

On a Journey Homeward: An Interview with Muhammad Haji Salleh

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Educator, critic, translator, Muhammad Haji Salleh is Malaysia's best known bilingual poet, writing both in Malay and English for well over forty years. Born in 1942 in British Malaya, he was educated first at the University of Singapore, and later at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, USA, obtaining, respectively, B.A. and Ph.D. degrees in English literature. Muhammad wrote his first poem in the English language while in England for a teacher-training course in 1963, but soon after wrote in Malay (later renamed Bahasa Malaysia), to quell his feelings of guilt at his involuntary allegiance to the imperial language. This push and pull tendency between the two languages—an attempt to decolonise his consciousness through a rejection of English as his creative medium and yet his continuous use of the language for translating his own work and for his academic projects—remains the central defining element of Muhammad's poetry and poetics. Muhammad acknowledges this problem when he quotes the Algerian-born French writer Albert Camus, "My language is my motherland," to suggest his deep allegiance to the Malay language and yet maintains, paradoxically, in the introduction to his collected volume *Rowing Down Two Rivers*, that as a poet he has "two rivers flowing within him" and that he could row down one river or the other at his wish.

While still an undergraduate student of literature in the mid-1960s, Muhammad's first poem was published in the international Australian journal *The Bulletin*. Since then, he has published over forty books, including twelve volumes of poetry. *Time and Its People*, a volume of poetry published by Heinemann Educational Books in 1978, was written originally in English. The rest of Muhammad's poetry was written originally in Malay, and some, such as *The Travel Journals of Si Tenggang II* (1979) and *Rowing Down Two Rivers* (2000), he later rendered into English himself. Muhammad's other recent publications in the English language include *The Mind of the Malay Author* (1991), *Beyond the Archipelago* (1995), *Burnished Gold: An Anthology of Malaysian Poetry* (ed. 2004) and *Malay Literary Poetics* (2004). Muhammad's poems have been anthologised in *Singapore Poetry* (1965), *Commonwealth Poems of Today* (1967), *Seven Poets of Singapore and Malaysia* (1973), *The Second Tongue* (1976), *Contemporary Literature of*

Asia (1996) and *Petals of Hibiscus: A Representative Anthology of Malaysian Literature in English* (2003).

In a distinguished career spanning four decades, Muhammad has received many accolades both for his poetry and scholarship, at home and abroad. He was named Literary Laureate of Malaysia in 1991, and has since received the Malaysian Premier Literary Award twice, in 2000 and 2002. He was the recipient of the Australian Cultural Award in 1975, the ASEAN Literary Award for poetry in 1977, the SEA Write Award in 1997 and the MASTERA (Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei) Literary Award in 2000. Muhammad received Fulbright Fellowships to teach and research at the State University of North Carolina (1977), the University of Michigan (1981-82) and the University of California-Berkeley (1992-93). In 1992-93, he was appointed Chair of Malay Studies, at the University of Leiden, Netherlands, and in 1999-2000 he received a Senior Fellowship from the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, Japan. Muhammad was the Director of the Institute of Malay World and Civilisation, National University of Malaysia from 1995 to 1999, and at present he is professor of Literature at University Science Malaysia. In September 2005, he was in Leiden, Netherlands, again, as a poet-in-residence with the International Institute of Asian Studies.

This interview, which covers a wide spectrum of issues, was carried out via electronic mail in February 2005. The discussion ranges across Muhammad's narration of his formative years as a writer, his impressions of his own writings and of Malaysian and regional literature, and the shaping influences of his poetic mind. He further goes on to talk about his views on nation and national identity and the writer's role in the formation of the nation, especially his feelings about the contentious but pivotal issue of "Bangsa Malaysia," that requires this newly emergent heterogeneous nation-state to find an abiding/living unity and cohesion between its various racial and religious groups (in Malaysia, religion is the ultimate marker of ethnicity, as in order to be a Malay, one has to be a Muslim as well). Moreover, he discusses his sense of community, rootedness and tradition vis-à-vis the growing universal urbanism and modern capitalist globalisation. He also discusses the problems associated with Malay poetics and the translation of classical Malay literature into English, including the prevailing cleavage between Malaysia's national literature, written in the national language of Bahasa Malaysia, and those dubbed as "sectional literatures," written in its minority languages such as Chinese, Tamil and English. The interview also investigates Muhammad's view of women and their position in society, and most importantly his dichotomous relationship with the English language, characterised by a rejection of its role in the formation of personal/political identity and yet a benign acceptance of its presence and significance as an emerging global language.

