer which says that Miss Garbo "denied having involvement with Mr Gronowicz or of making any contribution to (it)", it is difficult not to believe in the essential veracity of its account of the actress's life and character. This is so despite one's doubt about the rightness of Gronowicz's decision to tell 90 per cent of the story in Garbo's imagined voice by using the first-person fictional device.

The author says he took copious notes immediately after each session with Garbo. No doubt, those notes contained many words and sentences that she actually used as well as presumably, Gronowicz's own impressions and interpretations of those words and other modes of expressions she must have resorted to. But still, the first-person fictional device is a dubious thing to use in a book that purports to be a biography, especially that of a modern personage. I think it would have been better for Gronowicz to write a straight fiction, something like Robert Graves's *I, Claudius*, though without using Garbo's name for the 'autobiographer'.

The problem with Gronowicz's 'autobiography' is that frequently, the tone simply doesn't ring right to me, however close a good measure of the words and wordings may be to what Garbo actually may have said and however much one believes in the essential veracity of the details. Gronowicz should have remembered the truism that in order to get really close to the feel of the real person or events, the creative freedom of fiction is better than the laborious fidelity to facts of a conscientious documentary. Perhaps Gronowicz was inspired by the so-called 'new journalism', like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* or Norman Mailer's *Armies of the Night*. The latter was advertised as "History as a Novel, the Novel as History", in which the author becomes a character involved in a historical event called the Vietnam March on the Pentagon together with well-known American poet Robert Lowell and other literary dissidents, all superbly re-created and given the feel of fiction. If Capote or Mailer had in some way inspired Gronowicz, then he hasn't quite mastered the 'new art'.

That Gronowicz is a poet in his handling of prose is more evident in the prologue (though not terribly memorable even there) than in what follows it. In the prologue, he quite sensitively re-creates his first meeting with the legendary Sphinx in the house of a mutual musician friend in Switzerland, the meeting that led to the bedroom on the very first day or night. Though he admits Garbo wasn't actually transported to the seventh heaven of ecstasy by his love-making, he didn't do too badly. One detail of that memorable night is delightfully recalled: Garbo abruptly pushing him to one side, jumped off the bed and started doing some forceful dance exercises while singing a Swedish peasant song that apparently was her way, learnt from her peasant mother, of avoiding pregnancy.

The book is a result of a deep, but far from being uncritical, fascination with the Sphinx. It is also a sort of tribute to an elusive goddess the author had actually once known (Biblically speaking). The impression of Garbo left by the book is not a terribly favourable one; she doesn't emerge as someone one could love for her warmth or vulnerability. She was basically tough with the toughness of a peasant, but her long life, with its much sought-after material success beyond the dream of any Swedish peasant, was not something that would make one envious. It was quite sad.

But there is nothing tragic in the sadness of her story. The story that does approach the tragic in this book is that of the man who discovered and moulded her screen image, took her to Hollywood and perfected, or crucially helped to perfect that image, much in the way Josef von Sternberg created the image of Marlene Dietrich. That man is the remarkable theatre and film director, Mauritz Stiller. Stiller was a volatile man with autocratic tendencies and driving obsessions, but capable of warmth and love, not sick like that other autocratic image-creator Sternberg. Full of fire, ideas, vision and determination, he was defeated by Hollywood, gracefully allowed Garbo to 'abandon' him, went back to Stockholm to pick up the pieces of his career and reputation there, and died to 'haunt' Garbo in her moments of doubt, the Garbo who 'said': "I'm not known for my delicate conscience."

That famous face. What did it all amount to? That a 'simple Svensk Flicka' had been magically transformed into a presence that haunted a generation and beyond? The French semiotician Roland Barthes, in his beautiful little book of mini essays *Mythologies*, has a highly suggestive meditation on 'The Face of Garbo'. "In this deified face," Barthes writes, "something sharper than a mask is looming: a kind of voluntary and therefore human

relation between the curve of the nostrils and the arch of the eyebrows; a rare, individual function relating two regions of the face... Garbo's face represents this fragile moment when... the archetype leans towards the fascination of mortal face, when the clarity of the flesh as essence yields its place to a lyricism of Woman."

That's why I suppose that even for us today, that face still hauntingly fascinates especially so when the films such as *Camille*, *Queen Christina* and *Anna Karenina* are no longer really watchable as films. Or watchable merely because of Garbo's face.

## Terrible Beauty's Blasted

[12th April 1991]

*Demon Lover?* And the subtitle, *On the Sexuality of Terrorism?* How suggestive! This is a book by Robin Morgan who was a 'woman of the demon lover'. And a feminist, too, obviously. But this I didn't know until I had read the book. The author, I have to admit, was unfamiliar to me. I have read a few feminist writings and Morgan's wasn't one of them.

My initial attraction to the book was born of a characteristic (for me) misconception of the title. And that misconception was due to ignorance about the author and, I must admit, to residual patriarchalism – in particular, a patriarchally perverse romantic interest in anything that suggests sexual abnormality. It's a highly suggestive title, you've got to admit. And I am sure a lot of patriarchs and renegade patriarchs have bought the book for the wrong reasons.

For a book by a 'woman of the demon lover', it is (I can hear the patriarchs complaining) short on sexual demoniacs. Robin Morgan, a one-time New Left activist who spent a few years in the late Sixties and early Seventies enthralled to violent radicalism – or radical violence – has only one chapter out of 10 on her own personal experiences. This reticence, she says, is due in part to the statute of limitations. The period fixed for incrimination regarding certain acts is now up, but not for others. I can't help wondering who or what the 'others' in Robin Morgan's case refers to.



The main burden of this fiercely articulate, well-researched as well as thoroughly experimental book, buttressed by literary references and allusions to myths, is to expose the great lie that has dominated universal thinking about the business of making the world more human, more just, and truly beautiful. That great lie, incorrigible sceptics like me have known all along, but never in the perspective proposed by writers like poet Robin Morgan.

Sceptics have known that the world can never be made better by means of revolutions, violent or otherwise, as long as the old Adam in us is the same old Adam. (Feminists should like that 'old Adam' bit; no need to add a sic after it, as Ms Morgan tends to do after every generic use of the masculine personal pronouns by 'sexist' writers.) What did the poet say? "We must love one another or die." And we will never truly learn to love one another as long as we are caught in the wheel of the great lie.

As Robin Morgan reminds us: "The word 'evolution' means that: A turning of the wheel, an upside down reversal. But the wheel that turns is the same wheel." We can only break away from this wheel if we change our perspective radically, by the root ('radical' is from Latin *radix*, meaning 'root'). But before a way out can be prescribed, the exact nature of disease generated by the great lie has to be identified. In this book, both the diagnosis and the prescription are 'feminist'. But don't let us (the 'sexists' among us especially) rashly dismiss it.

Be a man-*lab*! I mean, be a gentleman. Give Robin and feminists like her a hearing at least. After all, we've got to admit we've made a thorough mess of this world. Haven't we? Man compartmentalises, woman connects. Man disintegrates woman integrates. Man polarises and confronts, woman reconciles and harmonises. Man is Manichean, woman is marvelously ambiguous. Man is enthralled, and has been for centuries, to Thanatos; woman is forever open

to the caress of Eros. Man makes wars and breeds death; woman makes love and breeds children. We need Eros if our world is to survive and thrive. Yes, say 'yes' to Eros. You, whose manhood has not been thoroughly perverted by Manhood, say Yes! Yes to life blessed by Eros.

It's Thanatos (that Death principle incarnate) which spawned the demon lover. 'Carlos' (Illich Ramirez Sanchez) whose "greatest joy was that he was able to claim an energetic sex life as a legitimate working expense"; Norbert Kroecker, associate of the Baader-Meinhof Group and male chauvinist incarnate who "did not do anything in the home but only exercised Anna-Karin", an example of a woman terrorist thoroughly enthralled to her demon; Andreas Baader himself, of course; Habash the PFLP leader ("a good-looking man in a Thirties matinee idol sort of way") who, it is rumoured, 'terrorised' the notorious Fusako Shigenobu of the JRA in bed; and many others. Demon lovers, all of them.

Many of the woman terrorists enthralled by their demon lovers were, so Ms Morgan believes, "token terrorists"; the real woman terrorists, who did not become one because of their men, were terrors like Fusako Shigenobu and Leila Khaled - and I think, though Ms Morgan doesn't think so, Ulrike Meinhof of the Baader-Meinhof Group. Of course, not many of these woman terrorists would admit to being victims of demon lovers. It is the rare exception who would say what the former Chilean terrorist Carmen Castillo once admitted: "All that I did back then was for love. It had a logic, and the logic was love" (for fellow terrorist Miguel Enriquez who was killed in a shoot-out with General Pinochet's forces). But in the feminist perspective of Robin Morgan, this love of Carmen Castillo, however genuine, was given in the context of wrong values, the values of life-denying patriarchalism of Thanatos. If the very idea of revolution itself had the values of

compulsive violence and obsession with manhood as its unspoken *raison d'être*, women devoted to the cause would only become sacrificial victims on the altar of pervasive patriarchalism.

Robin Morgan's own personal history shows how one woman, originally enthralled by the demon lovers managed to free herself of that enthrallment in time. She was far from being a passive (read 'feminine') participant in the revolutionary movement. In fact, she was quite outspoken, often blurting out 'proto feminist' objections to particular attitudes of the male leaders (to their extreme irritation, of course: many of the New Leftists being MCPs and not realising it).

But, despite her evident independence of mind, Morgan was sold to the patriarchal idea of violence as purgative. Her chief mentor in those heady days was the father of the violence-as-purgative idea himself, Franz Fanon, who, she later realised, was as much an (unconscious) MCP as the others. She, who was later to author *The Wretched of the Hearth*, took two decades to 'divorce' herself from Dr Fanon, that magnetic author of *The Wretched of the Earth*.

*All changed, changed utterly.  
A terrible beauty is born.*

The ambivalent refrain from W.B. Yeats' poem on the Irish rebels who immolated themselves on the altar of nationalism comes compellingly to mind. Demon lovers certainly have beauty – of a terrible kind, indeed. It's a beauty born of obsession with the manly will to sacrifice (oneself and others), a sacrifice that "can make a stone of the heart" (Yeats from the same poem again).

So, let's blast this manly will to sacrifice, this pursuit of the terrible beauty. Let's say 'yes!' to the beauty of Eros, not Thanatos.

## The Gospel According to Gopal

[13th November 1991]

Something seems to be really happening in Singapore. Premier Goh's announcement early in the year that Singaporeans had finally discovered fun and were looking forward to the emergence of a "culturally vibrant society" seems to be unbelievably true. The first person to add her own "bubbles to the Singaporean champagne" (metaphor courtesy of Premier Goh) was venture capital-consultant-poetess Anna Wong with her Lady Godiva-blessed book-launching sensation (see article: 'Lady Godiva Rides Again).

Now we have a neurosurgeon-novelist with two simultaneously published first novels, surprisingly frank (for Singaporeans at least) in their treatment of sex, religion and politics. Gopal Baratham, who is in his mid-50s, is a very zappy writer and the bubbles he has added to the Singaporean champagne will no doubt dazzle readers who have only recently been released from the clutches of puritanism. I wouldn't be surprised if *Sayang* at least becomes a bestseller in the republic; it has all the right ingredients - sex, drugs and violence - and doesn't make too much demand on the reader. If *Portnoy's Complaint* is a minor epic of masturbation, *Sayang* is a would-be epic strictly not meant for minors; it literally begins with sodomy and ends with 'dry sex', a night-long intercourse sans movement and sans orgasm. And all this sex business is

intertwined with religion in a way that the average Christian will no doubt find blasphemous. Why blasphemous? Because the major characters in this 'soft porn' sentimental thriller are improbable reincarnations of the central figures in the drama of Jesus Christ, and their story is a profane re-enactment of that drama in the context of modern-day suburban Singapore.

The names of these characters and the echoing of familiar motifs of the Christian drama loudly proclaims the parallelism. And if the reader is too dense to notice it, the author makes sure he does by spelling it out for him. (There is one thing you can't fault Baratham for. He is very helpful when it comes to spelling out the meaning of his writings to you. This is true of both novels under review.)

The novel's hero, retired school teacher Joseph Samy, has been married for a long time to a woman 20 years his junior named Marie. They have a son in his 20s called Kris. The name is really from the Malay word for that infamous dagger. It's chosen with the idea that it'd be mistaken as short for Kristian. So, we get Joseph, Marie, Kris. And virgin birth too? Oh, yes. Marie or Ri is one of those women who "enjoy it up the back way". She got mysteriously pregnant by Joe without his ever penetrating her the normal way. And she insisted on remaining a virgin until Kris was born, thus making him literally rip his way into the world. Kris turns out to be a son with a mission that leads to him being literally crucified by the drug goons whose operations he had tried to expose. There is also a Peter, nicknamed Rock (Really? You've got to be joking!). This Peter the Rock actually does in this novel what that other Peter the Rock did in the Bible. And the Devil? Who else but the leader of the drug syndicate, a hazy half-character named Logam. And the Holy Ghost? Someone called Gopal - I think. Christ!

There is a lot of f—ing in this book, but as Holy Ghost Gopal would no doubt say, they are necessary accompaniments to the real business of the book. Or, in the words of one of his characters who actually f—ed her way out of a guilty conscience: "I'm not f—ing well just talking about f—ing!"

About what else then? *Sayang*, of course. That's the gospel of the book; that's what all the sodomy, the fellatio, the crucifixion, the dry sex, are all about. All of them have to happen before Joe Samy can penetrate the mysteries of *sayang*.

Why the Malay word? Because the English 'love' is hopelessly inadequate to be the vessel of the Gopal Gospel. And what is *sayang* according to this gospel? Hear this: *sayang* is "a love bound to sadness, a tenderness trembling on the edge of tears," something that is "only possible between creatures born to perish," whose value is inseparable from transience itself. What a revelation!

Stuck all night long inside Ri, who is dying of AIDS (yes, *Sayang* is very up-to-date), Joe the compulsive fornicator and sentimentalist affirms that once you have discovered true love called *sayang*, the need for orgasm is transcended. From sodomy to *sayang* via crucifixion and AIDS is one tortuous journey for Joe Samy. In the words of a defrocked priest he befriends in Thailand: "The ways of God, Joseph, are not just mysterious; they are... downright obscene."

Reading *Sayang* was quite a frustrating exercise for me; it was like having one coitus interruptus after another. Gopal Baratham, I think, has a talent for comic writing. There are enough hints of it in this novel. But every time the comic impulse raises its funny head, he knocks it. *Sayang-lah*, Encik Baratham! (What a pity, Mr Baratham!) Joe Samy, who is the narrator of his own story, is probably also the author's mouthpiece. With all his imperfections and charming naivety, he at times sounds like a sort of aged but still potent Catholic

Portnoy from Singapore, especially in the beginning. The tone of the opening chapter, the way Joe talks about his wife's preference for "the back way", and all that virgin birth business, leads one to expect an irreverent romp through the sacred territory of Catholic mythology. Instead, we get sentimental droolings about *sayang* in between stretches of self-indulgent sex scenes, improbable talk of crucifixion, and even more improbable rumours of resurrection. As to the supposedly satanic figure, Logam, he simply fizzles out into nothingness – which is his proper territory.

*Sayang* is, thus, a potentially comic novel that gets smothered by sentimentality, misplaced blasphemy, compulsive solemnity, and pages of sheer pretentiousness. If only its author had trusted the creative instinct, which I suspect he has, it's just possible that we might have got a Rabelaisian romp of a book.

*A Candle or the Sun* is a novel that is truer to the author's instinct than *Sayang* but unhappily, far from perfect. It is marred by Baratham's incorrigible compulsion to explain almost everything even to the point of repeating himself. There is also the appearance of patchwork in the structuring of its material most clearly evident in the use of previously published short stories, now supposedly written by its writer-hero.

