

Mere Observations, Fair Comment and Actual Facts: The Voice of Rehman Rashid

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ABSTRACT

In the twilight of British Malaya, Rehman Rashid was born. He grew up in independent Malaysia, as his nation approached the turn of the millennium. As a young journalist in 1981, he had believed it simple to see what was special about Malaysia; it was a multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-lingual country, what could be clearer than that? Rehman wrote passionately about Malaysia, this country that he loved dearly. Dissected to its constituent parts, Malaysia to him was a hopeless mess of conflicting priorities, mutually unintelligible languages, contradictory cultures and blinkered religions. Politics were divisive, its economy exploitive, its pillars of authority buttressed by an impenetrable scaffolding of draconian laws upheld by a parliament in which dominance seemed to matter far more than debate. He also believed that there was no reason for Malaysia to survive this far but it had. This is what he wrote about in his columns called 'On Friday' and his different take on things didn't quite sit well with his peers or his superiors. He chooses above all else to see it as a testament to resilience and durability, and perhaps a certain steely apathy; to the presence of sufficient numbers of citizens prepared not to die for their country. This is where this paper situates this research, within the journalistic construction of this journalist's writings.

Keywords: *Columnist, On Friday, journalistic construction, joint authorship, praxis of agency.*

INTRODUCTION

In the twilight of British Malaya, Rehman Rashid was born. He grew up in independent Malaysia, as his nation approached the turn of the millennium. He became a journalist in 1981 with the New Straits Times (NST), Malaysia's leading English-language daily at the time and after seven years as Lead Writer and Columnist, Rehman became restless and joined Asiaweek in Hong Kong as a Senior Writer. From there, he left for Bermuda as a Senior Writer with Bermuda Business magazine, before returning home to Malaysia to complete 'A Malaysian Journey', his first book. He was the Malaysian Press Institute's Journalist of the Year (1985) and Bermuda's Print Journalist of the Year (1991).

As a young journalist, he had believed it simple to see what was special about Malaysia; a multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-lingual country. Then he was to learn, so was virtually everywhere else. Rehman wrote passionately about Malaysia, this country that he loved. Dissected to its constituent parts, Malaysia to him was a hopeless mess of conflicting priorities, mutually unintelligible languages, contradictory cultures and blinkered religions. Politics were divisive, economy exploitive, pillars of authority reinforced by an impermeable framework of draconian laws upheld by a parliament where dominance was far more important than debate.

Rehman also believed that there was no reason for Malaysia to survive this far but it had. Some have portrayed this as an argument for stern leadership (Dr. Mahathir Mohamad was Prime Minister) and stringent laws but he saw it as a testament to resilience and durability, and perhaps a certain steely indifference; to the presence of sufficient numbers of citizens, which were

prepared not to die for their country; as to say they were not patriotic enough. This is what he wrote in his columns, in different years, in different durations, in different columns.

Rehman had several columns; On Friday, Midweek, Comments and Scorpion Tales, being the most famous of them all. He wrote about current issues happening locally and internationally, and his different take on things that didn't quite sit well with his peers or his superiors and especially the people he would mention, specifically. He chose above all else to see and present issues as they were and provide commentary for things to change and those in charge to make that change.

THE ISSUE

The crux of the issue aims to answer the question of what, how and why a journo makes the decision to write in a weekly column in a highly institutionalized newspaper. How does a journo go against the grain, if and when he should and must, and how does he do it? It would be interesting to enable the reader-critic to tease out and see the interplay of 'power relations' in a text between the journo and the institution, and even the elites that were involved.

A journo may speak in different platforms and capacity, of things he cannot say or be heard of. It becomes understandable if a journo's voice is 'deep-seated' long after his death. It becomes somewhat the burden for those who survive him to contrive a research as means of putting his thoughts together. This is where a timeline becomes purposive as it provides the researcher an open 'archeological' structure of the journo's position, the choice of style and moments of articulation throughout his life.

But when all traces of a journo's discursivity have been mapped, and the questions or curiosities answered, what should one do with these archeological findings? Whilst the journo's obituary should be respected and remain intact, posthumous disclosure and closure have become part of the human desire especially if the new argument and findings can significantly enlighten the unknown or unspeakable discourses he might have experienced and endured during his lifetime.

