

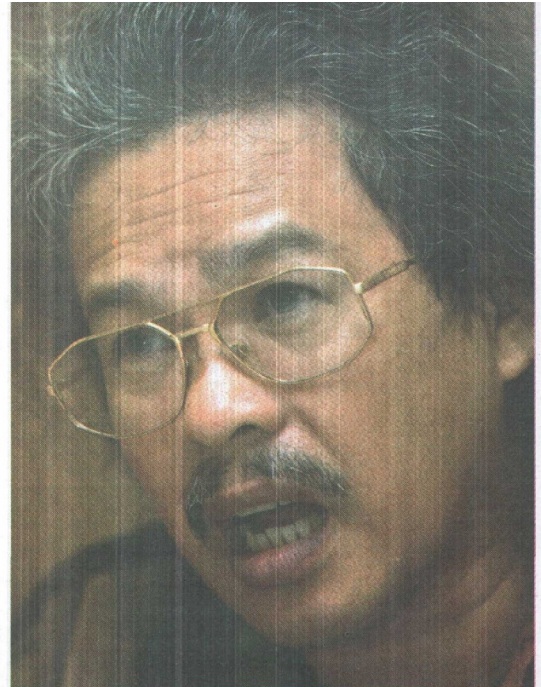
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Global Malay writing

LIM SWEE TIN IS ONE OF ONLY A FEW NON-MALAYS WHO WAX LYRICAL IN MALAY, EVEN WRITING BOOKS IN THE LANGUAGE. OF CHINESE-THAI PARENTAGE, HE HAS BEEN WRITING FOR 37 YEARS AND HAS WON MORE THAN 20 AWARDS, INCLUDING THE SEA WRITE AWARD FROM THAILAND AND THE PERDANA LITERARY AWARD. THE PROLIFIC WRITER HAS PRODUCED 18 BOOKS OF POEMS, SEVEN NOVELS AND OVER 20 SHORT STORIES. SOME OF HIS POEMS HAVE BEEN TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH, RUSSIAN AND KOREAN. LIM, 55, HAS BEEN INVITED TO RECITE HIS POEMS IN THAILAND, TAIWAN AND BRITAIN. A LITERATURE LECTURER AT UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA, HE ALSO SITS ON THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE COMMITTEE IN THE EDUCATION, AND ARTS, CULTURE AND HERITAGE MINISTRIES. LIM LAMENTS TO **BISSME S.** ABOUT THE DEARTH OF GOOD LITERARY WORKS IN MALAY AND HOW MALAYSIANS DO NOT READ. NEVERTHELESS, HE DREAMS OF SEEING A MALAYSIAN WIN THE NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE.



theSun: Why do you think there are so few non-Malays in the Malay literary scene?
Lim: Sometimes the non-Malays feel an inferiority complex. Some of them feel that their work will not match that of the Malay writers. Frankly speaking, they (non-Malays) should not have this attitude. They should feel confident about their talent and their work. After all Malay is not a strange language to us anymore. It has been incorporated into our school system for years.

Some say discrimination exists, so a lot of non-Malays are not keen to write in Malay. Is this so?
 I do not think discrimination exists. I am a good example. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (a government body that promotes Malay literature) has been publishing my work since 1985.

People say you are the perfect example of discrimination. You have been writing for more than 30 years yet you have not received the Sasterawan Negara (national laureate) award. So far, no non-Malay who

has written in Malay has received this award.
 I have a hope to get it. I have a dream to get it. I feel I have given a lot to Malay literature. The award is a recognition of your contribution and your sacrifices. If I get it, I will not reject it (laughs). It will be a thrill to be called Sasterawan Negara. I do not think I am being discriminated against. There are many writers out there who are more deserving than I.

What changes would you like to see taking place in the Malay literary scene?
 In recent years, I have found the Malay literature scene stagnant. There has not been much progress. Our literature is far behind that of the (rest of the) world. We need to shake things up so our literature scene will move at a fast pace and we will catch up with the rest of the world.

But some Malay novels have been selling more than 200,000 copies. Isn't that a good sign?
 I agree that the popular commercial literature is doing very well. But not the serious Malay literature.

Why do you think serious Malay literature lags behind literature in other languages?
 We are stagnant in terms of new ideas. And

it is not enough just to have new ideas. It is also important to present these new ideas in a way the world's readers can relate to them. It also boils down to your writing technique and presentation.
 Malaysian writers writing in English such as Tash Aw (*Harmony Silk Factory*) and Rani Manicka (*The Rice Mother*) are on the right track. They have somehow perfected the art, presented their ideas so world readers could relate to them. It is not surprising that western journals feature them and their books. At the same time, I also find there are not

enough writers producing serious Malay literature. We can count them on our fingers. One particular young writer I am really impressed with is Faisal Tehrani. I see a lot of potential in him.