The subject is the sensitive matter of religion and politics in an island paradise where conscience and freedom are drowned by affluence. The themes are the interconnected ones of political commitment and indifference, of resistance and submission, of compartmentalising one's life into the morally compromising and the morally innocent. The fact that a political novel of this nature, so closely reflective of recent political events in the republic, was actually written, published and allowed to circulate, speaks well of the literary situation in Singapore.

The novel, according to a report, was actually completed in 1985, but no Singapore publisher dared to touch it. It was eventually brought out in London by a relatively unknown publisher. The date of the novel's completion is worth noting because its political plot about a group of church workers conspiring to incite resistance against the State uncannily prefigured a more or less similar plot that actually happened two years later (the so-called Marxist incident of 1987); that is, if the author had not revised it after the incident.

The interweaving of private and public dilemmas in the story of its writer hero, Hernando Perera, is quite ably done. And in the portrait of Samson Alagaratnam, "a highly-placed official in the Ministry of Culture" who speaks in the manic idiom and accent of a disc jockey, Gopal Baratham shows his skill as a satirist. It is Samson, Hernando's childhood friend, who presents the desperate hero with the temptation of security through betrayal – betrayal of both friendship and his vocation as writer. But Hernando lives to discover that one cannot serve both God and Mammon, and that to think life can be morally compartmentalised is a delusion.

In a number of ways, *A Candle or the Sun* is a more satisfying work than *Sayang*. Both, however, suggest that Baratham's real talent probably lies in comedy and satire. Let's hope he agrees with this diagnosis and confirms it in his next novel.



## Viva Vulva! Viva Vargas!

[15th July 1992]

I believe I've read a novel which contains a scene in which the act of defecation is described in lovingly lurid detail. (Or is it a novel I'd secretly written in my own head but never saw the light of day? I can't be sure.) By sheer coincidence the other day, a friend brought back a book from New Zealand for me, a comic novel by a Tongan anthropologist writer called *Kisses in the Nederends* (Penguin, NZ). You can guess from the title alone what the book's about.

Yes, it's literally as well as symbolically about the hilarious adventures of an asshole, one aptly-named Oilei Bomboki. The writer, Epeli Hau'ofa, clearly a devotee of Swift and Rabelais, relishes the idea of being gleefully and satirically frank about man's last great taboo (a Tongan word, by the way), and I wish him well.

The treatment of man's last great taboo in fiction – I propose that as a subject for a literary thesis. That thesis will be definitely incomplete if it doesn't also deal with Mario Vargas Llosa's latest novel *In Praise of the Stepmother*. I've read all kinds of books but, until this one, never had I come across the act of defecation so lovingly described as a ritual leading to love-making – the juxtaposition of bowel movements in the loo and body movements in bed, in fact, the assertion of synonymy between the act of intercourse and the art of defecating.

makes this little novel quite unique. It's the kind of thing that would have made James Joyce, the Joyce who wrote those shocking letters to his own wife, applaud, 'Viva Vargas! VIVA VULVA!'

Bowel movements as foreplay – if that isn't magic realism (the anything-goes, no-holes-barred Latin American variety) taken to its comic limits, I don't know what is. One's urge to laugh at the absurdity of the hero's obsessions, anality and all, is somewhat checked by the novel's eccentric eroticism (also Latin American in its decadence?) – an eroticism that can perhaps be taken as an affirmation of the unity of the body and of the spirit. Is the affirmation tongue-in-cheek in kind? The reader alert to the organic music of the narrative, its delicate at times playful tones, will have a sneaky suspicion that the tongue is, if only slightly and subtly, in the cheeks. (Whose cheeks? And which ones?)

Vargas Llosa seems in this novel to have performed the feat of writing a poetry of shitting, or making poetry out of shitting, thereby affirming the paradox of spiritual body on celestial earth. Nothing is really dirty when passion makes all contradictions one; nothing is really vulgar if the vulva vibrates to the music of the organs, from the rumblings of the bowels to the esoteric music of the mind, or of the soul. Some lines of W.B. Yeats in one of his 'Crazy Jane' poems come compellingly to mind:

But Love has pitched his mansion in  
The place of excrement;  
For nothing can be sole or whole  
That has not been rent

*In Praise of the Stepmother*, I must say, is one of those rare things – a nicely balanced erotic comedy, or more accurately, a comic erotic novel in which the comedy doesn't

undermine its semi-playful eroticism. It's a work which is atypical of its author. Nicely short, it has a narrow canvas and is limited in concern; it confines itself to the private world with hardly any reference to social reality. Its narrative, in terms of both content and structure, is rather simple.

There are only four characters, one of which has only a minor role, the other three forming an unholy trinity. The trinity consists of Rigoberto, his second wife Lucrecia and his son from the first marriage, Alfonso or affectionately Poncho. Don Rigoberto is a man who has created for himself a magic space or private paradise of sheer sensual delights. Through studied daily ritual in service of almost every key organ of the body, each night being devoted to different organs (ear, nose etc.), he seems to defeat the treacheries of time and space. The bathroom is his temple, the wash basin his sacrificial altar. But there is a little serpent in this paradise, and his name is Poncho. This boy who can combine innocence and guile, charm and treachery brings about the shattering of Don Rigoberto's fragile paradise. He uses his innocent charms to seduce his stepmother (a nice reversal of the cruel stepmother of fairy tales, that). The novelist leaves Alfonso's secret motive, if he has one, ambiguous to the end.

The disaster that leads to the expulsion of the stepmother from the erotic paradise, and the transformation of Don Rigoberto into a solitary and cheerless old man brings some pathos to the story of this unholy trinity. But the pathos is drowned in the concluding paragraph by the laughter of naughty little Poncho. After the boy had scandalised the maid by kissing her hard on her mouth she hears him laugh – laugh “with genuine delight, although enjoying a splendid joke. Fresh, round and full, healthy, childish, his laughter drowned out the sound of the water in the wash basin (Rigoberto at his ablutions).

upstairs)." The laughter then "appeared to fill the whole night and mount to those stars which, for once, had appeared in the muddy sky of Lima." One thinks of an earlier scene in which the boy is riding his stepmother, while in the bathroom upstairs, the Don is engaged with his hygienic ritual of solo foreplay, this particular night involving, presumably, the most vital of his organs – ending as usual with shitting.

*In Praise of the Stepmother* is a rare sport of a story indeed. Its rareness is laced with visual 'aids' – reproductions of paintings, the well-known and not so well-known, the realist and the abstract, the profane and the sacred. They are not exactly illustrations, though a couple of them I found quite erotic, or at least sensuous, and as such have an allusive relation to the enclosing narrative. Perhaps they are meant to generate some kind of mythic resonance (I love that word). That, or they function as – well, let's say visual titillations, plain and simple.

*Stepmother* is good reading, shamelessly good. I wish I had written it. Viva Vargas! Viva V! (V for victory, not that thing).

## Wither Our Heroes?

[5th July 1984]

"Unhappy the land that has no heroes." Thus says a disappointed young hero-worshipper in a Bertolt Brecht play. Shaharuddin bin Maaruf might say: "No. Unhappy the land that has nasty heroes." This, in fact, sums up the thesis of Shaharuddin's book *Concept of a Hero in Malay Society*.

The author is unhappy for the country because the hero propagated by contemporary Malay 'intellectuals' and politicians is undemocratic, non-humanitarian, irrational, and, predictable enough, non-Islamic. To him, all these modern-day hero-worshippers are, in spite of their ideological difference, either feudal romantics or plain materialists.

The figures from the Malay past (legendary or historical) promoted by the feudal romantics are all nasty, "magical heroes". From the *Hikayat*: brawny yes-men with superhuman strength but little brain or ethical sense, like Hang Tuah, or violent sensualists intoxicated with amok, like Hang Jebat. From recent history: feudal chiefs with supernatural powers, "so-called patriots motivated by personal vested interests" – like Maharaja Lela or Mat Kilau. The materialists are the New Economic Policy (NEP) warriors whose battle cry is '*Revolusi Mental*' (the title of a book published in 1971). They want instant *Bumiputera* millionaires and their hero is crudely capitalistic. American billionaires like John Getty are celebrated as 'modern heroes.'

To Shaharuddin, the hero concept that should be propagated is one based on "Islamic and modern democratic-humanitarian" values. These values are all fine and one is wholly with him when he castigates the vulgar 'Go-Getties' among the *Bumiputeras*. One can even share his suspicion that the spokesmen of the ruling elite who continue to promote heroes like Hang Tuah are really feudalists at heart, motivated by unholy interests. Shaharuddin's main concern in this book is to argue that if the wrong notions about heroism are propagated, the masses will tolerate bad leadership. There may be something in this. But he grossly over-simplifies his arguments and betrays his inadequate understanding of the problem of heroism. He lumps together as "feudal hero-worshippers" literary critics like Kassim Ahmad and Muhammad Haji Salleh with mindless feudal hagiologists and concocters of patriotic melodramas. And his arguments become irrational when he accuses Kassim and Muhammad, along with the others, of showing a kind of thinking that "would deny the people the right to judge their leaders"!

Kassim's thesis that Hang Jebat was a hero of Malay nationalism and a rebel on behalf of a 'democracy' and Muhammad's claim that Hang Jebat was an 'intellectual' hero conscious of the principles of individual freedom may not be very convincing. But their efforts to reinterpret the *Hikayat* should be welcome as part of the continuing debate on what the Malays mean, or should mean, by the concept of hero.

Shaharuddin asks why historical figures that would better serve the ideals of freedom and justice were not invoked and he gives three examples of "humanitarian heroes" who, unfortunately, are all foreigners. He does not seem to appreciate that a people needs heroes from its own past, the more mythical the better. After all, heroes are creatures of myth. They are superhuman, really at home only in a world

of aristocratic values. And the energy of being that makes them heroic, embraces elements that would make good humanitarians like Shaharuddin cringe in horror.

There is something problematic and ambiguous from the ordinary ethical point of view in the very idea of the hero – at least in the old sense of the word. But Shaharuddin, who wants to “purge (the Malay) cultural heritage of ambiguities, ambivalences,” cannot understand this. The ambiguity in the idea of the hero can be found in both ancient Greek and Hindu epics. And it should be pointed out that the English word ‘hero’ is Greek in origin, and the Malay word for hero, ‘*wira*’ comes from Sanskrit and, therefore, is loaded with Hindu connotations. All this is not even touched on by Shaharuddin.

It has been said that the modern egalitarian temper is really anti-heroic and, therefore, suspicious of the hero in the old sense. In the dream democracy, everyone is a ‘hero’ – and the old idea of the hero would be anachronistic. Thus the fallen hero’s answer to the disenchanted young hero-worshipper in the Brecht play mentioned earlier: “No, young man – unhappy the land that is in need of heroes.”

We are still inhabitants of the Brechtian unhappy country; and we are still desperately in need of heroes. The masses are ready worshippers whose insatiable needs are satisfied by the media. The more fastidious minority are either romantic atavists who get turned on only by Achilles or Hang Jebat, or earnest academics like the author of this book who want only clean unambiguous humanitarian heroes.

I suppose I am a “feudal romantic” myself. And I would need a better book than this to persuade me to be otherwise. This one is pedestrian, simplistic, wordy and full of second-hand ideas. The author is a good parrot of his ‘hero’, the sociologist Syed Hussein Alatas, whose writings he quotes extensively, and who kindly rewarded him with a flattering foreword.

## A. Samad Ismail – The Man and his Myth

[22nd September 1987]

The lanky figure and thick spectacles, wearing a tie but somewhat carelessly dressed, always on the move, flitting from desk to desk on the editorial floor, apparently doing nothing – that figure is unmistakable. One has heard much about him – tales of deeds or happenings which are awe-inspiring, scandalous or even sad. Perhaps one had heard him speak, tell an obscene anecdote, or even exchanged a few words with him. He makes one curious; there is an element of mystery about him.

At one time, he was Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the *New Straits Times* Group. Then he disappeared from public view for a number of years; during that time, he was a guest of the Government at Detention Camp – the third such experience in his long eventful career. Now, one is told, he is the *NST*'s Editorial Adviser – a position that is almost as difficult to define as the man himself.

Those of us who, like me, are secretly intrigued by the figure of A. Samad Ismail (or Pak Samad to many of us, but can't really claim to know him), will be glad for anything that can reveal something of the man. The book that was recently published, *A. Samad Ismail: Journalism and Politics*, might just fulfill that need. It is in part a collection of reminiscences by his wife, friends and former colleagues; the rest consists of a selection of his newspaper writings.



The man really demands a full-scale-in-depth critical biography. (The only biographical study of him that has so far appeared, in Bahasa Malaysia, is far from adequate.) A. Samad Ismail has reached that stage in his dramatic life which justifies such an undertaking. But until such a biography comes along, this volume of tribute will have to do. If we take note that the pieces collected in the first half are merely reminiscences, and not scholarly studies, we will read them for what they are, and not entertain wrong expectations.

A. Samad Ismail, or in full, Abdul Samad Ismail. Many other Abduls abbreviate their first name, but the A. in this one has a particular force, uniquely and ambiguously his. What shall we read into the stark challenging A.? Adept, agile? Arrogant, acrid? Audacious, ambitious? Adaptable perhaps? Or simply ambiguous? Samad likes to quote to his wife the well-worn maxim: "Man is like an onion; one has to peel layer by layer to seek its substance."

How many layers does one have to peel to get close to 'the real A. Samad Ismail' – whatever the 'real' might mean? What makes A. Samad Ismail tick? His late wife managed to peel off quite a few layers of this rare species of Malaysian onion in her lengthy contribution to the book. Charming, amusing, perceptive and revealing in parts, her piece is easily the gem of the collection. After peeling her share of the oversized onion, this most patient and devoted of wives, and an intelligent plain-speaking woman to boot, has to confess: "Frankly, I still don't know my husband as intimately as I would like to." Puan Hamidah Samad leaves it to Allah the All-Knowing to answer the nagging question: Who is the real A. Samad Ismail? Is Puan Hamidah merely indulging in coy mystification? I don't think so.

There is, for instance, something a bit odd about a man whose journalist wife was a comrade in a common nationalist struggle but who went out of his way to keep her in the dark about his professional and public affairs.

During the Indonesian Revolution in the 40s, Samad was a gun-runner smuggling arms from Singapore to Indonesia. But Puan Hamidah did not know this until many years later, in 1983, at a chance meeting with Samad's former comrade in the gun-running. One can understand why Samad did not tell his wife about the gun-running at the time when he was doing it; this sort of pastime is best kept secret from even one's own wife. But never to tell her until she had to learn about it many years later from a stranger – that's carrying the need for secrecy a bit too far, isn't it? Or is it the apparent oddity, perhaps, simply a symptom of residual 'feudalism' in a man known otherwise for his progressive views?

Similarly, with Samad's attitude to his wife when she was a reporter and he the editor and her boss. The man went out of his way not only to treat his wife as he would any other common reporter (which is fair enough if one sets great store by the principle of professional impartiality); he also made it a point, so Puan Hamidah claims, not to teach her anything about the craft of writing and reporting, simply, it seems, because she was his wife! And this was the editor who was known for his professional generosity to young reporters eager for guidance. Isn't this carrying professional impartiality a bit too far?

Puan Hamidah reveals other puzzling things about her husband. This man, this enlightened intellectual, we are told, has a superstitious phobia about wearing an all black Malay *baju*! And he is haunted, believe it or not, by an inherited family curse lasting seven generations! What curse? That "under no circumstances should he involve himself in business that entails the handling of rice and banana leaves"!

The man is a bundle of contradictions. From the other contributors to this volume, we learn that he could be overwhelmingly arrogant and touchingly generous,

brutally sardonic, and capable of deep faith in the cause he espouses or the persons he believes in. Supremely sure of himself to the point of egotism, yet in certain situations, surprisingly shy. A fierce Malay nationalist, he can cross ethnic barriers with ease and finesse. A wise teacher to many young aspiring writers, he loves to shock the innocent with his crude dirty jokes, his fondness for the obscene almost compulsive. A sober thinker and responsible father of 10 grown-up children, there is also something of the imp about him. If Pak Samad is a bundle of contradictions, so be it. Given his restless energy and volatile temperament, these contradictions are only to be expected, and should be accepted as part of his genius – genius in the sense of ‘essential spirit’.