Rehman was a very respectable orator and a rhetorical acrobat when it came to writing. This paper offers a historical timeline where Rehman's weekly column might have possibly been written on his thoughts or follow up to traceable moments, people that he encountered while writing his column if not his own private life. There are gaps in the timeline that needs to be filled in, to better understand the journo/writer motives and how he constructs the public sphere and communicative action to convey a one-way monologue as praxis, to bring change to the society.

THE FRAMEWORK

Joint Authorship

Hye Jean Chung (2010) explored joint authorship when she looked into a trilogy of films produced by a Korean female filmmaker Byun Young-Joo on the subject of *Comfort Women*, an oblique term used during World War II, where these women were captured and forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military forces. The trilogy of documentaries were titled, *The Murmuring* (1995), *Habitual Sadness* (1997) and *My Own Breathing* (1999).

Chung (2010) established the process of joint authorship between the filmmaker and the subject, based on the telling and recording of witness accounts. The trilogy eventually gives voice to these formerly silenced women. Through their association, the filmmaker and the victims

conjoin to interpolate the spectator to action expanding the scope of relevancy from personal to collective.

Going through the trilogy, questions were raised as to what it means to bear witness to a historically traumatic event through the medium of film, especially by the subjects affected. What kind of discursive strategies were deployed to reclaim the silenced voices into official history, and how they are effective enough to make changes and compensate these “comfort women” for what they have gone through?

This is the same expansive strategy deployed for this research for a joint authorship to sustain Rehman’s thoughts as he no longer can. It is also to give a better understanding for all the misconceptions towards him as a powerful writer. When he writes, he merely makes observations, gives fair comment and writes based on actual facts. Although his tone can sting and sometimes leave a painful lasting impression.

This is perhaps what is meant by Chung (2010) when she talks about the reclamation of the voice of the disfranchised or exiled (as how Rehman describes it) through 'joint authorship' of his stories. Rehman’s agency has enabled more Malaysians to be engaged with current issues at the time and effectively allowed the critical comment for change to take place and forced the powerful elites to move victimhood to one of survivors and agency (Baskar & Walker, 2010).

As a fellow journalist and a friend, although from different mediums, Rehman, from print while I come from a broadcast journalism background (*TV3*), I write with and for Rehman, for despite the drained, exhausted, numb with despair state he was in when his career ended so did his notoriety in the industry depleted of peers, colleagues and friends. In the end, he could not explore the lives of others or tease out the patterns in the daily flow of events to weave into tales to tell. By allowing another person-with-social-cultural-professional interest to represent and complete the picture or suppressed narrative of now the disenfranchised co-author, it also serves to enable the joint authorship to make known Rehman’s unheralded contribution beyond the *A Malaysian Journey*, bearing in mind this is not a coverage of hagiography for Rehman, as he was far from that.

Praxis of Agency

According to Pennell and Burford (2002, p. 111) praxis serves as the “epistemology of the modern emancipatory movement” which resonates with the influential Freirean pedagogy of the oppressed. It often begins with an act of thinking or questioning a situation in the light of one’s notion of what is right and good (or evil); or what moral disposition will be required to further human well-being and the good life. The Frankfurt School’s most critical term to denote the act of engaging the subject of interest in order to shape and change the subject’s social and political condition is known as ‘agency is praxis.’

Inevitably, praxis requires a great understanding of *other* peoples and this may be potentially achieved by way of a synergy between “thought and action [and the] reshaping [of] each other through [our] engagement in social change” (Lather, 1991 in Pennell & Burford, 2002, p. 111). The concept of agency may be referred to as the ability of the post-colonial subject to initiate either physical or intellectual resistance against a domineering yet hegemonic power.

In another research done locally on a video journalist, Indrani Kopal, her praxis of agency is visible through her works and 'political' activism over the years at the individual, community and national level. The stories excerpted in the discussion were largely specific to the varied intersections of the Indian-Hindu lives. She arguably has built her leadership talent by immersing herself in these spaces of conflicts, armed with strong professional principles, techniques and an insight into what her subjects really want say to the authorities in order to insight change (Roslina & Badrul, 2013). Ashcroft et al. (1998) agency denotes;

The ability to act or perform an action [and] it hinges on the question of whether individuals can freely or autonomously initiate action, or whether the things they do are in some sense determined by the ways in which their identity has been constructed.

