

Speaking and Writing the Anthropocene: In Conversation with Cecil Rajendra

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Cecil Rajendra

83-year-old Cecil Rajendra, nicknamed “The Lawyer-Poet”, is one of Malaysia’s most prominent literary writers. A lawyer by profession and a poet with over 20 published collections, his literary contributions were recognized with a nomination for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005 (Personal & Profane 159). His poems have been featured in multiple media forms including magazines, journals, newspapers, BBC educational programs and textbooks all over the world. He is the only Southeast Asian poet to be included in a wide-ranging anthology published by HarperCollins in 2001: *The Poetry of Our World: An International Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, which includes Nobel laureates like Pablo Neruda, Seamus Heaney and Wole Soyinka

In Rajendra’s view, a 21st-century poet should act as “The Equalizer”, balancing the weight of an imbalanced world, as well as bearing witness and speaking up on behalf of those unable to do so (*The Poet as “The Equalizer”* 3). His poems therefore delve into issues such as injustice, social problems, race, war,

gender inequality, human rights, and environmentalism. “The Animal and Insect Act” (1980) is one of Rajendra’s most well-known poems which was featured in *Amnesty International Anthology* and *Asian Wall Street Journal*, reflecting his legal profession and activism. His *Broken Buds* (1994) has had its fourth print and is included in the curriculum of the universities of Newcastle, Northampton, and Sussex. Another acclaimed work is *Papa Moose’s Nursery Rhyme* (1991) where Rajendra parodies famous nursery rhymes, twisting their familiar narratives to express concerns about issues such as war and environmentalism. Other notable collections include *Hour of Assassins* (1983), *Shrapnel Silence & Sand* (1999), and *by Trial ‘n Terror* (2006).

Rajendra’s dedication to environmentalism is well-documented. He began expressing concern about the destruction of nature long before it became a mainstream issue. His poem “Requiem for a Rainforest” (1993), published in a Penguin Anthology, received a lot of publicity, resulting in the Malaysian government taking the unprecedented step of barring his passport because he was anti-logging. Most of his environmental poems are found in *Dove on Fire: Poems of Peace, Justice and Ecology* (1987) and *Rags & Ragas* (2000), while some of his recent ones include *Limericks & Lyrics from a Lockdown* (2021), and “Half-Past Doomsday Hour” published in the *Sunday Star* newspaper in 2022. We find it important to interview him, because he has contributed so much to the local literary scene as well as many legal cases related to the environment.

Muhammad Syaukat Mustafa Kamal (MSMK): What are your thoughts on the Anthropocene, the geographical epoch that we’re now in? What is the role of the writer in this epoch?

Cecil Rajendra (CR): I think it's quite interesting because for now man is undeniably in control of the environment. I'm glad that in your research you turn your focus to the environment. It is high time. When I was writing about the environment quite a long time ago, I got into a lot of trouble because I was labelled as anti-development. I talked about the conservation of tigers, logging and the Penans, among others. The Plight of the Penans is very sad. The Sumatran Rhino has become extinct.

The most important thing for the poet or writer is to bear witness to the changing times. A writer sees things happening around him and he records it. I'm not the only person to write about what's happening around me. The thing is people want to write about what's happening around them, but they're scared it may be a very sensitive issue. Like talking about the climate. You find very few people talking about it. 10% of the pollution is caused by carbon emissions by the motor industry. But there's nobody talking about it, putting a brake on it. Instead, more and more cars are being sold, right? I remember I spoke to the Penang state

government when I came back from Denmark about using electric buses in improving public transportation. But there's so much money and stakeholders involved. When the palm oil was just taking off in the '70s and '80s, they said it will green the Earth. You know what a joke that was! The same thing about having golf courses – they would green the earth. We are still in this sort of denial now. We refuse to accept the fact that we are actually doing very little about the environment. Not many people are willing to give up their home comforts, you know? You see how many cars are on the road now and how every family has more than one car, when it's completely unnecessary? So as long as we carry on with this sort of denial, it's going to be very difficult.

Zainor Izat Zainal (ZIZ): You experimented with a lot of different styles at the beginning of your writing career. Has your style of writing changed over the years?

