

An Interview with Anwar Ridhwan: A Malaysian National Laureate

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Anwar Ridhwan was born on 5 August 1949 at Parit Satu Timur, Sungai Besar, Selangor, Malaysia. The youngest in a family of six children, his early education began at Sekolah Kebangsaan Sungai Besar, where he studied from 1956 to 1962. After that, he went to Sekolah Menengah Sabak Bernam (now Sekolah Ungku Aziz, Sabak Bernam) from 1963 to 1967, and attended Sekolah Alam Shah, Kuala Lumpur from 1968 to 1969. In 1970, he enrolled as a student in the Malay Studies Department at University Malaya (UM) and received his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1973, Master's in 1983 and Ph.D. in 1988, all from the same university.

After graduating in 1973, he worked as a temporary officer at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) for three months, after which he was accepted as a Literary Research Officer there, on a permanent basis. He was on the Editorial Board of *Dewan Bahasa and Dewan Budaya* at DBP. In 1982, he took a management and book publishing course at New York University, Manhattan, USA. In 1986, he attended the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, USA. Later, he became Head of the Literary Development and Expansion Unit at DBP. From April 1997 to March 2000, he was a Visiting Professor at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. In 2001, he was appointed the Director of Publication, DBP until his retirement in 2005. Since July 2008, he has been the Dean, Faculty of Creative Writing, Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan Malaysia (National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage, Malaysia).

He began his literary career at UM where he founded ISUM, Literary Association of University Malaya. He also wrote for the culture column of the campus newspaper, the *Mahasiswa Negara*. His short story "Perjalanan Terakhir" (The Last Journey) won the Hadiah Sastera Malaysia (Malaysian Literary Prize) in 1971, the youngest to have won such a nationally acclaimed award. In 1976, his first collection of short stories, *Parasit* (Parasite), was published. The second anthology was published in 1978, entitled *Sesudah Perang* (After the War). He

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also won the Hadiah Karya Sastera Malaysia (Malaysian Literary Award) on three other occasions, respectively for his stories “Sesudah Perang” (After the War) in 1976, “Sasaran” (Target) in 1982 and “Sahabat” (Friend) in 1983. In 1992, his short story “Dari Kiev ke Moskova” (From Kiev to Moscow) won the first prize in a short story writing competition organised by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

His first novel, *Hari-hari Terakhir Seorang Seniman* (The Last Days of an Artist), published in 1979, won the first prize in a Novel Writing Competition organised by the Sabah Foundation and GAPENA (Federation of Malay Writers Association). It has been translated into English by Harry Aveling, Japanese by Tatsuo Hoshino and French by Monique Zaini Lajoubert. His second novel, *Arus* (The Current) published in 1985, also won the Hadiah Sastera Malaysia. It has been translated into French and Thai. His latest novel, *Naratif Ogonshoto* (Tales of Ogonshoto), published in 2001, has been translated into Russian.

His plays include *Orang-orang Kecil* (Little People) and *Yang Menjelma dan Menghilang* (Those Who Appear and Those Who Disappear), published in 1990. Both have been translated into English by Solehah Ishak. *Yang Menjelma dan Menghilang* won the first prize in a Drama Writing Competition organised by Yayasan Seni (The Art Foundation) and the Malay daily *Berita Harian*. He also has an anthology of poetry, *Tercipta dari Tanah* (Created from Clay), published in 1985.

In 2002, Anwar Ridhwan received the SEA Write Award from Thailand. In 2009, he received the most prestigious literary prize in Malaysia, *Anugerah Sastera Negara* (the National Laureateship). He is the tenth Sasterawan Negara (National Laureate), after Keris Mas, Shahnnon Ahmad, Usman Awang, A. Samad Said, Arena Wati, Muhammad Haji Salleh, Noordin Hasan, Abdullah Hussainn and S. Othman Kelantan.

Your reading habits were cultivated in childhood. Would you like to elaborate on it?

It was spontaneous. The awareness was cultivated when I figured out that for a poor village boy reading acted not only as a companion but also as a source of education. Therefore I loved to read widely. I could say that I had read each and every book at the library when I was in primary school, which were not that many really; there were around fifty books per shelf, but they were plenty. That was how it all sparked, because reading opens up the mind and expands our understanding of the world.

What were your favourite books back then?

As a child, my favourite was of course story books like those published by Pejabat Karang-Mengarang (Department of Writing, established at the Sultan Idris Teacher Training College), such as the translated and abridged works of Shakespeare, Sherlock Holmes, and then there were the animal tales and the *Thousand and One Nights*. Indirectly, this was my early exposure to Western and classical Arabic literature.