The praxis of agency is an important political action or informed resistance by the subject in order to subvert the forces that construct and define their subjectivity in the first place (Roslina & Badrul, 2013). Seeing it this way, it is not a coincidence that Rehman has cast his net rather narrow, focusing on issues that were pledging the country.

THE LITERATURE

Autobiographical research is a group-related qualitative research method for dissecting autobiographical text materials (interviews or written episodes and stories), that was developed in the early 1980s by Zech (1983, 1988, in Roth, 1989). The theoretical background of the autobiographical research was provided by the cultural-historical school of Soviet psychology and critical psychology. It has been noted that it is compatible individual process of having become a particular subject or forms of the subject's individual capacity to act under different concrete social conditions that form the general subject of research.

Past and present research have examined how individuals actively and independently develop the social conditions of their lives, how their personality developed and capacity to act during these processes of change. They also realize how existing ideological offers adjustment that caused them to abandon possibilities for their own development. So it is the relation between the objective situational conditions of acting and the subjective explanation for acting in its effects on the individual development of personality that is analyzed (Thomas, 1994).

Abrahão (2012) understands life history as a methodology in autobiographical research. Autobiographical research uses various empirical sources (life narratives, oral stories, documents - both official and personal - diaries, memorials, epistles, videos, photos) and techniques (triangulation of information and in-depth analysis of the sources). The same understanding is also cited in Pineau (in Abrahão, 2012).

Life history is, in Abrahão's (2008) view is a (re)construction made by the researcher, where the researcher analyses empirical sources as mentioned above, in a critical dialogue with research findings from elsewhere, and with a global view of a social economic and cultural environment where the studied lives and the research takes place. She stresses that 'life history is a product, not a process.' The act of giving a new meaning to a narrated fact indicates that the researcher is consciously trying to capture that fact and is aware that it is being reconstructed by a selective memory, whether intentional or not.

THE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

i. The Text – ‘On Friday’

This research looks at one of Rehman Rashid’s columns called ‘*On Friday*’. A total of 27 articles were purchased from the NST’s Resource Centre, read and dissected to determine dates, titles, issues discussed and Rehman’s personal thoughts on the matter. As part of the content analysis, an ‘autobiography’ column was added to see what was going on in his life based on evidence captured in his book, ‘*A Malaysian Journey*’. The results were then triangulated to see the connection which is heavily slanted on momentous timelines, the people he met and his own private life, to give a glimpse of what made him the journalist that he was – audacious, amazing and arrogant.

ii. The Mapping

On Friday ran for almost a year, making its debut on 7 August 1987 till 12 August 1988 with gaps and raptures in between. The content analysis gives a clear indicator timeline for all 27 articles but not all of them could be traced in terms of Rehman’s private life. The following discussion attempts to give a better perspective of what happened throughout that one year of his life, with regards to his column and his comments.

(a) ‘It Even Feels Good to Sweat’ (7 August 1987)

From 7 August till 23 October 1987, there was a steady stream of articles that filled his column. It was a norm for Rehman to discuss several issues in a single article. His debut article was titled ‘*It even feels good to sweat*’. This opening column talked about coming home, MAS – the aircraft, their service, the unarguably prettiest stewardess and Subang airport. He has stated his personal comments;

...foreign investors to Malaysia that had this annoying habit of insisting they know us better than we do. After all that time gazing at the macro-view (which has its merits), I am dearly looking forward to once again listening in to what people are saying at the *sarabat* (tea) stalls and in the pubs and coffee shops and *makan*-places (eatery) of Malaysia; to get the view from down where it counts; to once again draw close to the throbbing, vital pulse of my homeland.

Rehman had just returned from a stint as NST’s London correspondent for a year. The title also indicated the change in weather. He left after the 1986 general elections and then returned to Malaysia in August 1987. He left because he felt like;

My career had soured beyond bearing. My column (Scorpion Tales) had become a burden. I had lost my sense of humour; I couldn’t find all that much to laugh about in the things that were happening to Malaysia.

(b) Voices in the Wilderness (21 August 87)

Rehman attended a seminar by Aliran titled “Reflections on the Malaysia Constitution.” The conclusion of the seminar was - this nation is in a state of rapid change and that “the new social

realities and aspirations of Malaysians of all communities” need to be reflected in the Malaysian Constitution. The subsequent castigation from the Government was the result. His personal suggestion was;

May I suggest that the proper way for the Aliran chairperson to have introduced the Secretary-General of the DAP”, should have been as “The Honourable Mr Lim Kit Siang, Member of Parliament and Leader of the Opposition”; and not, as happened, “Defender of the Oppressed and Guardian of the Underdog?”

