

Virtual Meeting with an Accomplished Writer

by Nazima Versay Kudus



The writer in action

On 11 June 2021, two classes from the Integrated Language Skills II (ELC151) course of Ms Nazima Versay Kudus had organised an online Question and Answer (Q&A) session with an accomplished writer, Dato' Dr. M. Shanmughalingam to gain some insights on the process of writing short stories and his short story entitled "Birthday".

Ms Nazima: Good morning Dato' Dr. M. Shanmughalingam, our speaker today and students from ELC151 P2PH110 2A and B classes. For this semester I have selected Dato' Shan's short story, "Birthday" as one of the reading texts in Integrated Language Skills II (ELC151) course. Before we begin our Q&A, let me introduce our distinguished speaker.

Dato' Shan holds an Honours degree from the University of Malaya, a Masters from Harvard and a Ph.D. from Oxford University. His short stories, poems and essays have appeared in national and international anthologies in France, India, Ireland, Malaysia, Singapore, the UK and the US, in university publications (Harvard, Malaya, Oxford and Singapore) and in national literary journals (Dewan Bahasa). Marriage and Mutton Curry is his first solo collection of short fiction. He has served among others at the Finance Ministry and Petronas, and is presently the managing director of investment holding and consultancy company, Trilogic Sdn. Bhd.

Akmal Taufik Hasridi: When did you begin writing stories? Why did you write?

Dato' Shan: I started writing stories when I was in secondary school, at the Victoria Institution in Kuala Lumpur. I spent 7 years there from Form 1 to Upper 6. At first I wrote articles for the school newspaper called the Seladang and also the school annual magazine, the Victorian. The story that you are learning in your class "Birthday" was one of my first stories that got published. First, it was read over Radio Malaysia. After that when I was in Oxford, I submitted my story to the Oxford University Short Story Competition and the judges were the famous writer Iris Murdoch and John Bailey, who was the professor of literature at Oxford. I got the second prize. Later the story was published in this book Marriage and Mutton Curry. My stories and poems are in 37 different publications. Marriage and Mutton Curry comprise my nine best stories and six new ones.

Haikal Abdullah: Where did you receive your inspiration from?

Dato' Shan: There were many things that inspired me. My father was a government clerk. We lived in government quarters. The linked houses were very close to each other. The walls were thin and people spoke loudly. I could hear my mother talking to our neighbours. The dialogue they used to talk about is still in my head waiting to jump to the page as short stories. Even as a child, I read all the time. I enjoyed reading. If you want to become a writer, you must read widely. Next, listen to the way people talk, not only on the words they say, but on how they say and their body language. Reading and listening helped me a lot in my writing. If you recall, the first thing that human beings did when they were cavemen was to make fire because it was cold at night and tell stories to each other. Stories and story-telling were the oldest professions. Some of us write them down, many don't. I think most of us, especially Malaysians, should write our own stories. I wrote stories covering the three major periods of our history, the British colonial period, Japanese occupation and then the years after Independence- the period of Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Razak and so forth.

Anis Sofea Ramli: What makes a good story? Should there be a story behind it or just from merely one's imagination?

Dato' Shan: I think it is good to have both. Create a story by listening carefully and then from what you hear you think further. Our brain is made up of the left and right brain. The left side of our brain is for reasoning, analysis, mathematics and so forth. The right side of the brain is for our imagination. You need to use both sides. Sometimes when I start writing a story about a character or more than one character, after a while when I'm in the middle of writing, the character would go on its own way. I don't control the character but the character controls me and says where it wants to go and what it wants to say. You must let your imagination roam freely. Don't edit, correct spelling or grammar mistakes. Just write freely. Later then you edit it.

Nur Fatin Syafiqah Jeffry: How long do you spend on researching before you write?

Dato' Shan: It varies a lot. My stories are mostly historical fiction. Thus, I have to refer to my notes. I wrote down what my parents, teachers at the Victoria Institution, neighbours and the elders told me. It is very important not to rely on memory. Write them down in notebooks. Whenever I think of an idea, I write it down. Yes you need to do research by reading widely. Read whenever you are free. If you are in England, you see people reading on the train or bus. The habit of reading is very important. They say in Africa when an elder dies, a whole library is burnt down because everything is in his head. In the past especially people in the Third World - in Asia, Africa and Latin Ameri-

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ca did not have the habit of writing. In Europe people do. You can go to The Library of Rhodes House in Oxford University and ask for the agriculture report of Kedah in 1952. They kept meticulous reports. Malay-English dictionaries were written by British Civil servants here such as Richard Winstead and A.W. Hamilton. The British author Virginia Woolf said, "Nothing has happened until it has been recorded." Thus it is important to write your thoughts and events by keeping a diary. In fact, I wrote a draft memoir first about my parents and the old days and from there, I turned it into fiction.

