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All despite its 'vague immensities'

iewed by Salleh Ben Joned

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 himself 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 - whose chapters are expanded versions of the speeches he has made overseas and articles published in international magazines has already provoked cynical comments by his detractors 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 reservations, '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 (see *Journal One*, October 1996).

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 as expressing "the central thesis of my vision for Asia", and 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 Berhormat 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 heterogenous 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 the something odd in the quoted verse referred to above.

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 so many proofs of his wide-ranging reading by lacing the text with so many

literary and philosophical quotations - not all, 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 overimpressed. 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 lift so many big or esoteric names in the biblio.

\* Anwar will autograph The Asian Renaissance tomorrow at Times Bookshop in Starhill (Lot T.3), Jalan Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur. Time: 4-5pm.

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