(c) *The Long Road to Jakarta (11 September 87)*

The column talks about the Jakarta SEA Games and how our athletes cope to get there. A comparison is made of foreign athletes that are treated better than ours and they don’t get scolded so much. After all these years, you’d think we might have learned to handle defeat with a certain panache, remaining true to the spirit of competition. We’ve had so much practice at losing; we ought to be quite good at it by now. Rehman although serious, always had a way to make a heavy topic light by making fun of himself. And he did this with equal flair with;

Boy, I sure used to envy those athletes. They were fine, strong guys. Those who represented the school at team-games like rugby and football seem to have remained firm friends all their lives, and those who were bigshots in track-and-field enjoyed quite a bit of personal glory. I am what you might call a co-ordination defective. It’s not that my arms and legs don’t know what to do on the sports field, it’s just that they’ve always had trouble trying to do it as a team. This was not good for me, although I got the distinct impression that I was a lot of fun to watch.

Rehman had interviewed one of these athletes, Rabuan Pit, in ’81 when he was in his prime and he was hurting even then. When this piece was written Pit was 32 and he was being chastised for unable to return the times he was clocking at 26 – and by people who look as if they’d die if compelled to run the 400m in less than half-an-hour.

(d) *No smoke Without Liar (18 September 87)*

The column talks about smoking - The ban of cigarette advertisements. Rehman also reminisces smoking, zippo lighters and actors of yesteryear that carried the smoking phenomena with style and continues to argue how a clutch of countries like Finland, Italy, Norway and Thailand’s consumption has increased since the year of the ban. His personal thoughts on the matter was;

I’m almost sorry there’s a bit of a stink being kicked up over the use of what might be construed as “gambling” to sell what is by any measure a nasty product – in the essential unwholesomeness of it all there is at least some deformed honesty...

Given that cigarette smoking is a compulsive, obsession, addictive habit, the ban seems unreasonable to him. Being a heavy smoker – cigarettes and cigars, Rehman's take was, "*Might as well go out in style, hey kids?*" And that he did, unfortunately. Rehman suffered a heart attack on the 26 January 2017 while cycling from Kuala Kubu Baru (KKB) to Rawang and was in a coma for a month. Three months later on 3 June 2017, he died of pneumonia at 6.30 am at the Selayang Hospital in Gombak.

(e) *Our Coral Reefs Are Dying (2 October 87)*

This article explains how the coral reefs are killed by the *Tapak Sulaiman* or Solomon's Footprint and also by scuba diving activities. Years of development on the peninsula that has raised the sediment load and turned waters turbid was equally a problem because corals need light to grow. Being a marine biologist by study, he laments;

What's left of the marine biologist in me, the one that remembers what those reefs were like just seven or eight years ago, wants to see all human intrusion into our coral waters banned for at least 50 years.

Rehman studied marine biology for his undergraduate at Wales's Swansea College because he thought that it sounded 'good'. He thought there was a bit of romance about it; a dash of glamour; a hint of adventure. It was an impulsive decision no doubt; picked out of the college handbook much as one might grab a packet of chewing gum at a supermarket checkout counter. He was well into his second year of A-Levels course and had no idea what he wanted to study. He ventures that, it turned out to almost unremittingly tedious, and he eventually stop going to lectures altogether.

(f) *The Conduct of Dissent (9 October 87)*

This article discussed Mr Lim Kit Siang's suit against United Engineering Malaysia (UEM) and the government. The question was should the letter of intent given to UEM by the Government be considered null and void? And should UEM be restrained from signing the North-South Highway agreement with the Government? His take was;

I always thought everyone had that – that it was a basic human right in civilized societies and a foundation pillar of justice. But no, the law almost never takes anything as read – it needs it to be written.

This was the issue that broke the camel back for Rehman.