CR: It probably has. You know until today, I keep dictionaries in Malay and English. I constantly check the meaning and spelling of words. And I constantly read. Many writers don't read. People are amazed that I read so much. I read all the time. There's no place where you can succumb to a point where you'll feel yes, I've perfected it, I've done it. There's so much to learn. Now, I'm not being modest, I'm far from a modest person. But if you look at the great writers from the past, and you put yourself in that, and then you realize how really insignificant you are and how much more you've got to do.

MSMK: When you write your poems which comes first, the form or the content?

CR: The content always finds the form! For example, I felt compelled to use the Japanese Tanka (5 lines, 31-syllables) to record the 2004 tsunami disaster as 'Tsunami' is a Japanese word that has found universal coinage. It seemed natural and appropriate to record the impact of the tsunami in Japanese Tankas. Likewise, I recorded the so-called war on terror employing Omar Khayyam's quatrains as it was waged in the middle east.

MSMK: In some of your poems, for example, "Requiem for a Rainforest" and "Song of Hope", the pronoun 'I' is in lowercase, but in others like "No 20/20 vision in 2020" the pronoun is in uppercase. Can you explain the usage of the uppercase and lowercase pronoun 'I' in your poems? Was it done intentionally?

CR: I try to use the lowercase "i" in all my writing - prose and poems - as I feel the uppercase 'I' draws too much attention to the author rather than the subject matter. However, many publishers, editors and typists (typesetters) think it is a mistake and revert the lowercase to the uppercase. I find the uppercase "I" too loud and egoistic.

MSMK: You also had a collection of poems that uses nursery rhyme.

CR: Yes, you see that was very controversial as well. When my daughter was about 6 years old or something my wife and I gave a book of nursery rhymes to her. Both of us were working. My wife worked in the hospital and when we came back home my daughter would be singing “London Bridge Is Falling Down” So, I said, you know, this nursery rhyme has no relevance to Asians at all. Many of them are actually very sadistic. You know, like “Three Blind Mice”?

So, I decided that I was going to rewrite all this. By this time the logging was happening and the Penans were barricading the forest. I wrote “All The Trees Are Falling Down” which actually had direct relevance to what was going on in East Malaysia. That’s also part of my environmental stuff now. So, that was the first time in my life I had to buy a rhyming dictionary because nursery rhymes won’t work unless they rhyme. A nursery rhyme has to rhyme, so the kids can sing it with rhythm and everything else. My daughter was very excited about my first version of nurse rhyme and she was asking for another one. So, it became like a bit of a game with her. So I continued with “Humpty Dumpty”. Everything else after that was based on traditional nursery rhymes. I came up with *Papa Moose’s Nursery Rhyme* because you know, the traditional ones are known as a “Mother Goose Nursery Rhyme”. Then, Anwar Fazal who served as the Senior Regional Advisor with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), who was a bit of an environmentalist, invited me to one of his conferences. He was one of the few people in this country who saw value in my poetry. So, I tried the nursery rhymes. And he said, oh, this is so relevant to what is going on. So, the UNDP seconded an artist from Canada, Catherine Worthington, who did the illustrations. The UNDP was very much involved, supporting the whole thing, but the book was published in India because it was controversial. My nursery rhymes are very political, of course. I remember in the year 2000 I went up to Kathmandu, very eager to see them sell my book at the book shops there. It did pretty well. I was very flattered because one day my daughter introduced me to her friend who couldn’t afford the book, and who had actually copied all my nursery rhymes and drew pictures. That was amazing, so, I gave her a copy of the book. People said that the kids won’t get it, but there were many kids that were into it. And actually, there was another kid in the kindergarten who used “All the Trees are Falling Down” as a nursery rhyme. So yes, the book was specifically written as a nursery rhyme for my daughter, her friends, and of course her cousins of the same age.

MSMK: But they sound a bit political.

CR: Yeah. I believe there is no such thing as an apolitical animal. I believe the very fact that you drive a car on the left-hand side of the road and not the right-hand side is a political thing. You know if we were colonized by the Americans, we would be driving on the right-hand side. But we were colonized by the British and so we drive on the left-hand side. So, you cannot be apolitical.

ZIZ: Who do you write for?

