TIMES EDITIONS

Adibah Armin

Afterword by

and

Margaret Drabble

Introduction by

with

Sallie Ben Jomed

Salt Please
The (Malay) Malaysian Writer’s Dilemma
(1st January 1992)

An intelligent and morally sensitive Malaysian of Malay origin to whom self-respect and the dream of the brotherhood of man are as vital as the air he breathes is not an enviable creature in the age of NEP (New Economic Policy). The Government’s attempt to get his fellow Malays out of the “Malay dilemma” has put him in a new one – the Bumi Dilemma. Bumi is short for Bumiputera, literally, “son” or “prince” of the soil, i.e., the Malays and other natives. It can be a somewhat pejorative term, at least when used by non-Bumis especially in the post NEP era.

The “Bumi Dilemma” afflicts only a tiny minority among the Bumiputeras. Under certain circumstances, or at its most acute, it can be in some ways almost Hamlet-like in its neurosis. To be or not to be part of a “protected species”: that is the question. Whether it is nobler in the mind to “opt out” for the sake of necessary pride and independence and fidelity to ideas that transcend barriers of ethnicity – that, or to commit some kind of moral suicide by accepting unquestioningly those convenient pieties about ethnic survival and dominance. The Bumi afflicted with this dilemma may accept the rationale of the NEP as a time-bound historical necessity. And he may be able to see and acknowledge how, like other similar good-intentioned “correctional” policies, it can be abused. He may even be willing to admit that, though he as an individual doesn’t need the protection of such policies, directly or indirectly, whether he likes it or not, he is beneficiary. But, because of the kind of individual he is, the situation he can find himself in as a result of being a member of a “protected species” is not an enviable one. It is especially unenviable if he is a writer.

As I see it, the most serious problem for the Malaysian writer of Malay origin has to do with the question of fidelity or loyalty. And this question, because of its peculiar implications and of the pressure of certain stubborn ethnic realities, raises the question of a proper audience for the writer. The phrase “Malaysian writer of Malay origin” is here used after some thought; unwieldy though it is, I can’t think of a better one to stress certain realities and remind ourselves of what is supposed to be our common dream. As I have suggested above, the “Malaysian writer of Malay origin” that I mean here refers to a tiny, very tiny minority within a much bigger group. The majority of this group can’t be bothered with fine semantic distinctions between “Malaysian writer of Malay origin” and simply “Malay writer”. In fact, it’s a matter of pride and ideological principle with many of them that the latter is used without question, just as they hardly ever question the givens of ethnicity and religion that make an innocent term like “Malay writer” bristling with divisive connotations. And what is truly, chillingly disturbing is that these givens seem to be becoming more and more set, more shrill. The shrillness is the most immediately disturbing: it’s the shrillness of ideological atavism that, I believe, is death to the creative principle.

The vast majority of Malaysian writers of Malay origin are, I believe, untroubled in any serious way by the question of audience. They just know who constitutes their audience, and they don’t have the slightest doubts about it. One sometimes gets the feeling that they deeply believe and rather like it that things will remain unchanged, the solidity of their audience guaranteed, written into the Constitution as it were, which, in a sense it is. Similarly, the
question of aesthetic, intellectual and moral fidelity doesn't trouble
them. Fidelity to them is mainly a question of being true to certain
ethnic pieties; truths and ideals not narrowed by the myopia of race
and religion don't concern too many of them. The best way to make
the problem of audience and the issue of loyalty something that
could be concretely felt is for me to talk about it from my own
personal experience.

I feel, in fact, I know in my blood and my bone that I belong to
the tiny minority. Every time I sit down to write, I am bugged by
these troubling questions: who am I writing for, in actual fact and
ideally speaking? What am I supposed to be loyal to? In my
pessimistic moments, I even wonder if I have any audience to write
for; if the element of stubbornness in my notion of loyalty and fidelity
had not condemned me to a no man's land. It's quite easy for my
conscious self, the self moved by the will and governed by intelligence,
rationality and ideals of common humanity, to say that as a writer I
recognise only one loyalty: loyalty to truth and beauty, justice and
freedom as I perceive them with all the honesty I could muster;
with an informed mind and an informed heart.

