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Shahnon's denial has many people puzzled

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ALOR STAR, Mon. - Did he or didn't he?

Although novelist Datuk Shahnon Ahmad has denied apologising to the Prime Minister (as reported in some newspapers today), several people claimed they heard him saying so.

"I heard him speak and he did apologise to the Prime Minister," said Fazli Abdullah, a marketing executive who attended the ceramah where the writer spoke in Taman Rakyat on Friday night.

"Shahnon said he was sorry if the Prime Minister was offended or insulted by the book he (Shahnon) wrote," he added.

A government officer, Khazali Din, also said he was shocked and surprised to read in newspapers today that Shahnon had denied making the apology.

"I was there. I heard him. He shouldn't deny it now .... This may be Shahnon's own interpretation of what he said at the gathering but many who were present understood what he said as an apology," he said.

Yet another person who attended the gathering was Johari Ibrahim. "As a Muslim, Shahnon should say what is right. Shahnon should admit he said what he did. I heard him making the apology."

But Shahnon, when contacted this evening, was still insisting that he did not apologise to the Prime Minister. "I never did. I am an old and unknown writer and maybe they heard me wrong."

Shahnon said he told the gathering he felt sorry for Dr Mahathir for assuming that he had attacked the Prime Minister personally and the Prime Minister's mother in his controversial book *Shit*.

"I said I was sorry for Dr Mahathir because he misunderstood my intentions," he told the NST by telephone from his home in Changkat Minden, Glugor, late today.

"But I never attacked him personally, or his mother."

This is seen by many as a rather odd explanation because if he had really said he was sorry for Dr Mahathir for having misunderstood the intention, he would have used the word *saya merasa sedih* in his speech instead of *saya minta maaf*.

The expression "feeling sorry for somebody" does not exist in Bahasa Malaysia as there is no equivalent for such an expression in the language.

It was reported in the *New Sunday Times* that what Shahnon had said in Bahasa Malaysia was: "Jika Dr Mahathir tersinggung atau terhina saya minta maaf tetapi saya langsung tidak berniat menghina dan mengutuknya. Saya juga tidak pernah menghina ibu Dr Mahathir."

(If Dr Mahathir is offended or insulted, then I apologise but I did not in any way mean to insult or deride him. I have also never insulted Dr Mahathir's mother).

Shahnon further claimed that his attacks were not personal when he wrote *Shit*. Instead he was criticising the Prime Minister's policies and how they were being implemented.

"I have nothing against Dr Mahathir personally. In fact, I care for him.

"I met Dr Mahathir in Canberra, Australia, after he was sacked from Umno in 1969 and I liked him.

"But now, I am quite uneasy with his leadership."

Shahnon said he also cared for many Umno members. "I have nothing against them. Take, for instance, Umno Youth. I care for them too but they are such passive observers ... too scared to raise concerns over Dr

Mahathir's leadership.

"To me, they (Umno Youth members) behave like pokka di batang buruk' (a little bear always nodding its head) (see CORRECTION above) to all of the Prime Minister's actions.

"Umno Youth members should be critical. They should take risks."

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