The title of the interview refers to Muhammad's struggle to overcome his westernised, anglicised self, created by his personal English education

and the colonial impact on his young and impressionable imagination in childhood and adolescence, and to increasingly identify himself with the indigenous values of his Malay culture and the language and tradition that he had inherited at birth but that was later distanced in his mind by his colonial education. It is a journey of the soul towards *being* by overcoming the treacherous process of *becoming*. However, the problem and the paradox in the enterprise lie in the fact that his homecoming is dependent on the successful dismantling of his current two-ness, or the double consciousness in his personality, through an absolute erasure of his colonial knowledge, in order to reach the imaginary essence of his being. The process involves the near-impossible task of turning the wheel of history and looking away from the quintessential hybridity that remains a living reality in the poet's personality. Secondly, it also requires the poet to overcome the endemic alienation of a celebrated intellectual elite in order to realise the authentic culture of the disenfranchised masses and the subalterns of his society. However, having said that, if one accedes to Emerson's principle of empyrean imagination that enables the poet to encompass the universe in his heart in a moment of visionary leap, or Whitman's idea of connecting the various spheres of the world through a continuous process of spinning an imaginary gossamer, or Tagore's axiom of *Advitam* that immediately connects the self with all and with God, then certainly Muhammad's journey and wish for arrival are not merely poetic postures, but pregnant with deep cultural and spiritual meanings. They take on the significance of a dynamic poetic aspiration to reach for a transcendent moral goal that is replete with the threats and challenges of everyday reality but positively not beyond the poet's reach if he retains an active soul, or knows how to shed his garb of, in Emerson's words, a "thinking individual" and experience an awakening into "Man Thinking."

MAQ: How did you come into literature? Were you a voracious reader in childhood, or did you get your lessons mostly from life and nature? Tell us something about the books that fascinated you most in adolescence and youth.

MHS: Unlike many writers, I did not come from a family of writers or with a clear literary background. My father had a strong religious training; he studied in many colleges in Malaysia, and also in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, for a few years. I only remember old folktales told by my grandmother—but they never seemed to be consciously present, and after some time seemed to have disappeared from my conscious memory.

I think I owe several teachers and professors for my interests in literature and writing. My English teacher in High School Bukit Mertajam, Mr. Mohan Singh, encouraged us to read and make a list of books read so that it may be shown to the class. I started late, only in Form II (Grade 8), and in English, as the education system then only supported the colonial language. So I was initiated by a wonderful discovery of a new world of language, of the imagination and literature, and a real discourse on life

itself. In Form III, Mr. Long Heng Hua was our English teacher, and I remember being congratulated by him on my story. Sometime in the middle 1950s, I won an essay contest in Malay in the *Utusan Kanak-kanak*. The prize/honorarium was RM5.00.¹

In 1958, in Malay College, Kuala Kangsar, Mr. Baird, a Scotsman, impressed me tremendously by his renderings of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice*. I was a lonely (and quite poor) young man in a school of children of the well to do and nobility, and I came there late in my schooling life. So the new-found and well-stocked library became my refuge and friend. I read books for my age and also tried reading beyond: Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, after finding out about them. There were also several magazines, including *London Illustrated* (great reading for the already colonised kid!), *Saturday Evening Post*, and *The Listener*.

In 1958, while I was in Form IV, there was a competition for the Wise and Butler Scholarship. The requirements were to write two essays, in English and Malay respectively, and translate an excerpt from English to Malay. I can't remember why I took part in it, but it must have been the lure of the money as I had a monthly stipend of only RM5.00 from the Penang State (can you think of a more meagre financial support? My classmates were receiving seven times that amount, and another, a prince, had an allowance of RM300.00 a month), and my father had to borrow at the beginning of each term. Anyway, to cut the story short, I won the competition, for reasons I was not told of. This certainly came as a great boost for this village kid, who liked literature, and the path among the bushes looked a little clearer now when it came to literature and my literary aspirations.