Pak Samad’s career as a journalist and political activist has been colourful enough to generate tales with which legends are made. Adibah Amin, in her pithy well-written piece, feels compelled to talk in terms of ‘the man and his myth’. The ‘myth’ has somehow to do with his days in Singapore in the 40s and 50s. “Nobody,” says Adibah, “knew precisely what it was he had been doing in the South, but it had given him an aura that caused many to regard him with a mixture of awe and uneasiness.”

It wasn’t just the gun-running – a romantic episode that probably had more colour than substance in terms of the impact of his action on society, or its implications for his subsequent career. It had more to do with his relationship with the left-wing forces in Singapore and the role he played in the *Utusan Melayu*, in the late 40s and 50s, the one newspaper that was fighting the cause of anti-colonialism and nationalism with passion and conviction. And A. Samad Ismail as its Deputy Editor and the real mover behind the paper, was inseparable from it. “A. Samad Ismail was *Utusan* and *Utusan* was A. Samad Ismail.”

Not only Puan Hamidah, but Usman Awang, Ali Salim and Dr M. K. Rajakumar in their contributions, testify to the remarkable influence of the man and the newspaper of which he was the effective leader. It was an influence that cut across ethnic boundaries. *Utusan* under Samad was such a powerful voice of anti-colonialism and champion of the oppressed that it was loved by the working class of all races. Even rebellious Chinese middle school students and trade unionists opened their arms to its reporters when others were rebuffed.

Many of us today are aware that Samad was one of the founders of the PAP. But how many of us know that it was A. Samad Ismail who "initiated Lee Kuan Yew's entry into the Chinese Left in Singapore and obtained their backing for forming the PAP? Puan Hamidah even talks of Samad's "underworld connections" which enabled him to help Devan Nair in the 1955 general elections by neutralising Nair's rival's "secret society" support. Nair lost but not as badly as he would have without that support. For the editor of a Malay newspaper to do all this was no mean feat.

Evidence of Samad's skill and far-sightedness as an organiser and political strategist can be further gleaned from Ahmad Sebi's account of the way he made use of his position as Editor of the *Utusan* in the Sixties to build a network of agents and "informers" all over the country. This network kept him informed about the changing feelings of the people and enabled him, in Ahmad Sebi's words, "to be two steps ahead of the situation". Ahmad Sebi also gives us an interesting glimpse of the role Samad played in what he calls "the biggest coup in the history of Malaysian journalism" – the sensational takeover of the Kuala Lumpur operations of the *Straits Times*, and the setting-up of the *New Straits Times*.

It is one of the curious ironies of Samad's career and of the tortuous ways of Malaysian politics, that this remarkable man who had achieved so much for his nation should be

incarcerated for four years by his own government. Perhaps because the episode is still recent, not much is said about it in this book. What actually happened though is more than hinted at by two of the contributors – Puan Hamidah herself and the person who shared Samad's experience, Syed Husin Ali. The former sees the episode mainly in terms of betrayals by friends, the latter seeing Samad as a victim of a power struggle within UMNO, a struggle in which Samad's former comrades across the Causeway played a more than obliging role.

As for the impact of that experience on Pak Samad the man, one can only guess. Adibah Amin ends her piece on a curiously moving note by hinting at the subtle change in the man as a result of his incarceration.

As befits a book of tribute, *A. Samad Ismail: Journalism and Politics* is full of praises of the man and his achievements. But the reminiscences certainly do not read like one monotonous hymn of praise. The man, after all, is not infrequently seen in the round, with all his quirks and contradictions. In this connection, one should read, apart from Puan Hamidah's piece, Melan Abdullah's lively and amusing *A. Samad Ismail in Love and War*.

And if there is a lot of admiration for the man in this book, so what? He fully deserves it. He may not be "the Jean-Paul Sartre of Malaysia", as Dr Rajakumar somewhat hastily dubs him, except of course, in his role as a committed intellectual. But he has achieved much, has had a truly outstanding career, suffering for his courage and convictions.

As for his much-advertised brilliance as a journalist, one only has to read the generous selection of his newspaper pieces that make up the second section of this book. By any standard, A. Samad Ismail is a stimulating writer capable of both the dramatic flourish and the vivid detail, fully alert and often perceptive. The best of these pieces have a full-bodied flavour and a vitality that reflect the man.

## All Despite its 'Vague Immensities'

[1st June 1997]

Like the well-read Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in this book and his speeches, I myself, being a bit of a show-off, can also be a compulsive poetry quoter. So I can't resist opening this review of his eloquent and very readable book on an important subject with a quote. The quote happens to be by the great Irish poet Yeats, who Anwar also quotes in *The Asian Renaissance*. His is from the much-debated difficult poem 'The Statues' (something about "Asiatic vague immensities"). Mine is from '*Ego Dominus Tuus*', one line of which, I must confess, I've taken the liberty of slightly mangling for a purpose relevant to the review:

The rhetorician would deceive his neighbours  
The rabid idealist himself; while art  
Is but a vision of reality

(Yeats has 'sentimentalist', not 'rabid idealist'; my rude mangling is, perhaps, unnecessary for it could be argued that there is no real difference between the two types.) I begin with the quote because Anwar's book – chapters of which are expanded versions of speeches he has made overseas, including articles published in international magazines – has already provoked cynical comments by his detractors. Comments that this is a book by a professed

idealist who has mastered quite a skill in the art of colourful political rhetoric with a dazzling scholarly shine. However, I'm not going to waste time on this because it involves matters purely speculative and personal. What strikes me most about this book is how much I agree with many of the things he says in a number of essays – especially in 'The Primacy of Culture', 'Symbiosis Between East and West', 'Islam in Southeast Asia' and, with some reservation, 'The Asia of the Future'. Issues like multiculturalism, open-minded non-fundamentalist Islam committed to this ephemeral world as much as the eternal Hereafter, the idea of a symbiosis between the best of the West and the East, and the vision of an advanced technological civilisation composed of nations based on the values of civil society and humane economic system.

There is no space here to go into details, so please tolerate my immodesty by letting me say that quite a few of these viewpoints and ideas are, in spirit or essentially at least, not different from what I had expressed in a number of my now safely-buried column *As I Please*. Shortage of space also compels me to refer the reader to another recent piece of mine in which I applauded Anwar's rejection of ethnocentrism, championing of solidarity in a multicultural world as well as his timely chastising of the "culture of fear" that has been paralyzing the minds of our intellectuals and media people.

I must deal now in some detail with the opening essay which gives the book its title. This essay the author himself describes in the Preface, express "the central thesis of my vision for Asia", and is the only one which is not an elaboration of a previously delivered speech or published essay. *The Asian Renaissance...* yes, nice sounding phrase suggestive of a stirring clarion call to us, Asiatics, whose 'essence' is supposedly mere 'vague immensities'. But somehow, thanks to the Almighty, who has blessed us

with an economic resurgence that makes the arrogant West envious of us, we can envision a renaissance of our own, a holistic one this time, all despite our 'vague immensities'. Anwar says, with charismatic eloquence, that our economic boom should be the impetus for a full-blooded holistic rebirth (renaissance) of the multi-dimensional glories of ancient Asia, the Asia before the rape of Western imperialism. The difference between his vision of an Asian renaissance and that of the renowned West is that our brand of renaissance must not repeat the disastrous long-term consequences of the European one which eventually spawned that 'root of all modern evils', secular humanism.

How does our *Yang Berbormat* Datuk Seri conceive the idea of renaissance, Asian style? Stressing the continuing importance of religion as the spiritual foundation of the envisioned cultural rebirth of Asia, he is aware enough of the heterogeneous reality of that vast continent (one can't talk of an Asian civilisation as one can of a European one) that he makes seemingly clear his essentially liberal vision of the hoped-for renaissance. "It is religion," he says, "rather than any other social forces which makes Asia a continent of infinite variety. Thus, the renewal of faith and the assertion of multiculturalism is an integral component of the Asian Renaissance." Here he quotes from the Pakistani poet Iqbal's *Asrar-I-Khudi* ('The Secrets of the Self'), a poem with strong Nietzschean influence. When I read the quoted verse (p. 19), it sounded a bit odd to me. Originally written in Persian, not Urdu, for the reason that Iqbal wanted to reach a much wider Muslim audience, it was first translated into English by R.A. Nicholson. The translation used in Anwar's book is the same as the one I happen to have.

Iqbal was one of the nearest to a renaissance man in modern Asia (he was a philosopher and important statesman as well as a prolific major poet). But I'm not



quite sure what Anwar precisely means when he says that the Pakistani poet-philosopher embodies the "spirit of Asian Renaissance". My uncertainty is reinforced by something odd in the quoted verse referred to. The last line of the quote in Nicholson's version reads:

That I may lead home the wanderer  
... And advance hotly on a new quest  
And become known as the champion of a new spirit

In the version that appears in Anwar's book, the words 'in Asia' are added to 'a new spirit.' Is that addition a slip induced by Anwar's idealistic enthusiasm for multicultural Asian renaissance? I ask the question because Iqbal, who authored a book called *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, was well-known for his ardent advocacy of the ideology or vision of Pan-Islamism, a vision with which he became disenchanted towards the end of his life. This leads me to my sense of uncertainty about one of those seductively liberal assertions Anwar makes in the book. There seems to be an ambiguity in certain places when he champions the cause of unity in diversity in the form of multiculturalism, for example. When he talks about multicultural Asian renaissance, is he referring only to multiculturalism among the very varied Asian nations or is he also championing multiculturalism within one multi-ethnic, multi-religious nation such as our Malaysia? This uncertainty and perception of ambiguity on my part puzzle me a little.

Our possible future PM has been trying with somewhat 'flamboyant' tenacity, to project an image of the kind of national leader rare in contemporary Asia. A leader who not only has an impressive agenda (however many questions that agenda may beg), but also one who is a solid intellectual as well. In this book, the projecting of that image, I feel, is somewhat overdone.

If I may say with due respect, is it really necessary to have to prove his wide-ranging reading by lacing the text with so many literary and philosophical quotations – not all of which, I'm afraid, are strictly necessary or even relevant to the text. And when I flick through the nine-page Select Bibliography, that includes names like T.S. Eliot (of course), Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Gabriel Marquez and Lady Murasaki, I felt myself in danger of being over impressed. And note, it's only a select biblio! I feel it would have served the book better if the author had been a bit more selective in his use of quotations and not listed so many big or esoteric names in the biblio.

But let me, this compulsive quoter, end this review by quoting some silly verse that I got from a book of quotations:

Ah, Yes, I wrote the 'Purple Cow' –  
I'm sorry now, I wrote it!  
But I can tell you anyhow  
I'll kill you if you quote it.

## Straight Rib, Crooked Rib, No Rib. See?

[28th November 1992]

This modest book, *The Rights of Women in Islam* by Asghar Ali Engineer, is a welcome addition to the growing body of writing impelled by the need to re-evaluate some fundamental issues in Islam. It's fairly gutsy, and that's good enough for me, even if it's not terribly well-written. Although a male, the author is non-sexist in his point of view. The book (a local reprint of an Indian publication) belongs to a sort of sub-genre within a wider 'feminist' field led by the vanguard of re-awakening Muslim women.

Mr Engineer, Director of the Bombay Institute of Islamic Studies, is a fairly passionate fighter for the rights of Muslim women – those suffering 'Sisters in Islam' who are beginning to come out in growing numbers to reclaim their rightful identity and equality with (Muslim) men. And this effort at recovery, of course, means a radical challenge to the feudal-minded *Hadith*-besotted patriarchs, a challenge based on a conviction that human beings are meant to use their God-given mind, and that *ijtihad* (individual judgment or creative interpretation) should not be the monopoly of the *mujtahid* (religious scholars), most of whom are not, in any case, particularly noted for their creativity of interpretation.

In my modest way, I'd like to declare the support of my teeny (and, unfortunately, somewhat alienated) voice to this minority *jihad* of Prof Engineer and his kind;

'minority' because the number of Muslim men willing to be counted in its cause is still small. Macho hang-ups and patriarchal pokery still imprison too many Muslim men.

Brother Engineer's book argues the thesis that has been frequently advanced by liberal-minded Muslim thinkers; the thesis that Muslims must go back to the *Quran* and reinterpret it with a fresh, truly creative and rational mind to ensure the social, economic, moral and spiritual health of the *ummah*. First, they must identify the verses on woman that are 'contextual' (i.e. expressed in terms of the historical-social values and needs of the time of the revelations), and reinterpret them on the basis of a concrete experience of the now, as well as in the light of liberated consciousness. If they did this, they would see that God intended women to be equal with men. As simple as that. Or so it seems, or should be.

"Your women" may be "a tilth for you (to cultivate)" (*Quran* 2:223) – though in the age of the pill and AIDS, there is no guarantee that the 'tilth' will be fruitfully cultivated. But that metaphor is no licence for lordly abuse of women – sexually or otherwise. The modern movement for the fundamental reinterpretation of the *Quran* in 'Islamic-feminist' perspective has long been overdue. To the so-called 'anti-*Hadith*' Muslim modernists, this business of recovering the original divine dispensation with regard to the position of women, should begin and end with the 'real' Word of Allah.

The *Quran* must be the main or controlling 'text'. To the radical truly 'anti-*Hadith*' Muslims, the *Quran* should even be the only 'text', the sole point of reference and confirmation of that Divine dispensation. Any attempt to reinterpret the *Quran* for this purpose must begin with the very beginning. "Recite in the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace, Lord of the Day of Judgment ..."

Then this: *Wa min ayati an khalaqa-kum min nafsin wahidatin wa khalaqa minha zawjaha wa baththa minhuma rijalan kathiran wa nisa'an* (The *Quran*, Surah 4, An-Nisa, (Women), Verse 1). Bearing in mind that the *Quran*, being the Word of God in Arabic, is untranslatable, the basic message is this: "O mankind (sic)! Be conscious of your Sustainer, who has created you out of one living entity, and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women." (Translated by Muhammad Asad)

Amina Wadud-Muhsin, an American who was, until recently, a lecturer at the International Islamic University, Kuala Lumpur, published a book earlier this year titled *Quran and Woman* (Fajar Bakti), in which she analyses closely the language of this crucial verse. The focus of her analysis is four key terms in it, two of which are absolutely crucial to any reinterpretation of the verse: (i) *nafs*, which means a 'living entity', gender unspecified; better still, just 'life essence' or 'vital principle'; the latter frees the verse from the Biblical account of the creation of Adam and Eve which is commonly assumed to be implied by it; (2) *zawj* (a pair, one of a pair, or a mate; the latter, according to Asad, signifying 'a woman's mate (husband) as well as a man's mate (wife)').

Engineer's arguments in favour of equality between Muslim men and women could do with the support of the kind of close linguistic analysis done by Amina Wadud-Muhsin. The analysis clearly shows not only that the *Quran* doesn't allude to the business of Eve being created out of Adam's rib (straight or crooked); it doesn't even say anything about Eve being created after Adam. And note that, unlike the Bible, the *Quran* doesn't put the blame for the fall of humankind on Eve. Isn't that very interesting?

Once a non-sexist, non-patriarchal interpretation of *Surah* 4, Verse 1, is accepted, the rest must necessarily

follow. Those verses which don't support the implications of *Surah 4* must simply be considered 'contextual' and, therefore, reinterpreted as such in the light of *Surah 4*. As for the *Hadith*, those which are not consistent with the *Quran* must logically be rejected; they simply can't be considered part of the traditions of the Prophet. Muhammad, apart from being a Prophet, was a highly intelligent man and very sensitive to the humanness as well as the (spiritual) beauty of women. It's most unlikely that he could have said those *Hadith* which contradict, not only his known attitude to women, but also the *Quran*.