But in this country, "loyalty" is a very difficult business. And if,
like me, you happen to be a writer somewhat alienated by your
education from the dominant values of your ethnic kind, a writer
who stubbornly persists in trying to see through and beyond the
inherited blinkers of race and religion, what you call "loyalty to
truth and beauty, justice and freedom" can be considered a betrayal.
And for the Malays, this "betrayal" is a form of apostasy. People like
me, bilingual and untroubled by sentimental pieties, are particularly
vulnerable to the damning charge of "apostasy" - apostasy from the
religion of race, which can be a worse charge than apostasy from the
religion of the race.

When I came back to Malaysia after a decade in a foreign country,
I made a conscious attempt to recover my lost cultural self. Being a
man of words, the attempt naturally took the form of repossessing
my mother tongue. But, as everyone who has gone through it knows,
such attempts can at best be only partially successful. So was mine -
and I don't regret it. Quite frankly, I didn't want to recover my
original cultural identity in its fullness and purity. The idea of
recovering something of the "purity" of Malay language itself might
appeal to the poet in me, but not those values whose "purity" or
"Malayness" cannot be distinguished from atavism. I am aware that
I am in some ways quite Westernised, and I am not embarrassed by
it. In fact, there are elements in my Westernisation that I am quite
happy about, which I'd like to believe have made me a better human
being and hopefully a better writer. But I also feel I am still, in some
things, incorrigibly Malay. And I don't regret that either. In fact,
there are things about "Malayness" (not to be confused with
"Bumiputera") and in the cultural heritage of my race that I am
terribly proud of. That's why I like Lin Yutang's unusual definition
of patriotism as love for the good things one ate in one's childhood.
I am quite certain that these things, in my case sambal belacan (Malay
delicacy) and cincahok (Malay delicacy), both literal and metaphorical,
inform my writing, especially the poetry. Directly or indirectly, they
give much of whatever energy my writing can claim to have.

Because this energy is inevitably life-affirming, its source cannot
be "exclusively Malay". The streams that water my being, my life,
my dreams, my writings are many and various, though the central
one is no doubt Malay. I am a human being as much as I am a
Malay Malaysian; Malaysia is my country and so is the world.
Actually, my true country is not the world, but world literature. I
am told that in Tagalog, a cousin of Malay, the word "malaya" means
freedom or consciousness. Well, that's the "Malaya" I love to inhabit
and feel terribly loyal to, a country that has no border with that
other one - the country called World Literature.

An Austrian friend once gave me a poetry book called Song of
Malaya by Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek. No it's not about our
country; it's about a prostitute, for the word "malaya" means that in
As I Please

Swahili. When I get depressed or angry because of the atavistic fantasy of “Malaya” and “Melayu” befogging the already blinkered minds of our sasterawans (writers), I think with bitter cynicism of that Swahili word. There are many forms of prostitution. To me, the worst is when the writer uses his talent to prostitute a collective ideal. It is made even worse by his conviction that no prostitution is involved; it’s all in the name of bangsa (race) and semangat kebangsaan (spirit of ethnic nationalism), you see. (We really must do something about that kebangsaan word; as long as we use it to mean nationalism or nationality, we’ll continue to be trapped in the dark alley of atavism).

The Austrian satirist Karl Kraus (a Jew, of course) once ringingly announced his crusade as a writer by describing language as “a universal whore” which he must “turn into a virgin.”

It’s a big dream, a mammoth crusade, that one. But I believe every writer worth his/her salt must commit himself/herself to it. Otherwise, he/she might as well resign from the community of writers – and of human beings. In other words, commit literary hara kiri.
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Cover design by Chong Weng Ho, Sydney, and Lynn Chin, Times Media

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Published by Times Books International
An imprint of Times Editions Pte Ltd
A member of Times International Publishing
Times Centre
1 New Industrial Road
Singapore 536196
Tel: 62139258 Fax: (65) 62854871
E-mail: te@tpl.com.sg
Online Bookstore: http://www.timesone.com.sg/te

Times Subang
Lot 46, Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park
Batu Tiga, 40000 Shah Alam
Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia
Fax & Tel: (603) 56563517
E-mail: cchong@tpg.com.my

Reprinted 2002 (twice)

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Printed in Singapore

National Library Board (Singapore) Cataloguing in Publication Data
Karim Raslan.
p. cm.
1. Islam — Asia, Southeastern. 2. Asia, Southeastern—Politics and government. 3. Asia, Southeastern—Social life and customs. I. Title.
DS521.2 2002
959. — dc21 SLS2002023273
The Modern Malay Dilemma