So it was reading, teachers and incidental surprises like these, I think, that brought me to literature. However, over time I began to realise that literature deals with the core of human life and meaning; it is close to philosophy, and complements the sciences. It is in literature that one is able to read the passions of a human heart, to know of the shapes and colours of his dreams and ideals, and also his search for meaning.

MAQ: When did you actually begin writing? Was there a particular reason that led you to write your first poem/literary work?

MHS: Other than the essay I won in the 1950s, I don't remember writing much. However, my first poems seemed to have been written in May 1963, in the Malayan Teachers' College, near Wolverhampton, England, where I was studying to be a teacher. We had come there in the midst of a very cold and long winter, and were meeting new people at rare instances.

It was a combination of the long cold winter, meeting of new people, and at the same time an eclectic but passionate introduction to contemporary English writing, a reading of new poets, and friendship with Omar Mohd Noor, who was also beginning to write, that turned me into a

¹ RM refers to the Malaysian currency, Ringgit Malaysia.

poet. The background was the beginning of spring, the bursting forth of a new life, not experienced before (Malaysia being a country of eternal summer does not experience the seasonal cycles like in other countries). All these found life in my first poem, which I wrote in English. Moreover, I was in an in-between world, two cultures, and I left a girlfriend behind. At that time I was also feeling through the sounds and the emotions of the English language. As I read it now I can see the elements and tones of the Malay in it, but why not?

MAQ: Why poetry? Why not some other genre?

MHS: Good question! Perhaps it has something to do with my personality. I was quite shy, and did not say much, and tended to think in metaphors. Perhaps I was impatient with long-winded information or explanations, and preferred not to explain myself. Moreover, I worked in the intense fire and blaze of concentrated short periods, which all drove me to poetry. And poetry as a genre is the great house of the imagination, closer to music and art—it is felt rather than explained or described.

MAQ: You have written several academic books side by side with your creative works. Aren't they very different kinds of writing? Do they in any way interfere with one another as you pursue them?

MHS: It is true, when I was younger I considered poetry and criticism to be two parts of my person—one in verse, the other in prose; one from the left side of the brain, and the other from the right. But being younger in those days it was easier to switch from one to the other, but later I noticed that it was not so easy. But lately, thankfully, I was given back this switchboard, more because of practice and getting used to, rather than a natural tendency to be able to change immediately. For many years now I have been known as a poet and critic, and people have been kind to me—last year they were so kind, I had to write at least twelve seminar papers, about ten talks etc. At the same time I have been asked to read poems, old and new. So I had to live two lives at least!

As a lecturer I always had research projects. As you are well aware, our work depends on exploration into new areas, and therefore new discoveries. For many years my personal search for identity (especially after living overseas for about ten years) coincided with a search for native roots, especially in our Department of Malay Letters and the Institute of Malay World and Civilisation where I worked for over thirty years. I proposed and carried out projects on the Malay culture of the different states, including Perlis, Melaka and Negeri Sembilan—to systematically describe what has not been researched on before. On my own, I searched for the Malay images in European literature and then a theory of Malay literature, with some interesting results—books, papers and new projects, and have been recognised for the findings. For the last ten years, I have

searched for the *pantun*² around Southeast Asia, because it is a great example of the world form and able to renew itself in the most alien places and the most remote languages. And now with the establishment of the International Pantun Secretariat in University Science Malaysia, I am again combing the North (of Malaysia) for old and new poets, and am happy to report that three manuscripts of Kedah and Perlis pantuns are with the publishers now. So these projects, poems and research are part of my search for roots, my past and also, if I may add, my country's uniqueness.

I usually work with a few projects running parallel. No writer's block; if I get stuck with one, I would move to another. This last year, as I said, I had to write numerous seminar papers, prepare for keynote addresses, poetry readings, and meetings. At the same time, I was completing a long poem of my times in Japan (which came out at the end of 2004 as *Salju Shibuya—Snows of Shibuya*), while translating Neruda and German poetry. Another book of poems (translated also into English) was published with paintings especially done by Syed Ahmad Jamal, the National Artist. In addition, I had put together a book of Malaysian poems translated into English titled *Emas Tempawan/Burnished Gold: An Anthology of Contemporary Malaysian Poetry*.