Rational and informed reinterpretation of the *Quran* would clear all the obstacles to the long-overdue emancipation of Muslim women. On the basis of the Holy *Kitab*, Muslim women can now claim practically all the moral, social, economic and political rights (rights dealt with in some detail by Engineer) that Muslim men have enjoyed for centuries at the expense of their long-suffering sisters in Islam.

## Life-Affirming Religion

[4th January 1985]

Malise Ruthven's *Islam in the World* (Penguin) is a book which everyone who thinks that Islam is a cheerless, puritanic and baffling religion should read. With the instinct of a well-trained literary mind, the author tackles his complex subject magnificently. The central themes and their supporting arguments and documentations are organised with cogency.

The Book opens with a perceptive chapter on the *Haj* – that “central event in the Islamic calendar”, pregnant with symbolic meanings, political as well as religious. In the *Haj* rituals themselves, says Ruthven, are implicit the central message of Islam – wonder of life and the responsibility and equality of man before a transcendent merciful God. The rest of the book explores the ramifications of this message and examines the success and failure of its realisation in the world.

After a chapter on the Prophet himself, we are given a lucid and stimulating treatment of the Quran, the scripture whose place in the religion is truly unusual. Most Westerners, relying wholly on translations, have found the Quran boring and incoherent. Ruthven, who has taken the trouble to learn something of the amazing peculiarities of Quranic Arabic, has grasped the significance of the book's stylistic features – such as its condensed ellipsis, allusiveness, frequent use of formulaic patterns of speech and associative

modes of thoughts. He says of the Quran's elliptical use of one particular formula of conjuration: it is "elevated into a hymn to the miraculous power of the Creator."

Natural phenomena, the *Quran* reminds us, should be read "as 'signs' or symbols (*ayas*) of God's benevolence or power... The realm of appearances (*al shahada*)" should be read as a reflection of "an unseen world (*al ghaib*) whose ultimate reality is unknowable." Ruthven can see that what is at the heart of the *Quran* is the "vision of creative energy constantly at work." Despite its blood-curdling passages on eternal punishment, despite its stern do's and don'ts, the *Quran* is essentially life-affirming in the fullest all-embracing sense of the word.

Ruthven's elucidation of the bewilderingly rich ambiguity of classical Arabic throws up one revealing example that hints at this complex, simultaneously other-worldly this-worldly, vision. Because Arabic, more than other languages apparently, is a highly contextual language, the word *ghaib* (unseen), for example, "can apply to a reality outside human sense-perception, or to the private parts of a woman - 'that which is (ought to be) concealed'." (p 112). I hope I won't be misunderstood if I claim that in this characteristic Arabic-*Quranic* ambiguity lies the paradoxical essence of the Islamic world-view. The best embodiment of this world-view is, to my mind, the person of the Prophet himself.

There is a *Hadith* (tradition) which I love: "Perfume and women," said Muhammad, "have been made dear to me, and coolness hath been brought to mine eyes in the prayer." This is not, of course, the raving of a Bedouin intoxicated with the flesh. It is the inspired utterance of a Prophet to whom had been revealed the truth of "a concise doctrine of the outward reverberations of the love of the Inward" (to quote Frithjof Schuon, one of the most stimulating interpreters of Islam today).



Islam, which is staunchly anti-celibacy, has a fundamentally healthy attitude to the life of the senses, sexuality in particular. The *Quran* expresses it in a vigorous, if patriarchal (or in today's buzzword 'sexist'), language: "Your women are tillage for you; so come unto your tillage as you wish, and forward for your souls; and fear God..." (Sura 2).

One of the things about Islam that has been gravely misunderstood by Westerners and by some ("some", did I say?) Muslims too is this element of sensuality in its teaching – expressed most strikingly in the *Quranic* vision of Paradise as well as in the Prophet's own attitude toward women. Christians condemn it for its unashamed sensuality; puritanical Muslims tend to denature it by taking it in the purely symbolic sense. Both fail to do justice to what I've called the paradoxical essence of Islam. Or, as Ruthven sees it, Islam's unwillingness to perpetuate "the mind-body dualism of Helleno-Christianity" which "forced Western consciousness to divide the world into separate categories of matter and spirit." In Islam "the Transcendent is made manifest in every aspect of daily experience" including, of course, the sexual.

Islam, says Ruthven, is "the least 'other-worldly' of the great religions, the one which, above all others, seeks to realise its aims in this world" – hence, the book's title *Islam in the World*. Its noble ideals of universal justice and equality are very much bound up with its all embracing life-affirming stance. Its refusal to separate politics from religion is of a piece with its anti-dualism in metaphysics. At the heart of this world-view is a fundamental rationality informed by a powerful sense of the Eternal Transcendent.

But, Ruthven argues, Islam's noble ideals have over the centuries become obscured by pharisaic rigidity in the interpretation of the Divine word and the practice of the Prophet. And its rationality has almost been obliterated by life-denying "fetishistic attachment" to petty rituals for ritual's sake.

Take the attitude toward women. The *Quran's* patriarchal language in certain passages notwithstanding, the Islam of the Prophet has a basically positive conception of women's sexual and social identity. This is no better suggested than in the *Quran's* version of the story of Adam and Eve. In the *Quran*, the blame for what Christianity calls the "fall of man" is put squarely on Adam. It was Adam, not Eve, who was tempted by Satan. There is, thus, no slur attached to Eve that we get in Genesis where the voice of the terrible God actually curses her ("Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee").

Ruthven also points out (and he is not the first Westerner to do so) that a number of *Hadith* actually affirm "an active view of female sexuality" which is in striking contrast to "the assumptions of female passivity in the Western tradition". Your women may be 'tillage' for you, but the 'tillage' may not be treated in any way you like; women have rights and needs no less important than men's. And these rights are not merely sexual; they extend to the social areas well.

In Islam, the social position of women at the same time of the Prophet was quite advanced compared to Europe of the same period. But the systemisation of the *Shari'a* (holy law) and the *Fiqh* (jurisprudence), while giving Islamic civilization its unity and coherence, unfortunately brought with it a slow but steady erosion of the social position of women. Ruthven sums it up pithily: "The very success of the *Shari'a*... was accompanied by a failure in the area of human rights in general, and an aspect of them which lay close to the heart of the Prophet, the emancipation of women." In the *Maliki* (school of *Fiqh*) rule on marriage contracts, for example, or in the rule on the veiling of women, one can see the tendency to interpret *Quranic* injunction in a restrictive way to women's disadvantage.

*Islam in the World* has a range of coverage far wider than my comments suggest. For a book meant for the general reader, it is surprisingly thorough. Various movements are analysed in their proper historical perspectives: from those fired by nostalgia for the idealised Medinese policy of the Prophet to those who turned to the mystical way of the Sufis with their search for spiritual renewal.

A whole chapter is devoted to Islam's response to modernity and the challenge of the West. In this critical but essentially sympathetic chapter, the author highlights some of the intractable problems that Muslim thinkers have had to face and continue to face in their efforts to ensure the relevance of their religion to the modern world. The main problems are how to maintain a balance between reason and revelation and how to preserve the fundamental doctrine that the *Quran* is the eternally valid Word of God, without betraying its essentially humane, universalist and life-affirming spirit.

# How to Review a Book

[1st February 1985]

This is a short lesson in seven painless steps. As an example of a book for review, we take the Penguin paperback *Islam in the World* by Malise Ruthven (see review: Life-Affirming Religion). This 'review' we will use as a model.

1. Turn to the last chapter. The first sentence to be lifted is the very last one, but change the word order slightly. "In a world increasingly driven by the gap between rich and poor nations, and in constant danger of nuclear catastrophe, this message has urgent relevance." (*Islam in the World*, p.362) Words like "catastrophe", "urgent relevance" sound portentous enough, and should whet the reader's eagerness to go on reading your piece. It doesn't matter if the whole sentence isn't yours. Book reviewing recognises no ethics.
2. For your second sentence, go back a bit and lift the following: "It is a message (change it to 'it carries a message') that proclaims the Eternal Transcendent, and man's special responsibility as guardian of this planet. It is a message phrased in the language and imagery of a pastoral people...." and so on till the end of the long sentence.
3. Backtrack again and lift the following: "beyond the admonitions to the faithful to create the good society

by observing the Law, there is a message addressed to the whole of mankind." You've got the message now? A message addressed to the whole tribe of reviewers.

The above should take care of your opening four paragraphs.

4. Now you can acknowledge your compulsive lifting by putting this phrase within quotation marks: "and it is one (the message, of course) that we ignore at our peril." Never mind about the perils of reviewing.

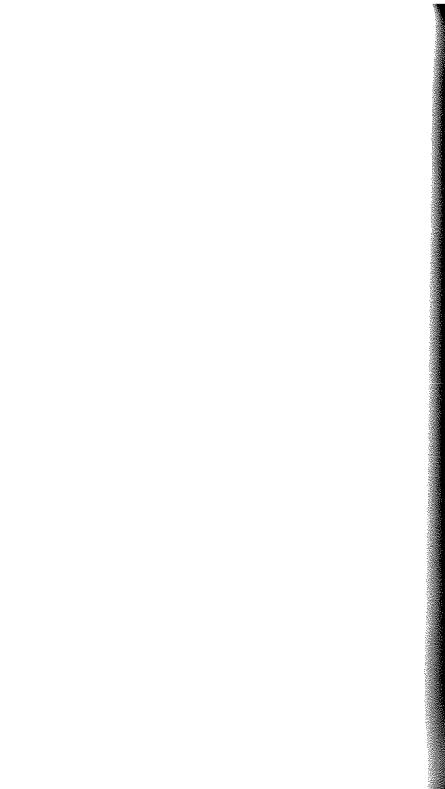
Having 'summarized' so eloquently the 'theme' of the book, you can now make an assessment of its worth as a contribution to the burgeoning literature on Islam. What is the best way to do it?

5. Simply turn to the very beginning of the book. Lift the following from the Preface: "the voluminous literature on Islam" not withstanding (yes, 'not withstanding' - the two words must be yours; they add the necessary personal touch) the book will be of much use (change the phrase to 'will be useful') to the general reader (add "non-Muslim") seeking a comprehensive account of the Islamic *Weltanschauung*." *Weltanschauung*, yes; make sure you get the spelling right, even if you don't know what the word means.
6. Praise the book further by lifting the following claim by the author: Many books "which describe Islam as an ideal system or set of beliefs pay too little attention to its actual role in history..." and so on till the end of the paragraph. Ruthven's own book is, of course, an exception. And since he is rather modest, you spell out what he has left only implicit.

7. Between the above and your concluding paragraph, quote (sorry, lift) as much as you like, making sure that you sprinkle a few quotation marks between some insignificant phrases. The reader can easily be misled; no fear.

See, how easy it is to review a book. No sweat at all. For this, you'll get 100 ringgit, or, if the editor is in a generous mood, 150. Any thought that a book on such a topical subject will actually be read by your readers can be safely dismissed.

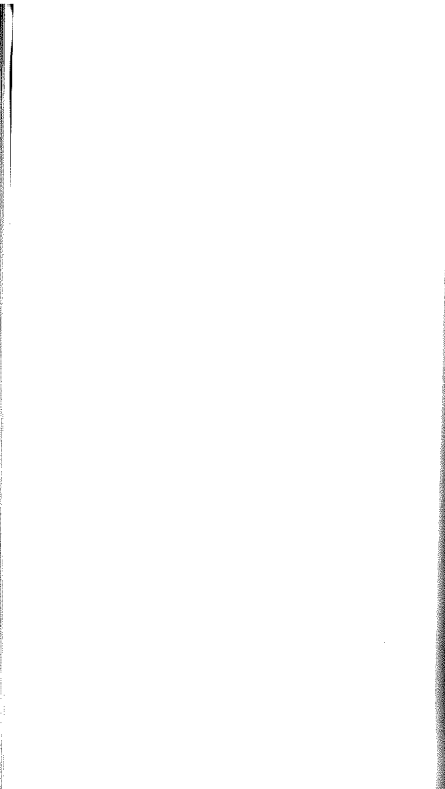
Good luck.





## Abroad View





## An Open Letter to Taslima Nasrin

[3rd August 1994]

Unlike Salman Rushdie's open letter to you (*New York Times*, July 14) this one by a nobody won't be published in dozens of newspapers across Europe and the United States. And it's highly unlikely the *New Straits Times* will come your way, holed up as you are in some Godforsaken corner of Dhaka with a mullah's prize on your lovely head – unless they have managed to smuggle you out of the country, which I hope they have.

I am addressing this letter not so much to you as an individual, but to the spirit that you embody, and to other Muslim-born writers who are blessed or cursed with the same transgressive spirit as you. I admire your courage and would defend your right as a writer to be critical of Muslims and their religion, but there are things I am going to say in this letter about you that you may not like. I hope you will take them in good spirit, as coming from someone whose society is in some ways not unlike yours, who is in some ways not unlike you, and who is essentially sympathetic to the stance you have taken. In a way, this open letter is addressed to myself as much as to you. It's a dialogue with the side of myself which is sometimes tempted to be as recklessly outspoken as you seem to be.

From reports I've read, you must be some woman, Taslima. You are a doctor who chose to leave a moneymaking

profession for the uncertain career of full-time poet, novelist and columnist (how I'd love to read your column). Three times married, you write erotic poetry (what a terrible thing for a Muslim-born woman to do!) and are said to be an open advocate of free love (are you really, Taslima?).

You've published a novel critical of Muslim fanaticism that has provoked rallies and violent clashes, been banned in your country and become an underground bestseller. You have provocatively spoken out about the terrible discriminations against women under Islam as practiced in your society, and what you have said about Muslim MCPs in your sexual poems couldn't have endeared you to the mullahs.

One poem describes a man as a cockroach seeking your vagina; no wonder a snake-charmer mullah has threatened to release 10,000 cobras on your lecherous body. You have demanded the revision of the law to ensure equality of rights between the sexes – according to one report, even to the extent of granting women the right to have four husbands! (This last you must have said, if you did say it, tongue-in-cheek, for I doubt you would seriously favour the idea of Bangladeshi women being given the right to burden themselves with MCP husbands. I am sure you would rather see polygamy abolished.)

You have also been quoted by the Calcutta newspaper *The Statesman* as saying that the *Quran* was the work of Muhammad and as such could and "should be thoroughly revised" to conform with modern ideas of justice and equality. This you have denied saying, protesting that the newspaper had misquoted you. But that report had provoked protests leading to the Bangladesh court issuing a warrant of arrest against you. You face a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment under a little-used section of the Bangladesh penal code that proscribes

statements of writings "intended to outrage the religious feelings of any class by insulting its religious believers." (You have not been charged with blasphemy, then, as some reports have suggested; according to the Bangladeshi Ambassador to the US in a letter to the *New York Times*, there is no law against blasphemy in your country, where the laws are still secular.)

There is no doubt, more shocking things you have said or done. Some of them have been exaggerated, taken completely out of context or deliberately distorted. Your enemies, after all, have every reason to distort what you have said to turn you into a hate figure and an enemy of Islam. The fundamentalists' dislike of you must go back to the time when you started breaking taboos in your newspaper column. What turned that smouldering hatred into hysterical demands for your head was apparently the publication of your novel *Lajja* (Shame) in September last year. (It's a bit unfortunate that you chose that title, for you must know that it's the title of Salman Rushdie's third novel. No wonder they have hung his name around your neck, calling you a "female Salman Rushdie." And Rushdie's championing of you couldn't have helped matters much, though I appreciate that he couldn't have done otherwise. Alleged 'blasphemers' and 'enemies of Islam' must after all stick together.) The novel has not yet been published in the United States (where I am writing this), and so, not having read it (except for a few tame extracts published in the *New York Times*), I have to rely on newspaper reports in making any comments about it.

In *Lajja*, you tell the story of the violence done to the Hindu minority of Bangladesh by Muslim fanatics after the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, India, by Hindu extremists. If all you have done in *Lajja* is to expose the brutality of Bangladeshi Muslim fanatics in order to

put across the moral point that violence done to innocent Hindus is no better than violence to innocent Muslims, then you have done something that I can only applaud. Such points need to be made, and made as often and as eloquently as possible.