Did the environment at home encourage your reading habit?

We didn't have many books at home, so my brother and I liked to borrow from the school library. My mother liked to buy her own favourite books of *syair*² and *hikayat*,³ which she collected. I often read her collection of *syair* and *hikayat*. Abang Lang, my third brother who studied in Maahad el-Ehya al-Sharif in Gunung Semanggol, Perak had a whole shelf full of reference *kitab*s. Those *kitab*s had beautiful covers. I always browsed through them with regret and envy towards him, because they were in Arabic and I couldn't understand them.

You have been writing for 40 years. What made you write the first time around? What motivates you to write? Could you explain to us about your creative process?

I was motivated by having an idea that could be shared, and sharing not in the form of conversation that would leave no impact but in a creative and imaginative form, published in the shape of a book, all written down. I am talking about ideas transferred into a book, in writing, because when I first read the library books, I got the impression that if someone has talent, is able to write and the writing is published, then it would be an immense contribution to others and that contribution might possibly last for a long time, depending on its quality and its exposure to society. The life span of works as such is longer than the writers. So when I was small, I had dreams of becoming a writer so that my work would be published, read by people and would stay for a long time at libraries. That was my childhood vanity (laughs)!

So at that point you hadn't thought that you would become a writer?

Not yet. It was all just dreams. I was yet to know how to write a literary work. It was only through reading that the dreams developed into an ambition. A well-kept ambition! In secondary school, I started thinking about writing.

² A Malay poetic form consisting of a series of quatrains and an ongoing story.

³ An Arabic word that literally means "stories." It is a form of classical Malay literature, which recounts the adventures of heroes of Malayan kingdoms, or royal chronicles. The stories they contain, though based on history, are often romanticised. It has some similarities with epic poetry.

Through reading, I learnt on my own how fiction writers set the narratives in motion, introduce the characters, begin and put the plot into action; also, I scrutinised the narrative style, the language used and so on. That was how I first learnt how to write fiction, because there was no school in my place at the time that taught writing or offered writing courses like the way we have now.

I “officially” began writing when I was in my first year at University Malaya. My lecturers introduced me to a number of terminologies and tips for good writing. It turned out to be easy for me because I had been studying it on my own since secondary school. Initially I felt a bit overwhelmed by all the heavy terms and jargons, but with time it all fell into place.

What is your view of globalisation? How would you describe your worldview?

I believe the modern global society has become very complex. Nonetheless, every individual or society should understand this complexity and try to find a common ground that can be used as a basis for creating a harmonious world. If we look for differences, of course there would be a lot, with all the various cultural, political, social, religious and geographic backgrounds of people around us. And political demagoguery would often go for the exclusivist and divisive option for the sake of power.

If I am asked about worldview, I would say, let’s look for similarities that we could share to live together happily, without any unnecessary war and carnage that puts us in a vicious, unremitting cycle of devastation and destruction. It is better for us to leave behind a safer and more peaceful world for the next generation than its opposite.

In your opinion, how could globalisation help or harm the growth of literature in Malaysia?

If during the colonial era, when we were restrained in so many ways and were forced to believe that the West was the centre of the world and culturally superior to us, globalisation has started to deny that and allow the emergence of cultures and cultural products from other nationalities. Thus, literary works as a nation’s cultural product has the potential to develop globally, through translation and so on. And in Malaysia, there are works by established as well as young writers that could be transferred to the global stage. However, literary works, including those by Malaysian writers, must be of a really high quality to be accepted and recognised globally.

Globalisation could also harm the growth of literature in Malaysia in several ways. The first enemy would be the writers themselves, if they fail to produce magnum opus from time to time, while the public has access to works of high quality from other countries. Globalisation could flood the local book market with works from other countries, and crowd the sphere of literary

theory and criticism from extraneous sources, which we should have owned and controlled ourselves. I think, local authors and critics realise this and are constantly trying to produce excellent works. So as not to be terrified by the consequences of globalisation, our only option is to produce and provide readers with high quality literary works. That is no other alternative.

How do you think a writer could help to create a better world to live in?

This is a good question. Writers could, through their works, help to create a better world. However, writers should not be overly egocentric and think that they alone could help in the attainment of a better world. There are others as well who could contribute towards this goal: thoughtful and ethical politicians, rural and urban planners, economists, sociologists, intellectuals, religious scholars and so on.