The judiciary had granted injunctions against UEM and its highway contract, refused to uphold expulsion orders against certain foreign correspondents, granted publishing permits to human rights gadflies, and even ordered that the New Umno had to buy the old Umno's assets, and not simply take them over. Mahathir's criticisms of the judiciary for "interference" mounted in intensity, and at last the Lord President of the Supreme Court was moved to

write to the King to ask for a royal intercession against the depredations of the Executive. Sultan Mahmood Iskandar conferred with Mahathir, and apparently liked what he heard, because the only intercession conceded was to suspend the Lord President and five other judges. After the due process of a tribunal, the Lord President was sacked for “judicial misconduct”. Two other Supreme Court judges were also dismissed.

(g) *‘The Riots That Weren’t’ (23 October 87)*

The discussion became intense on the topic of Chinese education: MCA took hold, and wouldn’t let go. It was stirring at first, then it grew a little annoying. Then frightening. Concessions were demanded of the Government. The Government made them. An admission of error was called for. An error was admitted to. A reappraisal was sought and a reappraisal was promised. It should have ended there but it didn’t. The MCA, caught up in the passion of its cause, momentarily forgot that it was part of the Government. The shadowy “*Barisan* mechanism” that was essentially an attempt to remind the MCA that the *Barisan Nasional* stands for something known as “consociational politics”. His comments were,

It was perfect, almost poetic. The two most unimaginable commodities in Malaysia are heroism and madness. In politics, they can be difficult to tell apart. But down here where we live, it’s easy. Last weekend we found our heroes in a football match and our madness in *Prebet* Adam Jaafar. Everything else was politics, and it is a great relief to think that the Malaysian people are no longer willing to go crazy just because politics doesn’t know when to stop.

His comments in this article didn’t land him in trouble but his editorial for October 29, 1987 did. There was a crackdown famously known as ‘*Ops Lalang*’, where in his capacity as Minister of Home Affairs, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, like Poseidon setting free the Kraken, unleashed the Internal Security Act and bid it to go tame this fractious land. *Lalang* is the colloquial name for a species of razor-edged wild grass, *Imperata cylindrical*, that can grow in impenetrable thickets on waste ground. On the night of October 27, 1987, operatives of the Special Branch spread out across the nation and began arresting social activists, environmentalists, Chinese educationalist, Opposition politicians and sundry radicals. In all, 115 people would be detained without the possibility of trial. The small fry among them would be released within several weeks while the more prominent would be kept behind barbed wire for 18 months.

The day after the first arrests, three newspapers were banned, one each in the English (The Star), Malay (Watan) and Chinese (Sin Chew Jit Poh) languages, egalitarian enough. Rehman wrote the next day’s editorial, in which he adapted a mournful tone, lamenting that the government had no recourse but this. The editorial was extensively quoted in the world media, generally in substantiation of a widespread denunciation of the Malaysian Government’s action.

It’s always thrilling to see your work gaining any kind of international recognition, but I had a feeling there would be a price to pay for this.

The heat was almost immediate. By mid-morning of that Thursday, the Police and Home Ministry were demanding to know the reasons behind the composition and publication of that editorial, the identity of the writer, and if a full retraction would be published the next day.” Indeed, the editorial comment seemed to part of a galvanizing of the NST. The demanded retraction was published as an editorial on Sunday.

But the heat remained. I was told it might be prudent to ‘lie low’ for a while, although no journalists were expected to be detained. My weekly column was temporarily suspended – I didn’t mind, it seemed the only way left to protest – and I took emergency leave to seek out some solitude and silence to reassemble a badly shaken perspective.

On Wednesday, November 11, the NST received a telephone call from the Special Branch, asking that I present myself for questioning at 2.30pm the following afternoon. The Group Editor called me at home and informed me of the request.

They just want a chat, he said reassuringly. If they’d wanted you, they’d have come and got you. Don’t worry. You’ll be all right.

Datuk Rahim Nor, the Director of the Special Branch questioned Rehman for two hours.

I thought back over the events of two weeks before, testing the memory of what it had been like on the editorial floor of the NST. I remembered the resolve, “that NST needed to make a stand”, and replayed the way things had gone subsequently; the way things were now, me sitting in that office, sweaty-palmed, this dark angry man asking me questions I didn’t know how to answer...

After determining Rehman was not a threat, he was let go.

I went home, knowing my country had changed, and with it my career and my life, but not knowing how. I cannot look back upon this episode without the greatest shame. So feebly had I defended myself. My capitulation was complete, and virtually immediate.