But you have been accused of 'insulting Islam', of 'blasphemy' and 'sacrilege'. I wonder what you have actually said or depicted in the novel that could have given rise to this charge. Perhaps a graphic depiction of fanaticism in action in itself and a sympathetic portrayal of innocent Hindu infidels was enough to make you guilty of the charge. Or do you have characters in the novel who make the kind of transgressive statements that you are alleged to have made elsewhere?

It's impossible to talk about a novel one hasn't read, but this much I will say: I hope you have not done what Rushdie did in *The Satanic Verses*. I have defended Rushdie in my writings (you see, I can be reckless too), but I have also pointed out where I thought he had gone wrong.

Bengali culture (that of Bangladesh as well as of Indian Bengal) may have "always prided itself on its openness, its freedom to think and argue, its lack of bigotry," as Rushdie affirmed in his letter to you. And I recognise the responsibility of today's Bangladeshi Muslim writers to defend the tradition that produced the Indian Renaissance, and to ensure that it is not undermined by Islamic fundamentalism. I was glad to learn that some prominent Bangladeshi poets, intellectuals and human rights activists, have spoken up in your defence and demanded that the government, whom they accused of "caving in to pressures from fundamentalist forces," withdraw the arrest warrant against you. But there are also reports that say that a number of Westernised intellectuals and professionals, a class of people who would agree with many of the things

you have said, have criticised you for giving fundamentalists an opportunity to foment passions among the population for their own regressive political ends.

Apparently, these fundamentalists have exploited the mass hysteria about you to renew their demands for the expulsion of foreign aid organisations which they accused of undermining Muslim mores with their advocacy of female education, birth control and other women's rights. And the weak government of Khaleda Zia, fighting for its survival, might be forced to bow down to these pressures. If this happens, it would raise issues which can put outspoken writers like you in a dilemma. It's the kind of dilemma that we should seriously think about.

I feel, Taslima, that on certain matters, in certain situations, a degree of diplomacy might have to be considered. Some of the things you have been reported to have said could have been put less starkly. You claimed that the Calcutta newspaper had misquoted your remarks about the *Quran* (a claim that, significantly, the newspaper has disputed), but your statement denying the remarks only made matters worse. The *New York Times* (July 13), reporting that denial and your statement of clarification, quoted you as saying: "We have to move beyond these ancient texts if we want to progress." That remark may be what one would expect of an apostate which you claim yourself to be. But, given the status of the Holy Book and the extraordinary feelings of Muslims about it, and the vulnerable position of apostates in Islamic countries, it was not a wise thing to say so openly, especially in the predicament you were in.

The fact that you denied making the statement, which the newspaper insists you did and is prepared to prove that you did, seems to suggest that you are not incapable of diplomacy or second thoughts. It will be some time, Taslima, before we get enough Muslims who are sufficiently

intelligent not to equate rational critical comments on sacred texts with insult to the religion, and sufficiently perceptive to see that the real insult to any religion is to claim that its sacred texts are beyond rational scrutiny. But that's what the unfortunate situation is today in practically all Muslim countries.

Something must be done about it, of course. But how we do that 'something' requires some serious thought.

## The Rise and Fall of a Playwright-President

[15th July 1992]

His fall merited only a brief report in an obscure corner of our newspaper's inside page. "Prague, Friday, July 3 – Vaclav Havel, the President of ..."

Vaklav who? Czechoslovakia (I still can't spell it) is only a small East European country where people have weird-sounding names that are either unpronounceable or wrongly pronounced by foreigners. The name of this country's President, though marvellously memorable (at least to me) even when incorrectly pronounced, is not exactly a household word among Malaysians. Unless they are politically informed and have been following the dramatic events of the last three years in Eastern Europe. Either that, or they are well-read literary people.

To the latter, the fall of Vaclav Havel has more political significance. This celebrated playwright and philosopher is, if I'm not mistaken, the first major European writer to be the president or prime minister of his country. By being elected to that high office, Havel became an unexpected 'guinea pig' in a rare 'experiment'. What 'experiment'? One conducted by the gods. Purpose? To determine to what extent a writer of Havel's artistic and moral calibre can remain unsullied by the brutal game of politics. And what politics, too! One played in a country just emerged from four decades of totalitarian rule. A country whose



economy is very sick and the people, intoxicated with new-found freedom, are full of expectations that would frighten even the most experienced politician. And that our playwright is certainly not, being a shy virgin in the game of power.

Vaclav Havel is an unassuming, unusually decent and sensitive man with a lined but boyish face, perpetual grin, and a sharp sense for the absurd. Short, with (in the words of one observer) "a thick body perched on small feet" and a manner of walking "almost Chaplinesque", he is a bundle of nervous energy, with hands constantly waving "like twin propellers". He is both a deeply private and, given the right time and place, a convivial man with simple tastes. He is most comfortable in jeans (or at least he used to be), reluctantly wearing a suit and tie only under extreme duress. An original Bohemian in the literal and metaphorical senses of the word, he has both a deep feeling for his native region (Bohemia) and a love for Prague taverns full of scruffy intellectuals and equally scruffy workers.

Pavel Kohout, a fellow Czech playwright and comrade in political dissidence, compares him to his own beloved stage character and theatrical twin brother, Ferdinand Vanek. Both have "everything that make a man a man" but manage to retain "the soul of a child." The latter suggests an essentially ethical or spiritual "chastity" (Kohout's word), a chastity that doesn't exclude a deep passion for the joys of living, which Havel certainly has.

This man was a most unlikely candidate for his country's highest office. His very virtues as a human being and writer, especially his passion for truth and his stubborn morality, seemed to disqualify him as a politician, that creature of compromise par excellence. So it seemed - until the November '89 revolution, of which he was the intellectual leader, made the improbable a political fact. In December of that same year, he became Czechoslovakia's

first democratically elected President in more than 40 years. The world was struck by the phenomenon of Havel, and began to watch his presidency with a special interest; the cynics and sceptics for signs that would confirm their worst predictions, the idealists for those that would promise the fulfilment of their wildest dreams.

But the Czechoslovakian romance didn't last long enough to confirm one or the other. On July 3, after only two-and-a-half years as President, Havel was voted out of office by the country's Federal National Assembly. What a great pity that was! A rare chance for the world to see a major writer as a political animal, to find out how long he could remain unsullied, was eclipsed by the brute realities of ethnic politics and narrow nationalism. His fall was a consequence of last month's general elections which had polarised the country's two constituent parts, the Czech and the Slovak. The latter's deputies in the Federal Assembly overwhelmingly rejected the playwright-president, a Czech and strong believer in the united multinational republic founded in 1918 by another noted thinker, the philosopher-statesman Thomas Masaryk. But Masaryk, who is in a sense Havel's spiritual ancestor, was a politician as well as a scholar-thinker, with the qualities of a promising statesman. And he had world enough time to realise his vision of a united and democratic Czechoslovakia. The republic created by Masaryk was the only state in Eastern Europe which maintained political democracy and free institutions right up to the moment when they were crushed by outside powers, Nazi Germany in particular.

Though Vaclav Havel is no Masaryk (apparently at least), his career is, in other and unexpected ways, truly remarkable. The way this rare breed of essentially 'unpolitical' man and writer became the president of his country is great stuff for a play. It is in a sense a 'play', his greatest, whose stage is a much-suffering country called

Czechoslovakia, with himself as the reluctant hero and director, the doomed totalitarian state as the antagonist, and a cast of hundreds of thousands of ordinary men and women. The theatrical analogy is suggested by Havel's own comments on the 1968 short-lived surge for radical reform known as Prague Spring. That confrontation between Czechoslovakian reformers and the might of Soviet imperialism, says Havel, "is usually understood as a clash between two groups on the level of real power... It is frequently forgotten that this encounter was merely the final act and the inevitable consequence of a long drama in the theatre of the spirit and the conscience of society." (See 'The Power of the Powerless' in Havel's collection of essays *Living in Truth*). These words were even truer of the much more momentous confrontation of November 1989. And the theatrical analogy in this case acquired an uncanny literalness when an actual Prague theatre, known as The Magic Lantern, became the virtual headquarters of the so-called velvet revolution, with actors playing some important roles alongside the student demonstrators, the revolution itself as an improvised play, and Havel, of course, as its inspiring and manic director.

Struck by the theatrical analogy and its element of literalness, those familiar with Havel's writings will immediately recall his conception of the theatre and its role in the transformation of human consciousness. Havel is an Absurdist playwright whose early works were inspired by a revolt against Communist propagandist drama, the debasement of language, and the perversions of rationality by totalitarianism. As such, he is a staunch believer in the necessary autonomy of his art and firmly non-ideological. Being non- or even anti-ideological (ideological in the limited political sense) doesn't mean that Havel denies the political relevance of the theatre. He rejects 'political theatre' in the popularly understood and limited sense of the term,

but affirms the true theatre's essential politicality in its widest and paradoxical meaning.

To him, the theatre is bound to be political in this sense because it is anti-politics. That's the paradox. The theatre, as he explains in one of his essays, is 'anti-politics' in that it can reveal the hidden truths about politics "not because it has a political aim: politics is the aim." By "politics", Havel, I'm sure, really means all forms of it: Western-type capitalistic democracy as well as Communist and Fascist totalitarianism. Especially, of course, the politics of a totalitarian state such as Czechoslovakia which was a system that compelled its people to live, or rather exist, like automatons in an ideologically poisoned world of subtly manipulated official lies.

In that world, the writer has a vital function of keeping alive and, as far as possible, disseminating the ideals of truth, freedom, justice and fraternity. The truth here meant is of the truly existential and morally luminous kind; the kind much written about by Vaclav Havel.

## Havel's Challenge to Live in Truth

[27th July 1992]

The latest news from Prague (July 19) has confirmed the end of Vaclav Havel's relatively brief presidency. Admirers of his plays who lamented his swapping of playwriting for the presidency and were worried about the purity of his soul, especially his commitment to his own ideal of "living within the truth", must now be sighing with immense relief.

And Havel himself too, I suspect. Although he was willing to suffer the burden of office (to people like Havel, office, which means power, is a burden), he did once say that he wasn't sure whether the prison of the presidency was any better than the prison of the Communist regime that he had suffered. The presidency was a burden because it meant a larger responsibility; in prison, he was just responsible to himself and to God.

Well, now that he is no longer a president, he can go back to doing the thing he does best – playwriting, which in this case, means a living affirmation of the need to live within the truth and, thereby, serving his country and the world in the most profound and, therefore, unregulated or unprogrammed sense of 'serving'. The phrase "living within the truth" comes from one of Havel's major essays, 'The Power of the Powerless' (in *Living in Truth*). Like all the other essays of Havel's, this one is written out of

a deep personal experience. By that, I don't mean his imprisonment by the Communist regime only. Since the whole Czechoslovakian society under that regime was a vast prison that tried to incarcerate the mind and soul of man and to deny the needs of his spirit, the personal experience I mean implies the whole life of the writer; the private and the public, the aesthetic and the political, the social and the spiritual.

This makes the essay heavy with the burden of being. The ideas it expresses are pregnant with a sense of the real, and written in a style and language expressive of their existential roots and spiritual yearnings. Vital general principles are articulated in this wide-ranging essay, but their generality arises out of the concrete. The ideas are charged with an energy that can only come from the writer who truly breathes with the spirit of his art; who perceives with its light the poisonous garbage in the garb of truth, the irrational in the allegedly rational, the dehumanising in the supposedly human.

What does Havel really mean by the business of "living within the truth"? What kind of political system and society makes it difficult to so live? How does the real nature of the ideology governing that society manifest itself as the secret enemy of the truth? Are there inner contradictions in it that makes it deny the very thing, the very ideal it affirms on the level of rhetoric and slogans? How subtle and deadly are those contradictions and manifestations?

The truth that Havel means is an existential thing, a mode of being that affirms the humanity and dignity of man, the potential uniqueness of each individual and his life, and the vital necessity of freedom for the survival of his soul and his humanity on this earth. The kind of political system that makes it hardest for the individual to "live within the truth" is the Communist with its totalitarian apparatus designed to deprive the individual

of his human dignity. Between the aims of this system and the aims of life, says Havel, "there is a yawning abyss." Life "in its essence moves towards plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution and self-organisation, in short, towards the fulfillment of its own freedom." But the totalitarian system demands and, therefore, enforces conformity, uniformity and a life-denying discipline, all of which are aimed at transforming the individual into a mere thing designed to fuel and serve the automatism of the system. The abyss between the aims of life and those of the system, however, is joined by a bridge created by ideology which, in this case, is the Communist. Ideology "pretends that the requirement of the system derives from the requirements of life. It is a world of appearance trying to pass for reality." The totalitarian system impinges upon the individual virtually everywhere and almost all the time, but it does so "with its ideological gloves on." This is why life in the system is deprived of the essential things that make life really life; that is why the system is "so thoroughly permeated with hypocrisy and lies."

The result is the blatant pervasive contradictions that make the abnormal normal, the absurd rational, the meaningless meaningful. Thus, a highly bureaucratic and dictatorial form of government is, without batting an eyelid as it were, called popular government. The workers are enslaved in the name of brotherhood of man; the undermining of the human dignity of the individual is blatantly called his or her final liberation; the abuse of power is projected as going by the code of law; the denial of freedom of speech is represented as an ultimate form of freedom; "farical elections become the highest form of democracy; banning independent thought becomes the most scientific of world views," and so on and so on.

The totalitarian regime, Havel points out, is "captive to its own lies"; and because of this, "it must falsify everything.

It falsifies the past. It falsifies the present, and it falsifies the future..." Every form of injustice or act of terror done by the system is sweetened by ideology which offers it the means and the language by which a complex and highly organised and omnipresent structure of pretence is erected. The pretence is such that the system, says Havel, even "pretends to pretend nothing." Elsewhere, Havel describes ideology as "a specious way of relating to the world. It offers human beings the illusion of an identity, of dignity, and of morality while making it easier for them to part with them... it enables people to deceive their conscience and conceal their true position, both from the world and from themselves."

Havel's well-known play *Protest* is a striking dramatisation of the kind and depth of self-deception that the ideology of totalitarianism can produce in people. The most crucial means by which this elaborate system of pretence and lies is erected and sustained is language. No wonder that the abuse and prostitution of language is the most important single preoccupation of Havel, both as playwright and philosopher-essayist. In one way or another, directly or indirectly, most of his writings show this linguistic preoccupation. Among his plays, the early work *The Memorandum* comes immediately to mind; among the essays, 'The Power of the Powerless' is the most searching and revealing.

Havel's compatriot and voluntary exile, the novelist Milan Kundera, has described the real sense of Havel's absurd plays as a "radical demystification" of the language of totalitarian communism. The plays, says Kundera, "show a world where words have no meaning, or meanings different from accepted sense, or still again are screens behind which reality had disappeared." Havel himself has endorsed Kundera's point. In an ideologically make-believe world of communist totalitarianism, he says in 'The Power



of the Powerless', language is formalised and ritualised to deprive it of "semantic contact with reality" and "transformed into a system of ritual that replaces reality with pseudo-reality."

Havel wrote the plays and essays with the Czechoslovakian totalitarian state in mind. But that doesn't mean his critique of language here doesn't apply to other political systems, including the capitalistic consumerist ones like ours. In a fundamental way, it does apply, albeit differently and to a lesser extent. Havel himself takes care to alert the reader to the potentially universal relevance of his radical critique of language. And I'm sure he would agree with Karl Kraus's conception of the modern writer's role *vis-a-vis* the state of language: "Language is a universal whore that I must turn into a virgin."

Writers, ours in particular, must be alert to any signs of the abuse of language by politicians and literary whores.