I believe that since the time of Socrates and Plato a significant body of serious writings have had its own epistemology and subtext that aspire for a more humanistic society, with an improved liveable condition for the species. Writers generally love peace not war, harmony not conflicts, a healthy not toxic social environment, and humanity not bestiality in mankind; they love *love* itself, not hatred. I think writers could help to create a better world by continuing to produce ethically and aesthetically appealing works, and not forgetting the epistemological and pedagogical aspects in their writing, although I realise that there are writers who refuse to be bound by the concept of epistemology in literary works. One's purpose of writing would determine his level of awareness about his society and the world. The level of a writer who writes for money and popularity would certainly be different from one who is aware of the social issues that should be woven into his work. This awareness comes with inner vision, regardless of whether a writer is young or has matured with age and experience.

Who are the writers who inspire you most? We understand that you admire the works of Keris Mas, Shahnon Ahmad, Hemingway and Faulkner. What distinguishes them from other writers?

Generally, the four of them excel in their narrative skills; their works are well-ordered and contain rich thematic and artistic elements. They know their language well and manipulate it very creatively. We are taken on a journey, observing people and their every day experiences in a way that is vivid and convincing. We are invited to experience their physical world and partake of their (the characters') spiritual and emotional spheres. There are also philosophical and educational subtexts in their works which help to enhance the

intellectual experience. Thus, in their works, we not only get to observe characters and events, but also experience profound ideas.

You also like the works of the Indonesian writer Pramoedya Anata Toer. Is it for the same reasons?

Yes, for the reasons I mentioned above. Furthermore, if we compare him to the other four writers, Pramoedya's life was far more difficult; he was politically oppressed and incarcerated. In spite of all that, however, he held on to his idealism and poured it all out into his writings, to the extent that we could see his life in his work.

I also like Pramoedya because of the affinity of his narrative prose to Bahasa Melayu. It is not Indonesian like that of most contemporary young Indonesian writers. In some of his works, the language seems very much Malay, clear and well-ordered, like the narrative language of Keris Mas – and of course clear writing comes from a clear mind.

Why do you prefer writing novels and short stories over poetry? Do you find the composition of poetry more complicated?

To me, a short story is like the lake and a novel like the sea. It is easier to set sail in a sea because it is wider and has more room. However, relatively, both of these genres provide a large canvas to the extent that, especially with novels, narratives on people, events, and ideas could be presented with more details and depth. Perhaps people think that writing poetry is easier than writing short stories or novels but for me, writing poetry does not come with ease. Yes, indeed, I find writing poetry more complicated because of its limited space. Poetic language has to be concise and adorned with metaphors and imagery, its substance involves intellect, a way of thinking and philosophy. But other writers may find writing poetry easier than short stories or novels.

What do you think about the present state of Malaysian literature, not only in Malay but also in Mandarin, Tamil and English? How has it developed so far, in your opinion?

About Malaysian literature in English, I once heard an opinion voiced by Wong Phui Nam, a writer and a scholar in the field. He mentioned that English writing in Malaysia is in its deathbed. I have no idea why he said so, perhaps because there are no young talents after himself, K.S. Maniam, Lloyd Fernando and others.

About Chinese and Tamil literature, it's a pity that I can't read them, except those that have been translated into Malay or English. Nevertheless, I am aware that Chinese and Tamil literature in Malaysia will continue to grow because

every race would always keep their culture alive and produce their own cultural products like literary works. I believe, like most literary works, Chinese and Tamil writers also support the humanity concept (at least based on their poetry and short stories I have read in translation). I am not sure if they have any “underground” works that are not translated for some reason.

It is an irony that we know of Western, Eastern, African, Latin-American writers, but in the Malaysian context, we do not know the works and writers of other races – those whose homes are much nearer to ours. My hope is, especially for writers of the new generation, that they would get to know more of these writers. Non-Malay writers and people should also get to know Malay works and talented writers.

Who are these young writers you have in mind?

I am thinking of, among others, Zaid Akhtar, Faisal Tehrani, Nisah Haron, Mawar Shafie and S.M. Zakir. They write with a clear literary awareness and vision. They are different from a number of other writers who crave for popularity by writing pop fiction.

Since you mention pop fiction – what do you think of Malay romance novels which are in abundance in the local bookstores?

Well, we cannot enforce on the public what they should or should not read. Different people have different tastes. There are people who may not like to read serious novels, or perhaps not yet, but my view is, they are at least reading. Most popular novels talk only about people and events, very little on ideas, and if there’s any, there’s no multilayered meaning in it, everything is explained in a straightforward way. But at least it encourages them to read and to want to understand people and events other than their own. My hope is that when these readers grow older, their tastes will change and they will look for something else, in a different genre. And the same goes for the writers. If they are in their 20s and 30s, they might be writing romance novels, but when they grow older they will be switching to something more serious to keep up with their readers who would have by then grown out of the romance genre.

