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# Oh Rok De Bot

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Robert Warde

*Oh rok de bot en korap de lengguejeh/  
Mutilet dem ol laik de sevejeh*

—“*Kelantan Inglisy*,” Che Husna Azhari

At the Singapore Art Museum this past January, I visited an exhibit called *Singapore Art Today*. The first room I entered featured an imposing canvas by Siew Hock Meng titled *The Starting of an Era*. Painted in the year 2000, it depicts, at the viewer’s left, a pig-tailed Chinaman, shirtless, holding a British flag and assuming a position suggestive of the crucifixion. In the center of the composition crouches a roughly clothed Malay warrior, sword in hand. To the right stands an Indian signalman, facing front, rigidly at attention, garbed in a British red-and-white uniform, with another Indian trouper at his feet. These figures do not acknowledge or interact with one another, and they announce themselves starkly, atop a rocky prominence, backed by a dark sky that threatens rain. The image speaks volumes about Malaysia, and, by extension, about the city-state of Singapore, expelled from the newly formed Malaysia in August of 1965. It evokes, of course, British colonialism, itself an echo of earlier Portuguese and Dutch settlements in Melaka, and it also highlights the ethnic diversity that partly depends on British-driven labor migration in the 19th century. Most notably, it captures, through its juxtapositions of men and costumes, the complex and vexed relationships among ethnic groups and between those groups and the not-very-distant colonial past, a past whose hold upon the present has by no means disappeared.

Today, Malaysia officially celebrates its diversity as an economically valuable resource in the competition for tourism (“Malaysia, truly Asia”), and as a political model of tolerance in a world where borders seem everywhere to be blurring. Indeed, the standard iteration of

Malaysian ethnicity—61 percent Malay, 29 percent Chinese, 8 percent Indian—hardly does justice to the variety of cultures that inhabit Peninsular and East Malaysia. As Albert Gomes contends, such grouping constitutes “a rather simplistic portrayal of the country’s ethnoscape.” He notes that the category of Malay alone “covers a range of people from Middle Eastern descent to Indonesian peoples such as Acehnese, Boyanese, Bugis, Javanese, Minangkabau, Rawa and Mandailing, and Muslims who trace their roots to the Indian subcontinent.” The Government recognizes a standard Malay language, Bahasa Malayu, but, in Gomes’ words, “there are several Malay dialects . . . Malays from Kelantan, for instance, speak a distinctive dialect (*loghat*) from Perak or Johor Malays.”<sup>1</sup>

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As is the case with any nation, reality in Malaysia does not perfectly mirror the Government’s or the Office of Tourism’s representation of things. It is hardly surprising to encounter various tensions in the country that tend to belie the official portrait of multiethnic harmony, and that manifest themselves openly from time to time, whether on a large scale (the racial riots of 1969) or a smaller one (the clashes between Malays and Indians outside Kuala Lumpur in March of 2001). Similarly, while the language of instruction in Malaysian secondary schools since 1970 has been Bahasa Malayu, the vision of a monolithic language, able to unify within its sonorities the population’s expressive imagination, seems at best a dream, and perhaps not a desirable one at that, even if viable. Ironically, the Malay words for language, *bahasa*, and for indigenous people, *Bumiputera* (“sons of the soil”) are derived from Sanskrit, and thus stand as reflections of Indian influence rather than examples of a discrete vernacular native to the region.

One can grasp some of the characteristic intricacies of Malaysian culture via a consideration of ethnic make-up, or, importantly, through a study of religious practices. Islamic beliefs and values lie at the heart of the country’s declared identity, but Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism make themselves strongly felt, along with a number of other faiths, including Christianity. Alternately, one can also begin to understand Malaysia’s historical and political circumstances in terms of the state of its spoken and written languages. As one would expect, language issues are tightly bound to the subjects of ethnicity and religion, since language is perhaps the central element that colors any culture.

More immediately, language determines the forms of verbal and written communication, be they quotidian or artistic. Thus, by scrutinizing a country's linguistic life, one begins to comprehend its particular individuality.