I am sure my poems or essays suffer because of this incessant mixing of the genres, but then again, I feel I am contributing more, especially in a situation where there are not many bilingual students of literature in a Third World situation—Malaysia is still a Third World country where literature is concerned. We do not have the luxury of the poet and professor that is being enjoyed by our colleagues in more developed nations. Here we are called upon to contribute at short notice, for better or for worse. In such a way I get a lot of papers done, but quality-wise they do feel the effect of the lack of time and new and strong research.

MAQ: You began your writing career in the English language. Tell us about the literary scene in English in Malaysia in those early days. Were you personally involved in any literary forum/magazine at the university? Who were your fellow writers during that period?

MHS: This is a difficult question to answer. When I was a student in Kuala Kangsar, in the late 1950s, I only knew and was taught literature written by the British. In the fifties very few wrote or were published;

² A Malay poetic form, pantuns are generally written in quatrains with an *abab* rhyme scheme. Sometimes pantuns can also come in the form of two, six or eight lines with the *abcabc* or *abcdabcd* structure. Pantuns are generally made up of two parts, known respectively as *Pembayang* ("shadow") and *Maksud* ("meaning"). Often the *Pembayang* acts as a mere preamble and has little relation with the *Maksud*, except in the development of the rhyme scheme. The essence of the pantun is actually contained in the second half of the verse. Unlike most forms of poetry, the pantun used to be an integral part of Malay life. It is used in proverbs, in romantic exchanges between lovers, and in diplomatic or hilarious situations.

anyway, it did not come to my attention. It was not long after the Second World War, and people were more preoccupied with meeting their basic economic needs.

It was only in the middle 1960s that I came to know and in fact became friends with my predecessors: Edwin Thumboo, Dr. Goh Poh Seng, Ee Tiang Hong, and Wong Phui Nam. We had a literary society at the University of Singapore and for about two years I was its president; it became the mould of new writing and literary spirit. There was also a keen sense of competition. In my years there were Lee Tzu Pheng, Chandran Nair, and myself.

I feel there was a blossoming of sorts then and we felt a little like celebrities. Not least was the encouragement of D.J. Enright and Edwin Thumboo. Poetry readings, discussions and play readings were held quite often. We even had a poetry competition. It was then my first poem appeared in *The Bulletin* (Australia), I think through the good offices of Enright (who was also a kind of mentor to me), besides the University magazines like *Focus*.

MAQ: Since there was no literary tradition in English in the region when you embarked as a poet, where did get your inspiration from? Who were your literary models, for example?

MHS: I was overseas then, and my models were mostly British, not even American. I was a voracious reader and would comb libraries and bookshops for new books. The Third Programme of the BBC was especially uplifting—it provided plays and poetry readings (I still remember Dylan Thomas reading his poems in his deep and romantic voice).

I am now embarrassed to confide that the ultra-conservative T.S. Eliot was my first model and he stayed with me for some years until I turned left. But I read a lot of and liked Auden, R.S. Thomas, Robert Graves, and MacNiece. However, I had crossed the borders of the Anglo-Saxon world and at this time I was also reading Goethe, Ibsen, and Baudelaire. American poets were also coming into the fore and were easily bought in the shops. I read Ginsburg, whom I met in Ann Arbor about ten years after that, and his friend Kerouac (not a poet, but his writings were more poetic than those of some poets).

It was also a time of exploring the poetry of China, India and Japan. I came to realise then that you can be an important and even great writer even if you don't write in the English language. My colonial indoctrination was so complete, for some years I was made to think that only English literature was great. The Irish or the American were unimportant, and in some universities not even mentioned, what more taught.

MAQ: Why did you choose to write in English and not Malay? What were the difficulties you faced writing in a non-native language? Why did you

give up writing in English and take to writing in Bahasa Malaysia in the 70s?