What about censorship? Does it hinder the growth of literature?

We must admit that censorship still exists in our country. Specially for government and IPTA publishers whose financial resources come from the government. They are totally under the thumb of the government. I do understand why there is censorship, but I do not necessarily agree with it.

Things however have started to change. The government is becoming more open. There are alternative media out there now. If the government doesn't show flexibility, it only brings harm to itself. That is why there are more anti-establishment publishers now, such as the one who published Faisal Tehrani's *Perempuan Politikus Melayu* (The Malay Woman Politician) and numerous other works with political themes. Apparently, there are issues that the government tolerates but not when it comes to Muslims' *aqidah* (faith), racial unity and national security.

Censorship, especially that restricts freedom of expression in the arts, could indeed hinder the growth of literature or growth of a society. Writers can no doubt circumvent the censorship rules through various literary strategies in their narratives, or through the incorporation of symbols, metaphors and other figurative devices in their work. This was what I did, for instance, in my novel *Naratif Ogonshoto*. However, not all writers are comfortable in doing so. They want to convey a clear message, like an arrow that would hit right on its point of aim.

What sparked the idea for Naratif Ogonshoto?

The idea for this novel came when I was working in Japan. I was there for 3 years. When I was far away from my country, it came to be so close, especially with political conflicts involving such a scholar as Anwar Ibrahim, economic problems and all these tittle-tattle about cronyism, corruption etc. However, when I was planning for the novel I saw many of the developing countries going through an acute political crisis. Politics in a number of developing countries happens to be a toy for some people for their power and the wealth that comes with it.

This dilemma is not only Malaysia's. It is also true for most of the developing countries in Africa and Asia. The idealism to see politics as a medium for developing mankind and civilisation is being overshadowed by the presence of too many vile political figures. Therefore, in *Naratif Ogonshoto* I did not want to merely write about Malaysia, but about problems that are universal in the so-called third world. That's why I invented a new country with an imaginary setting – the Republic of Ogonshoto.

The name itself sounds Japanese. Was it because you were in Japan that you chose such a name?

There are indeed Japanese influences in the novel. My memories in Japan have been woven into the book. The Republic of Ogonshoto has three active volcanoes, whose flowing lava at night looks like fluid gold pouring into the sea. If I were to give the novel a Malay title, it would be Kepulauan Emas (The Isle

of Gold). In Japanese, *ogonshoto* refers to gold. That's what I meant. But as you know, this narrative is allegorical. At its core, there is an earthquake which creates an amok and a tsunami which brings punishment for the deserving.

What is your view of race relations in Malaysia?

I am worried because there is no real attempt to bring the races together, such as through a cohesive educational system or a strong language policy. In Indonesia and Thailand, the governments have taken various measures to build bridges between the races and yet we hear of racial conflicts from time to time for various ethnic and economic reasons. In Malaysia, the attempt to bring the races together is merely superficial. I am worried that when politics fails to function to the best of its ability (because Malaysian politics generally is built on the fulcrum of race), then something will explode and push the society to the brink. This troubles everyone, including writers. Let us hope that race relation in Malaysia remains free of troubles forever.

What do you think of "1Malaysia"?

I wrote a poem on this concept, about this 1Malaysia "mayhem." The poem begins with these lines:

It is like a maiden suddenly appearing
at a robbers' lair.

It is like a gentleman suddenly materialising
at the nuns' hut.

Everyone wants to possess it
in the name of lust, love or hypocrisy.

It should be remembered that "1Malaysia" is a kind of a catchphrase for the current Prime Minister of Malaysia, for in the tradition of Malaysian politics it appears every prime minister must have his own catchword. Usually, this catchword would be forgotten once the prime minister was no longer in office. "1Malaysia" was introduced to give a voice and character to the current Prime Minister. Many see it as a catchphrase with a political motif, mainly to strengthen the current government at whatever cost it takes. As a result, a lot of people end up fighting for the importance of their own race and culture. "1Malaysia" is also used as a postmodernist tool to disrupt an existing norm. For those who honour the constitution and the country's language policy, "1Malaysia" could have dangerous implications if the concept is not clearly and properly elaborated by the Prime Minister himself.

You support the reversal of PPSMI (Teaching of Mathematics and Science in English). Would you explain why?

Firstly, PPSMI itself is at odds with Articles 152 (1) and 152 (6) of the Federal Constitution. One wonders how the Mahathir government put PPSMI into practice when it is at odds with the country's constitution.