With that idea in mind, it is instructive to examine the epigraph that opens this essay. The piece in question, from a collection of verse by Dr. Che Husna Azhari, is one of four poems grouped in a section called "*Poyengs ing Kelantan Inglisty.*" The poet grew up in Kelantan, a state that borders on Thailand in the northeastern corner of peninsular Malaysia. That border feels arbitrary to Azhari, whose Islamic fundamentalism and Kelantan dialect lead her to identify more strongly with her immediate Thai neighbors than with other parts of Malaysia. In a study of her home village, Melor, she writes:

We are different not in the sense of a genus, a race, but we are different in our loyalties and allegiances and, collectively, in how we perceive ourselves. We feel different in our political heritage. We feel different in our cultural heritage. We feel different in the cohesiveness of our family structure, and we feel justified in declaring the rest of the peninsular Malays as "*Orang Luar*" [outsiders], a term which we never use to refer to our Southern Thai . . . brethren, whom we consider our own kindred.<sup>2</sup>

Che Husna Azhari's husband, Dr. Wan Mokhtar, is from the same area. At home with their nine children, they normally speak their Kelantan dialect, not the standard national language, Bahasa Malayu, which dominates the Kuala Lumpur region. Azhari now holds a teaching appointment in Mechanical and Materials Engineering at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), the national university at Bangi, not far from Kuala Lumpur, whose language of instruction is, by decree, Bahasa Malayu. When she lectures in Bahasa Malayu, says Azhari, she feels as if she is acting in a drama, a predictable sensation when one performs a linguistic act that is not entirely natural, involving the voicing of consciously acquired sounds, not the instinctive reproduction of a mother tongue. Having studied at an advanced level in Great Britain, Azhari says she feels as much at home in English as in Bahasa Malayu, and actually prefers to write in the former. She has been publishing fiction and poetry for the past decade, and in so doing she faces a quandry: In what language should she communicate her ideas?

To reach a reasonably wide audience, Azhari must abandon the Kelantan dialect. Consequently, she necessarily abandons her own

voice, the language of childhood through which she first learned to articulate ideas and feelings. No subsequent language can ever be manipulated in quite the same way, or yield quite the same resonances. There will always exist that self-conscious sense of being on stage, of enacting someone else's words, even when those words are nominally your own. Certainly Bahasa Malayu is closely linked to the Kelantan tongue, but it is not the same language. Given that fact, Azhari is content to write much of her work in English, the language of her later schooling, since she is effectively working with a foreign language whether she embraces Bahasa Malayu or the colonial alternative.

As it happens, most of the pieces in her volume of poetry are in Bahasa Malayu, but in the four poems mentioned above, Azhari reproduces an invented crossbreed, "Kelantan Inglisy." This is a comical language, a mad language, an impossible language. It is the bastard child of unwedded parents, set loose on readers who can at best be only half ready for it. This Inglisy is bumpy and awkward, and it projects the rueful, resigned good humor of an author who needs to have us understand that she is bedeviled by the joys and riches of several languages, and the painful frustrations of no language. Kelantan Inglisy (with Bahasa Malayu lurking at its interstices) is also, by default, political, because in Malaysia the choice of a language is unavoidably political: "*Oh rok de bot en korap de lengguejeh / Mutilet dem ol laik de sevejah*" (Oh rock the boat and corrupt the languages / Mutilate them all like the savages). These actions cut both ways. Kelantan-Bahasa is corrupted by the intrusion of English. English is distorted and mocked by Kelantan-Bahasa. To engage in either action is to rock the boat, since the pidgin Kelantan-English opens up an array of uncomfortable questions about the interface between East and West. The degeneration of English is an act wrought by "savages," the "native" population of a Third World country, and Azhari, like any Malaysian writer, is alert to her status. In a different poem she says in Bahasa Malayu, "*Ambo tetap ambo / Melayu Dunia Ketiga*" (I am still I / A Malay of the Third World). The hybrid language also makes indirect allusion to the primacy of English, because it is fundamentally a form of English (Inglisy), modified by the adjective "Kelantan." It works best for English speakers. Whenever they voice or inscribe their thoughts, Che Husna Azhari and her husband are negotiating among three languages. As devout Muslims, however, they worship from the teachings of the Quran, and thus their spiritual life is intimately linked

to Arabic, yet another dominant thread woven into the complex tapestry of words that sustain them. Even within the personal and intimate confines of their faith, they confront the need to function in a foreign idiom.