Muhammad Fakhru Fadzli Rusni: What inspired you to write "Birthday"?

Dato' Shan: Someone in my family had a baby and everybody was hoping that the baby would be a boy. This is male chauvinism where males are considered superior to females. There was a famous writer who said "I don't know why women are fighting for equality when they're superior to men." Even before a female is born there is prejudice against her. People want to have sons. In some cases sons would carry their surnames. Even though Indians do not have surnames, we still have prejudice against women and we treat them as if they are inferior to men. This story intends to show great injustice towards women by the preference of many families to have sons rather than daughters. In some remote villages when they have baby girls they would kill the baby until they have a son. In my story, I tried using humour to portray one of the injustices which is sexism where women are treated in an inferior manner to men. In fact, there are many areas where women are better than men.

Alia Sofea Ramli: Why is your collection of short stories called Marriage and Mutton Curry?

Dato' Shan: Marriage refers to a type of relationship that one has with another person. It could be between a husband and his wife or a mother and her daughter. Those days men can also be married to a job when he works not only from nine to five but also during the weekends. A person can also be 'married' to an idea. The word 'mutton curry' signifies a type of food that we like to eat. If you read my book you would notice that I also mentioned other types of food like dodol, kuih lapis and kuih talam. Preparing food, enjoying food and giving other people food has become one of the great equalisers among people.

Haziqah Hisamuddin: I would like to ask you about your poem "Into a Lighthouse". Is there a symbolic meaning of the lighthouse?

Dato' Shan: The poem was published in a book entitled Voices of the Commonwealth. I was fortunate to have my poem together with three other Nobel Prize winners' poems in this book. The writers representing Malaysia in the

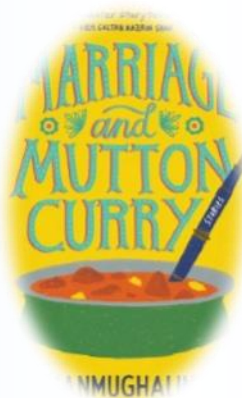
book were Muhammad Haji Salleh, A. Samad Said and myself. The imagery used in my poem was to signify the roles that everyone plays in society. We tend to judge people by their status in the society rather than their character, integrity, honesty or kind heartedness. This poem was written to question that issue.

Azreana Mohammad Abdul Aziz: Was writing a favourable career back then?

Dato' Shan: In that time people thought that the best careers would be doctors, engineers or accountants. Not many wanted to be pharmacists at that time. Now you are enlightened and want to be pharmacists! Becoming a writer was almost non-existent. Writing and doing the Arts were not considered desirable. If one cannot get into the Science stream then you have to fall back on the Arts stream. When I was in Victoria Institution, I had a choice of either going to Science or Arts stream. I was one of the very rare people who wanted to do Arts even though I had the opportunity to do Science. The Science teachers were horrified with my decision. They were prejudiced against those studying the Arts. People thought that it wasn't very specific like medicine or engineering. Arts is very general. In fact when I was in University of Malaya later, I told the Professor of Economics and also the Acting Vice Chancellor then, Royal Professor Ungku Aziz that I wanted to major in Literature. In those days, during the first year I took three subjects which were Literature, History and Economics. Later I wanted to major in Literature. He called me to the office and said "Young man, you can study Literature and History on your own but in Economics, we have to teach you. This country needs economists." He persuaded me very strongly to study Economics rather than Literature or History. There was a bias towards technical scientific subjects. The country does need people with Science and Engineering backgrounds. It also needs some people with imagination who write as well. I am arguing for a greater balance and not to say that the technical subjects are unimportant.

Amaluddin Murad: How did you manage to make your writing work and be read worldwide?

Dato' Shan: I used to send my poems to a professor of literature in Singapore for comments. Professor Dennis Enright was also a famous poet. He was the one who sent my poem to London that resulted in it being published in The New Voice of the Commonwealth. He knew the editor, Howard Sergeant and recommended the poem. I studied in the U.S. for my Masters and my PHD in England. Even earlier in school I was reading so much. I was exposed to writers such as R.K. Narayan from India, Chinua Achebe from Africa and V.S. Naipaul from the West Indies. Before that when I was in school, I read Jane Austen, William Shakespeare, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. I read very widely. Although I am a Malaysian by citizenship, my mind roams all over the world. That is how I have access



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Events ... (Conferences, Meetings, Trainings & Workshops)

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to publications abroad.

