

Narrating Malaysia: Rehman Rashid's *A Malaysian Journey* and *Peninsula: A Story of Malaysia*
by Carol Leon

“Ah, this tangled web; how utterly Malaysian it is!”
(AMJ 41)

This paper is an expansion of what I intended to do initially which was to focus on Rehman Rashid's latest book, *Peninsula: A Story of Malaysia*. However, over the past couple of months, I felt that I had to give my discussion a broader base which would layer my discussion better. This decision came about when early this year, I was asked to work on a university project which explores Malaysian culture and literature using heritage studies as a framework. It is, admittedly, a new area of research for me, and I will have to do much reading in the field to complete my chapter for the project which will analyse a selection of Malaysian literary texts located within the theoretical framework of heritage studies. Apart from writings by Tash Aw, Preeta Samarasan and Tan Twan Eng, Rehman Rashid's works were also on the list of texts to cover. In my early readings I discovered that Rehman's first travel text, *A Malaysian Journey*, provided an intriguing counterpoint to *Peninsula*. A significant episode in Rehman's life kept hidden in the first narrative was exposed in the later one and this added an interesting dimension to my research on *Peninsula*, especially in the way the author evokes Malaysia: a land he frequently and, unashamedly, declares his love for in both books.

When Rehman's *Peninsula* came out 23 years after his travel text, it was, as a reviewer said “long awaited” (Toh). Indeed it is said that British Nobel Laureate, VS Naipaul advised Rehman that four years between books was too long and you needed to “force yourself to write”. But Rehman conceded in an interview that if he had followed Naipaul's advice, he would have made many errors and forced to publish addendums every few years, due to Malaysia's volatile politics and history but time allowed him to discover context (Toh): “You have to wait for the story to unfold. In this case, it took 23 years, what can I say? But I feel there is enough perspective between *A Malaysian Journey* and *Peninsula* to make both kind of complementary now” (Toh).

Before I proceed I would like to say, by way of apology, that the paper I am reading to you imparts my very early ideas and impressions on these two works by Rehman.

A brief account of the writer:

Born in Taiping, in the state of Perak, Malaysia, Rehman studied in the Malay College Kuala Kangsar, before pursuing a degree in Marine Biology at University College Swansea in Wales.

He became a journalist in 1981. After seven years as Leader Writer and columnist with the *New Straits Times*, Malaysia's leading English-language daily, he joined Asiaweek magazine in Hong Kong as a Senior Writer. From there, he left for a

year in Bermuda as a Senior Writer with the Bermuda Business magazine, before returning home to Malaysia to complete the book *A Malaysian Journey*.

He was the Malaysian Press Institute's Journalist of the Year for 1985, and Bermuda's Print Journalist of the Year for 1991.

Rehman was in Bermuda when he had a great desire to write a story about his homeland. *A Malaysian Journey* depicts an excursion through the length and breadth of Malaysia and is an engaging mixture of interviews, personal observations, descriptions of places and chapters devoted to the political scene in Malaysia. I use the word “engaging” because the book became a bestseller. This is interesting information because the book was published by Rehman himself in 1993 after he offered it to three local publishers but their law firms advised them not to take the book. Why were publishers afraid to take the book? It was written in a brutally honest manner, containing issues which, normally in Malaysia would be considered controversial.

In *A Malaysian Journey* Rehman talks about being “deep in the thrill of being home” (8). But a very early encounter in his trip sobers him. Starting his journey on train, he goes for a drink at the station canteen and is soon joined by Shafie, a Malay government officer. The pleasant man is chatty and regales Rehman with stories of Malaysia’s growing prosperity, specifically with regards to the Malay community. Clearly Shafie’s conversation evokes the racial categories which still govern Malaysian society. Rehman writes:

“I wish he had said: We understand each other better now. But it was still, in this Malaysia I had not seen for so long, in the Malaysia of this hot and sunny April afternoon in 1992, a matter of ‘us’ and ‘them’. Perhaps it truly would take another thirty years to bridge that gulf” (10).

Perhaps at this point it would be imperative to say something about Malaysian realities. According to the Department of Statics, the total population of Malaysia in 2016 was estimated as 31.7 million. Malaysia's population comprises various ethnic groups, with the politically- and culturally-hegemonic Malays, whose claim to indigeneity is mirrored in their constitutional status as bumiputeras (Malay for 'sons of the soil'), making up the majority ethnic community (about 68.6% of the population). Malaysians of Chinese descent account for 23.4%, those of Indian ancestry comprise 7% of the population, 1% is accounted for by aboriginal peoples and 10.3% are non-Malaysian citizens.