MHS: My first poem was in English, but a few weeks after that I began to write also in Malay, perhaps as a result of a kind of guilt, or a reflection of the split and the eventual coexistence of the two languages within myself, one the language of my mother and father, and the other, a colonial language, forced upon me. Subconsciously the problem was working itself out. From that time on I wrote in two languages until the early 1970s when I was studying in University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, and decided to return to one alone—my mother-tongue.

In fact, what happened was that though both languages were used in the poems, the country where I wrote from seemed to decide the main language that I was to use in my own verses. Thus when I returned to Malaysia after 1964 my Malay matured and more poems came from this fountain. In 1965 I was in Singapore, and naturally more English poems were written. Then when I was back in Malaysia after 1967, and in Indonesia in 1968, again the Malay poems were flowing more easily from my pen.

For writers in the Malay language in Singapore and Indonesia, writing was an important nationalistic act; one wrote on behalf of others, of ideas of nation, urbanism, and a socialist future. These writers were read and known. I noticed they were more known there than the British writers were known in the English villages for example. While I admired the experiments of the British, I learnt of the social meaning of literature from people like Masuri SN, and later in Malaysia from Usman Awang, Baha Zain, and Samad Ismail.

MAQ: How has the language policy influenced the literary activity in Malaysia generally?

MHS: It returned the language of the people to their lives, their books and their poems. Malays and non-Malays—Chinese, Indians, Kadazan, Ibans—began to think and write in this language, that was also a unifying gel. Now we have an interesting literature that paints different colours of the experiences of many ethnic groups and with many special ways of using the national language. The Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, the National Language and Literary Agency, played a great role in this—there were a great many competitions, literary weeks and months, hundreds of seminars, performances, and not least, financial support and awards that lifted the language to a level not known during the colonial years.

I was better in English in the 1970s, but these last decades Malay became for me more natural, especially in poetry. We learnt from Indonesia too, which uses a very modern and virile species of the language, and together with Brunei and Singapore we created the MABBIM (The Malay Language Council of Brunei, Indonesia and

Malaysia), and after that the MASTERA literary awards for writings in the Malay language.

MAQ: Since you are a bilingual writer, what are the advantages of straddling two languages? Would you consider them equally close to your imagination?

MHS: I live in at least two languages. In school I studied Malay, Arabic and English; in the university I studied French and Dutch, and after that I studied some German and even some Japanese, when I lived in these countries. So there is a storehouse of many remembered words and principles flying around in my head. In fact it is a giddy and swirling world of languages. But I have not been impoverished by them.

The first advantage: there is a study that has found that people who think and speak in two languages are younger in their looks and in their mind! And that is quite an advantage. The next is that for the poet, one can be used to enhance the other. English itself cannot fully express my personality, but only with tones and connotations imported from the Malay would it be able to convey more of me. So is it with the Malay, I think, as I am a person of two or more languages.

MAQ: Who are the local and regional writers you admire and why?

MHS: I have been lucky to be close to many of the writers of Southeast Asia and Japan. Firstly, I sincerely think the *Malay Annals/Sulalat al-Salatin* is a work of genius, not only in its language but also in its narrative strategies, because of the multi-dimensional talents of the writer, Tun Seri Lanang. Next, the finer Malay pantuns are as good as any of the great poems of the east and the west, so I have tried to become a student of its form and ideas. From time to time I also compose in it.

The other great (dead) poets are Amir Hamzah and Chairil Anwar from Indonesia; they are the great creators in the language, giving it a new life in the last glow of the traditional age and also in the Indonesian revolution. I was also close to Subagio Sastrowardjo, a poet of ideas and thought, when he was alive, and I have a great respect for the struggle and achievements of Pramoedya Ananta Toer. In Malaysia I think the achievements of A. Latiff Mohidin and Baha Zain are second to none. Anwar Ridhwan, a novelist and poet, shows the way to the future.

Nowarat Pongpaiboon, Ankarn Kalayananpongs (Thailand), Alfred Yuson, Bien Lumbera and Frankie Sionil Jose all teach me the meaning of being a Southeast Asian writer. I studied Japanese literature in the university and have been able to follow up with the new writers. Shiraishi and Tanikawa are model new poets whom we will meet in Southeast Asia quite soon. Bei Dao is an extremely fine and imaginative Chinese poet, and I was very impressed, indeed, discovering him two years ago. I read Tagore and Iqbal and admire their wide horizons and depth of thought, and their act of bringing poetry closer to philosophy.