The Star, April 28, 2002
Sin Chew Jit Poh, April 28, 2002
The Business Times Singapore, April 30, 2002
Berita Harian, May 6, 2002

The Malay world vision has narrowed drastically in the past five years. This is a national tragedy because parochial and pedantic thinking in the corridors of power will destroy the Malaysia we know and love. Why? Firstly, the country is multi-racial. As such the Malays — who are politically dominant — have to maintain their ability to speak (and listen) across the religious divide. Consensus-building is an important part of nation's success. Secondly, the nation's trade is far larger than our GDP. As such, the prosperity we see around us depends on an export-driven economy. In short, we cannot maintain our livelihood — the Protons, the bungalows and the holidays in Medan and Hong Kong — unless we look outwards. Our horizons have to be global.

However, a succession of missteps culminating with Anwar Ibrahim's ouster, detention and trial has emboldened the forces of religious conservatism. PAS's growth might have resulted in the heightening of religious and moral issues. As such the political debate has focused almost entirely on the battle for moral legitimacy and supremacy, shifting the attention inwards rather than outwards.

In many ways this is understandable. PAS, as a party led by ulamas, has concentrated on their core strength: Islam. They have attacked UMNO at the ruling party's weakest point — its perceived lack of religious credentials. This in turn has raised important questions about the efficacy and effectiveness of contemporary liberal democratic institutions such as the judiciary and the civil service. PAS poses the question: if corruption is truly endemic, shouldn't we be replacing the entire western system of governance? However, in their haste to denounce the government at every turn, PAS has ne-
glected to present credible economic or diplomatic policy initiatives, and failed in essence to address the challenges of modernity.

Malaysians and especially the Malay community are in danger of becoming obsessed with microscopic issues of ritual and doctrine, to the exclusion of all else. Piety is all important. Only last week, one friend described the present Malay predicament neatly. He told me about two highly-educated Malay colleagues who were obsessed with the issue of the appropriate garb for women. He said that these two young men spent hours debating this subject, adding that "they seemed to have no interest in other more worldly issues." This 'closed' mentality has had a disastrous impact on our public life.

The nation's newspapers are engrossed by bizarre ideas like public flogging. Moral crusades against incest and homosexuality predominate as serious national issues are sidelined and ignored. Meanwhile, the Malay agenda — the uplifting of the Malay community through education, improved health-care and public services — has been forgotten. We spend our time praising the Bumiputra tycoons and ignoring the real heroes in society, the care-givers — the underpaid nurses and the over-worked teachers. Amidst the hype, young Malay males, for example, are being left behind. They are less well-educated and therefore more likely to end up unemployed and frustrated. In a twist of social-Darwinism the 'chosen of the chosen' are being eclipsed by their sisters and their girlfriends. Interestingly (and worryingly) it's the same under-performing Malay males who then take up positions of influence and authority later in life.

No one seems to be willing to ask why our education system is failing such a large (and potentially troublesome) chunk of the population. Why are employers less inclined to hire young Malay males? Why are we failing to create a cadre of globalised Malays that matches our economic aspirations? Could it be that their inability to speak English and or Mandarin makes them unprofitable and less attractive workers? Alternatively, can the government absorb the surplus? Are we sitting on a time bomb?

Similarly, last week when China's Vice President Hu Jintao and heir apparent visited Kuala Lumpur, most Malaysians just yawned: the KLSE Index was more important for them. Very few Malaysians (and Malays in particular) realise the extent to which our export-driven prosperity is threatened by China's gargantuan economy. If we are not careful our puny industries will be overwhelmed.

There is no one easy solution for the two challenges I've outlined. However there is an underlying theme — that of openness. We cannot address the country's weaknesses, domestically and internationally, unless and until we try to create a truly global agenda for the Malay community. This in turn will help strengthen racial understanding as well as an all-encompassing Malaysian identity.

Firstly, the Malay community has got to wake up. Whilst faith is vital, religious practices do not prevent us from addressing the challenges of everyday life. We must equip ourselves with contemporary knowledge — with science, economics and technology — in order to defend our way of life. Economics and business are going to have to be the drivers of this re-tooling of the Malay mindset. The engagement with China is a good illustration of what I mean by re-tooling. We have to learn about the world's most populous nation and create niches for ourselves in tourism, educational services, agriculture and natural resources.