And he’d said: What are a hundred people in a nation of 16.4 million? Nothing. A sacrifice. But he had not arrested merely a hundred people. He had arrested a hundred families, a hundred set of friends and relatives... he arrested an entire nation.

But I had said nothing. I sat and played with my fingers and tried to give the right answers to his questions and make the appropriate grunting sounds during his monologues. I wanted to be let go, I was scared. And he knew it, and believed it right and proper that I should be. I don't think I shall ever forgive myself for that fear. So effortlessly do the manipulators of fear exert their nefarious power on those easily scared. And how self-righteous they are, the custodians of such power!

A total of 12 articles were published before it got suspended pending investigations by the Special Branch.

(h) *'The Caterpillar That Could' (27 November 87)*

The column resumed again on 27 November 87 but with a safer tone. This was also the last article for 1987. In *'The caterpillar that could'*, Rehman talked about spending 45 minutes watching a caterpillar cross the road, about grim determination and boundless confidence. He saw the action of the caterpillar as totally bold, simply doing what it was his nature to do – which was to move through his world with consummate self-assurance. He added his personal comments mockingly;

I felt a little sorry for the children actually, and a bit peeved at their parents. Fancy driving your kids all the way up to Fraser's Hill and driving them around in the car with the windows up and the stereo on. Kids could have great fun in Fraser's. All that space to run around in and the sweet soft air to breathe and caterpillars to watch.

During his exile, Rehman went back to KKB, where he first rented a shop lot when he was writing *'A Malaysian Journey'* in August 1992. The book mentions this episode in his life;

Truth be told, it wasn't a bad life. Spartan, monastic, and consequently not unhealthy. I slept and ate adequately in a clean environment. I took to bicycling. Riding up and down the forested hills and lifting weights in my home gym, I became fitter than I'd ever been. During my regular rides up the 33 kilometers from KKB to the Gap, I would pull over at the lookout point about eight kilometers short of the summit, where the view was lovely, far and wide. I would reflect on the sweet irony of being there, by the grace of God, because I had lost everything – marriage, career, even family.

(i) *A Choice of Perception (1 January 88)*

His opening article for the New Year was a remembrance of the past year. Such a year this has been; a year to relinquish, a year to remember. What becomes us now will depend on what we choose to forget, and what we choose not to. Things we might remember – issues of inflammatory flayed their way through Malaysian conscience, each one building on those preceding until our nerves were stretched taut with apprehension. Things we might choose to remember – the truths brought home to us in 1987; that is better to speak softly than shout,

better to negotiate than agitate; that are important reasons why tolerance, discipline, restraint and simple civility are such highly-respected virtues.

If you are reading these words on the first day of 1988, I'm sure you'll join me in wishing this to be a happy and fulfilling year for all of us. And it will be, as long as we remember 1987 as the year which tested us with shadows and taught us the inestimable value of keeping our faces turned to the light... an important exercise of spiritual fortitude, otherwise known as looking on the bright side.

(j) *'Permitted to Remain for Residence...'* (8 January 88)

Emigration... such a forlorn word. Ten letters that float like scum on the surface of a stagnant discontent; spelling out a final solution to resentment, frustration and despair. In 1987, the Australian High Commission in KL received 5,760 applications for migration. Since 1985, a total of 6,065 Malaysians have obtained permanent residence in Australia. New Zealand, since April 1985 to date, has granted 550 immigrant visas to Malaysians. Britain, over the same period has "admitted for settlement" 200 Malaysians. Canada has received 2,091 applications for migration since January 1986. The United States issued 500 immigrant visas last year; 400 the year before – totals which include refugees from third countries passing through Malaysia.

To me, people who deprecate themselves as "second-class citizens" in this country are hardly better than those who exalt themselves as "first-class". They grasp the same tarnished coin; differing only in their perception of who owns it. Maybe you knew some of them. Perhaps you attempted to suggest to them that their perceptions may have been wrong or incomplete; that this country needs its people to stay and help it grow. Or maybe you were one of those who congratulated them on their decision, commended their courage, said you wished you could go too, waved them goodbye, and then went around telling people there are tens of thousands just like them, so they must be right. The keepers who slam the doors shut behind departing Malaysians are no worse than those who cheer them through.

'A Malaysia Journey' mentioned that time had frozen, for it had marked the end of their lives as Malaysians after the October night in 1987.