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When a newly formed country is engaged in the job of nation building, it does not help to ponder publicly the tangled linguistic circumstances of someone such as Che Husna Azhari, although her indeterminate position as a speaker and writer is surely the norm and not the exception. Malaysia in its present form is not quite forty years old, so it is no surprise that the Government has concentrated much of its energy on the task of cultivating a national identity, a process that must begin with a solid foundation. Patriots are not born of nuances and subtly shaded visions of reality. Their enthusiasms depend instead on unambiguous notions and memorable slogans. One obvious way to start was by bringing people together beneath the banner of a common language. At one level that move has been successful; Malaysian students in the public schools now learn in what is thought of as the indigenous tongue. We have seen, however, that even among Malays there are numerous speech variants to so-called standard Bahasa Malayu, and those Malaysians speaking Mandarin, Tamil, or some other non-Malay language did not simply disappear in the face of new policy.

Faced with schools that stressed the mastery of Bahasa Malayu, Chinese Malaysians founded a number of private institutions whose language of instruction is typically Mandarin, though there are many different Chinese dialects spoken in Malaysia. Sometimes resident Chinese must talk to one another in English, as the likeliest common tongue across a wide range of South China groups. Among the Indians, Tamil is most commonly spoken, but, like the Chinese, Indian Malaysians emigrated from numerous different regions, so their speech is by no means homogenous. There are so many languages and dialects employed in Malaysia that a decision to install Bahasa Malayu as the language of choice cannot easily overcome the vital presence of many other competing tongues.

Further, to the degree that the Government is successful in educating today's students in Bahasa Malayu, it creates a problem for itself relative to English. Because the latter language is now very much a secondary acquirement among public school children, current college-

bound graduates are generally less interested and less accomplished in English than was formerly the case. This becomes very apparent during their university years. The English language and literature professors with whom I spoke were unanimous in their assertion that mastery of English is markedly on the decline, and their departmental offerings are frequently under-enrolled. One could argue that there are no grounds for concern on these counts, the plan being, after all, to encourage mastery of Bahasa Malayu before all else.

Yet even the Government is aware of the downside of its policy. Malaysia, like the rest of the world, has no power to curb the seemingly relentless spread of English across the globe. Our group's formal meetings with the UKM and Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) faculties are a case in point. Each of those sessions was conducted in English, without translators. Malaysian faculty who presented papers or visited the sessions as discussants had to deliberate in English, and they were quite able to do so, many of them having been trained at English-speaking universities.

The members of our American contingent were well meaning, sensitive, and open to cultural differences, but none in the group spoke Bahasa Malayu (or Mandarin or Tamil). We hoped that English would carry us through the country and it usually did. When we encountered non-English speakers, it was, for me at least, always a slight shock. I took it for granted that English would get the job done, and if it didn't, I was momentarily taken aback. Even Malaysians who spoke little English tended to have the rudimentary vocabulary requisite to their particular interactions with us.

In part, our experience showed that despite its independence and emphasis on nationalization, Malaysia still labors to shake its colonial past. With respect to language, that past is reinforced by a contemporary need to know English in order to facilitate tourism, and, much more importantly, in order to move beyond national borders toward an engagement with the world at large. It is in relation to these latter points that current government policy becomes problematic. While the promotion of Bahasa Malayu hastens the disappearance of one crucial sign of British rule, it simultaneously threatens to isolate Malaysia from full participation in the realms of international business and scientific research, two areas in which the country aspires to succeed. Thus, at least with respect to the issue of language acquisition, the wish to promote Bahasa Malayu directly counters an equally strong desire to establish Malaysia's global presence as a commercial and

technological power. These latter goals demand an increased facility in English, exactly what the current generation of university students apparently does not have.