We will need a vast pool of Mandarin-speaking Malaysians in order to achieve this goal. We can of course turn to the Malaysian Chinese community and task them with the interaction. But that is not a sensible long-term solution. Instead, the Malay community must also get involved in what is potentially the world's largest marketplace. The Malays must be equipped to handle the relationship head-on, globalising their mindset.

This brings me back to the disturbing educational record of Malay males. Frankly, our national education system does not encourage the Malay community to be sufficiently open to other cultures and languages. This resistance to external ideas and influences
is prejudicial to the community's employment prospects and long-term future. If it isn't halted now, the exclusivity and isolationism will only worsen.

In order to create 'global' Malays we need to inculcate a more dynamic, forward-looking ethos. Tragically, the New Economic Policy has hampered this development. As long as jobs and other opportunities are controlled by government, the incentive to work and study hard is removed. However in the real world, 'knowledge', unlike capital, land and labour, cannot be mandated. Openness then also refers to the need to 'open' the community up to the harsh realities of globalisation. Only exposure to greater competition will make the Malays more resilient and competitive. Continuing the present policies encourages mediocrity, laziness and stupidity.

Creativity, independent thinking and risk-taking must also be encouraged. Diversity (racial and religious) has to be underlined. Malay students (as well as all Malaysians, irrespective of race) must become trilingual. Language proficiency in English, Malay and Chinese has to become a minimum requirement in the national education system. Moreover the cultures and philosophies underpinning the respective languages must also be taught. Muslims must learn about Christianity, Buddhism and Confucianism and vice versa. How else to foster religious understanding? Young Malay males must be trained to succeed in whatever careers they want, wherever they want (including China, Europe and North America). The 'global' Malay and the truly Malaysian identity is only a step away. Are we open to change?
The

Regenerative

Spirit

VOLUME 1

Polarities of Home and Away, Encounters and Diasporas, in Post-colonial Literatures

Edited by
Nena Bierbaum, Syd Harrex and Sue Hosking

LYTHRUM PRESS
ADELAIDE
Malaysian Poetic Licence: Writing Home and Away in English

NORITAH OMAR

The Malaysian literary scene is a 'very crowded' literary scene. This metaphor of 'crowdedness' may be extended to the sense of suffocation that leads Malaysian writers in English either to leave the scene disheartened, or to stay on to share the struggle of the new nation that is their homeland. The diasporic Malaysian literary scene consists specifically of Malay (Bumiputra [native] or literally sons of the soil) and Peranakan Chinese poets writing in English both home and away. The question of home and other socio-cultural and socio-political issues are discussed in relation to contested definitions of nationalism, national character and national literature. This chapter discusses the works of Malay and Peranakan Chinese poets writing in English, who write within these contested definitions. It also deals with the question of acceptance, and the sense of belonging these poets feel to the country as a nation.

A common factor for self-identification for poets with their nation is in their choice of language. This self-identification is determined by the nation's spirit of nationalism. Benedict Anderson proposes that a nation is 'an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.' The origins of official nationalism can be traced back to the dynastic powers of the Europeans in the 1820s, while the growth of nationalism witnessed the rise in the use of national languages. Every new nation state aspires to establish its own vernacular literature. In the case of Malaysia, its national literature is thus defined as literature written in the Malay language. This executive position of Malay literature and Malay language has, in turn, contested the importance of other languages and cultures of Malaysia.

Many who are English or Western educated would argue that the use of the English language does not reduce a Malaysian's spirit of patriotism or loyalty to the nation. This position is continually contested, as some Malay nationalists believe that because the English language is a colonial language, it will somehow shape a national consciousness that is not much different from the colonial masters' from the time of colonisation. The conflict between a resigned acceptance of the instrumental value of English, and the fear of the cultural values embedded in the language, particularly when it is used for cultural expression, is one that is shared by Malaysia's neighbour, Singapore. In resolving Malay nationalists' worry about the declining use of Malay language amongst Malaysians as a result of the promotion of Malaysian literature in English, Ismail Talib discusses how 'sensibility' is transmitted through language. He explains that while the language used by writers may be the colonial language,
English is now at the centre. Malaysian writers writing in English have now come to the centre of attention by gaining recognition internationally, as well as nationally, through the inclusion of Malaysian writings in English in the secondary school English literature curriculum. With the inclusion of Malaysian writings in English, the opportunity to understand wider perspectives on the national character and identity through literature is created.