CR: I don't write for anyone. I'm not writing for any special audience. Certain things happen in your life - you fall in love, you get married, you experience things. I basically write to record this, to bear witness to what's happening. A lot of stuff takes years to discover, like the university has taken a long time to basically look at my stuff. My last few books have never been reviewed here. Sometimes it can be kind of irritating. Occasionally, someone will pick it up.

MSMK: Do you consider your poems to be universal: by that I mean could they be read by anyone? Most of your contents are important, enlightening, but there are a few that might be a bit mature for the kids due to the rebellious, graphic, and explicit words.

CR: I have never consciously written for a universal audience or for posterity. That several of my poems have found international relevance is purely happenstance. For example, "The Darn Size of Trees" - written nearly 40 years ago - was discovered and published a few months ago by the American Bar Association (ABA). I believe this is due to the rising racism in America and Europe. Similarly, the poems "Sedition" and "Animal and Insect Act" have been published in over 60 countries because of political repression and censorship prevalent everywhere. Also, environmental poems written 30—40 years ago, like "Requiem for a Rainforest" have become increasingly relevant because of the climate critics. "Requiem for a Rainforest" and "No Celebratory Song" were recently performed at an eco-event in the U.K. Incidentally I am far from being flattered that these poems remain relevant in so many places, after so many decades. I'm indeed saddened and disappointed that they have done nothing to change the mindset of our politicians or improve the dire state of our planet.

ZIZ: You don't practice self-censorship, do you?

CR: No, I don't. I've never exercised 'self-censorship'. I do not set out to shock or outrage but let the words fall where they must. Many will be scandalized to read – after my demise – some of my private erotic and polemical poems. 70% of my stuff remains unpublished. In fact, I think a lot of my poems will never see the light of day. I wrote for the amusement of my friends as well. But you know, they will not be published. They will probably be published abroad.

MSMK: Do you read criticism of your work?

CR: Yes. I read all reviews and critiques, but only respond to constructive criticism. Most of the criticism I've received in the past has been personal, vindictive and motivated by envy.

ZIZ: You seem to know that people have been studying your work; that your work gets a lot of criticism.

How do you respond to all criticism?

CR: I read all criticism. And, I found out, in this country and Singapore, I have been attacked left and right, and it's basically not on my work, but on me. They're very personal. However, there was this one chap who told me not to be too upset, and that those who criticized were envious of my work. By the way, my first book was criticized in London when it came out. I had some good reviews, but I only remember reviews that were very critical and constructive. I have been very cautious. There are some very eminent writers around the world who have been my mentors and my critics, and they were very constructive in their criticism. Some of them are probably dead by now. So, basically, I read the criticism and I can't pretend that I was really hurt.

MSMK: Your work seems to be acknowledged more overseas than locally. As a Malaysian writer, how do you feel about this?

CR: Any writer worth his salt is both local and universal. While it is good to be acknowledged abroad, it is sometimes galling to be totally sidelined as a writer at home. For instance, for the last 10 years the George Town Literary Festival has been held and not once have I been invited to this annual shindig that happens on my doorstep!

Noritah Omar (NO): You said that some people don't consider you as a poet because of the political aspect of your work.

CR: Yes, that's right. There was another professor who said that if I only write love poetry, being one of the few from Asia that can write love poetry, I will be a great poet. But, according to him, I have polluted poetry with social issues. You know what is political and what is social? For instance, now everyone is saying that climate change is a political thing, but it is not.

MSMK: You dislike statements made by politicians in the past, for example the statement "We must utilise our gifts of nature". Now, we have had some changes in politics, do you see any changes regarding caring for the environment?

CR: It is a folly to assume that just because we've had a change of government (twice in two years!) that there has been a qualitative change in political thinking or policy. The old politicians in my home state who said it was a waste not to use the gifts of nature – in defense of the logging companies and destruction of wildlife habitat – championed conservation when in opposition but have failed totally to fulfil their promises. Not only have they failed to clean up our rivers as promised, but they got rid of Penang's iconic ferries and are threatening to get rid of our equally iconic funicular hill railway. At the national level, despite various pledges made at several climate summits, we haven't done much all to reduce carbon emissions or

improve atmospheric conditions. Instead, every year we churn out more and more carbon-spewing vehicles; to further ‘develop’ our oil and motor industry. As I grow older, I got more and more convinced that once a politician comes into power he gets immediately infected by a virus of greed and idiocy which is far more deadly than Covid!