Such considerations focus on issues that involve the individual's capacity to manage language without reference to the production of literature. Once the circumstances of the creative writer are examined, the situation becomes much more complicated. There is, to begin with, the question of audience, discussed above in relation to Che Husna Azhari's Kelantan language. If Malaysian authors of Chinese or Indian origin write in Mandarin or Tamil, a large percentage of their countrymen will have no access to their work, and they will, in addition, face the problem of marketing their books in places far removed from their own environment. Those who write in Bahasa Malayu can reach a sizable local audience — a larger readership within Malaysia than they can find in English—but there are few qualified translators and therefore the rendering of Bahasa Malayu into effective English becomes a struggle. Unless such translations are made, it is nearly impossible for Malaysian writers to be read beyond their own borders, although it seems as if a number of contemporary authors have committed themselves to the creation of a national literature and so are, perhaps, not too concerned (for the moment at least) about reaching other audiences. I was told that, currently, the impulse to translate Bahasa Malayu must come largely from outside of Malaysia, and very little of such work is being done. The Government sponsors a program of translation, *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (DBP, which also holds an annual novel-writing competition), but emphasis is placed on the rendering of English titles into Bahasa Malayu, and it seems that those translations are frequently of poor quality.

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My own inability to read Bahasa Malayu cuts me off from non-translated materials. Therefore, I had to rely on the opinions of others in an attempt to understand the relationship between authors who choose to write in English and those who work in Bahasa Malayu. Some members of the literature faculties with whom I spoke argued that the best of Malaysia's imaginative writing is being done in English, partly because Bahasa Malayu authors tend toward didacticism, intent on furthering national ideals. In addition, because Islam deemphasizes the self, authors are predictably led away from open-ended analyses of

the individual, and toward the articulation of larger moral values and social concerns. Whether this movement is good or bad (or neutral) is a matter for debate. In the meantime, there is always a question waiting in the wings: To what extent, if at all, can the Bahasa Malayu language and Islamic values convincingly capture the concerns of a country in which a significant percentage of the population is neither Malay nor Muslim? Answers, of course, vary, but one thing is clear. There exists a sharp division between those authors attempting the construction of a national literature via Bahasa Malayu and those who turn the colonial language, English, to their own purposes, with an eye toward a more international readership. As time passes, it may become increasingly possible to gain that readership, since English-language literature seems to be in the process of freeing itself from British and American dominance, relocating worldwide at what was once the colonial fringe.

Dr. Zawiah Yahya, from the School of Language and Linguistics at UKM, speaks of Malaysia's love-hate relationship with English, and one can feel the pressures emanating from that dynamic. In the campus bookstore at USM in Penang, I encountered a long shelf of Penguin Classics, a canonical march of British literature that dwarfed the bookstore's other literary offerings. "Does anyone buy those books?" I inquired, and the response was "no." The great tradition still takes up shelf space, but I gather its readership is disappearing. In 1994, Yahya herself published a critical study (in English) titled *Resisting Colonialist Discourse*, in which she reads a range of colonial writings from Joseph Conrad to Anthony Burgess. At the close of this work she says: "While recognising the legitimate place for western conventions of reading in literary criticism, I have sought in this book to deconstruct their Eurocentric (and therefore monocultural) claim for transcendent validity as representative and universal." She wants to help her readers "make that break from the Eurocentric prison-house to the readers' own home-based cultural and historical frame of reference."<sup>3</sup> In many respects, Yahya's study gives perfect voice to the love-hate paradigm that she identifies. The direction of her analysis is toward the rejection of "colonialist discourse," but to accomplish her ends she not only studies colonial writing (quite necessarily), she also employs a critical vocabulary that is heavily dependent upon Western, most often Marxist, theory. Her break from "the Eurocentric prison-house" is eloquent and moving, but it is written in English, it centers on European literature, and it is framed in theoretical terminology borrowed from the

colonizers she wishes to resist. There, in a nutshell, is the linguistic dilemma.

Beyond that dilemma, one additional factor must be weighed as one thinks of how the Malaysian author is situated. While the subject of freedom of expression is a convoluted one that demands an essay of its own, it is fair to say that censorship plays a major role in how these writers are or are not able to function within their society. Not only must authors grapple with the artistic and political matter of voice (what language is one able to use, and what language ought one to use?), they must also consider what it will be imaginable to say in the language of choice. Government publishing houses exercise a good deal of control over the materials they allow into print, and writers have to fall back on private presses if they hope to gain a somewhat larger measure of flexibility in the presentation of their views.

