



**Rehman
Rashid
(1955-2017):
A Tribute**

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

As an academic and a researcher in the field of Malaysian Literature in English, I, like many other Malaysians, have found Rehman Rashid’s vision of his homeland, inspirational and his elegant, witty writing style, impressive. In his writings he constantly confronts the fluff and opacity of official versions of Malaysian society, an endeavor that requires courage and wisdom. He is certainly a Malaysian author of considerable stature.

The first time I presented a paper at an international conference I chose to talk about Rehman’s *A Malaysian Journey*, his first book. Self-published in 1993, because local publishers were counseled by their law firms not to take on the project as the manuscript contained issues considered controversial in Malaysia, *A Malaysian Journey* went on to become a bestseller. I found much to say on this text. What I found especially appealing about it was its candour. Here was an author who was not afraid to speak his mind.

Since that first conference twenty-three years ago, I often try to present on local authors at international conferences because I want more people to know about Malaysian writers. I went back to Rehman’s writings when I had to prepare a paper for a conference in Spain in April 2017. As I began on my research on his two latest books, *Peninsula: A Story of Malaysia* and *Small Town* (both published in 2016), news emerged that the 62 year old writer had had a major heart attack while cycling. It was a shock to many Malaysians: this attack left him critically ill and he had to be put under intensive care.

Suddenly, a certain poignancy attended my research. The more I read the more I felt the need to return to Rehman’s first book. *Peninsula* especially made many references to *A Malaysian Journey*. It became clear that the first book provided an intriguing counterpoint to *Peninsula*. A significant episode in Rehman’s life, kept secret in the earlier book, was exposed in *Peninsula* and this added an interesting dimension to my study. Finally my conference paper included all three texts: *A Malaysian Journey*, *Peninsula*, and *Small Town*. These books, taken together, showcase the historical, political, social and cultural contexts of Malaysia with a startling depth of vision. Certainly Rehman had taken it upon himself “to narrate” Malaysia, a land he frequently and, unashamedly, declares his love for in all his books.

Born in Taiping, Perak in 1955, 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*, one of Malaysia’s major English-language dailies, he joined *Asiaweek* magazine in Hong Kong as Senior Writer. From there, he left for a year in Bermuda as Senior Writer with the *Bermuda Business* magazine, before returning home to Malaysia to complete *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 multitalented. In addition to his writing, he was also a musician and a singer. In 2011 he played Captain von Trapp in a stage adaptation of the *Sound of Music*. He loved cycling. A former Malay College Kuala Kangsar schoolmate, Datuk Dr Abdul Ghaffar Ramli, said that every year he would cycle with Rehman in Kuala Kangsar when they met up at college reunions (Toh, 2017). Ultimately this much-travelled, cosmopolitan man made the deliberate decision to move to the small, quiet town of Kuala Kubu Baru (KKB), a town he loved so much that he paid tribute to it in his last book

Small Town. The last remaining years of his life were spent there. He led an active lifestyle to the end. It is poignant that it was while he was cycling on the hilly slopes of KKB that he had his heart attack, which left him in a coma until his passing on 3 June 2017. He is survived by his mother Rosnah who is 82 and younger brother Rafique.

When Rehman's *Peninsula* came out 23 years after his first book, it was long awaited. 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" (Toh, 2016). But Rehman conceded in an interview that if he had followed Naipaul's advice, he would have made many errors and been forced to publish addendums every few years, due to Malaysia's volatile politics and history. Time allowed him to discover context: "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, 2016).

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 by 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). In a country where ethnic identity and religion are key signifiers of difference among Malaysians, Rehman was a brave, to some even reckless, dissenting voice whose writings suggest that we need to move away from racialised forms of belonging and begin to conceive Malaysia in a more dynamic way, paying heed to its connectedness with other cultures and peoples.

Rehman's story of Malaysia is built on his own personal history, a mixed ancestry which he alludes to frequently in all his books. His concern with racial identity and acceptance is understandable because he comes from a mixed family. He takes pains to delineate his father's Malay side and his mother's Indian heritage. Though his parents faced difficult challenges when they decided to marry, Rehman asserts that interracial marriage 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" (*A Malaysian Journey*, 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 diasporic Malaysians to feel at home wherever they are and interestingly enough, "never (come) across as an 'immigrant community' the way they're referred to here." (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....." (274).

Rehman's books persistently highlight the collision between what he sees as the rich diversity of Malaysian history, "a confluence of destinies, history's intertidal zone" (*A Malaysian Journey*, 42) and state definitions of Malaysian identity and history. 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 a record of his travels through and observations on the various states of Malaysia. Many

times Rehman tries to expand the readers' historical imagination by invoking the "intertidal" narratives and various configurations which have shaped multicultural Malaysia. 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?" (267). The book ends with this line: "The only thing wrong with Malaysia is the way Malaysia sees itself" (278).

In his Foreward to *Peninsula*, Rehman talks about homeland, belonging, and the importance of telling stories and keeping memories alive. These thoughts were reiterated by his brother Rafique after the author's death: "His wish was that the nation would write its own stories. This is the last thing he told me. Everybody in Malaysia must write his own story" (*New Straits Times*, 4 June 2017). The personal narrative always interweaved with the larger story. And so, just like his first book, *Peninsula* is part personal memoir and part historical rendering of the generational changes Malaysia has undergone since Independence. Everywhere in the text, Rehman depicts 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. 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 too which tell of the "ethno-cultural *mélange*" (*A Malaysian Journey*, 43) that is the nation of Malaysia.

If nations are narrations, finding a language to describe Malaysia 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 his wife 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 interracial marriage. Rosemarie was a Chinese Catholic and she would have had to renounce her religion if she married a Muslim and stayed in Malaysia (like his mother had to when she married his father) but Rehman did not want that for Rosemarie, "We could never go home again" (71).

So, what was Rehman finally saying about the space of Malaysia and how one could belong to it? I believe his last book, *Small Town*, holds some answers. In this narrative he describes his new life in the small Malaysian town of Kuala Kubu Baru which has a rich history and a thriving multicultural community. Indeed 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" (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.

During the question and answer session which followed my conference paper a foreign delegate said: "I think what Rehman is saying is that in order to belong there must be love." This was certainly an astute observation. *Peninsula* carries this line: "There are two ways to belong to a place: to be born there, and to die there." 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). In asserting diversity, connectedness, understanding, and acceptance, the strength of his love for his homeland shines through. One can only believe that Rehman, wherever he is, is still narrating Malaysia.

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