MSMK: Skyscrapers seem to be a recurring subject in your poems when you discuss development and environment. Do you view them as a symbol of environmental destruction?

CR: The skyscraper image is used both literally and metaphorically. It stands as a symbol of all that’s wrong with the so-called development in developing countries which have been more vertical than cultural, moral, or spiritual. We seem obsessed with having the tallest, the biggest this-and-that. This obsession, I posit, parallels the macho male’s obsession with giant penises. In many cities, parks and open spaces have been sacrificed to make way for this monstrosity. In Penang for instance, the historic heart of Georgetown was ruled out to make way for a giant phallus called KOMTAR. Likewise, the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur.

MSMK: Most of the environmental issues discussed in your poems are caused by capitalist development. However, your poem “No Celebratory Song” seems to suggest that you are not against development, but instead hoping for development to be done right. Can you elaborate on this?

CR: I am certainly not against development per se! But why does ‘development’ in the modern context always spell destruction, devastation and the ditching of the old for the new? And I’m not talking about the buildings but also the destruction of rainforests and wildlife for the ‘development’ of timber and palm oil industry, the transmutation (destruction) of traditional arts and crafts, culture and cuisine to cater to the development of the tourist industry, etc. I’m only against development that is not motivated by common sense and humanity but fueled by greed and money.

MSMK: “By Waters of Tembeling” is written for Ong Soo Keat, who is a famous nature painter. Could you tell us more about your relationship with him, and why this is especially written for him?

CR: I first met Ong Soo Keat at a pub in Penang. We were both in the Spaniard’s Inn Football XI and played regularly in inter-pub matches. At the time I was an arts columnist with the Sunday Star. One day his mother phoned and asked if I had seen any of her son’s paintings. I was surprised as I never took him to be an artist; he was more like a belligerent (‘samseng’) footballer ever ready for a punch-up on the football field. She invited me over for lunch to view his work. Attracted more by the prospect of a fabulous lunch – she was a superb cook – than looking at this samseng’s artwork, I accepted the invitation, but I was totally bowled over by the fine details and life-like quality of his paintings. I had never seen such striking, vivid

wildlife work by any Asian artist. I interviewed him immediately for my Sunday arts column 'Lively Arts'. During the course of the interview, I asked him how he managed to get such fine details in his work and he told me he painted directly from nature – capturing (and releasing) the birds, observing the tiger, seladang, tapir, sambar deer, etc. At close quarters. I expressed disbelief. So, he invited us to visit the Endau Rompin National Park where he said he was working closely with the nature society to record the birds and animals that were threatened with extinction due to the rampant logging that was going on all around the park. We spent 5 memorable days in the National Park, experiencing firsthand – thanks to Ong Soo Keat –wildlife and their habitats that were under threat. I wrote him up in my column, introduced him to art aficionados and critics, and helped organize his first 2 solo exhibitions. He quickly achieved international fame and success, but unfortunately, the quality of his works slacked off in later years. However, we remained close friends until his untimely death in 2018.

MSMK: In “Art for Art’s Sake”, you criticize the phrase for ignoring environmental catastrophe. Is this a criticism towards the slogan or is this addressed to some individuals?

CR: After being away for 13 years, I returned home in 1976. I was appalled by how little social awareness there was among fellow local poets and writers. Except for Usman Awang, most of these guys seemed to be nursing private wounds - navel-gazing while all around us the forests were being dismantled, our rivers and oceans polluted, the air thickening with smog, human rights trampled, and dissidents detained indefinitely. In my poems and in my column I was highly critical of this apolitical and apathetic attitude of local writers and artists. In 1981. I presented a paper – “The higher duty of a writer in a developing society”- at the Asian PEN conference in Manila criticizing this ‘Art for Art’s Sake’ stance. The paper caused a furor, and I was attacked from all quarters – artists, writers, poets and politicians – for polluting poetry with politics. To this day, most academics, writers, and critics in Malaysia and Singapore regard me not so much as a poet but a troublemaker. Yes, the poem takes a swipe not only at the concept but also at several critics and academics.