## Waiting for Godot in Bosnia

[17th August 1994]

The Russian-American poet and Nobel laureate, Joseph Brodsky, said it pithily and incontestably: "The literal tragedy is in Bosnia. But the ethical tragedy is right here." "Here" is the United States of America, where I am writing this. Why "the ethical tragedy"? Because the world's most powerful nation, proud and shrill about its commitment to freedom and democracy, could self-righteously talk about "naked aggression", "genocide" etc., etc. – and do nothing to stop it. Because the United States has done nothing, "the principles on which this country was founded," said Brodsky, "is a lie."

The betraying of that principle took a pathetic Clintonish turn when at last month's G-7 Summit, the President conveniently forgot his tough talk about "genocide" of only a few months earlier, and told the warring parties to be reasonable and accept the latest peace-and-partition plan of the international mediators. "Accept it or..."; the ultimatum in effect legitimising the Serbs' act of "ethnic cleansing."

Now that the insatiable Serbs, who know that the United States has neither the will nor the conviction to carry out its threats, have rejected the plan, we will no doubt soon hear Clinton tell the State Department people to be careful about using a certain word in connection with Bosnia, as he had earlier told them to be careful

about using that same word in connection with Rwanda. What word? Genocide, of course. There is an element of absurdist comedy in the waffly rhetoric of Clinton. I can imagine how the Sarajevo Surrealist Hit Parade, the most popular comedy troupe in the former Yugoslavia (sample: "Today our street reporter has joined a SWAT team seeking blood donors.") would report this latest turn in Clinton's policy on Bosnia in its regular mock radio news broadcast: "The latest edition of the American bestseller *Clintoncrap* (alternative title: *Washingtonwaffle*) has just been published. The word 'genocide'...

Thank God for the Sarajevan sense of humour. The city's tradition of satirical wit, very Eastern European in the flavour of its irony, has remained intact; a not insignificant aid for the survival of Sarajevans' sanity. Last year, a writers' and artists' collective, FAMA, brought out a beautifully designed book called *Sarajevo: Survival Guide*. A deadpan parody of Michelin guide books, the publication is aimed at visiting moral tourists to the ruined city. Sarajevo is a great city for shopping, it says: try one of its shopping delights – the daily bread ration (233 grammes per person). Without such hardened humour, wouldn't you go mad from the unbearable knowledge that the whole world knows about the ethnic mass murders going on around you, makes a lot of threatening noise about it, but does nothing to help?

The really terrible thing about what has been happening in Bosnia (or Rwanda) is not that it happens, because genocides have happened before. No, what's really terrible about it is that it's happening in full knowledge of the so-called civilised world. Brodsky, in that same statement I quoted, in fact, made this very point. "There were no camera crews in Auschwitz: that was our excuse during World War Two." Now, with instant coverage of genocide by the likes of CNN, "we've been anaesthetised, as if the

murder is part of television." Susan Sontag, writer and film-maker, echoed Brodksy when she said: "Until the Bosnian genocide, one might have thought that if the story (of genocides such as Auschwitz) could be gotten out, the world would do something. The coverage of genocide in Bosnia has ended that illusion." Illusions. Illusions. That one Sontag was talking about, the illusion that in matters of genocide knowledge is the spring of humane action – that, and a few others. Bosnia has shattered more than one illusion.

But there is one 'illusion' that even Bosnia seems unable to destroy: the 'illusion' that what morally concerned writers and intellectuals say about world politics could make a difference to public opinion or even government policy. This 'illusion', however, is of a positive kind: it is necessary to the moral life of a nation. Writers and intellectuals have been called the conscience of a nation, and though that conscience can be, and has quite often been, a mere conduit of fashionable commitments or even a tool of state ideologies (national or foreign), the keeping of it alive in the face of blatant barbarism anywhere in the world is vital for the moral health of that nation's literature and thought, and, hence, that of the nation itself.

Although the Bosnian war, the bloodiest in Europe since the Second World War, hasn't quite become "another Spain" as some writers claim (the Spanish Civil War of the Thirties was the last Great Cause for Western writers), it has inspired passionate sympathy in a number of well-known American and European writers and intellectuals. And some of the major newspapers and intellectual journals have been consistently vocal in their sympathy for Bosnia and criticism of the lukewarm policy of the Western powers. To give one striking example, the Serbian slaughter of civilians in the Sarajevo market in February provoked *The New Republic*, a weekly journal with liberal tendencies, to

dramatise in an unusual way its trenchant criticism of Clinton's evasive and gutless policy on Bosnia. The criticism, expressed in the editorial for its Feb 28 issue, was printed in big white type over black on its cover and continued in the inside for three long pages.

A number of well-known writers and intellectuals (Joseph Brodsky and Susan Sontag being among the most notable) have been urging the United States to intervene in Bosnia. Many of these writers were anti-intervention during the Vietnam War. (Not all who are against the Serbian aggression, however, are for American intervention; notable among these anti-interventionists are Alexander Cockburn and Noam Chomsky, the latter one of the staunchest critics of American intervention in Vietnam.) In Europe, French intellectuals noted for their tradition of political commitment and their influence on French public opinion, have been very vocal about Bosnia. This was noticeably so after a period of relative disengagement in the wake of the ending of the Cold War.

In the run-up to the European Parliamentary election in May, French intellectuals, led by the former Marxist 'new philosopher' Bernard-Henri Levy, lifted Bosnia to the top of the French political agenda. A group of 35 intellectuals ran on a pro-Bosnia ticket in the election, demanding the lifting of the arms embargo on Bosnia and its preservation as a multi-ethnic state in any final peace agreement. Their campaign slogan was "Europe Begins in Sarajevo."

Apart from articulating the nation's conscience, and indulging in semi-quixotic electoral adventures, what else can writers do? Not much really, other than individual acts of human solidarity – like ambulance driving or even fighting on the side of justice and democracy, as some writers did in the Spanish Civil War. Or a writers' organisation could do something modest but concrete such

as helping, materially and spiritually, their beleaguered fellow writers in the country of the genocide. Like what PEN American Centre did in November last year when it sponsored a benefit evening for Bosnian writers in New York. Both Sontag and Brodsky spoke and read at the benefit. Other well known writers who also did their bit included playwright Arthur Miller and another Nobel laureate, poet Derek Walcott. The special guest of that evening was the noted Bosnian Muslim journalist Zlatko Dizdarevic, editor of Sarajevo's leading (and now only) daily. Dizdarevic, whose book *Sarajevo: A War Journal* came out last year, was the recipient of the 1993 Bruno Kreisky Foundation Prize (Vienna) for his "extraordinary efforts in fight for human rights and democratic freedom."

Sontag expressed her personal solidarity by doing a rather unusual thing. She directed a play, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in battered Sarajevo. What a frivolous thing to do, you might say. Fiddling while Rome burns. Not quite. Though Sontag was under no illusion that her act would "make (her) useful in the way (she) could be if (she) were a doctor or a water systems engineer", she was convinced that it was a symbolically significant gesture as well as being a concrete, though small, contribution to Sarajevo's cultural life. Sarajevo is a culturally sophisticated, cosmopolitan European city with a vibrant theatre and cinema; there was no reason why that cultural vitality shouldn't continue, even under sniper fire.

"Putting on a play," says Sontag, "means so much to the theatre professionals in Sarajevo because it allows them to be normal, that is, to do what they did before the war; not to be just haulers of water or passive recipients of 'humanitarian aid'."

To be "normal" at a time of abnormality? Why not? It's not to ignore the abnormality, or to anaesthetise oneself

to it. Art, unlike CNN news, doesn't anaesthetise. It enables one, through its transfiguring power, to survive spiritually and morally the tragedy of real life. Yes, even a grim play like *Waiting for Godot* in a grim city like shattered Sarajevo; in fact, especially a grim play like *Waiting for Godot*, staged specially for the shattered but still culturally hungry sophisticated Sarajevans. (Significantly, the other serious plays that were either in rehearsal or performance at about the same time as Sontag's *Godot* were two Greek tragedies and an original local play called *In Agony!*) Those who understand the meaning of tragic art will understand the paradoxical thing I am saying here. And will understand, too, that even the inevitable self-mocking "waiting-for-Clinton" joke that the cast of the *Waiting for Godot* production found themselves indulging in, was a way of transcending and surviving the grim reality.

One of the greatest modern plays was successfully staged in a shell-damaged theatre of the much-battered city with 12 candles on stage (there was no electricity, of course). At the end of one performance, writes Sontag movingly of this extraordinary event: "On Wednesday, August 18, at 2pm - during the long tragic silence of the Vladimirs and Estragons (Sontag had three pairs of the forlorn tramps and all put on stage at the same time), which follows the messenger's announcement that Mr Godot isn't coming today, but will surely come tomorrow, my eyes began to sting with tears...."

No one in the audience made a sound. The only sounds were those coming from outside the theatre: a UN APC thundering down the street and the crack of sniper fire.

## Political Fallout of 'The Verdict'

[27th November 1995]

As I write this (9.20pm, Oct 16), the TV is on and I half-watch Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam being interviewed by CNN's Larry King. Earlier today, I watched 'live' the so-called 'Million Man March' in Washington. The rally was conceived by Farrakhan. I was hoping to drive to Washington to have a ring-side view of the "March of the Century", but family commitments in Pennsylvania's Happy Valley made that impossible.

The MMM's declared intention is a noble one: to gather at least a million black males on the historic Washington Mall in an act of "atonement and reconciliation." Atonement for what? For the blacks' failure as men to be truly self-reliant and morally responsible to their family, womenfolk and community. That act of "atonement" leading to "reconciliation" would, it is claimed, affirm the blacks' unity as people in racist America. If the intention is so noble, why then is the controversy so heated; why has this celebration of unity and responsibility created a division among the blacks themselves? It is alleged by many groups (including some black) that the declared noble intention has been contaminated and, therefore, made morally questionable because it was conceived and virtually



controlled by Farrakkhan. The outspoken leader of the Nation of Islam is widely regarded by Americans (some black leaders as well as most whites) as a racist – not only towards whites but also Koreans, Arabs, and, of course, the Jews, all of whom, the last in particular, he has called “bloodsuckers” of the poor blacks.

It is not my intention to write about Farrakhan and the MMM. That will be the subject of another article. I mention him and the MMM because it dramatically highlights the great racial divide now pulling America apart because of an event which had the whole world buzzing, and which everybody in America is still heatedly debating. I refer, of course, to the O.J. Simpson Trial, the notorious verdict delivered, and its consequences. It is significant that at a pre-MMM event on Oct 15, the fiery Farrakhan’s aide, Khalid Muhammad, said, with reference to the intention of a rally, that “we are here to put the white man on trial,” that though “we won’t rush to judgment,” the “genocidal white supremacists” would be found guilty.

Some of the words rang so disturbingly familiar in the wake of the Simpson trial, and the substance and tone of Khalid Muhammad’s words didn’t quite fit with the stated purpose of the rally. In spirit, at least, I sense that the great omnipresent OJ was among the great crowd on the Mall; perhaps he was even physically there – in disguise. Remember the false beard he had with him in the famous Bronco chase last year? He may have been there wearing that beard. But if not in person, his spirit was certainly there, haunting the minds of many of those blacks as a victim (though a lucky one) of racist America. In his fiery rambling nearly two-hour long speech, Farrakhan unsurprisingly referred to the trial and the critical reactions to the verdict by many Americans; and the racist Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), of course, came under

attack, its most infamous racist cop mentioned by name. Actually, some newspaper reports or speculations had created the expectation that OJ, for compelling reasons triggered by the recently concluded 'Trial of the Century' that resulted in his stunning acquittal from the charge of double murder, would show up at the march.

Simpson's lead attorney Johnnie Cochran was reported as saying that he would be participating. Persuasive Johnnie, it was assumed, would no doubt be able to induce his client to join him. Simpson's acquittal has so incensed the majority of Americans (by no means all whites) that, as a fallen national icon, he is now on the defensive and needs to find some form of redemption. Re-embracing his people, from whom celebrity and money had estranged him, is considered by some as one form of such redemption. But OJ didn't seem to be there. Neither, it seemed, was Cochran. Their decision not to participate was actually announced by one of Simpson's legal strategists, Alan Dershowitz, who happens to be an American Jew. And in this dilemma of his client (to join the MMM or not), he must have been more persuasive than even Cochran.

It would have been something if the 'March of the Century' had been graced by the presence of the 'Criminal Defendant of the Century', a week after the 'Verdict of the Century' that ended the 'Trial of the Century'. Especially after the debacle of the 'TV Interview of the Century' on Oct 11. Simpson's chickening out at the last minute from the scheduled interview on NBC's special edition of *Dateline* was a stunning blow to mindless millions but a relief to some hundreds, if not thousands, of more critical Americans. The blow was to addicts of the 'Media Circus of the Century'; the relief to those who were either critical of a high-profile murder trial being turned into a media circus, or those few among the majority who believed Simpson was stinkingly guilty. The latter were relieved because,

being non-addicts when it came to media circuses like this one, they were angry with NBC (with which Simpson had served as sports commentator) for giving a forum at prime time to "a murderer" acquitted under the most dubious circumstances. The saga of the Simpson trial and that stunning Oct 3 verdict have made many Americans wonder about their disturbing political fallout, that may include white backlash which could possibly precipitate events leading the nightmare of racial violence. If we confine that reaction to the stunning verdict to the thinking minority, the dissatisfaction with it cut across the ideological, as distinguished from the strictly racial, divide.

The major Eastern dailies that I saw, the ones that form what the Republicans call "the elite liberal media establishment" (the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and one or two others) unanimously questioned the reasonableness or wisdom of that Verdict. Those that form the conservative media establishment (pre-eminently, the *Washington Times*) don't require mentioning; without seeing any of them, I can bet that for once they agreed with their liberal rivals. The whole OJ business ('business' in more than one sense) has made me so sick and befuddled that I almost swore to myself not to talk or write a word about it (that would have probably made SBJ the only person in America to be so affected by the OJS circus).

If I didn't think I know something about this country, the compulsive rhetorical vice of the Great American Hype, the compelling myth of the Great American Dream, and the troubling reality of the Great American Dilemma, the sheer tragi-comic circus of the Simpson trial and the sickeningly juicy superlatives that have been and are still being, squeezed out of it, I would not have been motivated to write this piece. But serious issues were raised by the whole thing, that the world, including our country, should take an interest in. There have been some compelling spurts

and even streams of superlatives regurgitated by the media which are typically American.

The 'Trial of the Century' – isn't that a bit America-centric? What about Nuremberg? "The longest running miniseries with the highest rating in the history of television." (I won't quarrel with that.) "The juiciest soap opera beyond the dream of Hollywood," with a mixture of the most intoxicating ingredients squeezed and imbibed to its very last droplet – glamour and money, a national sports hero worshipped by millions, both blacks and whites, trouble in taboo inter-racial marriage, gruesome murder of a white beauty by an alleged pathologically jealous former wife-beating black husband, and so on. No Hollywood scriptwriter could have conceived a plot so full of surprising twists and turns, such shocking revelations and super-suspense burlesque and tragedy blatantly blended to perfection... (err... okay, some truth in that one, I suppose.) The who-shot-JR suspense of Dallas was nothing compared to will-OJ-be-convicted-or-not suspense during those 14 hours of waiting for the Verdict on that memorable Monday and Tuesday. During the 10 minutes of the final moments leading to the stunning climax of the reading of that 'Verdict of the Century', the entire nation – from the President in his Oval Office to travelers at airports indifferent to repeated final flights calls, from the army at their post to school children in their classrooms – everyone stood stock still, breathlessly glued to the box. A front page headline in the *New York Times* says it for all: "The Day (10 minutes of It) the Nation Stood Still."

A nasty Oriental thought crossed my mind as I was reading that bit of NYT report: What if *jihad-crazy* Iran, had it the nuclear power it has been so fanatically trying to build, had taken the opportunity to blast this land of Satan to Hell during those 10 dangerously mesmerising minutes? After all, the blind Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman

and company had only a few days before been "unjustly" (to many Muslims, that is) convicted in New York of conspiracy to blow up the city. It took the 210 kph Hurricane Opal (16 dead and two-billion dollars worth of damage) that struck Florida the day after the "Nation Stood Still" to sweep (for two days at least) the hurricane of banner headlines on Simpson off the front pages and the flashings of Breaking News from CNN prime time. But hurricanes come and go quite swiftly, and as media entertainment, it's a non-starter compared to Hurricane Simpson.

