

8. Author Experience in Malaysia

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I am a lawyer but I am more popular as a short story writer. I don't know much about copyright but I know a lot about literature and essay. My role here today is to make sure that you don't fall asleep and that you get a sense of the challenge a writer faces in a small country like Malaysia.

I checked with my friends in the literary and essay publishing industry in Malaysia, and I can tell you what they told me about copyright. First, there is not much copyright awareness among Malaysian publishers. There is copyright violation by students, especially of textbooks. I know it because my short stories are studied at universities. When I go and give talks at universities, all the students have photocopies of my short stories. But I should say that it's better that they read literature even if it is only mine than not reading at all. So, if it has to be photocopied, it's okay. But having said that, universities are now trying to stop it. And I think that is good.

Another problem for a small country like Malaysia is the market. It is very small and it is very much controlled by the American and European publishers. We can find books from New York and London within a few weeks, but we hardly find books from Jakarta, Bangkok, and Manila. And because of this, we know more about writers from London and New York than we ever know about fellow writers in Jakarta, Bangkok, or Manila. And this is a major issue. This is something which I hope, from the fact that you have invited me today and talking to some people in Ikapi now, that we should do more to bring together writers from the two different countries.

Because we all face the same challenges of dealing with a very small market, sometimes it is very difficult for us to publish short stories in magazines and newspapers, especially with literary editors. They don't want to pay much so they want everything very short. We try to get books read by young people who only want to watch sinetron and television. This is our challenge. We have to make what we write as interesting and exciting as a sinetron and also put substance in it. That is, we connect with what is happening today, in a way which tell people about where we come from and who we are. This is our challenge.

Officially I write in English. My mother is English and my father is Malaysian. I grew up speaking English and I am most comfortable writing in English. Therefore, my perspective on my country, Malaysia, is not the one which all Malaysian agree

with. That's fine, but it means that I am an outsider, even though I come from a very privileged and comfortable background. However, because I am an outsider, I've been able to write for many newspapers. I maintain a column in Bahasa Melayu and in Chinese as well. I cannot write Chinese and my Bahasa Melayu is translated. But, this also tells you how Malaysia is so complex. Only 25 million people with three big languages makes it very difficult to write for everyone. And Chinese Malaysians have viewed Malaysia very different from mine as a Moslem Malaysian.

Many years ago, when D.S Nipol was visiting Malaysia and writing about Islamic world, I helped him in his research. You see my name at the back of the book. He said to me, "Karim, if you want to be a writer, never give up your day job." As a young man, I wanted to stop work, stop being a lawyer. He said, "No! Always keep your day job and write, because in your country, it would be difficult to survive. If you move to London or New York, yes maybe it is possible, but maybe not in your country."

But I've been very fortunate being able to create my carrier because I also write my columns in so many different newspapers in so many different countries. But, it's very hard work. I am sure any columnist in Indonesia will tell you so, such as Mas Gunawan or Pak Budi from Kompas. It's very difficult to keep writing every week, to look after your carrier and also to make *oatmeal* necessary to survive. What I am trying to tell you today is writers need money to survive. We need money to buy books to read, to buy computers and to have Internet access. We cannot live on air. And so, I always say to any newspaper editors here, please increase the amount you pay to your contributor. That is very important because for most writers their only source of regular income is from the newspapers and magazines.

Now, let me tell you more about Malaysia and how and why writing in Malaysia, or literature has evolved. There are three points I have to make on why, and the impact. Our country is so small, only 25 million and we have only 10 % the size of Indonesia. And then, we are so diverse. For 25 million people, there are three big languages plus, the fourth, which I represent, English language. Frankly, it's a *topeng* (mask) of the community. And because of that, it means that it has an impact on politics, and to literature.

Each community, each people, Chinese, Indian, and Malay, have their own schools, and their own newspapers. They have their own writers. So, that

means that they have their own world. Chinese writers write things resembling what is written in Hong Kong, Taipei, or Beijing. Those who write in Tamil tend to look like what is written in Madras. And I always look like more to New York and London. So, we all look in different way, however much I try. But sometimes, we don't look into our country enough. We are very diverse. It also has an impact on the indigenous community, the Malay Moslem who feel that Malaysia is their homeland. And because of that, there is a sense of paranoia about the others. And this is very central to Malaysian politics and how writing has evolved. And even in my short stories which always is about the Malaysian community, I write about what they say *bangsawan orang Melayu* (Malay noble people), like people in Menteng and Kemang (cities in Indonesia). They are my world. You write about what you know. I cannot go to villages and write about the life of farmers.

So, the diversity creates tension. It means that the Malay world tend to be quite defensive, even actually compared with Indonesian writers. I come to Indonesia more often than most of my Malaysian friends, and I find Malaysian writers are not very comfortable. I think this is a great shame. So, the third point is politics. The Malaysian community is dominant political community. They have a tension from the very strong Chinese business club, but the Malaysian community needs to dominate. They say it is national identity, in terms of what it is to be Malaysian, and then, in terms of what it is to write Malaysian literature. The political party that run the country, essentially UMNO (United Malays National Organization), is very strong in defining what it is to be Malaysian and to write Malaysian literature. When I write in English, the Malaysians don't like to consider me as a Malaysian writer. And if a Chinese write in Chinese about Malaysian experience, the people and the government are not very happy either. They really want Malaysian to write in Malay about the Malay world. That is Malaysia. But then, that denies the complexity of Malaysia.