Why do you think there are very few writers producing serious literature compared to popular fiction?
 In the last decade or so, we have sort of neglected churning out a new generation of writers in serious literature. In the past our writing associations and government bodies had many contests and programme to encourage writers to dabble in serious literature.

Some say it is not profitable to write serious literature compared to popular literature. Do you agree?
 Yes. In popular fiction,

a writer spends three to six months on a book. Then he sells more than 100,000 copies. The high volume will guarantee a high royalty. But in serious literature, a writer may spend several years on one novel and the sales volume is nothing to shout about. So it can be very discouraging to write serious literature.

What are the first steps we should take to encourage young writers to produce serious literary works?
 For starters our serious literature needs to be translated into English and many other languages and sold worldwide. When you have the world market, the sales volume will be higher. Slowly the western journals will feature these writers.

I will give one example of a writer from China called Wei Hui. Two of her books *Shanghai Baby* and *Marrying Buddha* have been translated into more than 20 languages and sold millions all over the world. The western media also featured her. She is only 23.

The same thing should be happening to our authors who are writing serious literature, for example Faisal Tehrani. When people see local authors of serious literature doing well, more will be tempted to write serious literature.

Some believe the themes Malay writers choose are very national and Malay culture-orientated so it is not easy to translate their books and sell them worldwide. What do you say?
 It doesn't matter what theme you choose. It doesn't matter what culture you choose.

You can choose to write about a Malay fisherman in a village. But you must be able to write it in a way the world could relate to. One good example is Indonesian writer (the late) Pramoedya Ananta Toer. He wrote about situations all around the world and of different cultures could relate to his stories. His books are well known all over the world.

There is less effort in translating our literature books into English; therefore the Malay books can't travel to the overseas market easily. Do you agree?

Yes. We need to translate more of our books into English and other languages so they will be more marketable overseas. But translation is a minor reason. What we really need is the support and people who have the experience to distribute and market our books to overseas markets.

Is the government, especially Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, doing enough to promote our books overseas?

We cannot only depend on the government and Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in this matter. Big groups such as MPH can take our serious literature to the world. It (MPH Bookstores) has the resources, the network and most of all, the experience to take our

literature to the world. One company I really respect is Silverfish. In the last few years it has taken the initiative to organise international literary seminars and invited well-known writers from all over the world to participate. Indirectly their seminars give exposure to local writers to improve their knowledge and to promote their books.

Is Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka doing enough for Malay literature?

It is doing its best. But there is still room for improvement. Almost every year, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka has a booth to display our books at the Frankfurt Book Fair. Publishers all over the world come to this fair to buy and sell copyrights. But so far we have not heard of any outcome.

What kind of role do you think the government could play in promoting Malay literature?

The government could give grants to writers to attend writing seminars overseas. It is so difficult for writers to get any kind of grant. When a writer travels and attends writing seminars overseas, he meets a lot of people and he broadens his mind and his horizon. It will make him a more experienced writer and this will be reflected in his future work. If the government

can send a man to space, why can't we send a writer to a writing seminar in Spain or Germany?

What is your hope and dream for the Malay literary world?

I would love to see our literature reach world level and win a Nobel prize. I hope this dream will not remain a dream.

Do you think our literature has the potential to be nominated for the Nobel prize?

Yes, it has. I have read many works of Nobel prize winners and I really believe Sasterawan Negara (national laureates) such as A. Samad Said and Shahnun Ahmad have the potential to win this award. A. Samad Said's *Satina* would have made a perfect nomination.

So why haven't we walked this road?

It is not easy to get a Nobel prize nomination... it is a different ball game. First, someone has to nominate your work. This someone must be a scholar of literature and must be well-known worldwide. The Nobel prize committee will then check on the background of the person who nominates the writer ... (also) the background of the writer who is nominated.

So the first thing we should do is to translate our books into many languages and promote them in the world market. Then a scholar of high reputation will be able to see these works. When the scholar is impressed with the work, he or she will nominate it. But how many of our books have been translated into English and other languages? How many of our books have we sold overseas? But it is not too late for us to do that. We have young writers such as Anwar Ridhwan whose work we can promote to the world and still win a Nobel prize.

These days the education ministry is giving more preference to the English Language. Some Malay writers view English as a colonial language and we should not promote it. What do you think?