MSMK: You have voiced out fishermen’s misery caused by development and tourist attractions. Now that overfishing is a huge issue to the ecosystem, has your view changed?

CR: Overfishing has not been caused by traditional fisherman eking out a living in coastal villages but huge hi-tech fishing boats and trawlers who harvest our seas on an industrial scale. Tourism continues to be a double-edged sword – attracting foreign revenue but at the same time transforming/transmuting (if not entirely destroying) traditional values, arts and crafts, culture, cuisine and customs to cater to voracious tourists.

MSMK: In general, how would you describe your feelings towards what’s happening to the environment?

CR: I've always been angry with what they have done with the environment. Not just the forests, but the oceans and the streams here. By the way, I took the government to task, you know. The government that came in 2008 said that they would clean the river. And I challenged them, I said look at Sungai Penang, look at the state of the rivers and streams. They have not done much about it. They have not done much about the air pollution that was going on either, even when you try to educate them. I thought that when we have a change of government here, there will be more efforts because they were very critical of the previous government. When they came into power, they were just as bad if not worse. I'm not the sort of guy who goes behind the back and criticizes. I'll tell you openly, publicly.

NO: Do you think environmental issues should be something that unites all of us?

CR: Yes. It should. Because it affects all of us. Whether you are rich, poor, or come from whatever race, you are badly affected. We saw that when we had the haze. How many people have gone ill? And now we are feeling the heat.

MSMK: Back then people did not get any information about the dangers of deforestation, how were you aware of all this?

CR: You see, they were destroying the forest. Back then another thing that was being destroyed was the mangrove swamps too. They were saying mangrove swamps were all dirty and we had to get rid of them. I remember I had a big argument with someone, saying "You are nuts, you don't see the value of the mangrove swamps at all!" Only after the tsunami everyone became aware of the importance of mangrove swamps.

MSMK: Do you believe that more artists should be more concerned like you are now?

CR: People should write about whatever they want. Of course, they can also write about the environment. Now it has come to the point when you see all kinds of floods. You don't have to go anywhere nowadays; you see and feel the heat. Now that Chinese New Year is coming up, how many fireworks will they be firing? These small things could add a lot. More people should be aware about the environment. By the way, I was aware about this already, it was what was happening in the Amazon. When I returned here, I was shocked that it was happening here. They were selling timber and were clearing land for huge cattle farms.

I wrote a poem called 'When the tourists flew in' when I was in Trinidad. They thought I wrote about Penang! I wrote about it when I went to Trinidad, when I came back here, I found out that Mutiara Hotel had just closed down and they had a resort at their beach for VIPs. It was exactly what happened in Trinidad, where the beautiful beaches are only reserved for the elites and tourists, whereas the locals weren't allowed to go to the beaches. So, I wrote the poem. Kee Phaik Cheen was the Minister of Tourism in Penang then.

She was very angry and said, we are trying to bring tourists, this guy is chasing them away! I got this sort of reaction. I said that was the profanity about tourism, it is a double-edged sword. You know all the traditional dance that we have, they go and bastardize them for the tourists. You see some of the things that they do there, they weren't authentic stuff, but it's tailor made, so that tourists would enjoy it. So, these things were happening in a bigger scale in the Caribbean. I was shocked that they have bastardized the local culture here. Beaches there were actually barred. That's why I wrote the poem. The first poem that I wrote about tourism being a double-edged sword, and when I came back here I saw the same thing happening in Tanjong Tokong. The poem by the way is used a lot in tourism studies all over the world now. So, that was the poem that got me into trouble the most. What happens when tourists come in - they destroy a lot of culture, and in some cultures like Bali, a lot of the arts and crafts are made to cater for the tourists. The Philippines was even worse. During conferences they always had this dance, and I asked what these Filipinos were doing with the Hawaiian skirts. It had nothing to do with their culture. They messed up the whole thing with the hula skirts and so on.

MSMK: Do you feel optimistic about the future of our environment?

CR: No. I'm very pessimistic. Every day you'd have to put up with the heat.

MSMK: Have you considered other means or other platforms? I mean, you have a burning passion for environmental issues.