The emotional aspect of Malaysian poets' self-identification is apparent in the cultural and political expression of their poetry. The power of poetry has arguably been underestimated in the nation's exploration of what makes up the Malaysian identity, particularly the emotional element that lies underneath the poetic language. Shirley Lim expresses that the 'lines, images, rhythms, rhymes, alliterative force, [shape] an inward sense that is the radical opposite of emoting'.

The importance of Malaysian poetry in English lies in the cultural images and symbols powerfully evoked by the poets. These images and symbols capture the poets' diasporic identity; creating a unique poetic voice. Malaysian national laureate Shahnah Ahmad asserts that with poetry, 'the selection of words is more intuitive, not as something decorative or symbolic as we normally accept its definition'. In his study of Muhammad Haji Salleh's work, Shahnah posits that Muhammad adopted D.H. Lawrence's idea that 'symbols do not depict something, but stand only as units of feelings and experiences of man'. Shahnah's argument supports the view that the poet or creative writer's work may be taken to be the voice of the nation's conscience.

A Peranakan Chinese who writes on themes of estrangement and exile, Wong Phui Nam writes from home and is creatively critical of the Malaysian experience. His criticism of Malaysian consciousness is hidden in his description of landscape. Images of disease subtly insinuate the socio-political state of Malaysian society, and can reflect a consciousness, repressed or controlled by the mechanisms of the psyche. Among the various diseases, both physical and mental, captured in Wong's earlier poems are:

- anguish
- mania
- depression
- torment
- terror
- paranoia
- loneliness
- distress
- sickness
- hunger
- lust
- a sense of uselessness and defeat
- [and physical ailments such as] diabetes and gangrene
- [which] are all related to one disease: cancer.

Susan Sontag further suggests that "disease imagery" is used to express concern for social order and to judge society not as out of balance but as repressive. However, the repressive or controlled psyche should not be generalised as representing the national character of Malaysia.

Wong Phui Nam's poetic expression is symbolic. His evaluation of the Malaysian political identity is projected by the subtle images of the body and disease. Wong's attack on the Malaysian national character and consciousness may also be seen as ideological and spiritual. His observation of the Malaysian experience in forming its national literature and national identity is internalised and beyond the material. Wong Phui Nam, although writing from home, is similar to Salleh Ben Joned and Muhammad Haji Salleh in that he may still be considered diasporic by his choice to write poetry in English.
Si Tegang returned to his mother's lap,
Burdened with all the sins not in the Book;
The country of the Bumis's now trapped
In progress dictated by patriotic goals. 42

Salleh Ben Joned's experience resembles that of Muhammad Haji Salleh. His temporary diaspora causes him to reflect both on the notion of home and on himself and his cultural roots. The following stanzas from the same poem are very revealing:

My father was a Malay of the lost breed,
Who loved his neighbours as much as his stout;
Faithful in his faithlessness, he knew his creed;
Religion's something he didn't fuss about

When I left my kampung I swear to be true
To the words of the poet ringing in my mind;
With the last of the lion, I screamed: 'I don't need
This ticket to the heaven of your kind' 43

Ben Joned not only satirises his own personal experience but also the national experience, particularly Malaysians' use of the English language:

What more we really give full blast
To the 'id' in idealism
So how dare you say we mistake
Our stress, our nationalism

We always have them about us
Ebittime talk english lah
Our way of talking the lingo
Is our way of being unik aso

It's our great opportunity
To practice our own democracy. 44

Ben Joned's satire ironically explains the seriousness of issues about national character and Malay nationalism. His playfulness in his poetry is a way of hiding overt criticisms of the issues he addresses, as this may jeopardise his social and political position.

The notion of diaspora traced in the works of these two Malay poets who write in both English and Malay is not solely limited to geographical borders, but also the ideological borders determined by the language in which they choose to write. Their Malay consciousness or patriotism may be questioned if the use of the Malay language is the basic measurement for their Malayness. Ben Joned and Muhammad may not have been granted the licence to represent the Malay community if they had been unable to express their poetry in both languages. Being Malay, and writing creatively in the homeland, their choice to also write in the Malay language saves them from being completely diasporic. By choosing to write in both languages, the two are potential representatives of the Bangsa Malaysia aspired to in Mahathir's brand of nationalism.

