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## Notes on literature and politics

OSCAR Wilde, Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag all once wrote essays in the form of "notes". These essays presented thoughts and impressions in the form of bite-sized chunks rather than a whole meal. They were broken up into different parts and the points they made didn't always follow a logical or cumulative sequence.

Why on earth did they write in this manner? Because they were lazy, that's why. But they also instinctively grasped the allure of this seemingly scattershot but deeply rich and meditative genre. So they were being quite smart lah.

As the only possible Malaysian equivalent of those literary luminaries, I shall now whip out my own McNuggets on the very local topic of "literature and politics". Bon appetit.

1. "Literature" and "politics" are closely linked, probably because they both have three syllables. There are some people of American extraction who might pronounce the first word with four syllables, as in "lidduruhture", but I suggest that we ignore them.

2. Vaclav Havel is an example of a good writer who became a politician. Edwina Currie is an example of a politician who became a bad writer. Does the sordid world of politics debilitate one's creative energy? Draw your own conclusions.

3. Politics and literature both require passion and integrity. They need an ability to translate and adapt time-honoured concepts into the local vernacular. The best practitioners will have a fearsomely individualistic drive that you can simultaneously admire and despise. On the minus side: a writer who "sells out" his ideals is analogous to a politician who accepts bribes: it's a species of corruption; it rots away at your insides.

4. Our own politicians usually never utter any kind of public statement about literature, but they have been wrenched out of their silence. They now feel free to discourse on what constitutes "proper" fiction by giving Press conferences and heading literary panels. This democratisation of literature is due to Shahnun Ahmad, who has succeeded where many others have failed. He should not be deprived of his Datuk-ship but instead given another one.

5. There are those who believe that politics should stay out of literature. This view trivialises both endeavours. Politics isn't just a matter of standing for elections, just as literature isn't just a matter of weaving pretty sentences. Things are much wider than that. Any reasonably complex, concrete work will give a clue about how the author sees the society around him being run, and whether he is happy about it. This approach may not fall strictly into the realm of party politics but it is politics all the same. Even a studiously apolitical story can be a political work by default.

6. Any literary work that too blatantly promotes a political cause is usually rubbish, since it can lapse into cheap sloganeering and laughable earnestness. For proof, check out the smorgasbord of soggy poems printed in the Malay Press about the Kosovars. (As if those people haven't suffered enough!) I am sure that the writers had pure, shining motives, but motives are sometimes irrelevant. Most of those poems should be bombed to bits.

7. It's all right for politicians to chant slogans and propose easy answers because these are part of the political process. Each politikus

needs to stress and simplify to get mass support. An ideal politician will combine the modus operandi of a simple person with the thought process of a complex person. But for literary writers it is different. Literature uses a more insidious approach in taking up residence in the collective consciousness of the public. It may take a longer time but the impact can last for generations. This explains why some politicians receive support only in their lifetimes, while some writers become popular only posthumously.

8. Our political system divides people into convenient ethnic boxes. The threat of strife is constantly trotted out as emotional blackmail to make people stay in their own compartments. Our literature unfortunately follows this trend. There are very few local writers who consciously try to breach the barriers of race and class. Most are content to merely pad their own boxes.

9. Our literary agencies mirror the workings of our political parties. Anecdotal evidence from places like Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka and Gapena speak of the institutionalised bodek and hentam that go on in there. You also get the same cases of sidelining, overwrought ambition, and proxy wars. There's so much "politics" in literature that it's no wonder people have so little time to read and write.

10. Malay literature has been fortunate enough to benefit from political patronage, particularly since the 1970s. All big literary functions are officiated by government representatives. Works are commissioned, subsidised and actively promoted with public money. You can actually make a living by being a full-time creative writer in Malay. The awful thing is that writers are then implicitly made to feel dependent on the State's largesse. There is a danger that they will become mere mouthpieces of the establishment. Why is this bad? Because all great or at least reasonably good writers need to be independent. English-language writers should probably feel lucky that they are officially "marginalised".

11. The genre of "sastera bodek" is not uniquely Malaysian (just look at the stuff that came out of China's Cultural Revolution) but there is something unutterably local about the way we do it. All it took was for our then-DPM to allude to the myth of Si Tanggang in a speech, and a lavish play on the very subject was staged, complete with video-clip of said speech. All it took was for our PM to write a poem called 'Perjuangan Yang Belum Selesai', and DBP duly commissioned a play with the exact same title. Comrades, what is to be done?

12. Local anti-establishment work is either so subtle and obscure that it appeals to only the cognoscenti, or so adolescent that it's worth nothing more than a few cheap yucks. An example of the latter is a recent Mingguan Malaysia short story about the hatred an undergraduate demonstrator feels for a hectoring relative who is in his mid-70s. All the young guy's problems are then solved when his relative conveniently kicks the bucket. The anti-Mahathir slant of this story is so lacking in literary flavour that it's not worth the paper it's printed on.

13. It was either Whitman or Emerson or someone else who said, "I can't write an intelligent poem without an intelligent audience." Malaysians are not dumb but we're so used to having it easy that we don't know how to react when things get rough. We either lash out in fear and loathing or retreat into a cowardly, self-preserving cocoon. I hope that we are seeing the start of an intelligently contentious literary tradition, away from not only neo-feudal subservience but anti-intellectual prickliness. The time is now!

14. A Sasterawan Negara once had an excremental vision in which politicians are reduced to their most basic biological needs. You probably think that I'm referring to Shanon again, but I have outwitted you this

time. These are actually the thoughtful closing lines of Usman Awang's poem `Bagaimana Kalau':