CR: Of course, I'm a lawyer, and I'm very much involved with the Bar council. By the way, one night, a group of Penans came to see me at my house because logging had become a big issue. They were barricaded. The bulldozers were also sent in. So, they came to see me. You know that this country is a very big country. You know that the lawyers in West Malaysia cannot represent those in the East of Malaysia. They won't allow us to go there and represent them. We have the same law, but we can't practice there. So, they came, and I asked what about the lawyers there? All the lawyers there were involved with the logging companies. No one wanted to act for the Penans or any of the natives there, which was a sad thing.

ZIZ: I remember Azmi Sharom, I read a lot of his works. He said in Malaysia, the problem is not because of the lack of environmental law, but the political will.

CR: Yes. The enforcement. We have some of the biggest traffickers of wildlife here. It's not the law, nobody enforces the law.

ZIZ: What would it take for these laws to be enforced?

CR: They've reduced the age for voting to 18. More younger people should get involved. But the sad thing

is that people get easily corrupted. I used to do a lot of legal aid cases, for like some people and places that you might have never even heard of. One of these was in Balik Pulau. There was a lot of smuggling going on in Balik Pulau. People were smuggling things from Medan and some were caught. But hardly anyone got prosecuted. A very dedicated police officer told me that some policemen had fancy clothes and bikes which they couldn't afford with their salaries. They'd have to take money on the side. Corruption has become second nature.

My family and friends came back to vote for change in the last election. It was great. There was a tremendous amount of celebration. Everyone was in for a real change. We got new people. I wrote a poem about it, that it was too early to celebrate, because there was so much "crap" from the old parties. These guys were more like mudskippers in mud. Sure enough, you saw what happened. I was not prophetic. I just saw the composition and the amount of in-fighting. I was attacked by a lot of people, including Ambiga.

Coming back to our discussion, hopefully in the next election, we get young people who are not easily corrupted. We have a very materialistic society.

NO: I think your poetry is celebrated more now than when you wrote it.

CR: I think now it has become more relevant. They are seeing the effects of it. I was just writing about what was happening. You see when I was doing "All The Trees was Falling Down", they thought I was corrupting the children. My daughter was 6 or 7 years old, but she understood them. She saw the Penans being arrested.

ZIZ: We have a lot of environmental issues in Malaysia, what do you think is the most pressing environmental issue?

CR: The most pressing environmental issue is the denial of what's happening to the environment. That is the most pressing issue. We are in denial. If we accept these issues, then we'll do something about them. Don't blame somebody or something else.

Now, few people know that we are at the age of Anthropocene, and what it means. Humans have been controlling the environment ever since the industrial age. And people have to accept that. Now, we are in the position of doing something, but we are doing the opposite. We have to accept the fact that we can do something, we can mess it up, and we can also do something to rectify it. Whether it's too late or not, that's another thing.

NO: I gave lectures on transcendentalism and romanticism in my class, how the reiteration of the environment is the reflection of our humanity. I was telling them, when we talk about religion, we always

think about all these theological things, it's in relation to the environment that one has to consider the reflection of the creation. So, they start to have this awareness. Do you think there is a way to create awareness in the young people?

CR: Yes. You are right. In the Malaysian culture, trees have spirits, right? And they are sacred. So, if you destroy the trees, you are also destroying something which is sacred. But people don't even consider that. Some people would say that there are certain values and religious significance of the environment including the rivers and animals. But we don't even look at it as sacred. We don't relate that way. A politician once said it is a waste to not use the gift of nature. So, you can use all the trees and animals, otherwise it's a waste? What kind of nonsense is that?

So, basically, we don't have respect for nature. And that's what a lot of people should learn.

It's very important for people to be aware that we have reached a moment in time where we are destroying the planet. Human beings should be held responsible.

NO: People always say the environment is separated from humans, it is not.

