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Talk about nationhood

Francis Dass

SOMETIMES you just have to trust a poet's keen eyes and mind to see the obvious truths in life, those that ordinary men and women easily lose sight of.

"Your country has already justified some of the major themes of this conference. The sense of nationhood already exists. I spoke to some of the participants and they were very proud to say that I am a Malaysian Indian or a Malaysian Chinese!" said Dr Niyi Osundare, the Nigerian academic, critic and poet who presented a paper at the recent international conference organised by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia titled Language and Nationhood: Confronting New Realities.

Osundare was touched by the great pride with which Malaysians introduced themselves to him.

He was one of the speakers at the conference organised by UKM's School of Language Studies and Linguistics.

Just as their varied nationalities and backgrounds suggested, everyone at the conference had their own interesting or concurring takes on the link between language and nationhood.

However, the man who brilliantly kickstarted the conference was Datuk Dr Munir Majid, who presented his paper titled "Like a Kind of American".

Munir - who is the chairman of Celcom (M) Bhd, president of the Kuala Lumpur Business Club, and founding and first chairman of the Securities Commission - took the audience on a wondrous ride of the modern English language and all its nuances, be it power politics, economic might or the noise from clashing cultural cymbals.

"In the only 50 years that the United States was introduced and introduced itself as a preponderant world power, it has achieved awesome predominance in almost every field of human endeavour, whether you like it or not," he said.

His was a very practical, modern and extremely enlightening take on the idea of nationhood, and the audience concurred.

He shared his enlightened insight into the world of business, saying, "Overwhelming US economic success has, apart from offering a demonstrably high achieving market system and model, also introduced sub-systems and micro-systems which permeate and dominate the way economies are run.

"The US has the thick skin and the depth of markets to survive these transgressions i.e. Enron, WorldCom, Arthur Andersen. It is an American world, these globalised financial markets, and you play in it, as you have to, according to American language, concepts, practices and standards - and sometimes double-standards!"

Munir also expertly manoeuvred his take on what it all means in social terms for the global audience when he added, "What about smaller countries like Malaysia (which face the onslaught of American language and communication dominance) then?"

"We can preserve our language and culture without turning our back on the world, and without closing our minds to ALL American or Western influence. We should organise financial sustenance to preserve our culture and language, without any pretension to wider world export, even if we might want to show them off.

"At the same time, we should equip ourselves to take on the world, with the necessary language and the tools of the New Economy. If we fail in the world, who is going to care for our language and culture? Indeed, where

would our language and culture then be?"

Munir fought his case suavely and the applause at the end of his session indicated that this smartly-suited corporate man had clearly won his argument for a sensible and enlightened approach to the idea of nationhood, from the perspective of the larger, interdependent and interconnected world that we live in today.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who closed the conference, maintained the momentum and excitement set off by Munir.

Mahathir too spoke on the need to ignite the parallel engines for the mastery of both Bahasa Malaysia and English - one, to ensure greater inter-ethnic bonding of the Malaysian people; and the latter, to ensure that Malaysians and Malaysia remain relevant on the global front.

If Munir took the conference audience on a whirlwind tour of a brief history of the modern world (touching on the intricacies of American politics, economics, media hegemony as well as literary powerplay amongst writers for readers in the English language); Mahathir took the audience down the annals of Malaysian history to share his observations of the history and development of the Malay language.

Mahathir cited how, in the past, the Arab and European civilisations gained from their willingness to study the knowledge available in other languages.

"If Malay is to be better known, then the Malay-speaking people must become advanced in their material development, at least at par with the developed countries. To do this, they must be willing to study the current language of knowledge, namely English," Mahathir said.

If Malaysians confined themselves completely to Malay it is unlikely that they would be able to develop and build a greater Malay civilisation, the elder statesman cautioned.

"Malaysian nationhood remains tangible and real, especially when Malaysia's development and progress gave Malaysians reasons to be proud of their Malaysian identity and nationality," the former prime minister said.

In between these two Malaysians, the three-day conference saw a host of speakers from within as well as overseas who spoke of their own experiences as regards language and nationhood.

Discussion of languages was not restricted to the verbal skills but expanded to include the abstract forms of languages - in the form of films, for example.

Professor Hamid Naficy of Rice University in Texas spoke of the language of exilic filmmakers and their "accented" movies - where exiled filmmakers pine for a highly idealised homeland while living in another country and not setting roots in their adopted country.

His paper was titled "Multilinguality and Nationality in Exile-produced Films".

Naficy also spoke on how the views of the second generation of exilic filmmakers differed from that of their parents as they shed their exilic longing for an idealised and faraway place and instead focussed their cameras on their own experiences of growing in a "new" home country as the new immigrants.

Of Iranian descent, Naficy, a professor of Film and Media studies and Chair at the Department of Art and Art History, has authored a few books, including "An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking" (2001) and "The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles" (1993).

Koh Tai Ann, Nanyang Technological University's professor of English at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, spoke on the topic "How to Read, And What For: Literatures and Literacies in Our Time, Our Place" which touched on the urgent need to equip young minds with critical literacy skills and awareness.

"In a globalising, multicultural society and in the world of the Internet, young people need (to equip themselves with) more than one literacy," she said.

To read the vast array of material on the Net, she says, children need to acquire media skills that includes critical literacy so that they can think for themselves and assess who is writing the message and why it is being written.

"Critical literacy is very important in helping us to distinguish the different material (available in the electronic media today), so that our minds are not easily captured by the media," she explained.

Nigerian poet and academic Osundare, on his part, spoke on the topic "What is The Nationality of Your Idiom?: African Literature and The Language-Between".

Osundare discussed in detail the challenges faced by African novelists in the face of linguistic and cultural pressures.

With penetrating observations and wit to spare, Osundare pointed out that, in the case of Africa, on the one side there are the hardcore Anglophiles and Francophiles, while in the middle are the reformed types cured of their colonial pangs, and at the other extreme are nationalist who want to see the preservation of the vast variety of African ethnic languages, and how the greater African literary scene manages to remain relevant in the midst of this babelic "noise".

In all, there were 14 plenary papers and 120 parallel papers presented at the three-day conference held a few weeks ago.

Zawiah Yahya, professor of Postcolonial Literatures in English at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, UKM and Chair of this conference, said of the gathering: "The conference as we planned it was about thinking things through - which involves looking at and questioning existing paradigms, systems, policies, ways of doing, ways of seeing and ways of thinking.

"Discussions on language issues were to be interdisciplinary in nature and not exclusive or compartmentalised. That's why we chose plenary speakers who are experts not only in language, literature, linguistics and education, but also in sociology, politics, film and media, corporate business and management.

"Most of the sessions generated discussions in this spirit of inquiry. We talked about different visions and versions of nationhood, from different ideological and geo-political terrains. We talked about different ways nation-building could happen, as well as different discourses that constructed the idea of nationhood, from cyber chatter to subterranean propaganda, from classroom material to hip-hop lyrics, from official document to profane literature."

Happy with the outcome, she declares that the conference was a roaring success, which it most certainly was.