MAQ: What is your view of tradition and modernisation? What should be the writer's relationship with tradition and/or modernisation?

MHS: I come from what used to be a country of jungles. Please don't mind me my forest (clichéd) metaphor: Tradition is the roots of the great tree; it is nurtured by its special situation, condition and make-up. A literature of genuine character and uniqueness will help to enrich world literature. So I think we have to keep the uniqueness all the time and help enrich each other. But of course even a tree changes and evolves, finding its place and special meaning in a changing situation. If it does not find this meaning it will become irrelevant. While having roots and traditions, I think writers must experiment with these traditions to enhance them, give them a new existence for the different and new generation.

MAQ: There is a lot of talk in the local media about the formation of a new, inclusivist national identity of "Bangsa Malaysia." Where do you personally stand on this? Is this a viable proposition given the current political structure in the country?

MHS: For almost forty years now—and we have not arrived—the signs of Bangsa Malaysia are very elusive indeed, if they are present at all. We tried to bring the races together earlier with a common system of education, but Malaysians tend to think from their own cultural perspectives alone, and I think, are very selfish. So through political bargaining, we returned almost everything to the main ethnic groups; now we have very few things that bind us together, make us feel that we belong to one country. The radio stations blare out in the different languages, and they do not seem to meet or share spaces. And a student can follow one system of education and go overseas for graduate studies, without studying in the national language or being in anyway connected to the Malaysian culture. I know these are the times of deconstruction, but you can only deconstruct when there is a structure; we have no such structure as yet. I think we will all be floating in the tsunami of global rubbish very soon.

MAQ: What is your view of the future of literature generally? Do you think the current technological surge and the inevitable capitalist globalisation is going to have an impact on the growth of literature in the country?

MHS: I did a little study of the literary situation in Japan two years ago, and it looks rather bleak. These are my observations, and what happens in Tokyo will also be happening in other parts of the world soon enough: a. Literature is not looked upon as a meaningful subject; b. Enrolment in literature courses is suffering; c. The traditional space of literature is broken up and taken over by the *manga*—the comics, the cinema, TV, and now the computer and the cell phone; d. Now there is a battle between

paper and the computer screen, and the future of literature has to be adjusted; in Japan novels are sold and read on the computer and the cell phones; e. The readership is shrinking, but loyal readers continue to read; f. Literature has to adjust itself to the new media, techniques and strategies to survive. I think all these have arrived at our doors, and it is not a pretty picture for literature.

MAQ: Where do you stand on the issue of the social role of women? You know, it is very interesting that Malaysian classrooms at the tertiary level are mostly populated by female students, which gives me the impression that it is women who are relatively more educated in the country, and yet somehow they are not treated equally in the workplace or seen with same social respect as men. Why is this the case—or is it?

MHS: I agree with you that there are more women in the universities, and likewise there are more women professors now, more than ever before. However, I am not sure that now, in Malaysia, they are less well treated than the men. In Malaysia anyway, there are many women deans, professors, and even deputy vice-chancellors. This is not happening in Japan now; you almost never hear of women as deans, what more deputy vice-chancellors.

I have no problem with women colleagues; if they are good and hardworking then they deserve all my respect. As I have been a teacher to thousands of women students, for more than thirty-six years, I have also recommended the best for any post—men or women. I think the women are doing the human race a great pride, and furthering still their special achievements.

MAQ: What is the state of translation in Malaysia? Are there many Malay literary works that have been successfully translated into English and other languages?

MHS: Our ambiguous language policy, especially at the end of Mahathir's term,³ has created a sense of indecision about the language of Malaysia. It is said that Malay is the national language but soon sixty or more percent of the subjects—the sciences and their branches—will be taught in English; something against the constitution and also a great slap in the face to the national language. I think the decisions about language issues should be left to scholars of language and literature as is done in other countries.