It has been rightly said that America is 'in danger of entertaining itself to death.' But, like my favourite columnist Russell Baker, I have to admit that the trial was curiously and "utterly absorbing even when it was unbearably dull." I cursed it for sucking up so much of my time when more personally important things were demanding my attention. (I wasn't a sucker enough, though, to follow the gable-to-gable coverage or the babble-to-babble phone-in talk shows everyday of the nine month trial. Imagine trying to follow the abstruse forensic and DNA arguments which the uncomprehending jury must have slept through and which even some of the TV legal commentators admitted to have been quite hard to follow!)

Why was it absorbing despite the long stretches of boredom? Because it was revealing of some of the most troubling problems besetting America, this "great wrong place" of a country (to echo the words of poet W.H. Auden). The surprising verdict by the majority black jury (surprising, partly because of the incredibly quick way it was arrived at after such a marathon trial) dramatically heightened the racial tension already simmering during the trial. A trial that was full of shocking revelations of police racism, sheer incompetence, and even more shocking,

allegations about police conspiracy to frame up an innocent national icon, one who just happens to be a filthy rich black once married to a white beauty whom he loved to bash and, as so many believe, finally brutally murdered in a fit of possessive black rage. Russell Baker rightly observed that the trial was a reminder that "if entertainment is not to be the death of us, then the race division will almost surely be."

The City of Angels, if not this Sweet Land of Liberty as a whole, has, after all, yet to fully recover from the trauma of the Rodney King riots. The trial is over, the accused acquitted, but the OJ soap opera is far from ending. Talk shows like CNBC's Geraldo Rivera and CNN's *Crossfire*, *Larry King Live*, *Talk Back Live*, *Burden of Proof*, which have been talking the subject to death, are still going on about it almost every morning, afternoon and evening, and will go on till God knows when. As an obscenely inexhaustible money-spinning soap, it threatens to swamp the country with dozens of books by people, both connected (however remotely) and unconnected (however intimately), with the case, by ghosts and writers, would-be or otherwise. According to the latest count, 35(!) instant books have already been published, one of the best sellers being Simpson's own *I Want to Tell You*, the prison testimony (ghost-written?) of an allegedly maligned national icon that I swore never to be caught dead even flicking though it. To assemble his "dream team" of super lawyers and experts must have cost him millions; but the scandal industry is such that the filthy rich OJ is far from having been sucked broke. Johnnie Cochran quietly admitted to Larry King that even though the whole thing had been "very expensive, very," OJ was still financially okay, even though he had had to mortgage his house. He will be much more than okay when the proposed pay-per-view call-in TV show he is negotiating with one of the networks takes off.

Money, money, money. And, of course, he will write another book; the 'Verdict of the Century' would certainly seduce him into doing that. No doubt, it will be dedicated to the Jury ('the most objective and bravest in the world') and shamelessly in memory of 'My Beloved Nicole'; if only that book would be written by a real ghost - or two, those of poor Nicole Simpson and Ron Goldman. One of the jurors responsible for the verdict announced last week that a book by her on the case will be out in two or three weeks. (So fast? Ah... all those nights of utter boredom during the nine-month sequestration. What could she and the others have been doing?) Even Judge Ito, one report has it, seems unable to resist the temptation to make his own millions by scribbling his own version of this so-called trial of the century. No, the OJ business (yes, real business, man) is far from being over

## The True Colour of Justice in LA

[28th November 1995]

Conflicting perceptions of the 'Verdict of the Century' will certainly have disturbing effects on the already bad race relations in the United States. The widening national split along racial lines has been visually dramatised every afternoon these past few weeks on shows like CNN's *Talk Back Live*; it is confirmed by one media poll after another. And experts are still heatedly debating about the political and social fallout of that Verdict.

Will there be a White backlash? Will the fallout from the OJ tragi-comic circus be exploited in the greatest of all American circuses, the campaign for the Presidential election? (The election itself is not due till late next year, but the campaign is already and prematurely underway.) President Clinton, conveniently out of Washington during the Million Man March, gave a speech in Texas about the deteriorating racial situation in the wake of the Simpson verdict. And, in that speech he applauded the MMM's noble intention but criticised the man who conceived it as a dangerous bigot without mentioning his name. Clinton's possible Republican rival, Dole, immediately seized the chance to denounce Clinton for his weakness *vis-a-vis* Farrakhan, alleging that his criticism of the bigot was



insufficiently forthright, his rhetorical condemnation insufficiently strong.

Given the rising racial tensions following Simpson's acquittal, and the fact that black racist-separatist Farrakhan was getting the credit for the apparent success of the MMM, race as an election issue is likely to get inflamed in the Presidential election year. Will that great American circus called the Presidential election campaign finally 'entertain' this country to death? Absorbing and boring, and tiresomely revealing – yes, that, the 'Trial of the Century', certainly was. Like many others, I am glad I hadn't kicked my TV set in those moments of disgust at the sheer surfeit of coverage. Among the revelations about this marvellous country the trial has produced for me, is the very disturbing one about its much-vaunted criminal justice system. Not many seem to share this revelation, though. Nearly all the legal commentators have been babbling in a chorus of national self-congratulations about this system: 'For all its flaws, it's still the best in the world.'

In the beginning, Johnnie Cochran, in the face of criticism of the way the Simpson jury arrived at its KFC-style fast verdict, of the doubts expressed by a few commentators about the country's jury system itself, and of the way jurors are selected in sensitive or high-profile cases – smug Johnnie could say (understandably enough, I suppose) that the Simpson jury "is the best in the history of the country's jurisprudence." Nobody in his/her right mind really buys that hype about the system being now class-blind and colour-blind. I hope to say more about the latter claim in its wider political context in a future article, one which I solemnly promise will be "100 per cent OJ free", to echo the amusingly suggestive sticker on the cover of one issue of a weekly.

Right now, I notice something is not quite right about the American criminal justice system as well as its law-

enforcing institution. What is that 'something' and what could be done about it? The Simpson verdict had indeed sent a message that the demagogic Johnnie Cochran was thinking of his passionate appeal to the "best jury in American history", and through the jury, the American people (meaning, the blacks). Cochran's 'message', with its allegation of a racist cop planting evidence and its cover-up, even a conspiracy by police, meant that an acquittal of Simpson would amount to a guilty verdict on the entire LAPD (headed by a black, by the way) as racist. But Cochran's asking the jury to deliver that 'message', given its possible inflammatory political consequences, is something else. Why the lead prosecutor Marcia Clark didn't object, or Judge Ito reprimand Cochran, is a mystery to me; didn't Cochran's 'message' amount to jury nullification?

The message I was thinking of is a different one. And it's louder and clearer than Cochran's. Stark and simple, it says: if one is a celebrity with money to pay for an American 'dream team' of attorneys, whatever colour one's skin happens to be, one could get away with murder. No, the American criminal justice system is neither white nor black; it's crisp green. Obscenely green.

One of Simpson's legal strategists, Alan Dershowitz, says in his best-selling book *The Best Defense*: "Once I decide to take a case, I have only one agenda; I want to win. I will try every fair and legal means, to get my client off – *without regard to the consequences.*" (Italics mine.) Those who claim the defence had turned the trial of Simpson into that of the racist detective Mark Fuhrman (a key prosecution witness) and the incompetent LA Police Dept, are right, but who can blame the defence? Cochran has been widely accused of playing the racist card; but who, knowing anything about the job of defence attorneys (especially obscenely expensive ones like fast-taking Johnnie

with a client as rich as OJ), would expect him to do otherwise? A noted conservative columnist calls Johnnie a brilliant lawyer but a bad citizen; and, in the dual role, he is amorally championed by legal experts like Dershowitz. According to the rules of the game and the *raison d'être* of the profession, of course, the means Johnnie Cochran employed were 'fair' and certainly legal. And the self-proclaimed 'fairness' has the semblance of real fairness as judged by universal moral standards. After all, as Cochran has tirelessly been reminding the American people, he didn't create that pathological racist and liar Fuhrman, who the prosecution was dumb enough to make its key witness. Similarly, his allegation of the LAPD itself being infected by the virus of racism and a code of silence associated with it, isn't mere fantasy. But to employ such 'fair and legal means' without regard to the consequences on society? Isn't that something else? I wasn't at all surprised that the racist Farrakhan took advantage of that great day of supposed "atonement and reconciliation" to deliver the Cochran 'message' to the cheering crowd, the vast majority of which, if not to a man, must also have cheered on hearing the Simpson jury's verdict.

My own verdict about the 'Verdict of the Century' is a sort of 'hung' one; hung, not quite in the sense that most people had, in fact, predicted the actual verdict the Simpson jury would have delivered. My 'hung verdict' about the Verdict was tortuously arrived at by the personal jury secretly sequestered in the recesses of my mind. And this verdict is that that Verdict was both wrong and right. My 'hung verdict' suggests the terrible complexity of the whole business: the trial, the Verdict and what they tell us about the racial nightmare of America and the disturbing flaws of its law-enforcing and criminal justice system, and the equally disturbing obsession of the money-driven media to turn everything into all-consuming entertainment.

The LAPD was unbelievably incompetent and shockingly casual in handling the case. Fuhrman is questionably a pathological racist capable of concocting evidence to frame blacks; to hear the whole of the notorious Fuhrman tapes was quite chilling for anybody, but, while racist, Cochran's comparison of the rogue cop to Hitler was just Cochran at his silliest best. And the LAPD claim that Fuhrman was only one rotten apple in its mouldy, germ-infested barrel (already given a terrible shake by the Rodney King trials), is a bit hard to swallow. I am prepared to believe that enough majority of whites in the LAPD are not racists, but evidence suggests that Fuhrman is far from being the only one, though how many would go to the extent of actually framing blacks I wouldn't know. Then, there are the disturbing indications about the code of silence over racist cops' acts of lying and brutality first vividly revealed on tape in the Rodney King beating case.

About Simpson's guilt or innocence, I am with the majority of Americans (and not all of them are whites, by the way). I was far from being persuaded by the argument of Cochran and his team that Simpson is not guilty because he was framed by the police, aided by the LAPD code of silence and incompetence. The evidence against Simpson may not be that overwhelming as repeatedly claimed by the prosecution, and there are some gaping and slippery holes in it; but there are enough pieces of credible testimony and strongly suggestive circumstantial evidence (the blood and all the forensic and DNA stuff, and testimonies of witnesses other than Fuhrman) to strengthen my gut feeling from hours of following the trial that the black icon did butcher poor lovely Nicole and poor Ron Goldman, that nice guy who was at the wrong place at the wrong time. I'm prepared to believe that Detective Philip Vannater (Fuhrman's superior) lied on the stand about not initially considering Simpson a suspect (their justification

for going to Simpson's house and entering it without a search warrant, remember?) I am even prepared to entertain the strong possibility that Fuhrman planted the glove.

Ah, that glove! And that embarrassing moment (for the prosecution, that is) of failed demonstration before the jury! Cochran's skillfully timed reiterations of the magic mantra, "If it doesn't fit, you must acquit!", and the rhythmically near-hypnotic way this frustrated-preacher lawyer said it to the jury – all of this was very compelling. But not compelling enough to convince me of Simpson's innocence. Doesn't fit does not necessarily mean acquit, Johnnie. There are many kinds of fit. The glove demonstration itself was the height of the OJ comedy of confusion, playacting (OJ is a Hollywood actor as well, remember), trickery, apparent or pseudo-mysteries, and 'paradoxes'. Yes, the paradox (sort of) – it didn't fit and yet it did fit, in a funny way, metaphorically speaking. The paradox at the heart of the case is peculiar. At least two bungling, disorganised cops, one of them a pathological racist (Fuhrman) who probably and needlessly planted the glove to frame a man the cops already suspected from circumstantial evidence (other than the glove), was guilty; another (Vannater, a confused mistake-prone detective but probably not a racist) lied about the motive for going to the defendant's house and entering it without a warrant. How do you like that?

Christopher Darden, the one black in the prosecution team, summed up the trial in these words: "The defence proved that Mark Fuhrman is a racist. We proved that OJ Simpson is the murderer." Not quite the full story, Darden. I would reword and expand his comment thus: "The defence proved Mark Fuhrman is a liar and racist and capable of planting evidence and, quite likely, did, plant the glove, however unnecessary the planting was. The sequestered jurors were not supposed to know the latter

because the really troubling parts of the notorious Fuhrman tape was not played before them, but it was most unlikely they didn't know about it through conjugal visits and pillow talk.

"Just as they must have learnt about a lot of other troubling things that undoubtedly helped to plant seeds of doubt in their mind. The doubt would be unreasonable if the jurors were really totally ignorant of what the whole world knew, but quite reasonable, if you doubt that that was the case. (This alone is sufficient argument against gable-to-gable TV coverage of such politically sensitive murder trials and endless chatter-to-chatter phone-in talk shows and instant TV commentaries by all kinds and colour of legal experts)."

The relentless coverage of the Simpson trial, in fact, meant that another trial – more prejudicial to the prosecution than the defence – was being conducted in the boisterous court of public opinion. The defence also demonstrated the likelihood of Fuhrman's fellow cops or superiors (Vannater, at least) of being guilty of covering for him, and that the LAPD forensic experts handled crucial evidence in a terribly sloppy way. These evidentiary problems, however (which a different and **less** politically sensitive group of jurors could overcome), unsurprisingly became the persuasive basis for reasonable doubts in the minds of the majority-black Simpson jurors. These doubts were undoubtedly strengthened further by Cochran's playing of the race card, in particular, his passionate appeal to the jury to deliver that big 'message' to the country at large.

Thus, it is not really surprising that Simpson was acquitted. As for the prosecution, it did prove to objective observers that OJ Simpson is the murderer and that it was helpless before the skilful but dubious Cochran strategy of planting unreasonable reasonable doubts in the jurors' minds.

"Unreasonable reasonable doubts?" If that's a contradiction, it reflects the contradictions of American society. In the words of The Last Poets, the group considered by some as 'the first real rappers', this contradiction is an "American contradiction in black and white." The prosecution's blunders certainly didn't help their case. Having the racist Fuhrman as a key witness was only one of these major blunders. (This is a real mystery which I can't fathom, for Fuhrman's racism was not exactly a secret in the LAPD.)

What does all this really tell us about the American criminal justice system? Not that the majority black juries inevitably would acquit black defendants, for the surprising reality is that all-black juries often convict blacks in America, especially in Washington DC. Note that I questioned the idea of inevitability in this widely-held assumption. This suggests that the Simpson case is an exception, and as an exception (or 'aberration', as some prefer to call it), it dramatically highlights the flaws in the criminal justice system. Obviously, some kind of reform and some kind of 'interference' by a federal government much hated by white separatists and the militias, is needed here.

The present jury system, for all its many virtues, could be re-examined. The demand of unanimity in the verdict, the process of selection, to what extent racial elements should be allowed to determine its composition, the currently accepted meaning of the important word 'peers' in the phrase "jury of one's peers" (i.e. one's fellow citizens, of whatever level of intelligence, education, experience etc.) - these, at least, should be immediately re-examined. The ethical and legal standards governing the rhetoric of counsels could also be reconsidered. But, more urgently important, is the need for the federal government (the states cannot be trusted in this) to explore how to enable

poor and middle class Americans, accused of capital crimes, to, in some fair measure, benefit from the system's ideal of equal justice for all.

The *New York Times*' editorial of Oct 5, entitled 'False Lessons of the Simpson Trial' agreed with the *Washington Post*'s editorial of the previous day that the "new chorus of demands to cut back the rights of criminal defendants and revamp the jury system" were not the true lessons to be learnt from "the trial of the century" (or what the *NYT* preferred to call "this idiosyncratic case that has only tangential relevance to the normal workings of the judicial system"). But the *NYT* editorial, at least, concluded by confronting the problem of ensuring equal justice in capital cases for both millionaire celebrities and the common people. It said: "Few would argue that the government is obliged to provide a multi-million dollar legal team for every defendant. But the country clearly needs sensible reforms to insure (sic) that poor defendants get decent legal representation."