CR: I think, a big thing for the university is to educate. But a lot of things have gone backwards. You see when I was in university, we were taught things like ethics, etiquette and so on. When I came back here, I was asked to be a guest lecturer at a Law faculty in KL. I did a few lectures, I noticed they were not listening. I was talking about humans right, why it is necessary, why we need legal aid and I noticed they were not going anywhere. So, I stopped and asked them why are they doing law? About 90% of them answered they wanted to get rich quick. So, I told the professor I'm not going to continue, this is a complete waste of my time. I came to talk about values and justice. All they wanted was the quickest way to get rich. As a matter of fact, there are many lawyers here who are not interested in justice at all. The orang Asli case was a classic case. We took the Selangor government, federal government, and PLUS highway to court, and it was an uphill battle all the way. You know what was the first thing they objected to? The Orang Asli didn't dress properly to court. Thank God, we had a very strong team of lawyers. Thank God the judge was quite good. But they kept on appealing. Then the change of government. Then Selangor withdrew. These people were not asking for compensation. They were moved out of their land! Where were they going to stay? They were using a law that was passed by the British, it was the 1948 Aboriginal People's Act. Orang Asli cannot own land. They can only be tenants of the land. They've been there hundreds of years, and they can't own land? So, these guys came and saw me. I couldn't believe what was happening. Some people were paid millions of dollars of compensation, but these guys got a few hundred dollars. So, we challenged the whole thing. And, it did change the law after that. Because that's the sort of thing that happens when we talk

about the whole thing about justice. People were asking why are you doing this sort of thing? Well, the authorities are not doing much about it. In this country one day you have the minister of the environment and the next day it's somebody else.

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/ **Interview**

Speaking and Writing the Anthropocene : In Conversation with Cecil Rajendra



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Abstract

Cecil Rajendra, nicknamed “The Lawyer-Poet”, is one of Malaysia’s most prominent literary writers. A lawyer by profession and a poet with over 20 published collections, his literary contributions were recognized with a nomination for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005. His poems have been featured in multiple media forms including magazines, journals, newspapers, BBC educational programs and textbooks all over the world. He has been expressing concerns about the destruction of nature long before it became a mainstream concern. Most of his environmental poems are found in *Dove on Fire: Poems of Peace, Justice and Ecology* (1987) and *Rags & Ragas* (2000), while some of his recent ones include *Limericks & Lyrics from a Lockdown* (2021), and “Half-Past Doomsday Hour” published in the Sunday Star in 2022. We find it important to interview him, having contributed so much to the local literary scene as well as many legal cases related to the environment. The present interview revolves around his literary career, the relationship between his works and the environment, his motivations and his views on the Anthropocene.

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Section

Interview



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Author Biographies

Zainor Izat Zainal, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Zainor Izat Zainal is senior lecturer at Universiti Putra Malaysia, where she teaches Malaysian literature in English, creative writing and miscellaneous other subjects related to world literature. Currently, she is Vice President of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment ASEAN (ASLE-ASEAN) and Co-Chief Editor of *Journal of Southeast Asian Ecocriticism*. Her research interests include postcolonial ecocriticism and teaching literature in the Malaysian ESL context. She has been actively involved in producing student play productions in Universiti Putra Malaysia such as *Atomic Jaya* (2017), *Toast!* (2019) and *The Girl and The Ghost* (2023), and *When The Sun Sits On The Branches Of That Jambu Tree* (2024).

Mr. Muhammad Syaukat, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Muhammad Syaukat Mustafa Kamal is pursuing a PhD in English Literature at Universiti Putra Malaysia. His areas of interest are Malaysian literature, ecocriticism, affect theory, and narrative empathy. He is currently working at International Islamic University Malaysia, teaching English language proficiency.

Noritah Omar, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Noritah Omar received her Ph.D. from Indiana University, Bloomington, USA, in 1999. She is an associate professor with the English Department at Universiti Putra Malaysia, where she teaches Literary Theory, Malaysian Literature in English, and Feminism and Social Change. Her research interests include postcolonial literature and theory, the culture and politics of Islam in modern Malaysia, the history of Malaysian literary criticism, and the transformation of popular culture in Malaysia. She has published articles and book chapters on gender and Islam, Malaysian and Singapore Literature, Islam and modern Malay literature, and Islam and contemporary popular culture. She has also conducted research on issues in higher education and research methodology and ethics. Her current work focuses on new forms of intellectualism and its trajectories in literature, and addresses questions of literature's intellectual place in the world.

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