Ethnic identity is the key signifier of difference between Malaysians and continues to play an essential role in the constant process of giving meaning to the concept of a Malaysian nation. In 1993, then Prime Minister Tun Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad spoke of “the multi-racial time bomb we inherited from the colonial past.” Also alluding to this major challenge in articulating Malaysian nationalism, Malaysian academic and politician Goh Cheng Teik describes Malaysia’s population as being one where “deep in our heart of hearts, we are still ethnic. We are Malays, Chinese, Indians, Ibans, Melanaous, Kadazans or Bajaus, not Malaysian” (5).

Colonial strategies to reify racial differences through ethnic categorizations were replicated and consolidated by the workings of the Malaysian nation–state after Independence in 1957. The three main political parties in the National Front coalition that governs the country are constituted along ethnic lines and galvanize electoral support through the invoking of ethnic sentiment. It could be said that the multi-ethnic character of Malaysian society is still considered as potentially its greatest fault line.

In *Peninsula*, Rehman discloses why he wrote *A Malaysian Journey*. Though living a good life in Bermuda, he was, by his own admission, not happy, he missed Malaysia and felt he had better “get that story (of Malaysia) told even if it killed (him)” (61). His story of Malaysia is built on his own personal history, a mixed ancestry which he frequently alludes to in both his books. Rehman’s concern with racial identity is understandable. He comes from what we call a “mixed family.” He takes pains to delineate his father’s Malay side and his mother’s Indian one. Though his parents faced difficult challenges when they decided to marry, Rehman takes pains to assert that intermarriage is so common today that “there can be few Malaysians whose family trees do not resemble a banyan, the single tree that looks like a self-contained forest, with its superabundant dance of roots, each indistinguishable from a trunk “ (42). In *Peninsula* too there is, together with the many references to multiculturalism and migrancy, a chapter entitled “Diaspora” in which Rehman ruminates at length on the special ability of the diasporic Malaysian to feel at home wherever they are and interestingly enough, “never (come) across as an ‘immigrant community’ the way they’re referred to here.” (P 274). He rattles off the names of his relatives abroad: “Meet some of my first cousins: Jacqueline Wee Beng Kim lives in the United States and Shivani Elaine Kannabhiran in France..... Hafizah Ghani in Ireland.....” (P 274) etc.

Yet in both narratives, there is always this collision between what he sees as the rich diversity of Malaysian history, “a confluence of destinies, history’s intertidal zone” (MJ 42) and state definitions of Malaysian identity and history. In relation to this, writing about the process of identity formation as well as the construction of knowledge in Malaysia, AB Shamsul offers a useful distinction between ‘authority-defined’ notions of ethnic identity and the actual lived experiences, cultural tendencies and identifications of Malaysian ethnic communities. He argues that ethnic categories such as ‘Malay’, ‘Indian’ and ‘Chinese’ have not sufficiently been problematized or perceived as something constructed, despite the fact that what ‘such categories “mean” and what they “are” have always been altered, redefined, reconstituted and the boundaries expanded according to specific social-historical circumstances, especially after the introduction of colonial “racism” and “racial category” into the realm of authority-defined and everyday-defined social reality in Malaysia.

In varying ways in both *A Malaysian Journey* and *Peninsula*, state impositions of national and ethnic identities are questioned, resisted and actively problematized. *A Malaysian Journey* is conceived as an excursion through the 11 states in West Malaysia: there are 13 states in Malaysia, 11 of which constitute Peninsular or West Malaysia and the other two Sabah and Sarawak are in East Malaysia. Many times Rehman tries to expand the readers’ historical imagination by invoking the “intertidal” narratives and various configurations which have shaped multicultural Malaysian. Yet at the close of the journey, as his train pulls into Kuala Lumpur he reflects on his journey: “What had been the most frequent question asked of me on

this journey? ‘Are you Malay or Indian? Are you Eurasian? Are you Muslim? What Are you?’ Everything that emerged subsequently---every comment, opinion and answer--- would depend on my response to that question. What was Malaysia? Depends on who’s asking. Are you one of Us, or one of Them? What are you?” (AMJ 267). The book ends with this line: “The only thing wrong with Malaysia is the way Malaysia sees itself” (278).