Secondly, Bahasa Melayu has been used for years as the language of modern knowledge in Malaysia; its pinnacle was the establishment of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) in which all the courses are conducted in Malay.

Thirdly, a particular knowledge is easier to learn in one's mother tongue. When primary school students, especially those poor students in urban and rural areas are forced to learn science and mathematics in English, empirical studies show that many of them fail to cope. If this policy goes on, a lot of students will suffer in their studies and in their future careers.

Fourth, Bahasa Melayu should be the language for racial unity and solidarity in Malaysia. The PPSMI policy is troubling not only because it pushes aside Bahasa Melayu as a medium of education, but also as a language for racial unity. Our students are already in different school streams, and lack in Bahasa Melayu usage, so what would happen to racial unity if this policy is pursued? This is why I mentioned that the existing method of education should be maintained by improving the teaching modules and curriculum – including the English subject. If the teaching of English is improved, our students would have no problems in referring to books in English. And if we work more on translating works in foreign languages that would help to strengthen the human capital in the country.

One of the problems in Malaysian literature is that the writers are overly racially oriented. How could these writers contribute to the process of national unity?

What is meant here, I believe, is that there are many writers who write in their respective mother tongues. This is the consequence of our educational system which allows national schools to run side by side with Tamil and Chinese vernacular schools.

However, I believe that no literary work seriously talks about issues that can be seen as “racial,” for literature generally tends to be humanistic. This is what I observed when I read Chinese and Tamil short stories translated into Bahasa Melayu in the project “Titian Sastera” organised by DBP, and in the works of other ethnic writers.

When our literary writers are set apart by their creative medium, then the best way to bring them together is through translation. A Malay proverb says “if you know not, then you love not” (tak kenal maka tak cinta). By knowing how

other races think and what their aspirations are, we could understand each other better. Journalistic and other topical writings should be done with utmost responsibility. The pen is not a sword in the hand of the brute, but a tool to be guided by a sound mind.

There are disputes voiced over your laureateship. How do you respond to that?

I am open about this. It is true that there are some who have been writing longer than me, but have not yet received the award. I have been writing for about 40 years, and those who are grumbling have been writing for a longer period. However, we do not evaluate ourselves. We are evaluated by a panel of judges. The report from the panel mentioned that I have not been a prolific writer but that my works have created impact. The judges look for quality more than quantity. Although I have not published many titles, my works have won prizes in the short story, drama, and novel genres. For example, I have won the SEA Write Award and Hadiah Majlis Satera Asia Tenggara (MASTERA).

Do you think the national laureateship should be made open to Malaysian writers who write in English or other languages?

This is quite a sensitive and delicate question. In my opinion, a national award should be based on a country's national policy – in this context, it is the national language policy. All countries hold on to this principle. In the Federal Constitution, Article 152, Bahasa Melayu is named as Malaysia's national language. This language has been the *lingua franca* in this region for thousands of years, and has produced major works in the fields of literature, philosophy and knowledge. Malaysian national language did not just come into existence in 1957 with the country's independence. It has been there for thousands of years, compared to English which come with the colonisers in 1824. By saying that, I have no intention to demean Malaysian literature in English, for the task of writers towards mankind remains the same no matter what language we use. It is only in the context of your question that I was saying that the national literary award should be based on the country's national language policy.

Do you think non-Malay writers who write in Bahasa Melayu should be awarded the national laureateship?

Of course that is a possibility. I would like to mention two Chinese writers who have won the SEA Write Award, a prestigious award among Southeast Asian countries. They are Lim Swee Tin and Jong Chian Lai. There are other Chinese and Indian writers as well who write creatively in the Malay language.

What is your view about the state of translation in Malaysia? Are you satisfied with the translation of your own works?

Translation was marginalised for a long time for lack of a clear direction, limited financial resources, competition by English books, and lack leadership of the translation institution itself. However, for the past two years I have observed an extraordinary dynamism at Institut Terjemahan Negara Malaysia (ITNM) (National Translation Institute Malaysia). They have outlined a clearer direction, the number of translated works including literary works have increased, and they have started to build smart partnership with international publishers to publish and distribute Malaysian translated works in the global market.

As for my works, I am satisfied with their translations into English, and I say that after having read the works myself. But I am not so sure about the translations into other languages – such as Indonesian, Arabic, Dutch, Hungarian, Japanese, German, Korean, Macedonian, French, Russian, Tamil, Urdu and Vietnamese – because I can't read these languages. However, my hope is that the target readers in these languages would find my translated works satisfactory in their language.