The whole business is tricky, and author Karim Raslan has faced the problem quite directly. Raslan, a lawyer as well as a newspaper columnist and writer of fiction, chooses to work in English, a decision that in itself positions him politically. In the "Preface" to his essay collection *Ceritalah*, he offers this observation:

The role of a writer in Malaysia is not an easy one. It is hard not to be truthful and whilst I've struggled for ways of avoiding offence, the strain has, in the end, reduced me to my present silence. . . . Malaysia is not an environment that is conducive to freedom of thought. At first I used to think the Government was responsible for this intellectual and creative poverty. I know better now. We are responsible for it — no one else.<sup>4</sup>

Though he does not elaborate, Raslan's idea that the people (and the writers) themselves must assume responsibility for this "creative poverty" presumably stems from two things: a collective refusal to challenge the Government's stance on censorship, and the more subtle practice of internalizing the parameters of allowable discourse, so that self-censorship becomes the principal evil. Raslan argues that "we Malaysians are past masters of the ancient art of reading between the lines — we understand the importance of what's not said, who's not said it and to whom he or she has not said it." Authors, in turn, learn "the art (and the pitfalls) of writing between the lines. . . the art of writing for the reader who is practised in the art of reading between the

lines." Raslan likens this slippery approach to the movements of a gymnast on the parallel bars:

Think of the bars as the "lines" and the gymnast as the "writer," and you'll understand what I mean. The gymnast... doesn't actually rest on the bars for any length of time. Instead, he throws himself all over them; above them, below them and between them—grabbing them every now and then for balance. A momentary loss of concentration or control and he's a goner.<sup>5</sup>

We can say, then, that Malaysian writers might respond to the barriers surrounding them and within them in two very distinct ways. They can roughly disturb the otherwise placid waters on which they float by rocking the boat, by intervening to "*korap de lengguejeh*" in designedly unsubtle ways, through a proprietorial and dramatic alteration of the line itself. Or they can operate dexterously around and between the lines, communicating via the unsaid, by making silence their ally and by controlling the context within which silence generates meaning. Either way, an initial exposure to Malaysia's literary scene reveals the plight of Malaysian writers, who must contend with multiple languages, marked social pressures, and the persistent specter of censorship.

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What may be most interesting about such conditions, however, is not what they can tell us about the specific problems endemic to Malaysia today (though they are definitely revealing in that respect). What they also suggest is the way in which Malaysia serves as a magnified example of what all writers face at all times. Especially in America, where English "rules the roost," we are perhaps prone to think of belletristic writing as a fairly stable activity. There is an expected language ready and waiting. It commands a sizable readership at home and abroad. We are free to maneuver it as we wish, and it will still be around in times to come. This is a misleading vision to be sure, but I suspect most Americans embrace it, at least unconsciously.

The fact is, English, like any language, is always evolving (for example, students today need special training to read Old English and many examples of Middle English). While it is unclear how, exactly, technology may influence language development in the future, it is

likely that English—assuming it survives in some form—will continue to change. In our own society, we see how the cultural dominance of English may be challenged (for instance, conservative Californians are nervous that native speakers of Spanish may soon be ascendant in a state that contains one-eighth of the country's population). In addition, every writer is shaped to a considerable degree by historical conditions, and labors under certain constraints. Finally, even when the decision of which language to employ is a straightforward one, the writer's effort to make words serve a unique vision remains, as does the tension between private concerns and public exigencies, between the often competing demands of the individual and of the social body. The words we write are hard to choose. The audience for those words constantly changes. Political contexts alter rapidly. Meanings fluctuate and whole languages come and go. That which seems concrete and even permanent, the written text, is in some measure elusive and shifting. For Malaysian authors today, these facts are glaringly clear. "*Wat is de lengguez det yu en Ai spik / Rekognaiz or nok / It is de Kelantan Inglisy!*"

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### Notes

1. Amarjit Kaur and Ian Metcalfe, eds., *The Shaping of Malaysia*, pp. 81–82.
2. Che Husna Azhari, *Melor in Perspective*, p. 61.
3. Zawiah Yahya, *Resisting Colonialist Discourse*, pp. 156–57.
4. Karim Raslan, *Ceritalah*, p. 9.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 28.

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