They had moved to other countries and begun anew. Many of them were journalists, and most remained so, for theirs was a profession not easily distinguished from a way of life. But few would continue to write; instead they worked on the subs' desks of the Atlanta Constitution or the London Times or the Sydney Morning Herald. In time, they would cease thinking of themselves as exiles, and shed the notion of going home – or perhaps it would be truer to say that they would adopt a wider definition of 'home'.

After publishing eight more articles, his column went into hibernation when Rehman left for Indonesia the following week, to begin an extended assignment that took him on a journey through Sumatra, writing and sending stories as he went along. He wrote this message, “I hope you will come with me. I would be grateful for your company, as I have always been.”

He wrote 11 articles which started on 18th March 1988 with ‘*Memories of Past Abound in Aceh*’ and ended with ‘*End of the Line*’ on 15th April 1988.

‘*On Friday*’ resumed again on 13 May 88 till 12 August 88. He took to issues of poverty, taxes and neglect and clearly blaming Malaysia for its problems, hinting on the government to take action. The following articles clearly depict this.

(k) *It’s Our Problem (13 May 1988)*

The infamous affairs of the *Sekolah Menengah Teknik* in Cheras that revealed students’ delinquency that shocked the nation. Insolence, disobedience, gangsterism and vandalism are one thing; intimations of murder quite another. In response, there were calls for a return to corporal punishment, public canning; if a kid does wrong, bet him, humiliate him, show him who’s got the power; wreck one child as a lesson to the others. The savagery of rebellion answered with savage authority. He comments undoubtedly gave the authorities a lot to think about;

I remember the novice journalist on that assignment, surrounded by that ghastly dereliction and thinking that the only answer was education. As for what’s going on inside their heads, that’s not their problem alone. It’s also their parents’ and teachers’ and communities’. Which means, its Malaysia’s.

(m) *‘Taxes, Teas and Trails’ (27 May 88)*

This commentary talks about how tedious renewing your road tax can be when you can’t find your blue registration card. How officers manning the counters go on tea-breaks as early as 8.30am and 9.30am when they just started work. And how officers examine the forms with painstaking care, working with great precision, meticulously but still misspelling his name, in a predictable way.

The last thing I had to fill in was the license number for my car radio. There was no time. Extracting a small spanner from my toolkit, I smashed the radio. It had never really worked to my satisfaction anyway. It only played RTM programmes...

That was a poke at the government’s channel. After writing ‘*Taxes, teas and trails*’ on 27 May 88, Rehman left for Afghanistan. Under the heading of ‘*On the Other Side of the Borders*’. He started sending stories on refugees, the Afghan interim government, life in the Chakdara Camp and the bugbear in Indo-Pakistan ties in Kabul. His stories started on the 8th-15th June 1988 while he was still writing this column. This explains the gaps in his timeline.

(n) *The Ocean of the Future (1 July 88)*

Five powers of the 21st century would be the US, Soviet Union, Japan, China and Australia. China and Australia will replace Britain and France, the oldest members of the present Big Five. By the

middle of the 21st century, the US and SU will have finally come to terms with not only their own symmetry but also their own senescence. Perfectly equiposed between them will be the scattering of islands and spits of land collectively known as Asean. It is nice to think that Asean will find it much easier to perform the European functions of meeting-place, rather than the Middle Eastern function of battleground, because we stand to have a more intimate link between North and South than either Europe or the Middle East has been between East and West. Rehman's take was stinging but polite.

Last week, Australian Premier Hawke told Time magazine: "With South-East Asia, we have developed a defense policy based on a perception that there is no threat to us from any country in that area." (Ah the polite conceit of diplomacy! Couldn't he have said something like: "We have good relations with the countries in that area; we understand each other..."?). Then, together, the nations of the western Pacific Rim could have a whale of a time with our collective partners on the other side of the Ocean of the Future, represented as they will be by some splendid natural resources in the north, El Nino in the South and Hollywood California in the middle. And if that isn't a pacific thought, I give up.

