ACADEMIC JOURNEY

Zurinah Hassan
zurinahhassan@gmail.com

Numera Malaysia
Kuala Lumpur

MY JOURNEY TOWARDS BECOMING SASTERAWAN NEGARA
My childhood was mainly spent in a village in Kedah, during a time when grandparents preferred to keep girls indoors. Life was dull for girls without any freedom to roam around. Fortunately, my grandfather, who was a religious school teacher, was among the first in the village to own a radio. It was through this radio that I first encountered poetry. I became entertained and mesmerized with traditional Malay songs that comprised of beautiful pantun lyrics and learnt to appreciate the beauty of my language. These songs beautifully described gardens, seas and mountains, which only further kindled my imagination and love for aesthetic words and phrases.

Sekolah Tikam Batu was the Malay primary school where I first learned Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals) and simplified versions of Malay folktales. Bercerita (story telling time) was the most memorable part of school. Cikgu Mariam was the soft-spoken teacher who narrated the most interesting stories, which often began with “Once upon a time there was a king who had a beautiful princess and there was no other princess more beautiful than her.” This, together with bangsawan and drama stories told over the radio, introduced me to the craft of storytelling.

Bangsawan spurred my interest in learning syair, which is a four-line poetry with an “a-a-a-a” rhyming scheme. There were also books on pantun and syair that I read. The school provided us with the opportunity to speak and sing while schoolteachers fine-tuned our poetry recitation and storytelling skills. This was an antithesis to the stifled atmosphere at home, where singing was considered a shameful and sinful act and grandparents imposed on girls to lower their voice. I became withdrawn at home and began expressing my
feelings in simple poetry. This was where writing became a lifelong passion. Soon, I was submitting my writings to Radio Malaya’s special programme for children.

My primary school education was followed by taking special Malay classes in order to enrol in an English school. It was uncommon for girls to continue their education beyond Standard Six because secondary schools were located in towns, miles away from their homes in the village. It was more preferable for parents to marry off their daughters than allow them to further pursue their studies.

Commuting for twelve kilometres between my grandmother’s house and the convent school in Sungai Petani became the usual school day routine. Each school day began with braving the darkest skies and chilled air before dawn to wait by the roadside for the 6 a.m. bus. Indeed, life was such for kampung Malay school boys and girls in the 1960s. More hours were invested in travelling safely than studying or doing school work. Many were unable to cope and failed the mandatory Form Three exam known as the Lower Certificate Education exam. As such, they could not progress into Form Four. I could not help but be envious of my non-Malay school mates who lived in town.

The bus station I frequented had a news vendor. Browsing through the newspapers at this vendor, I came across something fascinating in the leading newspaper, Berita Harian. It published a special page every Wednesday called Ruangan Pelajar (Student Page) specifically for students to submit their poetry and short stories. Having already submitted my writings to the children’s programme over the radio, I tried my luck and eventually became a regular contributor of Ruangan Pelajar. I drew inspiration for my poetry by spending time alone under the trees and walking around the compound. Unbeknownst to me, my engrossment in poetic creativity caught the attention of the elders, who observed me with deep concern. One day, I overheard my grandmother telling our relatives that I may be possessed by a tree spirit, which explained my strange behaviour of wandering among the trees in the late evenings, during which spirits were said to come out.

In 1967, I continued my upper secondary education at Sultanah Asmah School in Alor Setar and also boarded there. This was also the year of shifting away from writing in children and student columns and submitting my poetry to publications that catered to “adult writers”. These included newspapers such as Utusan Zaman, Warta Mingguan, Mingguan Malaysia and Berita Minggu as well as magazines such as Dewan Masyarakat and Mastika. Personally, this year was the watershed of my writing career. My first poem as an adult poet
ZURINAH HASSAN was published in *Warta Mingguan*, a Penang-based newspaper, in December 1966. This was followed by my second poem published in *Utusan Zaman* in January 1967. My school allowance was spent mostly on newspapers and magazines to keep up to date with the national literary scene, especially with the activities of women writers. While there were a handful of women poets and short story writers when I first began writing to the media, there were no critical reviews or studies on their works. Instead, male writers such as Usman Awang and A. Latiff Mohidin were revered. There were occasional instances where male writers wrote articles on women’s writings but they revolved around the same comments:

1. Women’s writings were of lesser quality and quantity than men’s writings.

2. Women writers do not tackle oppressing local or international issues and instead limit themselves to domestic and family issues.