There is now very little translation, especially from the sciences, as the language of science in Malaysia is now English. There have been some novels, drama and poems translated into English, German, Russian, and French. Some of the translations by Adibah Amin and Siti Hawa are quite

³ This is reference to Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, 1982-2003.

fine. They are sometimes better than those translated by the native speakers because they have a sense of the hidden echoes of culture, meanings and connotations. However, some of the pantuns have been rendered well by Winstedt and Wilkinson, though Hamilton and Sim are not bad at all. The *Malay Annals* can be rendered better, I think, especially if the translator is a writer and scholar himself/herself. We need to retranslate it and give it the benefit of a poetic and scholarly experience of the text.

I am working on the Malay epic *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. Interesting that nobody tried it; perhaps it is too big—over 500 pages. I have a first draft of the first 460 pages and have still about another sixty pages to go. After that, with a background of the difficulties and problems of translating *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, I would like to try my hand at the *Malay Annals*.

MAQ: I know that you have translated several of your own poems. Would you agree with Robert Frost that “poetry is what gets lost in translation”?

MHS: Only partly. Sometimes what is lost is made up in the recreation in the other language, with its traditions and special sounds.

MAQ: Malaysia currently has two different categories of literature: national literatures, written in Bahasa Malaysia, and “sectional literatures,” written in minority languages, including English. Is there a possibility that these two categories will come together in the future to form one national literature, where writings will be judged not on the basis of its use of medium alone but in a more holistic way, e.g., its cultural content or the locale of the experiences narrated in the text?

MHS: This is indeed a difficult question. I gave up the colonial language to write in the national language. For the time being I would like to see writers contribute their talents to a literature in this language. Of course they have a right to write in any other language of their choice. I tell young writers to write in more than one language, one of them should be their national language. That will solve the problem. Writers should have a sense of roots, national identity and pride in their language. Says Camus, “My language is my motherland.”

MAQ: I think your leadership in regional literature is unique and incomparable. You are a professor of English/Malay Studies as well as a National Laureate. What would be your advice to a youngster who is willing to take up the craft/trade?

MHS: Thank you! I would say it is a very meaningful art, enriching, and makes a thinker of one. There is no money in poetry or literature, but as somebody quipped, there is no poetry in money either. Literature is not imported; it is home grown from the special situations and experience of a people. It is their significant speech and draws a picture of their horizons

and dreams and uniqueness. Furthermore its forms are locally developed. So it is the living product of a people, of their genius. Go to it, you will be a richer person, a better one, and one who is less selfish in this extremely selfish environment.

MAQ: How do you cope with the problems of readership and publication in Malaysia?

MHS: I am lucky—I have a job as a teacher in the university. Otherwise I would have been dead a long time ago, for reasons of hunger. I don't think much about it as I did not write for money in the first place. Writing gives me a great satisfaction. As Kenzaburo Oe says, when answering whether he is worried that his readership is small: it has always been small, but the selected reader will find his type of novels and enjoy them. In my case the readership for poetry is smaller still. But I am an idealist—and getting fair or good reviews from time to time, going to schools to talk of the poems, and meeting readers who enjoy them, seem to be enough of a payment for me.

MAQ: How has your own writing evolved over the years thematically/stylistically?

MHS: Difficult question—for the critic to answer really.

MAQ: Tell us what you are writing now and what your future plans are?

MHS: I am a scatterbrain—I do so many things at the same time. Now I am writing papers for two conferences, and poems about nature in the USM (University Science Malaysia) campus—have completed seventy of them, I shall ask Zakaria Ali to illustrate them in watercolour or oil. I am also translating *Hikayat Hang Tuah* in the evenings, and as a kind of project I am collecting pantuns from the North of Malaya; editing two books of essays, one in Malay and one in English, and finally, also writing my autobiography. This last month I wrote drafts of about fifty poems about the tsunami, and now I need to polish them too.

I would like to write a long poem perhaps based on the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. I have promised to look at the manuscripts of my research on the pantun in the Malay Archipelago and transcriptions of two hikayats. So I intend to keep myself occupied. And before I forget I would like to enlarge my *Anthology of Contemporary Malaysian Literature* to include post-1980s writings, and translate some of them into English myself.