(o) *The Crime of Neglect (5 August 88)*

The Butterworth jetty disaster was a tragedy which feels like a crime. There was a deep anger about it; a sense of great injustice having been done. People died who had no business dying; hundreds hurt for no good reason, united in their misfortune largely by their decision to celebrate festivals of St Anne's Feast and the Kuan Yin procession. The jetty was old and tired, and when it reached the limit of its endurance, it died, taking 31 people with it. This was not a crime. It was not an act of commission. Nobody deliberately willed this to happen. It was, in other words, an accident. Due not to sabotage, but neglect. However, this does not mean that there was no "culpability" to be assigned. As these investigations proceed, it might profit the commissions – and, indeed, all Malaysians – to ponder the criminality of neglect.

This preoccupation with "openness" seems somewhat peculiar, what possible reason could there be for this inquiry not being "open"? Who could have anything to hide here? What deep, dark and damning secrets may lie within the mangled carcass of that ruined structure on the Butterworth waterfront? The simple answer: Someone's guilt; someone's "culpability". When establishing culpability for the jetty tragedy, therefore, the commission of inquiry might care to consider those planners whose gaze is so fixed on what lies ahead that they cannot see what is falling apart behind them. In short, it is not a person or an organization that is to be blamed for this, but an attitude.

And what could be more cutting than that! The ideal practice of journalism is basically to seek the truth and be ethical, as Rehman would have understood and wrote about. He went against the grain as he felt he should and must. As presented and discussed elaborately above,

the interplay of 'power relations' between the journo, the institution and the elites that were involved. In the context of journalism ethics, objectivity needs to uphold above all else. Failing to do so, all would seem contrived and meaningless.

Until then, I had doggedly kept believing we might recover from the rapid-fire concatenation of calamities that had assailed us. I could see causes and effects, and I could still rationalize what had happened; fit it into the unfolding patterns of Malaysian history, and discern ways and means by which Malaysia might emerge the stronger for these catastrophes but when the Supreme Court got its head blown off, I gave up.

There were other incidents prior to this;

A piece on BUMIPUTRA Malaysia Finance (BMF) scandal was the first of my serious comments to be 'spiked'. And when it came to the constitutional crisis over Mahathir and the Monarchs, Dr Munir Majid (NST Group Editor at the time) told me not to even think about taking on the subject. So it wasn't long before my trawling of the national interest for suitable topics started getting 'snagged' on the rocky reefs of taboo. Out there in the real world, in the Malaysia beyond the carefully chosen phrases on the monitor screens of the NST's editorial floor, the honeymoon was over.

My personal distress was amplified by my role with the NST. I emphasize again: the most galling thing about being Malaysian was being a Malaysian journalist. The way we behave was not only a disgrace to our profession and an insult to our readers, it was a disservice to our owners. There was no escaping the fact of our ownership, but we could have done our jobs better nonetheless. The NST did not have to be sensationalist, or oppositionist, but we could have been credible.

But times, editors and policies had changed. He was fired and rehired, where he worked as a glorified production copy editor for four years, barring a nine-month hiatus between management. His 'corporate fit', it seemed was as bad as the tantrums he occasionally threw. So his byline stopped appearing in the newspaper, where he was valued more as a grammarian than a journalist, and he loathed that.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, misery motivates a lot of writing, some of it worth while but not his own, he mentions in his book. Well, he was wrong. Rehman's story had since become entirely his own, with little or nothing to do with this country or indeed anyone else. His story was a sad-sack saga of loss, loneliness, self-pity and woe – what could be more tedious to relate?

But relating his story provides the ontology for why thoughts, ideas, happiness and sorrow define humanity and our existantialism as unique individuals, and make us want to be part of a collective. Some of the articles would seem to come to some inconclusive end, and one could be

forced to curb the stream of consciousness, causing a gap or rupture either due to personal and/or external circumstances.

As argued, his autobiography timeline has proven effective to close the gaps and ruptures of those narratives. This joint authorship has been deployed to succour the voice of the disenfranchised co-author, Rehman Rashid. Rehman's own sense of agency was very challenging as he tried to bring forward injustices that needed to be rectified, appropriation of the country's resources and to go head to head with the establishment that needed to toe the line.

In the end, Rehman had left a body of work that could be traced back to his writings, his challenges in life and work, and his personal thoughts on the issues he wrote about. Hence, he is not actually silent after his passing. The Rehman I knew, was a person that judged himself too harshly, intelligent in mind and word, but he was also a friend who gave me too much to forget. And despite all his idiosyncrasies, we stayed friends till the day he died. I never got to say goodbye, so I guess this will have to do.

BIODATA

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