3. Women writers lack long-term commitment to their literary profession and even disappear altogether after marriage.

While the comparison between the qualities of men and women writers require an in-depth discussion beyond this article, there may be some truth to the “disappearance” of women writers. Women writers who preceded me became inactive due to various hurdles and setbacks in their aspirations to become prominent writers. What were these hurdles? My own personal story is a clear indication of the unequal opportunities women face in pursuing education and talent. My grandmother’s belief that girls must never be left alone resulted in clear instructions to have me closely followed, thereby losing my privacy. My family were also unhappy at my time spent constantly reading books. Instead, I was told to pursue cooking and sewing and perform other domestic chores like other girls my age. Emulating those girls meant that I would become the pride of my grandmother, who could finally brag about me to other mothers and grandmothers who stopped by our house for a chat and proceeded to outdo one another on the obedience of their daughters and granddaughters.

Having completed my Form Six, I secured a place to be among the pioneer batch of Universiti Sains Malaysia, then known as Universiti Pulau Pinang. It was a much smaller campus and the small population of students knew one another. Even the Vice Chancellor, the late Tan Sri Hamzah Sendut, would walk around the hostels and be mistaken for a contractor. After reading an article I
wrote about the splendid campus in *Berita Harian*, it did not seem strange for Tan Sri Hamzah to invite me for tea. By then, I had already published about 50 poems in various newspapers and magazines. He expressed his enthusiasm that I should continue pursuing my talent and even went on to help publish my first collection of poems entitled *Sesayup Jalan* (USM Press, 1974). This publication marked the first collection of poetry by a Malaysian woman poet.

Poetry was the most feasible genre for me during this time; I did not own a typewriter and the computer was unheard of. Hours were poured into perfecting my handwriting for the editors, who must sift through stacks of poems every day and decide which two or three poems were worth publishing in the Sunday poetry column. Once I have finished my legible poems, there was always the hurdle of going to the post office to mail them.

It was not until 1972 that I typed out my first short story entitled “Menanti Suria Pagi” (Waiting for the Morning Sun). This story reflects the issue of education during my school days and the difficulties of commuting between my home in the village and school in town, creating a disparity in opportunity when compared to the non-Malay school mates who stayed in town. Since then, there have been many more short stories and three compilations to my name. Personally, a short story must deliver pressing issues in a society; the “story” merely serves as a conduit to deliver these issues, just as a vehicle delivering goods. Although short stories and novels are considered as fiction, their purpose is to convey the harsh realities of life using the craft of language befitting a work of literature. The short story provides the much needed space for elaboration and discussion that poetry does not.

In 2016, I became the first female recipient of the National Literary Award, which began in 1971. Given the hardships that women writers face, I consider myself a survivor amongst numerous other aspiring and talented women writers who attempted writing but failed to overcome the obstacles against them.

My first attempt to pursue a Master degree in 1973 was a failure. Instead of becoming a university lecturer, I became a government officer. I also married and settled down to have children. What followed was a constant battle between juggling office work, house work and my own writing. This was a form of stress that was neither expected nor properly managed.

Most of my writings revolved around my personal experiences, particularly overcoming obstacles to become a good writer. The subjects and themes tackled customary and domestic obligations as well as the burdens of child bearing and child rearing, all of which suppressed the pursuit of artistic
talent. Such depressing circumstances were best expressed in the short story entitled *Catatan Di Meja Makan* (Writing on the Dining Table), which was first published in 1983 in a national newspaper. My experiences are poured into the protagonist named Hamima. Hamima is an upcoming short story writer who left her job to look after her small children, only to learn that the routines of being a housewife further detached her from her writing and identity. She clearly envies the idle behaviour of men, who can do as they wish and spent as long as they desired reading books by the table.

I opted for early retirement for several reasons, the most important being my desire to return to writing. It may not be financially rewarding but it did create significant stability and satisfaction. The debt of not completing my postgraduate study also weighed heavily on me, which motivated me to gain a Master degree from Universiti Putra Malaysia and PhD from Universiti Malaya in 2008. Simultaneously, I continued writing poetry, short stories and literary articles and was awarded the Southeast Asian Writers Award from Thailand in 2004.

There has since been tremendous progress in literary production. Gone are the days when your arms agonized in pain from punching the keys on the typewriter. You save a journey to the post office and no longer dread the risk of having your laboriously prepared manuscript lost in the mail. To the joy of all writers, the computer became available and drastically reduced the process of producing manuscript. Nowadays, anyone can be a writer simply by typing their ideas and emailing editors their prepared manuscript or even by self-publishing their works in their own blogs or websites for all to read. E-literature is in fashion; one can simply publish their works without the hassle of an editorial screening. In Malaysia, there is an influx of popular novels, with volumes sold at a rate that was unthinkable during my younger years. This seems like a happy ending, but only if the works produced are worthy of being considered as literature.

Personally, it has been a long and winding road until 13th October 2015, when I was announced as Sasterawan Negara (National Laureate), the first woman writer to be awarded with the highest honour by the government of Malaysia for literary achievement.

The road I have taken may have been long and winding, and paved with sharp and coarse gravels. However, if not for love and passion, I would not have reached anywhere.