Ahmad Mursyidin Arifin: What is the criteria of a good and interesting story?

Dato' Shan: When you write, tell a story. You must write a story that makes people want to know what happens next. This element is called suspense. The other element is conflict.

When one character disagrees with the other, then comes conflict. Conflict makes a story. When the conflict is great it becomes a drama. Conflict does not only occur between characters but also within a character. Suspense and conflicts are the heart of the story. I also use humour to tell a story. When people relax and laugh they are more likely to listen to your story. My means of story-telling may not be so much of conflict or drama but more of humour. When I tell stories, I like to make people laugh and this, I learned from my mother.

Amirah Rosli: Do you still think gender issues like those portrayed in the short story "Birthday" are still prevalent today?

Dato' Shan: Prejudice against women, in my opinion, is still strong throughout the world. That is why it is a challenge to women not to accept if you are treated unequally. You should fight and strive for equality. God created all of us equal. Man has no right to say women are inferior. Stephen Covey in his book 7 Habits of Highly Successful People says, "If something happens to you, it can only happen if you accept it." If you don't agree to be treated without respect or dignity you can prevent it from happening. Don't let anybody treat you as inferior to someone because you are female and they are male. When an organisation has to choose a candidate for a position, they will choose a male rather than a female with the reason that the latter will get pregnant and will have children. These do not matter, women can take leave for a month and then come back to work. Now with COVID-19, people are working from home. We should fight the various kinds of prejudices whether they are against race, religion, gender, economic status or age. Judge people by their capabilities. Can they do the job? Are they hardworking? My motto is to work hard, work smart and network. You need to work as a team, not alone. When Tun Abdullah Badawi became the Prime Minister he said, "Don't work for me, work with me."

Anis Sofea Ramli: What is the most important thing that you learned from writing?

Dato' Shan: Don't be precious with your first draft. Show your story to people for comments and accept criticism. Tan Twan Eng, a successful Malaysian writer, told me to listen to my editor. Don't argue with your editor if he/she asks you to rewrite. Writing is rewriting. Ernest Hemingway, rewrote more than 35 times the last page of one of his stories. He was one of the greatest writers who ever



Group photo

lived. There are great differences when I compare some of my first drafts with the published version. In anything, practice makes perfect. The more you practice the better you are.

Ain Maisarah Aznan: How do you select the names of your characters? Do you pay much attention to the naming process?

Dato' Shan: Names are important but not crucially important. A character in my story does not represent one person. I took two or three characters and merged them into one. This makes the character richer. I choose names that may seem to fit the character or after someone who made a great impression on me. Names are not a matter of life and death. It could have been a different name.

Aina Athirah Ahmad Fanizal: Can you please explain two historical contexts which are standard 8 and cheap matinee as mentioned in "Birthday"?

Dato Shan: Standard 8 was equivalent to Form 2 today. Cheap matinees are cinema shows in the morning. The shows are cheaper in the morning as opposed to those shown in the afternoon or the evenings. Students would normally opt for a cheap matinee or a discounted price ticket to watch movies because that is the only one they can afford to pay.

Ms Nazima: We have come to the end of the session. Perhaps Dato Shan would like to say something before we end the session?

Dato' Shan: You cannot judge a book or a writer by just reading one story. I would like to recommend that you read the whole book. The book was published in Singapore and London and it is priced at the equivalent of RM60. If you order online from MPH, you can get it at only RM33.92. By reading all the stories, you can get the idea of the history of Malaysia from the British Administration to the Japanese Occupation and after Independence. If you have any comments on the story you can post on KLBAC, Amazon or Goodreads and rate the book. You can also email me at drshantri@gmail.com.

Ms Nazima: I hope students will continue reading and can purchase the book via online platforms. Please also post about this session on Twitter or Instagram so that your friends can also know and read the book. We can't go anywhere and are stuck at home during the pandemic. Reading can take you to places. On behalf of Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pulau Pinang, I would like to thank Dato' Shan for sharing his knowledge and wisdom. Thank you very much Dato' Shan for making time to be with the class this morning.

Dato' Shan: The pleasure is mine.

