

24/07/2002

A question of persuasion

Kunbek

MALAYSIAN literature continues to haunt a few private conversations. Albeit a shy animal, it does, at a pinch, exist. (And from the way it looks these days, may well be coming out more.)

The likes of Somerset Maugham and Anthony Burgess are demonstrably not the last word to be heard in these parts. And yet the fact that the new Irish ambassador to Malaysia, with all the resources of the diplomatic mission at his command, was unable to locate genus *malaysianum* (see NST, July 10) in the great libraries of the West, must give us cause for concern.

Without making a big meal of it - for creativity is a Medusa's head and it may be a mistake to adopt the "in your face" approach - we might at least ask why the animal is quite so shy, to the extent that the world (in the guise of the Irish ambassador), has had to come all the way here to look for it, make a clearing in the hutan and induce it to appear, with promise of sweet reward? (The IMPAC Dublin Literary Award is a neat whistle's worth of 100,000 euros or RM380,000.)

Well, it's very nice of the Irish Ambassador to expect such great things of us, and tell us, as it were, "Malaysia boleh", but this enjoins us to answer the question - what's up with us then? Why haven't we yet forced ourselves upon the world? We've been to Antarctica and back again, and are contemplating a Visit to Mars (see NST, July 17), but the literary salons of the world are too far to walk.

Let's nobble the few comparisons lurking at the back of our minds. There are places where genius seems to grow on (banana) trees. Think the West Indies and you get Naipaul and Walcott, think Nigeria and you get Achebe and Soyinka, think India or Indonesia or the Philippines and you get whole boomtowns of writers. But think Malaysia and you get Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Think Singapore and you get Mr. Lee Kuan Yew.

Does this tell us something? It tells us that unlike any of these other places, Malaysia and Singapore, linked by the causeway of psychic history, have both had decades of peace and prosperity, of stable development and growth. We've had skilled, ingenious government - responsible, indeed frenetic, government led by talented men who sleep little and think much. But it also tells us that there is no direct relation between GDP and literary efflorescence.

Government is prescriptive, literature, descriptive. Great literature has been born in times of chaos - in the West Indies and Africa, in the era of self-determination, of freedom from colonial rule; in China after 1911, in the crumbling away of the weight of dynastic history, when the "first generation" of modern Chinese writers wrote out the exposed iron in their souls.

So is it the pervading presence of government that inhibits us? In both Singapore and Malaysia there is active support of the arts. In Singapore there is a yearly arts festival worthy of any European city. And although the government is probably saying "Crap," under its breath most of the time, it allows young theatre groups the freedom of the stage. It has even instituted sex as a smart advertising move. Thus the Arts Museum is "well-hung", according to a billboard of some months ago.

But literature requires more than sexual licence. Let's get to the nub. Does it really make a difference to writers if the little areas around the Kamunting or Whitley Road Detention Centres are cordoned off? Why and in

what way does it affect the whole realm of words? Or doesn't it? And do we need this mental blur?

But let's remember that we do have a literature... I am held in a bind between the need to probe the conditions literature requires to flourish, and the desire to affirm, to the extent of my modest efficacy, the brave little corpus of works we already have. A visit to the bookshops will show us whole shelves of local literature, and stacks of Asian literature, all looking distinctly "exotic".

Who reads them? Perhaps it's a question of persuasion. Our reading groups need to be persuaded occasionally to include a local work. To read K.S. Maniam or Lloyd Fernando or Chuah Guat Eng on Malaysia, rather than lean on the trusty form of Anthony Burgess. They need to be beguiled into reading such stuff as *The Stones Cry Out*, A Cambodian Childhood 1975-80, by Molyda Szymusiak, an elegantly poignant document of life under Pol Pot, which asks to be part of every Asian psyche.

And in these comfort zones, we need to be persuaded to have time, after watching *Ally McBeal* of the paraplegic eyes and the hoots, and learning at Oprah's knee, and imitating the transactional violence of American courtroom dramas, for those little corners of our souls that are lighted up by local fiction.

Perhaps also we need to be persuaded to ask questions of religion. Is religion denuding us of the experience of literature in our lives? For who needs stories when you can get the Master Story at source? Literature cannot reach the soul, it cannot save us. Thus it is mere entertainment. It is dispensable. How do we answer this?

And finally, our publishers. I had one tell me "Ah well, if you were Stephen King, I would take out my cheque book," or something to that effect. The same guy never reads the local newspapers, as they are not up to his nibs. I suspect he's beyond persuasion. Another publisher hasn't paid the author K.S. Maniam a cent for one of his novels, so he told me. But the rest of the scaredy-cats may well purr if they can have their hand held.

Tidak apa. We now have the game Raman Krishnan of Silverfish Books, urbane host of literary soirees at his Bangsar bookshop, and publisher of now the second volume of short stories of the series Silverfish New Writing. A third volume, a women's collection, will be on its way in September.

And between Raman and the Australian High Commission, who are hosting the launch of Silverfish New Writing 2 today, the invocations of the Irish Embassy, and the crowds of aspiring writers all now thoroughly roused (and a little soused?) we should be all right.

Party's just beginning.