Because it's a small market we all depend on government money. All the newspapers and the magazines are owned by the government. That means that there is not much money to go around for a lot of writers. It's very tough. In Malaysia, we don't have the situation that you have here in Indonesia with independent newspapers like Kompas, the Tempo Group and Jawa Pos, which are owned by individuals and people with a strong personality and their own views. In Malaysia, periodicals like Pelita Harian and Utusan Malaysia are all owned by the kingdom, people close to the kingdom or the political party. So, if you are opposing them, they don't want you to write for them. It's very difficult.

So, the three points are the size, the diversity, and the politics. What impact do they have on the literature and the writing? As I said, control. Because of so much government ownership of the media and every newspaper needs to have a license which can be taken away any year, all newspaper owners are very scared. They do not want people who write difficult things about Malaysia, about aspects of society which may not be agreeable to everyone else. That means, in newspapers, there are people who are good and loyal, and trusted. That is the most important thing in Malaysia, not professionalism.

This reminds me of Indonesia about the time in the past, pre-reformation. This also means that there is less creativity. There are very few newspapers, especially in the Bahasa Melayu area, where there is freedom. In English media, we are very lucky to have one group, The Sun and The Age, which are very supportive to different types of writing. But as I say, the government's ideas control the definition of identity. What it means to be Malaysia and even being Chinese in Malaysia. Then, the next thing that happens is because the Malaysian community is small, there is a strong pressure that all Malaysians should be the same. We should not have any differences. But in fact, the Malaysian community is very different. There are Arabic Malaysian, Indian Malaysian, Minangkabau Malaysian, Bugis Malaysian, etc. but the government doesn't like that. They want everyone to be just Malaysian. Because of that, it's very flat landscape. They try to deny all cultural differences because they want to strengthen national identity. It's a good idea. But we pay the cost by losing the sense of our personal identity. We lose also our connection with our friends, because so much of the Malaysian community came from Indonesia. We came from here. Our roots are over here. But because it has been wiped out, we forget about this. Even though there are so many people of Javanese background, they don't know any Javanese world any more. They don't know where they came from. And that creates Malaysian. But I think you lose something vital. You lose who you are if you don't know where your grandparents come from, and don't know their songs or their stories.

Another problem now is, and I think this is also an issue here, that the identity of Malaysian is always been Moslem. You cannot become Malaysian if you are not Moslem. Both are the same. It has been more conservative thinking in the past decade. Now, to be Malaysian also means to be very moralistic. All people and all Malaysian never commit anything immoral. There are no Malaysian prostitutes, no Malaysian homosexuals, and no Malaysian drug takers. So, we always deny things that are not good and that are not beautiful, although they still exist. They are only hidden. The task and the responsibility of a writer are to write difficult things. If we always

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write about how wonderful we are as Malaysians, it is Dr. Mahathir's rhetoric.

Then, we get a very bad headache of ourselves. We forget the marginal people who are left behind. And also we become very judgmental. Anyone who doesn't fit perfectly is out. And this is one of our challenges we are facing now because it is not just cultural conformity but also very moral conformity. So, you have to fit into a cultural and moral box.

People used to think just to exercise power. It is not about literature or art. They just wanted to be powerful. There are many campaigns against people who want to perform/to do things which break what are considered to be Islamic. So, it's very difficult now for younger people to write about the aspects of human life.

I've been very lucky because as I am a lawyer, I get my personal income. I feel very sorry for people who write in Bahasa Melayu because there are not enough media for them. I think there are a lot of blocks in Indonesia as well, but we are finding more and more blocks. People are writing very personal experiences, but if you do not have an audience, then you do not develop a discipline. We must all have editors. Sometimes I like blocks, because they come straight to the heart and they are very real. They give people a chance to express themselves. But without editors and without the discipline of the newspaper or something, there is no form. Discipline, structure and organization are brought by editors. And this is a challenge now for all young people who develop their abilities to write better and to find people to edit their works.

So, what we see in Malaysia is a kind of a monopoly of patronage. We have to acknowledge that all writers need money. It is a very romantic idea to say you can write only with water and rice. It's not true. We all need money. And there is a monopoly. There is not enough opportunity for people to live by writing. The market cannot judge a lot of these writers because they maybe considered too risky, too much sensuality, and too anti-government, or too loud to be published. This is the challenge now.

It's very lucky for people like me, who write in English. We can write for outside newspapers and publishing houses. So, I cannot complain. In fact, one of my fellow Malaysian, Tash Ao, who is a Chinese and about 15 years younger than me, wrote a novel called "How Many Silk Factories?" It received the grand prize for the first novel this year. But it was published in London. It's a Malaysian story. Maybe the only way that our stories from our part of the world to be told is to be published over there. Maybe it is too difficult for us to tell our story from here and get noticed. I don't know. Maybe the Internet will provide more access.

In conclusion for writers like myself, I have to stress, money is important. Anybody from newspapers or who edit on commission, you must pay more for your writers. And it's also important that you don't get back to the steps of pre-reformation here now that you've opened up everything. For many writers in Malaysia, Indonesia is like a beacon because you have opened up the doors.

Life is difficult but for those who write, there is so much more opportunity and market is so big and so open. We in Malaysia are still struggling in a very tight environment, very different opportunity to write.

That is all I can say. Thank you very much and I'll answer any questions that you have.

(Transcribed from Mr. Karim Raslan's presentation)