Peninsula contains a collection of essays which, as one reviewer rightly observes, could stand on their own. In the Forward, Rehman talks about homeland, belonging, the importance of telling stories and keeping memories alive. Like the first book, *Peninsula* is part personal memoir and a historical rendering of the generational changes Malaysia has undergone since Independence. There is, however, little of the descriptions of place which mark *A Malaysian Journey*. Here the focus is on politics and different chapters are devoted to significant phases in Malaysian history, Malaysian economy and its main drivers, specific Malaysian communities and regions. There are 20 chapters, each devoted to a particular period of time in Malaysian history or particular groups of people i.e. Chapter 10/Swarnabumi highlights the Indian community, Chapter 11/DAPenang discusses the Chinese community, Chapter 12/Lost Tribes addresses the nation’s indigenous groups, the orang asli, Chapter 9/Boomiputras features the Malay entrepreneurs enabled by certain Government policies, Chapter 7/Heartlands is about the social and political history of the East Coast states etc. Rehman says that *Peninsula* is not a “neat book” but offers a “slice,” “spectrum” which covers 250 years

Everywhere, Rehman highlights the problems which emerge at the interface, when different communities meet. In bringing together the various stories that shape the Malaysian narrative, Rehman insists again and again, on the importance of accepting and appreciating diversity. In the chapter “Future Stock” which talks about migrant workers from Myanmar, Nepal, Indonesia and Bangladesh who are currently flooding the country, Rehman makes an interesting observation.

In a tuition centre for refugees he chances upon a bright Bangladeshi who “is everything any Malaysian child her age could be, but she was more” (200) because she was spared “the congenital disease of entitlement” (20): here Rehman referring to preferential policies which favour particular groups and this ultimately stunts the growth and real progress of a nation. Invariably, when he recounts the political history of Malaysia, Rehman has to include the brash political voices calling for supremacy of one ethnic group over others but he constantly summons other voices which tell of the “ethno-cultural *mélange* (MJ 43) that is the nation of Malaysia.

It is useful here to briefly recall what postcolonial cultural theorist Homi Bhabha says in his introduction to *Nation and Narration* that “the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force (in spite of) the attempt by nationalist discourses persistently to produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress. He elaborates on this point in another essay in the volume: “The problem is not simply the ‘selfhood’ of the nation as opposed to the otherness of other nations. We are confronted with the nation split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population.”The idea here is that as a process of cultural signification, national identity is constantly open to internal splitting by the “otherness” within the nation,

which has the potential to contest dominant forms of representation that privilege cultural coherence and historical continuity.

If nations are narrations, finding a language to describe Malaysians has been elusive.

In the last chapter in *Peninsula* entitled “Requiem,” Rehman draws very close to his own life and tells about the death of his wife and his great sadness. In *Peninsula* he acknowledges that he was married and it was Rosemarie Chen who encouraged him to write his first book and yet he does not mention her at all in *A Malaysian Journey*. He expresses remorse that he had to keep secret their union and tries to explain why he did so. Like his parents it was an intermarriage. Rosemarie was a Chinese Catholic and she would have had to denounce her religion if she married a Muslim and stayed in Malaysia (like his mother had to when he married his father) but Rehman did not want that for Rosemarie. Read pages 70-71.

Conclusion

The Forward of *Peninsula* starts off with the line: “There are two ways to belong to a place: to be born there, and to die there” (5). Rehman continues: “It is remarkable that these two breaths should matter more than all those in between. But it does seem so, in the home thoughts from abroad of Malaysians far away; in the remembrance pilgrimages of the descendants of those who died here on their exodus to other homelands” (5). Touching upon the fluidity and transitory nature of life, Rehman seems to suggest that belonging should be conceived in different ways.

Often the realities of the country, he says, do not coincide with official versions of nation, history, identity and ethnicity: which often are static categories. In both books discussed, Rehman seems to assert that Malaysia should be conceived in a looser, more dynamic way which points to her connectedness with other cultures and peoples.

So, what could Rehman Rashid be finally saying about the space of Malaysia and how one could belong to it?

Last year he came out with a book called *Small Town* in which he describes his new life in a small Malaysian town called Kuala Kubu Baru which has a rich history and a thriving multicultural community.

In fact he makes a reference to KKB in *Peninsula*: “I consider this place a living showcase of this peninsula in its better aspect, from geography and history to society and politics. Perhaps I want to believe this all the more because, after 23 years of considering this place my home, I think we are well and good here. The landscape of Hulu Selangor is too enfolded in these hills for anything imposed upon it from above not to be infused by what lies beneath.” (P 269).

Here he opens up a space, the small town, to represent national identity and belonging: a space which counters decades of racialised politics and encapsulates history in a different way. The small town then, could be seen as a site of contestation, imaging not official history but a location which encourages dynamic, inclusive relationships, in this case people, culture, ideas and the environment. The

nation, the book tells us, is also constituted of those who have experienced history in other ways.

I have only just acquired *Small Town* and I look forward to see how Rehman continues to narrate Malaysia.

Reference:

AB Shamsul, "Debating about Identity in Malaysia: A Discourse Analysis" in *Cultural Contestations: Mediating Identities in a Changing Malaysian Society* ed. Zawawi Ibrahim (London, Asean Academic Press) 1998.