The *Post*'s editorial, surprisingly, avoided this issue. It blithely concluded: "The protections afforded defendants in American courts are the result of centuries of refinements designed to protect the citizen from a capricious and vengeful sovereign. They may not ensure a universally popular result or even a just one, but they exist to guarantee a fair trial to rich celebrities and common folks alike. They should not be changed in reaction to a single verdict." The *Post*'s editorials often annoy Republicans, but this one must have earned their reluctant applause. It strengthens my feeling in the unlikelihood of the "sensible reforms" that the *NYT* suggested. The GOP's firm control of Congress is likely to get even firmer because of the disarray among the Democrats and the recent spate of retirement announcements by Democratic senators.



And the 'New Deal' brought about by the so-called 'Republican revolution' under the leadership of anti-Washington House Speaker Newt Gingrich, in the name of renewing America and recovering the original American Dream, does not really have any concern for the helpless and demoralised on its agenda. Republicans can continue to feel comfortable with the lie that the American judicial system ("best in the world") guarantees "a fair trial to rich celebrities and common folks alike," as they feel so self-righteous about the stinking lie that the "welfare reform" as conceived by slimy Newt and his "gangrichs" is really meant for the good of the poor and the middle class.

God save America!

## Epilogue

# What's the Matter with Malchin\*?

[20th July 1966]

Some disloyal thoughts on Malaysian (\*Malchin = Malay, Chinese and Indian) students in Australia.

### My Dear Malchin,

Let me begin with an apology for dragging out private quarrels in front of these impudent foreigners. I can only hope that the shame of exposure will be compensated for by the ultimate good it will hopefully produce – if I may be allowed to be optimistic. If that fails to happen, there is always our hidden masochism ('hidden' because among the Australians, we are reputed to be mild-mannered, gentle-hearted, courtesy-loving people) to ensure that some private pleasure is squeezed from this public pain.

You will no doubt make the point that I am a renegade – ("They have accepted you as a pseudo-Western liberal, haven't they?") – and as a renegade, I am disqualified from initiating any act of communal self-criticism. You may be right. But do hear me out just the same. There is a chance that you might change your mind and be persuaded that my intention is not really destructive.

## Colombo Calamities

Tell me, Malchin, why do you come to this country? To get your degree in the quickest possible way and rush back home to join the scramble for top jobs and fat salaries? That, of course, is the most basic and common motive. (We will leave aside those sons of manipulators, redundant generals, superannuated sultans, rusty-minded ministers and plain opium-peddlers, – who come here simply to demonstrate their genius as academic failures, to live the life of nouveau-riche, with the blessings of their unsuspecting parents, more flamboyant than the locals in their devotion to the gaudy and the showy.)

I commend you, Malchin, for your practical sense. I can assure you that I would be the last person to disparage your devotion to the ideal we all imbibed at schools: 'Degrees are passports to success.' I am only disappointed that you should be so unimaginative in pursuing your necessary objective in this country. I mean, this business of sweating for the examinations is a pretty boring affair, isn't it? Even *YOU* must admit that. So why not make it a little more exciting by enlarging your conception of university life? Of course, I don't mean to suggest that you are that mechanical as to have literally no thought or time for anything but the examinations. Some of you *ARE* like that. But they are the queer ones I am not much concerned with in this context. Apart from these mysterious exceptions, you all have some awareness of the value of "extra curricular activities." That phrase "extra-curricular activities" is delightfully suggestive of the high-school idea of non-academic participation that you entertain. Sports, of course, are one of these, and you are justly admired for affirming one of the cardinal ideals of the Australian people.

### **Accidental Occidentals**

I gather you like parties too. Especially birthday parties. What do you like doing at these parties? Display and enjoy colourful 'oriental' dishes in honour of your Australian friends and of your own stomachs (we Asians are great food-lovers, aren't we?); dance cheek to cheek in soft lights to buttock-swaying Latin American rhythms (they say we Malaysians are great buttock-swayers, so frail and so tantalizing); and, of course, play party games, that most exciting social activity you refused to abandon after you left high school. How your motherly landladies love to see you in this role; how they regret their rat-bag sons preferring student power to such charming occupation.

What else do you like doing? O, yes, some of you are expert bird-catchers. Some of you find it quite easy to entice local birds into your gilded cages. Many of these are quite pretty, and very worthy of your ideals. God bless you, walking hand-in-hand on the road to happy matrimony, either to settle down in local suburbia as perfect examples of decent Asians the government should let in, or to help create enclaves of such set-up amidst the general squalor of your own country. Those Australians, who suspect that you marry to bypass the immigration laws, are unnecessarily unkind. And, what is even worse, they do immense injustice to the virtues of their own maidens to your genuine appreciation of these remarkable virtues.

### **Migrant Miscegenation**

A few of you with sufficient nerve and conmanship prefer the more adventurous role of philanderers, striking terror in the hearts of many Australian mothers to whom miscegenation is a depravity beyond imagination. You were well advised by those veteran prodigals at home not to miss the chance of 'mounting the beefy white horses while over there.' Sex-obsessed blondes and brunettes are a-plenty

on your campus. These creatures are incredibly unrestricted and unspeakably provocative. Here the government is not so over-civilised yet as to institute such a thing as a law against 'close proximity' that operates at home.

Here you can kiss in the open and hug intimately on the campus lawn – on the sacred lawn of a place of learning, mind you! There must also be quite a few bored housewives who must look upon their ever-smiling, buttock-swaying 'oriental' boarders as heaven-sent. These few pioneers in the hazardous task of extending the range and depth of international communication, deserve the Bung Karno Medal. If only more of you had the nerve and the energy to erect the banner of the spirit of Bandung in this vital field!

### **Australian's Algerian**

We, Malaysians (and we can include here our Indonesian brothers), like our white women because they are women, not because they are ideological whores. We don't moan, like the neurotic Negro in Frantz Fanon's mythology: "When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and white dignity, and make them mine." Every time we take an Australian woman to bed, we take her to bed. If we stage 'an insurrectionary act', it is according to the dictates of Eldridge Cleaver. And the maidens among you – what about playing your proper role in this enterprise? I am sure there must be quite a few nymphomaniacs lurking suppressed behind those demure faces. Let it not be thought by the Aussies that you are inscrutable because you are you-know-what – which is, of course, blatantly false.

### **Earl's Court Incest**

What I have said so far, Malchin, doesn't amount to a negation of the change that you are not involved in the life

of your university and of the host society at large. It is not merely that you tend to stick together as it has often been complained. (Australians forget that they too tend to stick together when there are groups of them living in a foreign country.) It is worrying that you stick together TOO MUCH, and in such a way as to generate a sort of social and intellectual in-breeding that is truly unhealthy.

Let me first deal with the social consequences of this in-breeding. Do you realise, Malchin, that not only you, but your Australian fellow-students, too, suffer from this habit of yours? I happen to believe that you have at least one asset that could help make life on the Australian campuses a bit more interesting and colourful. As a nation – assuming for rhetorical convenience that we ARE a nation, we are a bunch of delightful imposters, manic soap-box orators, magnificent happy-go-lucky bunglers, perpetually on the verge of ‘running amok’, and sometimes we do ‘run amok’ – in short, we are born comedians, master improvisers in the realm of the farcical and the absurd. Recently, at the National Malaysian Night in Hobart, some of you put on a tremendous performance along those lines. But why confine it to the stage, and once a year only? Why not let some of this irrepressible vitality spill over into the effort of daily intercourse on the campus?

Australia has been aptly described by one of her poets as “A woman beyond her change of life, a breast/Still tender but within the womb is dry.” Why don’t we all help re-fertilize this dry womb – so that eventually, with the blessing of history, a nation of genuine Australians, not mere second-hand Europeans, will pullulate vigorously on this magnificent continent.

Now let me turn to the immediately serious issue of the intellectual consequences of your tendency to in-breed.

### Within the Oriental Orbit

Apathy is a vice that is indulged in by a sizeable proportion of your Australian fellow students. But, in your case, it acquires a morbid character because of this in-breeding, and has disturbing implications because you are supposed to form the elite of your country on returning home.

I could forgive those among you who are Science students. (Their Australian counterparts are there to assure them they won't be lonely as future apolitical technocrats who will work willingly for any self-declared benefactors and builders of the nation who happen to hold the reign of power.) I am less willing to forgive those of you who are studying courses like political science, history and economics. I am amazed at your capacity to insulate what you are studying from the strident world of war, misery and hypocrisy. Perhaps deep inside many of you, there isn't such an insulation. I shouldn't like to sound arrogant or self-righteous, and damn you for crass insensitivity or plain stupidity. But if you *ARE* aware of the connection of what you are studying with the brutal business of living and dying, why don't you attempt, *AT LEAST ATTEMPT*, to articulate your awareness, to inform and sharpen it in a collaborative interchange of ideas that should be a central feature of any university life.

Yours Truly,  
A Renegade Malchin

(P.S: This open letter was first published in *Togatus*, the campus newsletter of the University of Tasmania and subsequently reprinted in *National U*, the national student newspaper of Australia.)

## *Afterword*

Salleh Ben Joned is, first and foremost, a man of letters. What distinguishes him from the likes of you and I is his talent for wrapping his two cents worth with language at once intelligent and harsh, and yet humble and measured. More importantly, like a real man of letters should, he dares to question the necessary questions.

Still, Salleh's talent and audacity have not saved him from being rejected as an extreme Malay intellectual by the literary Mafiosi of Malaysian literature. Known for his outspoken and often incendiary views on the apathy of local intellectual culture, Salleh is the poster figure for everything that a Malay man of letters shouldn't be.

But none of this matters. To Salleh, there is no more glory in being able to exercise one's intellectual gifts without having to rely on the questionable stratagems of the well-meaning-yet-mercilessly-deluded members of one's own artistic/intellectual community, especially when such stratagems are driven by divisive literary, cultural, religious, social and/or political sentiments.

As such, he is not to be ignored. Salleh may not have a chair in a local tertiary institution, but he doesn't need such academic crutches to be able to invest his thoughts with the gravity of one who can spot the dubiousness of fraudulent intellectualisms among his peers. His readers know, as Salleh knows, that Malaysia is not the pseudo-Bali paradise that countless tourism campaigns have made it out to be. And we are glad that someone like Salleh, born pre-Merdeka has the courage to stick his neck out in these post-Merdeka years.

But what about his motivations? Reading this book, it's crystal clear what they are. He makes no bones about it. He wants you, the reader to think, to criticise, to use your brain cells and look around at what's happening, not just turn on the TV and turn yourself into a twenty first century zombie, an imbecile marching mindlessly towards the blinding utopia of Vision 2020.

In his writings, one sees clearly where he sees Malaysia



and where he thinks we are heading. In 'Cincai and Canggih All the Way', Salleh shows the misappropriation and ironic celebration of words loaded with shallowness by the country's literati and the mindless adoption of them by two-bit writers whose two-cents had been used to pay for a mindless education system. It's at once a brilliant and precise dissection of the cancer of idiocy spreading throughout Malaysia's intellectual/literary landscape.

His words and the way he postulates them have the sharpness of scalpel blades: slicing up his subjects with the accuracy of a cultural surgeon equipped with an instinctive gift for seeing through the murky intentions of well-disguised hypocrites, bigots and chauvinists. And what we see inside is, like any tumour of the inner flesh, stunningly ugly.

For all its brutal honesty and insight, Salleh's work has sadly been overlooked by the people he intends them for, us. Not because they are not worth our two cents. But because we have forgotten what a man of letters is supposed to be and what he stands for. For most Malaysians – driving Kancils and Protons, swamped with long working hours, made jaded by the media, brainwashed by mass propaganda (and continually made fun of by the likes of Salleh) – a man of letters is someone who should stop whining and get a job.

That's why we need a man of letters like Salleh more than ever. To help us see the truth concealed so carefully behind the superficiality of suspect truths. So this is how it stands. Salleh is one of the few men of letters who is still with us, believing and trusting in the fact that we have a mind of our own. That we have a mind worthy of our status as Malaysians.

But who is Salleh and why is he sharing his thoughts with us? I like to think of Salleh as a literary maverick. Reading Salleh's essays is reading about ourselves, how we work, how we think, how we feel. And we see the pits we have fallen into, as humans torn between wanting to appear civilized and yet being the total opposite.

When I think of Salleh's inherent humanity, I am reminded of his poem, '*Monolog Atas Bendul*' (from *Sajak-Sajak Salleh*), in which he describes the rise of his appetite for

sexual excitement against the background of the onset of puberty in his childhood home. Going against folk wisdom, he pleasures himself and sees the forbidden as the vessel of ultimate truth. The body and its needs do not lie. It is the pre-programmed mind that denies. And this is the source of all our hypocrisies.

The great thing about the poem and the direction of Salleh's resolve in it is his unabashed acceptance of the body, mind and soul electric. There is no greater gift than the ultimate gift that Allah has given us: life, in all its myriad forms. Evil is not to be denied, it is as much a part of us as Godliness is. But we don't come to such wisdom by just reading about it. We must live it, question it, love it, hate it, experience it wherever we feel the urge. Above all, however, we must not deny it. For to do so would be to deny our own humanity.

Salleh has never denied his humanity, nor has he ever denied the humanity of others. He questions it, he attacks it, but never he denies its omnipresence. Even in the darkest corners of the realms of his imagination, Salleh never loses track of what makes us tick. As such, he is more than a man of letters. He is a man of the soul.

Salleh's gift to the world is his intelligence and his humanness. To be either in Malaysia, at this point in our history, is rare. But the only way to be a Malaysian, in all sense of what it means to be a 'Malaysian' as Salleh tells us, is to be both. How delicious.

In his 'Songs and Monologues 7' (from *Poems Sacred and Profane*), Salleh writes: "Keep me burning, dear God/ with the stubbornness of being./Keep me burning, even if I have to burn/all my fingers, my bridges, my boats,/to keep my self on my chosen burning path." To ask God to keep his being aflame is so typical of Salleh. But then, how else can he be? Salleh just is.

Jerome Kugan  
Kuala Lumpur  
May 2003

(Originally from Sabah, Jerome Kugan won a state scholarship to study writing at the University of Canberra, Australia, from which he graduated in 1998. Based in KL, he divides his time working as a writer and performing as a musician. His writings have been published in *Options/The Edge*, *New Straits Times* and *www.kakiseni.com*. He also occasionally publishes *Poetika*, a poetry zine. His story 'Love in the Post Nicotine Age' was featured in *Silverfish New Writing 1*. He is currently working on a collection of short prose and verse.)

## *About the Author*

Salleh Ben Joned was born in 1941 and brought up in rural Melaka. In 1963, he was sent to Australia under a Colombo Plan scholarship to study English. However, instead of studying, he got married to a fellow student in his first year at the University of Adelaide. Due to her family's disapproval of the marriage, the young couple moved to the University of Tasmania. There he became a student of the late James McAuley, one of Australia's major poets.

After his B.A. (Hons), he got a scholarship to do a post-graduate degree – a Masters that, with McAuley's approval, was converted to a Ph.D registration. That was a mistake, given his many interests, and his Ph.D remained uncompleted. He came back to Malaysia in 1973 and joined the English Department of the University of Malaya as a lecturer, mainly on the late McAuley's strong recommendation.

He was to continue work on his Ph.D thesis, but being the kind of person that he was, it remained unfinished. He quit his job in 1985 to become a freelance writer. In 1987, he published his first book of poetry, a bilingual volume entitled *Sajak-Sajak Saleh: Poems Sacred and Profane* which was reprinted late last year. His freelance work as a newspaper columnist resulted in a collection of prose entitled *As I Please* (London, 1994). Among his coming publications are a new collection of poems in English entitled *Adam's Dream* and a volume of satire *Verses Variousy Vicious*.