IN MEMORY OF SHAHNON AHMAD (1933-2017)

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SHAHNON – MALAY LITERATURE’S GREAT LEGEND

Foreword
Shahnon Ahmad’s contributions to the field of Malay literature began with his first short story, “Bingung” (“Confusion”), which was published in the magazine Majalah Guru in 1956. Shahnon next produced various writings, novels, short stories, dramas, essays, critical articles, studies, an autobiography and translations. According to a study by Mohd Yusoff Hassan, in the 60 years that Shahnon was active in literature, he produced around 150 short stories, 30 novels (including a trilogy of novellettes). Kembara Seorang Hamba [The Journeys of a Slave], published in 2010, was perhaps the parting gift of the writer to the world. This final work was an introspective self-assessment, in which the writer deals with the realities of human existence and the awareness of the need to fulfil the responsibilities and obligations as a servant of Allah and a reminder to the self in the journey to the eternal life.

This work describes the attitudes and idealism of Shahnon’s writings. His belief that literature is “a branch based on love; love for beauty and love for truth. Literary works are created by writers to develop the human personality to love beauty and truth. This love has various levels of status, grades, distinctions and qualities, culminating in the most pure and eternal love, that is, love for the Great Creator, Allah Most High”. (National Literary Laureate acceptance speech, 9 October, 1982).

Shahnon’s early works were dealt with rural life, the milieu in which the writer himself spent his childhood. Humans and nature, as represented by rural settings are closely intertwined in almost all of the works that he produced.
Rice fields, hills and rivers with their flora and fauna form the space in which people carry out all kinds of economic activities to fulfil their own and their family’s daily needs, among these are growing rice, clearing land, trapping birds and animals, catching fish, felling trees and collecting forest produce. Shahnon recorded the trial and tribulations of village communities, which he had experienced first-hand, as well as urban communities. He recorded the social phenomena that influence the character of social entities, family institution, social systems, politics and the economy. In his early involvement, Shahnon subconsciously subscribed to the belief in art for society, tending to incorporate in his works social criticism, with attention to message trumping attention to technique. Shahnon drew on his observations and experiences quite literally (see *Perjalananku Sejauh Ini*, 2006.). An obvious change is observable in the second phase in his writing, during which he first realised the importance of expressing his thought through the use of refined literary devices for aesthetic effect, such as the use of metaphorical expressions, symbols, images, allegory, associations and figurative language.

Against a backdrop of the countryside, the life and socio-cultural aspects of village communities continue to develop to form the worldview of its people, their cultural outlook, traditions, beliefs, norms, values, social institutions and structures, religious practices and the like. There is a tendency in the earlier works to deal with people and the issues within their communities, and he clearly revealed his compassion for people living poverty and inhumane conditions. In authentic village life, nature is the environment in which the inhabitants interact and carry out their activities. The inhabitants have a sustainable relationship with nature. The cosmos, sun, wind, hills, mountains, rivers and jungle while beautiful and magnificent, can be threatening and destructive, and yet are necessary for life. Although living in poverty, its inhabitants are rich in appreciation of nature and treasure its humaneness. In the early works, the natural world is merely the setting that forms the backdrop of the story. Nature with all its mystery also influences the views of the community. The people believe that nature possesses supernatural powers that cannot be violated and result in various taboos. The relationship between humans and the natural world is believed to be harmonisable through specific ceremonies. Where this was concerned, Shahnon held fast to the values, morals and principles of Islam as a yardstick to limit such beliefs.

In his novel *Srengenge*, the mysterious and supernatural natural world is shown to influence the attitudes and thinking of the people living at the foot of Srengenge hill. They believe that the majestic hill has the power of bringing about catastrophes. When the inhabitants encounter disaster, they quickly link
these to people whose attitudes and activities they believe go against certain taboos and affect the harmonious relationship with nature. As a result, any attempt to modernise, such as clearing land for more commercially-viable economic activities are quickly opposed because of the strength of their outmoded beliefs.

Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan [translated into English as No Harvest But a Thorn] displays the conditions of the traditional agrarian Malay community, represented by Lahuma, Jeha and their seven daughters. They plant rice using traditional methods without modern machinery and technology. Nature and human beings collide in a complicated conflict that shows the powerlessness of human beings when contesting with nature. In his novel Seluang Menodak Baung [Small Fish Stabbing at Big Fish], the economic problems and aspirations of an impoverished community that tries to change its fate through clearing land are the central issue. The lives of rural communities inspired him to write three of his novels, Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan, Rentung [translated into English as Rope of Ash], and Srengenge, among other works. That Shahnon is intensely sensitive to the plight of such people is evident in these works.