The Malaysian consciousness can also be seen in the works of the Peranakan Chinese (which means native-born)—'the Peranakan Chinese speak Baba Malay [they do not speak Chinese], a dialect of Malay, and share some cultural features with the Malays as a result of domicile in the Peninsular.' 41 The Peranakan Chinese's close relation to the Malay culture is worth exploring in connection to their sense of belonging to Malaysia as their homeland. The Peranakan Chinese, unlike the majority of the Chinese community, are mostly English educated, particularly the Peranakan Chinese of Malacca. Their sense of belonging to Malaysia can be assumed to be stronger because of the way they define themselves as 'native-born'.

However, their choice of language, which is mainly English, despite Malay being their mother tongue to write in has excluded them from being considered natives of the land. This is the indirect cause of feeling marginalised in their own homeland, within the borders of Malaysian nationalism. The home that they believe will help them identify their self-identity rejects them. The Peranakan Chinese of Malacca distinguish themselves from other Chinese communities and from Chinese culture by their close identification with English, rather than the Chinese language. At the same time, they distinguish themselves from the Malays by not being Muslims. The sense of rejection by both cultures, Malay and Chinese, has inevitably positioned them 'neither here nor there' in their own homeland. After the 1969 riots, Malay nationalism in limiting the borders of nationalism by referring only to the Malay culture and the Malay language, excluded English, which indirectly excludes the Peranakan Chinese from the national scene.

The recognition given to the Malay language has been taken as a gesture of painful rejection (by the Peranakan Chinese) from the national culture and identity. In the first place their decision for self-exile is mainly due to a strong sense of belonging to Malaysia/Malaya, causing them to merajuk at the perceived rejection. The Malay saying goes—'merajuk pada yang hasih' (merajuk where you are loved), can at best be interpreted as the feeling of hurt and anger (merajuk) which can only be felt when your heart is involved, or when the situation involves someone or something you love; in this case it is love for the homeland. Although Koh Tai Ann categorises the Peranakan Chinese and other ethnic minority groups as those who have not obtained equal status with the Malay, the sense of hurt felt by the Peranakan Chinese, compared with other ethnic groups is greater. This is especially captured in Ee Tiang Hong's collection of poetry Myths for a Wilderness. 45

Ee Tiang Hong, despite his long absence from Malaysia, was still considered a Malaysian poet because of his poems which convey 'a deeply felt sense of home'. 46 The notion of home, for Ee, connects closely to his hometown Malacca that stands for its 'myth, belonging as it does to a lost past, and now proving to have been only a dream'. 47 Ee's imagined home in Malaya is summarised in his last stanza of Tranquerah, Malacca:

We who are flesh and blood
Lack the forbearance to accept
The days that fail to deliver
Their stock of promises,
When yet another consignment goes,
33 Muhammad Haji Salleh, Anthology xxxii
34 Muhammad Haji Salleh, Anthology 185.
35 Muhammad Haji Salleh, Anthology 184.
36 Muhammad Haji Salleh, Anthology 185.
37 Muhammad Haji Salleh, Anthology 185.
38 Shahnon Ahmad, Literature as a seismograph of life.
40 Ungku Maimunah, ‘Between Content and Aesthetics: “Modernity” in the Writings of Abdullah Mansyur, the Acclaimed Father of Modern Malay Literature’, eds Fadillah Merican and Ruzy Suliza Hashim, Native Texts and Contexts (Bangi: Faculty of Language Studies, UKM) 61.
41 Salleh Ben Joned, Poems Sacred and Profane 39.
42 Salleh Ben Joned, Poems Sacred and Profane 42.
44 Koh Tai Ann in Quayum and Wicks, Malaysian Literature in English 114.
45 Adiba Amin defines and explains the untranslatability of ‘merajuk’ in Glimpses: Cameos of Malaysian life (Petaing Jaya: Erican & Web) 55–57.
46 Koh Tai Ann in Quayum and Wicks, Malaysian Literature in English 114.
47 Koh Tai Ann in Quayum and Wicks, Malaysian Literature in English 114.
48 Ye Tiang Hong, Myths for a Wilderness (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1976).
49 Koh Tai Ann in Quayum and Wicks, Malaysian Literature in English 111.
50 Koh Tai Ann in Quayum and Wicks, Malaysian Literature in English 112.
51 Ye Tiang Hong, Myths for a Wilderness 4.
52 Shirley Lim, Monsoon History (London: Skoob, 1994) 3.
53 Koh Tai Ann quoted in Quayum and Wicks, Malaysian Literature in English 118.

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