I do not see anything wrong with what the education ministry is doing. English is important. It is spoken worldwide. If we want to gain knowledge about the world, it is important we master English. My only hope is we do not neglect our Bahasa Kebangsaan (national language). There should be continuous development of Bahasa Kebangsaan.

Some serious novelists don't like popular commercial literature. What is your stand on this form of literature?

I do not see anything wrong in writing about romance and youth-orientated themes. It still takes effort and energy to write what they write. The best thing is society loves reading them. Indirectly these writers are creating a reading society.

Our society is not a reading society and I support any attempt to promote reading. I believe, with time, these readers might want to graduate from reading only romance and youth themes. They may start looking at serious literature.

Why do you think ours is not a reading society?

We live in a time when people want instant gratification. Reading improves you intellectually. It shapes your personality. But you do not see instant results. It takes time before you see the effects of reading in your life.

So people prefer to spend their money and time on things where they see fast results. For example, if they go to a movie, when the movie ends, they will feel some kind of excitement.

Some say books are very expensive here so people are put off buying them. Do you agree?

I do not agree with that. Going on a date to see a movie is more expensive than some of the books. But people still go on dates and see movies. Why? Once again, they get instant gratification.

What can we do to inculcate the reading habit in our society, especially among the youth?

I remember when I was a kid, way back in the 60s, there were always vans coming to our kampung to sell books. They also buy back old books. People are too lazy to go to the bookshop. So why don't we bring the bookshop to them?

Let us send these vans everywhere, from the housing estates to fancy condominiums. Who knows, that may spark an interest in reading again. Often we see vans going around collecting old mattresses and selling new ones. Perhaps it is time we see vans that sell books.

Your advice for budding writers?

A writer must always seek out knowledge. You will not be able to write a good novel if you do not have in-depth knowledge. So you must read a lot. You need to attend a lot of seminars. Not only literary seminars.

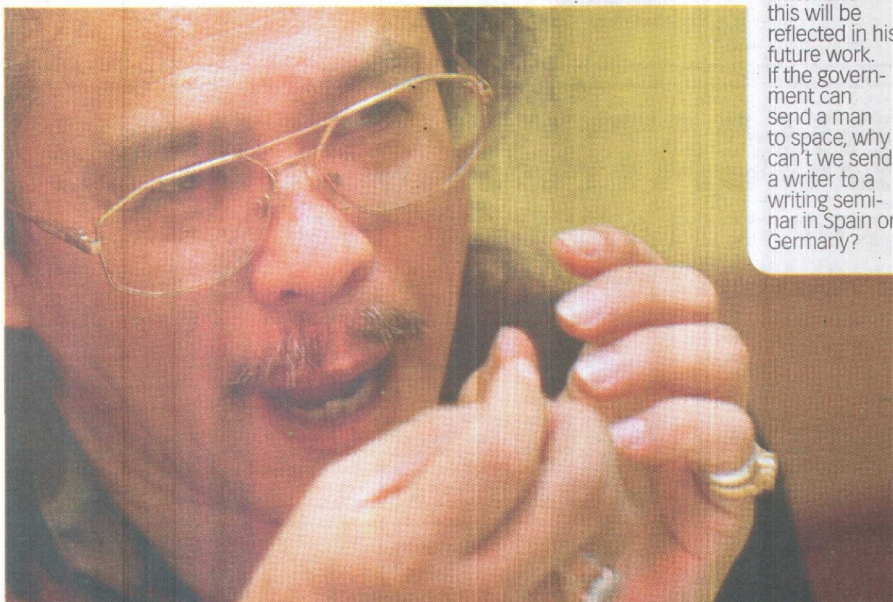
Attend any kind of seminar - from AIDS seminars to economic seminars. All these seminars will make you more knowledgeable.

Of course, you also need to travel. When you travel, you meet a lot of people and you see a lot of different things and all this makes you knowledgeable. All this knowledge will add substance to your writing and that will definitely impress your readers and critics.

Tell me something about yourself. What sparked your interest in reading?

I was born in Bachok, Kelantan in 1952. My father was Chinese and my mother was Thai. I speak Hokkien, Mandarin, Thai and mostly Malay. I always find myself expressing the best in Malay.

My father ran a small coffee shop while my mother was a housewife. My father had never gone to school. But he loved reading. He loved to tell his children the stories and articles he had read. I think that is where I got my reading habit.



It is so difficult for writers to get any kind of grant. When a writer travels and attends writing seminars overseas, he meets a lot of people and he broadens his mind and his horizon. It will make him a more experienced writer and this will be reflected in his future work. If the government can send a man to space, why can't we send a writer to a writing seminar in Spain or Germany?