Shahnon also displays his awareness of various changes that take place in the socio-cultural fabric of the rural communities through the infiltration of modern values that affect the continued existence of the natural world and its people, who lose their human kindness, such as positive values and good character. Such a phenomenon affects the harmony of society in the socio-cultural system. In a number of his works, Shahnon analyses the collision between city and village folk with their differing socio-cultures, reflected in differences in their attitudes and actions that stray from the original purpose of their creation and their failure to carry out their responsibilities as faithful servants of Allah.

His observations and thinking became more critical of the economic issues taking place. Such issues are presented in Kemelut [Chaos], among others, as a criticism of poorly-planned and uncontrolled development that fails to take into account the welfare of the community. With the rapid increase in foreign multinational firms having operations in the country to produce goods, the accompanying environmental pollution affects the income and health of the local inhabitants. Such development also affects the preservation of wildlife. The existence of such factories results in the erosion of ethical values and moral principles. The economic development that the fishermen had hoped for comes to nought to the resulting pollution, bringing about a humanitarian crisis. The setting for this novel is the fishing village of Kampung
Pantai Permai. Here, the villagers depend on fishing produce, whether from the shore or deep sea. In the end, they lose their source of income as a result of pollution by industrial effluents. This issue was a current one, seeing as there was widespread water pollution as an unwelcome side effect of the economic boom in the industrial sector in the 1970s.

Shahnon was at once a documenter, interpreter and analyst who was both sensitive and perceptive of changes taking place over time. Real incidents involving village communities inspired him to write about the decay of traditional values as rural communities experience transition into modern life. The positive values of the traditional village community are altered and affected by the influence of modernity and urbanisation happening at an uncontrolled pace. The realities of modern urban life and uncontrolled modernisation affects morals and character negatively.

TIVI describes the ill effects of urbanisation on a rural Malay community in a remote area on character and the family institution. The development does not come in terms of material gain but is evident in the changes that take place with the individuals within the small community who experience a culture shock when encountering urban culture. Moral decay slowly infiltrates the rural community as the young girls migrate to the city to work in factories. A wave of disgusting immoral activities results from the immorality that the girls encounter and bring back, to the extent that individuals descend into a world of sin that finally erodes the Malay family institution. The trilogy Lamunan Puitis [Poetic Dreams], in particular the novelette Sebuah Mimpi Terindah Buat Hari Tua [A Most Beautiful Dream for Old Age], and Titipan [Entrustment] describes the effects of urbanisation on traditional Malay village life. The repurposing of rice fields into industrial areas not only changes the landscape but also unravels the bonds the inhabitants have with their land, their socio-cultural environment and their humanity. In the end, the cultural ties are lost irretrievably and exist only in the pleasant memories of the senior citizens, existing no longer as social or cultural practices. The issues of a confused political system and politicians are touched on critically in Menteri [Minister], Terdedah [Exposed] and Tunggul-tunggul Gerigis [English Translation: Stumps].

Shahnon can be seen to deal in his works with issues that were current with the social, political and economic systems. He developed his creativity as a writer from merely using plain, conventional forms to artistic expressions that give higher emphasis to aesthetic values as his level of knowledge increased as well. The subjects of his writings moved from the idealism of art for society that plainly expressed social realities, especially those of the
uncorrupted rural Malay communities who witnessed their traditional lifestyle affected by the influences modernisation. Shahnon was extremely sensitive and perceptive in treating urbanisation and large-scale economic activities, and their effect on the rural areas as they upset and altered rural culture and values. The changes observed in this milieu brought about a decay in the characters of people, as expressed aesthetically in Shahnon’s artistic works.

His views on the importance literary works to express love that raises one’s status, degree, value, honour, and qualities climaxed in the most holy and eternal of loves, that is love for the Great Creator, Allah Most High, and this is expressed in the works he produced in the last 30 years of being active as a writer. The novel *Mahabbah* [Love] and his introspective work *Kembara Seorang Hamba* present the pinnacle of his feelings of humility and submission to his Creator. Shahnon has fulfilled his responsibilities as a writer who displays a high degree of Islamic values in his effort to express his humility as a servant of Allah. Shahnon Ahmad, who often identified himself as “Durian Hujung Julai” [The Durian Hanging by a Thread], like an overripe durian waiting for its time to fall, drew his last breath on the 26th of December, 2017. He leaves us as a legend in the world of Malay literature.